FROM OXYMORON TO REALITY: AGENDAS OF GENDER AND THE RISE OF BALINESE WOMEN'S GAMELAN BELEGANJUR IN BALI, INDONESIA

by Michael B. Bakan

For me, watching a woman play that music is like watching a beautiful woman driving a big truck.

-- I Wayan Dibia

An unusual and surprising development in the recent history of Balinese musical culture has been the emergence of women’s *beleganjur* ensembles. This article presents a preliminary study of the women’s *beleganjur* phenomenon, examining how the involvement of women in a quintessentially male music performance medium has problematized the dynamics of interaction between gender, Balinese cultural tradition, and Indonesian national ideology in contemporary Balinese society.

**Beleganjur: A Masculine Musical Territory**

Historically, *beleganjur* has been a music associated with and exclusively performed by men (see Figure 1). In the words of Balinese composer I Ketut Suandita, it is “... the most masculine of Balinese genres.” Indeed, more than any other Balinese ensemble, the *gamelan beleganjur* defines a “masculine territory” (S. Willner 1996[1992]:11) on Bali’s musical landscape. Functionally and symbolically, this “*gamelan* of walking warriors” forms inextricable musical links to warfare and rituals of death, and to qualities of boldness and bravery (*keberanian*), heroism (*kepahlawanan*), and forceful strength (*kekerasan*) that dictate the core terms of an essentially masculine valor demanded of Balinese men who engage in battle, whether such battle is real or symbolic and whether it is waged against human or spirit adversaries.

In its standard modern form, the *gamelan beleganjur* is a processional orchestra comprising: four large hanging gongs (two gong ageng, kempur, bendè) and two smaller hand-held gongs (kempli, kajar [or kempluk]), which collectively outline the music’s foundational cyclic structure; six hand-held melodically-tuned kettle-gongs (each played by a separate player), the lower-registered pair of which (*ponggang*) provides core melody (*pokok*) while the upper set of four (*reyong* or *bonang*) executes ornamental figuration; a pair of drums (*kendang*) played in interlocking style by the leaders of the ensemble; and eight pairs of crash...
cymbals (cengceng kopyak), which alternate between unison and interlocking textures in close coordination with the drum part. Twenty-one musicians and eight gong carriers are normally employed.

In pre-colonial Bali, beleganjur ensembles accompanied royal armies into battle, inspiring soldiers to bravery and striking terror in the hearts of their enemies with their imposing sonic force (Willner 1996[1992]:11). In pre-colonial and modern times alike, beleganjur’s functional importance in other war-like contexts has been great as well, especially in the confrontations between human beings and evil spirits that animate innumerable Hindu-Balinese rituals, from cremation ceremonies (ngaben) to exorcistic purification rites (meccaru). In such contexts the powerful intensity of beleganjur sound may be used to frighten and drive away meddlesome evil spirits (bhutas and leyaks), or to generate energy, strength, and coordinated effort among Balinese people endeavoring to meet the often taxing physical demands of ritual activity, for example, the carrying of the heavy towers (wadah or bado) seen in cremation ceremonies, which may reach heights of ten meters or more.

Since its emergence in 1986, the formalized beleganjur contest (lomba beleganjur) has provided a new medium for the expression of
beleganjur music’s martial, masculine character. Beleganjur competitions, most of which are produced under direct government sponsorship and supervision, are normally scheduled in conjunction with celebrations commemorating important events in the history of an area or region of Bali, or in connection with patriotic occasions of national significance, such as Indonesian Independence Day (August 17). These symbolic wars of music are typically “fought” by rival beleganjur clubs (sekehe beleganjur) composed of young men and teenage boys, with each competing group representing a different neighborhood association (banjar), village (desa), region, or institution (e.g., a high school).

Attired in matching, brilliantly colored costumes that merge traditional Balinese ceremonial dress and modern showtime sensibilities, the groups that compete in beleganjur contests play a highly exhibitionistic style of music known as kreasi beleganjur. Here, the ostinato-driven structures and rhythms of traditional beleganjur are blended with flashy pyrotechnics and complex, multi-part musical forms that bear the distinctive imprint of a Balinese gong kebyar aesthetic, where compositional innovation and performance virtuosity are highly prized. Through its retention of the standardized, eight-beat gong cycle structure (gilak) of traditional beleganjur music, and of an idiomatic, two-toned ostinato core melody, the modern contest beleganjur style remains firmly rooted in its musical past; but with its exceedingly complicated drumming, intricate unison and interlocking cymbal patterns, extensive formal and structural musical variety, and elaborate choreographic maneuvers executed by the musicians as they play, kreasi-style beleganjur is a musical genre of decidedly novel character.

