

Project development diary

The following diary charts the early development of the Matemahan/Transformation project, up to April 2020, including comments from Mark Hobart and Ni Madé Pujawati about plot and background and developing compositional ideas from Nick Gray.

July 2009:

Nick attended a lecture by Mark Hobart with Ni Madé Pujawati that sowed the seed for this project (Pujawati and Hobart 2009). This lecture highlighted the instability of body/self in Balinese thought and explored the consequent attitude of “command” as an approach to the arts, as opposed to a “control” model prevalent in Europe and America. This reflects a transitory mastery: “If a control model of perfection involves pushing the machine to its limits, a command one comprises interlacing effectively what is heterogeneous and conflicting.”

8 June 2019, email from Mark Hobart:

What if [our academic] models are so fundamentally wrong that they miss much of what happens? Concepts like structure and system are axiomatic to explanation which aims to establish what is necessary, fixed and determining behind everyday appearances. Other considerations – everything that is contingent – should be omitted as irrelevant. But what if people presuppose that everything is in flux: all matter, all animate forms, all ideas are continually transforming? Then anticipating and mastering change requires radically different strategies from trying to nail down flux through structure. A world of transformability fits observable practice and squares with how Balinese understand and act upon the world. The Greek thinker Heraclitus said you can't step into the same river twice. My Balinese friends retorted this was simplistic: the same person cannot step into the same river twice.

29 June 2019, Nick Gray:

Initial plan for the *Matemahan* project: an exploration using *gendér wayang*, music composition and dance. A collaborative practice-based project examining how Balinese ideas of body, self, cosmology and transformation impact on contemporary musical creation and performance. The aim is, at a later stage, to create a larger project flowing from this, which will combine ethnography, music composition, performance and musical analysis to explore these themes from different angles. This initial exploratory project will feature new music composed by myself and performed by my Balinese *gendér wayang* ensemble together with other instruments, plus Lila Bhawa Indonesian dance troupe.

15 July 2019, email from Mark Hobart:

Madé put on her thinking cap straight away and came up with an idea that I think may well work in all sorts of ways. It is to take episodes from the story of Walu Natèng Dirah, more commonly known in Bali as Calonarang. For a start it involves a dramatic transformation. However, looked at more closely the story allows several layers and can be made relevant to a contemporary European (as well as Indonesian) audience. The story is pretty obviously phallogocentric. In effect, once her husband the King dies, the Queen is in a very vulnerable position in a male dominated world in which it is easy for the Patih to stir up the masses against her. In the version Madé has in mind, she remains resolute and calm. However, when her daughter Ratna Manggali is rejected by a prince who wanted to marry her on rumours (once again circulated by the Patih) that her mother is a witch. Her composure is finally shattered and her good nature transforms into its opposite. The Balinese expression for this is interesting. *Merta matemahan wisia*. The elixir of mortality (or anything very good) transforms into poison. The reverse is equally possible: *wisia matemahan merta*. (Rotting compost or manure become valuable fertilizer for crops.) Ultimately everything is liable to transform into its opposite depending on the circumstances.

2 July 2019, Nick Gray composition notes:

The key theme suggests the following: fluidity, like water, lack of a solid structure, but also “manageable transformation”, “composing through a piece”. Institutions try to freeze and solidify but the fluid moves around like water.

In retrospect, much of my earlier work, both academic and creative is also about fluidity – from my work on improvisation and composition in Bali, to my composition projects: “The Birth of Kala” dealt with the transformation of the demonic; “Ardhanariswara” dealt with cosmological gender fluidity [Gray 2011, 2013, 2017].

Flow as “composing through” prevalent in Bali with *gendér wayang* pieces evolving through time and generations. The re-composition of old pieces as the principal compositional drive – is this not one manifestation of flow? The way the music flows through the particular historical moment that produces a “piece” – really a crystallisation in time.