The choreographic element (gerak, lit. “movement”) of modern, contest-style beleganjur represents a unique innovation of the form; no equivalent synthesis of ensemble music performance and choreographed sequences executed by musical performers seems to have existed in Bali prior to kreasi beleganjur’s emergence (see Bakan 1998 and in press). It is also a revealing symbolic indicator of some of the cultural, ideological, and gendered parameters of modern beleganjur expression, and is therefore worthy of a somewhat closer examination at this stage of our discussion.

Most active in competition-style beleganjur choreography are the cymbal section and the two drummers. The movement sequences of the eight cymbal players are especially compelling, Swinging and twirling their instruments through the air, moving quickly from one formation to another, forming a ring and circling around the two drummers at its center, and clashing cymbals with their neighbors, they engage in carefully coordinated patterns of energetic movements, poses, and stances intended to replicate the battle-like postures and actions of noble warriors, from swashbuckling to martial arts maneuvers. Their movement patterns bear a close resemblance to (and in some instances may be inspired by) the stylized
army-like formations of certain ancient ritual dances, especially Baris Gedé, in which martial movements and war cries figure prominently in a ritualized representation of royal Balinese armies of bygone eras (see Bandem and deBoer 1995: 18-21).

Both choreographically and musically, kreasi beleganjur performances tend to be rather serious-minded in their evocation of an essentialized martial heroism that symbolically links the Balinese past to the Indonesian present. There are instances, however, when lighter, more humorous "subtexts" may emerge, especially in the choreography, where devices such as pelvic thrusts and gyrations, protruding backsides turned towards the audience, and playful caricatures of stock nobles and warriors from Balinese history and legend are sometimes employed in satirical vignettes of the lofty conventions and ideals implicit in the more conventional choreographic images. Through such devices, an alternate expression of male energy and style, or gaya laki-laki, is given "voice"; the more earnest character of idealized martial valor is counterpointed by a spirit of lighthearted irreverence, in which playfulness and brash masculine sentiment find balance.

Through a complex, multifaceted melange of musical sound, visual imagery, and patriotic rhetoric (provided mainly in the long-winded speeches by political officials that invariably commence contest events), beleganjur competitions conflate the heroic grandeur of royal Balinese warriors of old with both the freedom fighters of Indonesia's struggle for national independence of some five decades ago and the modern forces of the Indonesian military. As a kind of bridge between Balinese cultural tradition and Indonesian cultural nationalism, existing in a nation whose thin veneer of democracy only superficially conceals the authoritarian militarism of the New Order political regime under President Suharto, the formal beleganjur contest stands as an important symbol of connection -- of shared values and ideals -- between officially-sanctioned Balinese culture and the idealized militarism of nationalistic New Order ideology. As we shall now explore, beleganjur played by women challenges the integrity of this relationship significantly.

Agendas of Gender

Whether performed in contests or for cremations, in patriotic parades or purification rituals, with solemn seriousness or satirical irreverence, beleganjur music has traditionally embodied and reflected a reification of male energy and style, of gaya laki-laki. A variety of factors, including the music's often rough-mannered (keras) intensity and aggressive character, its historical connection with warfare and other predominantly male-defined domains of culture, and "practical"
considerations such as the heavy weight of certain instruments (especially the large gongs and drums) and the high levels of physical exertion and endurance demanded of performers, have traditionally solidified beleganjur's location at the male extreme of gendered Balinese musical identity.

Balinese women have not necessarily been forbidden from playing beleganjur in the past; it is just something that women have not done, and have likely not thought much about wanting to do or having reason to do. Within the conventions of Balinese "cultural tradition," women playing beleganjur defies common sense logic. In my own conversations with Balinese women and men from various walks of life (especially middle-aged and older individuals), even as late as 1995, mention of the term "women's beleganjur" --beleganjur wanita -- often met with perplexed or amused reactions. For many people I encountered, "women's beleganjur" appeared to represent an oxymoron.

Yet since the mid-1990s Balinese women have been playing beleganjur, and have been doing so in increasing numbers and with growing frequency (see Figure 2). The musical arrangements played by the new women's groups are much simpler than those played by men; tempos are relatively slow and there is little if any choreography; the groups are taught and supervised by men and typically perform only in special demonstrations, rather than in competitions or in traditional ritual contexts. It is men too who normally compose the music for the women's groups, and who carry the heavy gongs in processional performance, since, even within this quite radical context, women carrying gongs is viewed as too great a departure from conventional gender norms.

Existing at the margins of the broader beleganjur scene and Balinese musical culture generally, women's beleganjur stands as a small but intriguing aspect of contemporary Balinese musical life. It owes its existence not to internal processes of change and development emerging from within Balinese culture, but to the priorities of a specific program of New Order ideology: the official promotion of emansipasi, or women's emancipation, as a symbol of the Indonesian nation's modernization and progress. It is the very incongruity posed by the formerly mutually exclusive categories "women" and "beleganjur" that both empowers and problematizes women's beleganjur as a symbol of emansipasi values.

Questions, Issues, and Perspectives

This article examines women's beleganjur as a controversial musical phenomenon of Balinese culture implicated in the emansipasi ideology of patriarchal Indonesian nationalism. It explores what is at issue and what is
Figure 2: Women's *beleganjur* demonstration performance, Kuta Beach, 1995.

at stake for women who play *beleganjur* and for others -- both women and men -- who care whether or not they do. The primary data for the study is drawn from interviews I conducted in the Denpasar area of Bali in 1995 with two “types” of individuals: female *gamelan* musicians (ranging in age from their late teens to their mid-thirties) and highly-stationed male representatives of the Balinese arts establishment (ranging in age from their mid-twenties to their mid-seventies).

The orientation of my analysis reflects the particular viewpoints and biases of my informants, as well as the impact of a critical theory-based interpretive perspective shaped to a significant degree by my interdisciplinary readings in gender studies scholarship across a wide range of Indonesia- and other Southeast Asia-related subject areas. Building from this perspective, I argue that cultural symbols such as women’s *beleganjur*, ostensibly designed to project images and reflect values of women’s empowerment in modern Indonesia, are in actuality used to reinforce stereotypes, or sociocultural myths, that reinforce the stability and durability of male-dominated structures of power whose legitimacy depends on widespread public assumptions of women’s marginality.
Examination of this central issue unfolds around a set of broad guiding questions: How does women’s beleganjur engage or defy conventional conceptions of gender in Bali? How is it employed as a hegemonic instrument of New Order eman Dipati ideology, and in this respect, how does it compare to other eman Dipati-directed forms of musical and cultural expression? Does it reinforce, reshape, or undermine "prevailing mythologies" (Douglas 1980:179) about women’s abilities and deficiencies in conventionally male domains? To what extent does it advance or diminish women’s access to social and political rights, opportunities, and power in contemporary Bali (and Indonesia more generally)? And finally, how do the expressed attitudes and opinions of particular Balinese individuals reflect, challenge, subvert, or even transcend the ideological agendas and cultural moorings of the women’s beleganjur phenomenon?

With respect to this last question in particular, it is important to consider that the Indonesian government’s strategic employment of women’s beleganjur as an ideological tool does not negate the music’s significance as a medium of expression for its practitioners; nor does ideological usage fully dictate the limits of the genre’s representational significance. What a music means in the lives of its makers is always important. It is crucial for us as scholars never to forget this, regardless of how far our analytical and interpretive forays may take us from direct engagement with the expressions and actions of musicians whose worlds we endeavor to understand.

From Oxymoron to Reality: The Emergence and Development of Women’s Beleganjur

Upon completing my dissertation fieldwork in 1992, I departed Bali armed with an abundance of information about gamelan beleganjur yet confounded by a massive accumulation of unanswered questions. One thing at least seemed certain, though: beleganjur, a musical embodiment of Balinese masculine identity, would never be a women’s music. In a series of formal interviews and informal conversations with leading beleganjur authorities, which addressed issues of the music’s future prospects at length and from a variety of perspectives, I was told over and over again that despite the considerable progress and increased prominence of women’s groups in another Balinese gamelan sphere, the performance world of the gamelan gong kebyar, “women’s beleganjur” would never -- and could never -- develop. The very idea of such a thing, I was assured, was “mustahil”: impossible, out of the question. Summing up the consensus position on the matter with succinct clarity was the revered Balinese composer I Wayan Beratha: “Beleganjur is music for men, not for women,” Beratha explained to me matter-of-factly during a September 1992
interview at his home, leaving no doubt in my mind that this was not only the way things were, but the way they would remain.

In 1994, however, the first all-women’s beleganjur group premiered on Bali’s main stage of cultural display: the opening parade of the annual Bali Arts Festival (Pesta Kesenian Bali). Elegantly attired in matching, traditional-style ceremonial outfits, the women, ranging in age from their late teens through their mid-thirties, performed before a stunned and titillated audience numbering in the thousands.5 Lacking the vigorous masculine energy and flashy musical and choreographic virtuosity of men’s beleganjur, the women’s style was nonetheless notable for its uniquely restrained character and understated dignity. The performance’s impact on the audience, however, reportedly had little to do with the quality or character of the music or its presentation. What alternately shocked, impressed, enthralled, and amused the huge crowd was the simple yet unfathomable fact of women playing beleganjur. In the blink of an eye, the crash of a cymbal, “women’s beleganjur” had been transformed from impossibility to actuality, from oxymoron to reality.