(MH:) Madé would like to use just three dancers (Andrea, Dewi and herself) on the grounds that the roles require both skill in Javanese and Balinese dance, but also acting. She would like to move between Javanese and Balinese dance and back depending on the scenes. Here she will play by showing the transformation from one style into the other.

13 July 2019, Nick Gray composition notes:

Early ideas for the music: combining Balinese and Javanese styles and instruments, modules, graphics, box notations, circulations, river designs, re-compositions or reconceptualisations of previous pieces (like Satie's *Gymnopédies*), composing *through* things.

(MH:) One of my motivating thoughts is to question the (largely male-driven) use of witchcraft as a narrative explanation. From many years' fieldwork it was abundantly clear that witchcraft is not the uncomplicated institution that it is represented as being, not least in the trivialized versions packaged for tourists (in which Mead and Bateson play a less-than-distinguished part). As I am sure you know, anthropologists focus on the circumstances of the accusation, especially on who the accuser was, rather than on the accused. I never encountered an incidence of purported witchcraft where everyone agreed that the accusation had any substance. It is motivated by many considerations from anger to mercenary calculation. Famously one of the few near universals is that, where witchcraft accusations occur, it is usually women, especially powerful, intelligent or otherwise non-submissive women, who are accused. So I think it is time for a piece that forefronts liberal critical thinking (with what more reflective Balinese themselves think) as an antidote to unthinking naive Baliology.

22 July 2019, Nick Gray composition notes:

[The music at this stage included:] Kawitan Calonarang [opening passage] to be built up as a piece of interwoven polyphony... the *pokok* [basic melody] of the *sisya* [witches' echo dance]– perhaps to include *kawi* [old Javanese] lyrics. There's the 9 beat *batél* [loud, fighting music] riff as well. Those three could be a good “frame” for the work as a whole. Within this, frame, riffs can be inserted fluidly, for instance drawing on material from the My Tricky Spirit project. [On this day too, Rob Shipster suggested a film version of the project].

19 July 2019, Nick Gray composition notes:

[This choice of plot and theme, led me to consider Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, in particular the witches' echo song and dance from Act II, “In our deep vaulted cell”.]

Echo song – [could I merge with the traditional] *sisya* dance of Calonarang's disciples? [This is a set dance in the Balinese performance]. [My echoes might include] alternating *pélog* and *sléndro* phrases.

[My thinking here was linked to the fact that echo poems in the 17th Century sometimes involve an answering back, changing the meaning, as in George Herbert's poem *Heaven*.

The 17th century is also relevant musically as, in Europe, it was a much less settled and stable musical and aesthetic style than subsequent centuries (see McClary 2000). I also felt a correlation between dynamic flow and patterning in both baroque and Balinese music.]

1 August 2019, Nick Gray composition notes:

One idea is to make an open score with room for improvisation and flexibility. Another is to explore echo, which is emerging as a consistent musical theme. What is an echo if not a transformation and a flow through time and space? A third possibility: to incorporate Balinese and English children's songs interwoven. [Around this time also, I started to consider the electronic elements to the music as:] very ambient and a reworking of previous material to sound much grainier, as an electronic soundscape.

10 August 2019, Nick Gray composition notes:

Writing the music in short discrete units –not attempting to cover all the instrumentation – a patchwork quilt approach, not trying to fill in all the gaps yet.

25 July 2019, Nick Gray composition notes:

Some questions:

- 1) How do Balinese ideas of body, self, cosmology and transformation impact on contemporary musical creation and performance?
- 2) How can a collaborative music and dance performance best situate and develop these ideas for a contemporary audience?

5 August 2019, Nick Gray composition notes:

Trying now to incorporate the Purcell witches echo dance rhythm [in the end, only the idea of echo was used]. An echo of Purcell, just as there is an echo of Mozart [Magic Flute] in the opening chords. Because echoes are like ripples in the air, ripples in water. [Echoes are also an answering back. They don't repeat uncritically.]