This groundbreaking performance was ultimately revealed as more than a peculiar, isolated event, when later in the same year a second ensemble was formed in response to a government request for a women’s beleganjur performance at PORDYA (Pekan Olah Raga Kodya Denpasar), a sports festival held annually in Bali’s capital city, Denpasar. The group’s personnel was drawn mainly from the ranks of a gamelan organization from the town of Kehen in Badung regency. Sekehe Gong Waniita Kencana Wiguna, recently-crowned champions of the women’s division of the Bali Arts Festival’s annual gong kebyar contest. Their principal teacher was I Ketut Suandita, a brilliant composer in his mid-twenties whose rise to prominence on the Balinese music scene had been achieved largely through his status as a dominant figure in competitive men’s beleganjur of the early 1990s. (See Figure 3.)

In their debut performance at PORDYA 1994, the Kencana Wiguna beleganjur group, although billed as a women’s ensemble, ended up relying on the leadership of two male drummers. “I decided to use the boy drummers because they only gave me ten days to prepare the whole thing,” Suandita told me in 1995. “That’s not enough time to teach girls to drum.” Following the success of their PORDYA demonstration, Kencana Wiguna’s beleganjur group was selected to perform in the opening parade of the 1995 Bali Arts Festival, further legitimizing the claim of an emergent women’s beleganjur phenomenon to a stake in the contemporary musical culture of Bali. On this occasion, all of the performers, including the drummers, were women. (See Figure 4.)
Figure 3: I Ketut Suandita coaches the Kencana Wiguna beleganjur group.

Figure 4: Cengceng players of Sekehe Gong Wanita Kencana rehearsing for the 1995 Pesta Kesenian Bali opening parade.
By the time of my most recent visit to Bali in 1995, women’s 
beleganjur was a fast-growing phenomenon, with new groups being formed 
in Kuta (Badung), Pengosekan (Gianyar), and other locations. Individuals 
who in 1992 had categorically dismissed even the idea of women’s 
beleganjur were now becoming actively involved with it. For example, I 
Ketut Gedé Asnawa, the individual generally credited with having 
“invented” contest-style beleganjur music in the mid-1980s (see Bakan 1993 
and in press), was in the mid-1990s talking about “liking the idea of it, 
women playing beleganjur,” and even mentioning the possibility of 
producing a special women’s beleganjur competition in Denpasar (although 
an e-mail note I received from Asnawa on October 10, 1997, indicated that 
no such contest had yet been held or even scheduled).

Since that time, the beleganjur wanita movement has continued to 
gamelan wanita are playing beleganjur..., though not in ritual contexts....” 
(S. Willner, 1996[1992]:11). The following 1996 (June 9) posting on the 
GAMELAN listserv (gamelan@dartmouth.edu) by Rucina Ballinger 
suggests that even in the realm of ritual the impact of women’s beleganjur 
has begun to be felt, and in remote areas far from the Denpasar urban hub 
from which the form emerged:

Friends: I went to a Barong ritual north of Bitra a few nights 
ago and lo and behold, the beleganjur accompanying the 
Barong consisted of all women, not even a male drummer in 
sight. They played for a few hours, while waiting for 
another Barong from Bangli to arrive, through all the 
trancing and then a bit in the temple. Apparently the 
government is trying to encourage women’s gamelans 
throughout the province. I was surprised to see this in such a 
small, isolated village.

**Emanisasi or Hegemony?**

Women’s beleganjur has been hailed as great by some, as grating by 
others. Its controversial status is not unrelated to the inherent ambiguity of 
emanisasi itself, the ideological foundation upon which this new musical 
phenomenon essentially rests. Although locally conceived and developed in 
Bali, beleganjur wanita is a direct product of Indonesian government efforts 
to promote emanisasi, a nationalist version of “women’s emancipation” 
that walks a fine line between appropriations of Western models of gender 
construction, a host of tenaciously persistent traditional views of the 
statuses and roles of women in Indonesian societies, and a rhetorical 
merging and conflation of gender, culture, modernity, and the national 
interest that is paradoxical and uniquely Indonesian.
The glossy exteriors of *emansipasi* rhetoric and symbolism only partially conceal the fragile entanglements of their underlying scaffolding. Public opinion, political discourse, and certain scholarly perspectives (see, for example, Lev 1996, A.R. Willner 1980, Geertz 1973:417-18, n.4, and Geertz and Geertz 1975:56) have collectively contributed to Indonesia’s reputation, both internally and internationally, as a relatively progressive nation where matters of gender are concerned. Yet, as Julia Suryakusuma observes, “Beneath the superficial ‘modernism’ of ‘national development,’ gender and sexual discrimination has at once become more acute and yet more subtle” (Suryakusuma 1996:118). The outwardly modern, liberated women of idealized New Order imagination and ideology, Suryakusuma asserts, are in truth valued “... as appendages of and companions to their husbands, as procreators of the nation, as mothers and educators of children, as housekeepers, and as members of Indonesian society -- *in that order*” (italics mine) (Suryakusuma 1996:101).

Framed by such paradoxes of nationalized gender construction and perception, by the complexities of Bali’s own traditional custom-derived (i.e., *adat*-derived) norms and conventions of gender, and by the tensions and conflicting interests that animate the relationship of New Order nationalist imperatives and “... local attempts to protect local autonomy and identity” (Guinness 1994:284), *beleganjur wanita’s* status as a powerful symbol of Indonesian women’s advancement, on the one hand, and of a modernist protocol geared towards the “elevation” of traditional Balinese culture, on the other, has been promoted and contested.

Women’s *Beleganjur, Balinese Culture, and the Emansipasi Agenda*

In the following comments from a 1995 interview, I Ketut Suandita eloquently captures the spirit of the official, government-promoted perspective on women’s *beleganjur*:

> It’s important to have [women’s *beleganjur*]. It’s an experimental thing, a symbol of *emansipasi*. If women can play *beleganjur*, it really shows something, because it’s the most masculine of Balinese genres. It’s a new idea. It captures attention and it says something important about how our society is changing. It’s exciting to be involved with this. It’s exciting and satisfying [for me] to be a part of it.... [Balinese society] has to be *emansipasi*. Girls and boys have to be treated on the same level. We need to make new forms to reflect this equality, like the women’s *beleganjur*. 
Suandita’s enthusiastic endorsement is compelling, but the officially-sanctioned virtues of women’s beleganjur he champions are not embraced by all. Critics, including I Wayan Beratha and I Wayan Dibia, attack beleganjur wanita as a development that threatens established gender norms in dangerous ways, presenting not only formidable but unfair challenges to the delicate balance of tradisional (traditional) Balinese and progrésif (progressive) nationalist values which modern Balinese people attempt to maintain as they negotiate and reinvent their culture within the political context of New Order Indonesia. Sarah Willner’s characterization of women’s beleganjur as an “... inroad into more traditionally masculine territory” (S. Willner 1996[1992]:11) is certainly accurate but perhaps understated. For some Balinese at least, beleganjur wanita is seen not as an inroad into, but rather an inappropriate and unwelcome invasion of, the musical territory of “the most masculine of Balinese genres,” an invasion that shakes the tenets of Balinese cultural propriety at their roots.

As Beratha asserts, “... the proper spirit of [beleganjur] music is masculine and courageously bold (berani), and to have girls play it both cheapens the music and puts the girls in an awkward and inappropriate situation.”

I Wayan Dibia, Associate Dean of STSI, Bali’s Government Conservatory of the Arts, expands on this position:

For me, beleganjur is like looking at rock music. I don’t think I would enjoy women playing beleganjur. Once I saw it, and I thought, “This is too much.” I guess I’m conservative, but I have my reasons. With gong kebyar, the women are still seated. There’s still the grace and beauty of femininity. But to have women marching on the street, playing that loud [beleganjur] music is too much....

I reject the idea of developing women’s beleganjur... [F]or me, watching a woman play that music is like watching a beautiful woman driving a big truck....

The way [women’s] beleganjur is developing now is not satisfying. What is happening in Bali doesn’t always fit with modernity. Pushing things beyond hurts the quality of our cultural expression.

For both Dibia and Beratha, as for other like-minded Balinese, beleganjur wanita’s violation of the integral connection that exists between Balinese conceptions of gender and Balinese conceptions of tradition is profoundly unsettling. “[W]ho bears more responsibility for being ‘traditional’ than women[?]” asks political scientist Daniel Lev rhetorically,
“and what could be more uncomfortable, even destabilizing, than women redefining themselves as something other than the wives and mothers they [have] always been?”

Whether women who play beleganjur are in actuality redefining themselves or are being redefined by others (i.e., by men), and whether or not their activities as musicians have any bearing at all on their values and priorities as wives and mothers, are relatively inconsequential matters at this level. The image -- women performing beleganjur -- is, in Lev’s terminology, “uncomfortable, even destabilizing” regardless. In broader contexts, however, the matter of who actually controls women’s beleganjur and defines its intended purposes does take on great significance. The perceived consumption of a Balinese cultural form by nationalist political interests has inspired resentment in certain quarters. As Barbara Hatley has observed, “Government cultivation of traditional, regional art forms [in Indonesia] has been seen to exacerbate the distancing of local communities from their own cultural expression, as performances are appropriated to new settings and ‘developed’ in accordance with outside values” (Hatley 1994:218). Concerns over such distancing and appropriation processes are clearly evident in the above comments of Dibia. Implicit in his specific complaint about women’s beleganjur -- his criticism that “pushing things beyond” hurts the quality of Balinese cultural expression because “what is happening in Bali doesn’t always fit with modernity” -- is a much broader, more general critique of government-instituted programs and policies that impose nationalist values of modernity on localized forms of cultural expression in inappropriate ways.

By way of contrast, implicit in the official pro-women’s beleganjur stance articulated in the earlier-cited comments of Suandita is the notion that a national imperative of progress and modernization necessitates challenges and modifications to traditional beliefs and values at the localized, cultural level, even in instances where these may appear inappropriate to the people most directly affected by them. Change may hurt, but time and culture march on, and in New Order ideology the emansipasi imperative is cast as a fundamental component of Indonesia’s drive towards modernization and progress.