28 August 2019, Mark Hobart, Ni Madé Pujawati and Nick Gray meeting:

Designed outline of plot as well as aspects of the piece we want to highlight: contrasts between power and *pouvoir*, flow, echo, transformation, *Samkhya* philosophy, parallels with Deleuze.

29 August, email from Mark Hobart:

The recent interpretations by foreigners now aped by Balinese that this is a fight between good and evil in which good triumphs albeit temporarily was not around when I began fieldwork, nor incidentally did it ever seem to percolate into our neck of the back woods. Quite the contrary.

Two themes. First, it is ridiculous to call Durga or Calonarang evil. They are the most powerful protectresses against some of the worst afflictions. Durga is called Dalem because she is so powerful it is unwise to say her name. You are cautious with the powerful.

Second, *Sakadi Roda Pedati*, like the wheel of the buffalo cart, it, goes round. Good inevitably transforms into something close to its opposite and vice versa. The idea of the purely evil - or good - leader, I was told, was absurd. Everything tends to, and ultimately does, transform into its opposite. When I tried to talk about someone being good, I was reminded at times sharply: 'who is the most likely person to commit a bad act?' Answer: 'the person who is the most dharma'. Monks and *Biku* are the ones who run the greatest danger of doing bad and must guard constantly against it.

So, if WND gets furious and attacks MB, she may be 'bad' initially, but it inevitably transforms so that he is the one to commit the terrible act of destroying the McGuffin on which the hopes of humanity depend. Here incidentally intention is interestingly irrelevant in Balinese legal thinking. It is the act, not the motivation, that is at issue.

30 August 2019, Nick Gray composition

notes:

Initial thoughts on instrumentation:

Lithophone, untuned

Gendér wayang X2

*Gendér rambat (pélog)*X2

Gendér Jawa X1

Slenthem X1

Gongs

Violin

Electric guitar, bass guitar

Electronics/synths

Drums/percussion

[in the end, this list was simplified to exclude *slenthem* and Javanese *gender*]

30 August 2019, Nick Gray composition notes:

Explosion, Becoming, Difference, Repetition (again, Deleuze)

The echo is the shadow of the shadow

Quotes from my second string quartet, My Tricky Spirit riffs and other material

Duration is what differs from itself

Echo is like water flowing in air

Make a score with holes

Framework for the piece evolving to include: atmospheric opening, a Pavane style slow-paced processional, echo piece for *sisya* dance, some cyclic riffs, overlapping children's songs, fighting sequence in 9-beat cycle.

11 October 2019, Nick Gray composition notes:

Further questions:

1 How do Balinese ideas of transience and fluidity relate to music and dance?

2 Can my work express and explore these ideas compositionally, in a narrative context, and in conjunction with choreography? And what insights can develop from this?

3 Can I find resonances with parallel ideas in other cultural contexts? In philosophy: Deleuze and Nietzsche; in music: improvisation and flexible form in contemporary art music, jazz.

15 January 2020, email from Mark Hobart:

[Plot outline sent – see **Story** page of this website.]

In the meantime I have been reading more about the background to the story, the most reliable—or least unreliable—source seems to be the Javanese princess Mahendradatta, who married King Udayana of Bali in a dynastic marriage, in which the Javanese kingdom of Medang was the senior party to the extent that she is listed as a Queen Regnant. That she was a woman, Javanese and (for this version relatively decent) explains why the old guard hate her. (Thinking of the difference between Prabowo and Joko Wi was a great help here, as were all sorts of other parallels to people I know well in Bali.)

To the original outline I have added one scene without dance, but which would require music and, if possible, back projection of scenes onto the wall (which works well in the Brunei Gallery and no one is on stage). It is a scene highlighting the scale of a cholera epidemic, as it provides the immediate rationale for getting rid of Mahendradatta.

31 October 2019, Nick Gray composition notes:

Initial rehearsal with Rob Champion to try some parts out. We experimented with different ways of realising certain sections, such as the overlapping *pélog* and *sléndro* motifs of the *sisya* dance.