On the surface, both the terms of the debate and the expression of those terms appear straightforward enough: Balinese cultural conservatism, as manifest in the archetypally masculine identity of beleganjur music and its world, versus Indonesian cultural nationalism, as manifest in the emansipasi symbolism of women’s beleganjur. This specific opposition reflects a broader conflict of culture and ideology that exists within the Balinese women’s gamelan world at large, one whose central dilemma is well articulated by Sarah Willner: “The structures of Balinese society and their interaction with modern Indonesian and international influences,” writes
Willner, “both encourage and discourage women playing [gamelan] music” (S. Willner 1996[1992]:1). This inherent tension of Balinese women’s gamelan, in turn, reflects even broader sociohistorical Indonesian realities. As Guinness (1994:270) explains, “Throughout the history of the Indonesian peoples local traditions and expressions of social and cultural autonomy have been pitted against external pressures for change.”

With women’s beleganjur in particular, though, the disparity between priorities of cultural autonomy and external pressures for change are extreme and unusually conspicuous. As we shall see later in our discussion, the stakes involved in choosing to encourage or discourage women’s musical activities in the beleganjur sphere are probably higher than they are in the women’s kebyar sphere. As a result, highly divergent opinions on the subject of women’s involvement in beleganjur performance are common. Beleganjur wanita is Bali’s musical manifestation of gendered “symbolic inversion” par excellence, seemingly possessing the power to “invert, contradict, or negate categorical distinctions” of gender constructs and thereby “… furnishing a framework with which to comment upon or question the accepted order of things” (Roseman 1987:145). The quintessential maleness of beleganjur music renders it an ideal vehicle for symbolically inverting gender distinctions, for reifying the progrésif ideal that in Bali, in the words of one female musician, Ni Madé Puspawati, “anyone can do anything, boy or girl.” (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5: Ni Madé Puspawati.
But does beleganjur wanita really even promote the progressive, egalitarian agenda for Indonesian womanhood that its symbolism and the rhetoric of its advocates imply it does? There is reason to suspect that it does not, and if this is the case, then a "traditional culture versus progressive ideology" opposition fails to do justice to the ideological complexity of beleganjur wanita's situation. A substantial literature encompassing approaches and perspectives of scholars from a variety of disciplines -- and addressing topics ranging from women's activities and opportunities in music and other arts to their involvement in the Indonesian political sphere -- suggests the need for a critical approach in the study of beleganjur wanita's purported intentions and ideological implications. Scholarly works concerned with women's issues in Indonesia, several of which will be discussed, compel the cultural analyst to view the women's beleganjur phenomenon not only in relation to the claims and counter-claims of its proponents and critics, but also through the lens of a critical theory orientation that frames beleganjur wanita as a hegemonic instrument of considerable power.

**Processes of Marginalization**

According to Clifford Geertz (1990:79), the challenge of "...how to prevent regional, ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences from taking on political force" largely dictates the terms of an Indonesian nationalist agenda rooted in the construction and control of "culture." The work of Stephen Douglas, Barbara Hatley, Aline Scott-Maxwell, and other scholars suggests that this challenge extends beyond the domains of ethnicity, language, and religion to encompass gender as well; the proudly displayed cultural symbols of Indonesia's professed emanisipasi ideals have frequently been revealed as contributing more to women's marginalization in political, social, and even musical spheres than to the purported empowerment of women in these areas. Cukier et al. (1996:249) are correct in noting that "...gender is a cultural phenomenon and, in consequence, modification of gender relationships require changes in culture." Gender relationships and culture alike, however, can certainly be made to appear more enveloped in processes of change than they truly are.

In his revealing study "Women in Indonesian Politics: The Myth of Functional Interest," political scientist Stephen Douglas observes that despite "...an absence of norms that severely proscribe the opportunities and status of women" (Douglas 1980:152), subtler forms of institutionalized marginalization serve to ensure that women are "...relatively inactive and have few opportunities for political expression" in Indonesia (Douglas 1980:76). Nonetheless, according to Douglas, "Almost all public pronouncements on this topic by individuals of both sexes are reaffirmations of the myth that women do not merely have equal
opportunities in politics but that they actually wield about as much political power and influence as do men” (Douglas 1980:178). This myth is strongly reinforced by the inclusion and prominent display of women at high-profile events such as political exhibitions and receptions. Through this systematic tokenism, the image projected, though illusory, is generally perceived as real. “The point is not merely that most Indonesians feel that both sexes should be accorded equal treatment and respect,” claims Douglas. “The more interesting (and mythical) feature of popular thought on this topic is the belief that Indonesian women do in fact have opportunities for extensive and meaningful political activities and, further, that they have exploited these opportunities” (Douglas 1980:153-54).