[This rehearsal enabled me to fix certain elements and discard others. The separate sections were all completed by the end of 2019]

10 January 2020, Nick Gray composition notes:

Arranging rehearsals. Started some spin-off pieces for violin duo: related themes and materials.

(MH:) Madé and I worked out that she has 8 dances sequences, which is about as much as she reckons they can manage. So I thought of scrapping the scene of young suitors coming that we had sketched in. We can focus that around Bahula's seduction of Ratna Manggali. Reading the Toeti version [Heraty 2006], I liked her emphasis on Walu Natèng Dirah being outraged as a mother by the mistreatment of her daughter.

(MH:) While writing the climax it occurred to me that I had fallen into a trap of a phallogocentric reading of Calonarang using a male form of power, namely force. Also most versions have to finesse an effective impossibility, namely that Calonarang's source of power (in whatever sense) stems from Lipyakara. But that *lontar* is about the path to righteousness and is not a Tantric manuscript at all. This enabled me to take several pot shots at arguments that are widely circulated as unquestionable truth about Bali but, based on my ethnographic experience, are largely the invention of Westerners, now enthusiastically repeated by Balinese. One is the displacement by which physical objects, such as *lontars*, have power in themselves, not as a result of the understanding of the reader.

(MH:) First I tried to get the language of feminine reproductive potentiality into the text, but it kept on coming out clumsily. What worked beautifully however was the contrast between fixity, order, tradition and power as coercion as against the inevitability of change and the flow of things. That, as I recall, is what you wanted to bring out. So, in place of 'the eternal battle of good versus evil', which yet again I think dates back to the 1930s and Westerners telling the world what Balinese were really thinking, the struggle between attempts at stasis and fixity as against transformation and fluidity works a treat. This offers, I think, a more interesting reading of what Walu Natèng Dirah does. Incidentally, my reading is, I think, very close to what an anthropologist would make of a myth about witchcraft, which is usually about the subordination of women under a narrative founded on culturally male presuppositions.

**March 2020, Nick Gray
composition notes:**

A list of pieces and instrumentation crystallised around the agreed plot (see **Music and Dance** page of this website). Some titles refer to instrumental riffs related to the My Tricky Spirit project (see **Related Projects** page). Others refer playfully to ideas of philosopher Gilles Deleuze, such as “The world is an egg” or “Beware of the other’s dream”. The whole set opens and closes with traditional *gendér wayang* pieces: “Tunjang” (for the witch Rangda, or the Goddess Durga) and “Tabuh Gari” (ending piece). These last were taught to me by the late I Wayan Locéng of Sukawati, Bali.

29 January 2020, Nick Gray composition notes:

First rehearsal of gamelan parts with Rob Campion and Paula Friar, enabling further solidification and clarification of materials.

[Rehearsals continued through to March 2020, selecting and rearranging sections to find the best fit with the plot outline]

**14 March 2020, Nick Gray
composition notes:**

Recorded basic gamelan parts. Paula, Rob and Nick plus Rob S filling in some narration.

Some with all of us, some pieces just me playing polos (basic part) as I haven’t taught all the pieces to the others yet.

Late March 2020, Nick Gray composition notes:

With the advent of Covid19, the project was reconceptualised as work in progress, with plans for film rather than performance in 2021.

Works cited:

Gray, Nick (2017) "'Ardhanariswara" for string quartet and dance'. <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24507/>

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----- (2011) *Improvisation and composition in Balinese gender wayang: music of the moving shadows*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited (SOAS Musicology Series).

Heraty, Toeti (2006) *Calon Arang: the story of a woman sacrificed to patriarchy*. Sanur: Saritaksu Editions.

McClary, Susan (2000) "What was tonality?" in McClary, Susan, *Conventional wisdom: the content of musical form*. Berkeley, London: University of California Press.

Pujawati, Ni Made and Hobart, Mark (2009) "Balinese dance and mastery of the human body: a lecture-demonstration". Unpublished lecture, Asia House, London, 2nd July 2009.