The gulf between practical reality and public perception identified by Douglas is recognized in a different context by Barbara Hatley: “Viewed from different perspectives, a woman’s position vis-à-vis that of men may be interpreted as either dominant or subordinate: ideological prescription and actual social practice are seemingly frequently at odds” (Hatley 1990:179). “[A]pparently egalitarian conceptions of gender relations in fact embody assumptions that are far from egalitarian in nature” (Hatley 1990:182).9 In popular Javanese dramatic forms such as kethoprak, writes Hatley, even the ostensibly emancipated, modern, independent-minded heroines, that is, the branyak/kenès heroines, “... are dramatically important only in their relationships with key male characters,” their self-assertion occurring only “... in regard to their relations with men” (Hatley 1990:204). In modern Javanese drama, as in modern Indonesian life generally, the “enhanced prestige of female concerns” invoked in the rhetoric of emansipasi is counterbalanced by a “greater female dependence on men” (Hatley 1990:205).10

Aline Scott-Maxwell, in “Women’s Gamelan Groups in Central Java: Some Issues of Gender, Status and Change” (1996), locates manifestations of similar patterns in a specific musical domain, noting that a “... lack of fundamental change in the role and status of women in modern-day Indonesia finds correspondence in [Central Javanese] women’s gamelan groups and perceptions of them in the community at large. While new, these groups are not seen as radical or as overturning social conventions” (Scott-Maxwell 1996:226; italics in original). Countering possibilities for substantial change in the gender arena is what can be described as an indigenous theory of women’s musical marginality that is strongly propagated, widely supported, and generally presumed true by members of Javanese society, whether male or female.11 The musicianship and musical potential of Javanese women are discounted on account of: a characteristic lack of “technical proficiency” and “aesthetic quality” among the women’s groups (Scott-Maxwell 1996:223, 226); their reliance on “visual appeal” rather than musical quality for the achievement of public recognition and popularity (ibid.:228); and a notable lack of self-reliance in
women’s music-learning processes (ibid.:226) that necessitates dependence on the guidance of male teachers and often the assistance of “two or three men who play the more difficult instruments” (ibid.:224) as well. “In the wider Javanese community,” Scott-Maxwell asserts, “women’s gamelan music is seen as an extension of other women’s activities: a harmless interest that also provides an opportunity for socialising [sic] and acquiring a new outfit” (ibid.:226).

Two fundamental and interrelated processes of women’s marginalization, inferred from a review of Douglas’s, Hatley’s, and Scott-Maxwell’s essays, appear to direct and define hegemonic appropriations of emansipasi ideals across a broad range of social, cultural, and political institutions in modern Indonesia. In the first process, cultural symbols of gender equality and women’s emancipation -- prominent displays of celebrated women at political events, assertive theatrical heroines, women’s gamelan ensembles -- are essentially turned upside-down, coming to function less as reflections of than as substitutes for substantive advances in women’s rights and opportunities. In the second process, both patriarchal control over the institutions of women’s emansipasi and a host of “prevailing mythologies” (Douglas 1980:179) that direct and distort public perceptions of the statuses and abilities of women in certain domains are seen to further diminish emansipasi’s real potential to challenge established gender hierarchies that marginalize women.

In the discussion that follows, Balinese women’s gamelan will be explored as a musical phenomenon rooted in these two basic processes of marginalization. The primary focus will be women’s beleganjur, although we will begin with and frequently return to that genre’s close relative and direct antecedent, women’s kebyar (kebyar wanita). The purposes of this examination are twofold: first, to identify how gamelan performance by Balinese women paradoxically reinforces myths of female marginality while purporting to advance the cause of emansipasi; and second, to illustrate that beneath the observable complex of practices and dispositions that relegates women’s gamelan to the margins of Balinese musical culture lies a rather broad range of subject positions which alternately empower, challenge, and problematize the hegemonic authority of status quo conceptions of women’s subordinate status.

**Women’s Kebyar: A Brief History**

Women’s kebyar, the dominant Balinese development of an otherwise Java-centered women’s gamelan movement, became an established cultural institution in the 1980s. Its roots, however, date back to the early 1960s, when I Wayan Beratha and I Nyoman Rembang began offering mixed-gender classes in gamelan performance at KOKAR (now
SMKI), Bali’s government high school of the arts. The purpose of the classes was to provide female dance students an opportunity to deepen their practical knowledge and understanding of the standard dance music repertoire.

Though the co-educational KOKAR groups did not perform publicly, they did influence future developments in important ways. According to Dibia, “The KOKAR classes with mixed gamelan set a precedent where people got used to seeing women playing gamelan. Before that, people would reject the idea of women playing drums and things like that. But that set a precedent. Because Beratha and Rembang were essentially endorsing the idea of women performing gamelan music, even some people in the villages picked up on the idea.” Most notable among the village groups alluded to by Dibia was a pioneering women’s ensemble formed in the village of Sidang, in Badung regency, around 1970.

The precedent set by the KOKAR classes also led to the formation of an all-women’s kebyar group at the school in the late 1960s and indirectly fostered the eventual emergence of a highly significant women’s group, Sekaa [Sekehe] Gong Wanita Puspasari, over a decade later as well. In retrospect, the KOKAR all-women’s group, which was organized by Beratha, likely had relatively little direct impact on the broader Balinese society, since the ensemble only performed once a year at the school’s annual anniversary celebration. It was the formation of Puspasari that truly represented the arrival of women’s gamelan on the cultural stage of Balinese society.

Sekaa Gong Wanita Puspasari was co-founded by the famous Balinese drummer I Wayan Suweca and his sister, Ni Ketut Suryatini, now one of the two leading female musicians in Bali (the other being her Puspasari drumming partner, Ni Desak Madé Suarti Laksmi [Desak]). In 1980, Suweca returned from a two-year teaching engagement in the United States, during which he, Michael Tenzer, and Rachel Cooper had co-founded Gamelan Sekar Jaya in California. Inspired mainly by the high levels of talent and ability exhibited by certain of his American female gamelan students -- and additionally by the growing popularity of Javanese women’s gamelan groups at that time -- Suweca became curious about the potential musical abilities of Balinese women and decided to form a women’s kebyar club, which rehearsed at his family home compound in Kayumas, Denpasar. Most of the group’s personnel, including Suryatini, were veterans of the mixed or women’s groups at KOKAR. Many were at the time dance majors at ASTI (now STSI). Two members, Rachel Cooper and Lisa Gold, were Americans who had studied with Suweca during his tenure with Sekar Jaya in California.
The most important event in Puspasari’s short-lived career -- the group as such survived for just over a year -- was a performance on Indonesian national television, which was reportedly seen by millions of viewers throughout the country. “[A]fter that,” recalls former Puspasari member Ni Putu Oka Mardiani, “the group just kind of dissolved.” Its legacy, however, did not. The attention generated by this pioneering women’s ensemble largely influenced the government’s eventual decision to add a women’s kebyar division to the annual gong kebyar competition of the Bali Arts Festival. (The original men’s contest had been established in the late 1970s.)

Since its founding in 1985, the annual Arts Festival women’s kebyar contest (Festival Gong Kebyar Wanita Seluruh Bali [see Yasa et al. 1993:89]) has been the defining institution of the Balinese women’s gamelan movement, and has provided “... the major incentive for the formation of women’s groups in Bali” (S. Willner 1996[1992]:12). Through its first decade, the contest was largely dominated by a succession of women’s kebyar groups representing the Badung regency of Bali.

Badung won its first championship in 1986. The winning group (representing the civil service corps, KORPRI Denpasar) was composed mainly of former members of Puspasari, Suryatini and Desak among them. It also included two of the principal informants for the present study: Ni Nanik Komarniati and the aforementioned Mardiani. While all of the performers in the ensemble were women, all of the teachers and coaches were men. In 1987, a nearly-identical group represented Badung in the contest but did not win, finishing second to a strong ensemble from Nusa Penida (the representatives of Klungkung, in eastern Bali). From 1988 on, most of the women who had performed for the Badung groups in the 1986 and 1987 competitions were banned from the contest, when a regulation disallowing participation by arts conservatory students, alumni, and faculty was instituted. In spite of this setback, Badung groups continued to be the dominant force in women’s kebyar through the mid-1990s, winning five Arts Festival contest championships between 1988 and 1995.

Obstacles and Myths

In 1993, Badung’s celebrated women’s kebyar tradition became the basis of the first book-length scholarly study of Balinese women’s gamelan, titled Kehidupan dan Repertoire Gending Gong Kebyar Wanita di Denpasar (The Life and Musical Repertoire of Women’s Gong Kebyar in Denpasar). This important 180-page work, written by a five-member committee of esteemed Balinese scholar/musicians chaired by I Ketut Yasa, was published as a Research Committee Report (Laporan Penelitian Kelompok) by STSI Surakarta, Java, under the auspices of the Indonesian
government’s Department of Education and Culture. Its contents reveal much about the ideological underpinnings of the Balinese women’s gamelan movement.

In R. Anderson Sutton’s terms, Kehidupan can be seen to represent a “crystallization” of the Balinese women’s kebyar movement. Crystallization occurs when a particular arts genre or tradition undergoes “... processes of objectification, formalization, and definition that are associated by Indonesians with a fine art tradition” (Sutton 1986:118). “[T]he existence of a book, objectifying the tradition, a visible symbol of permanence” (Sutton 1986:122) stands as a certain indication of a crystallization process having occurred.

In the case of Kehidupan, what is crystallized is not the “fine art tradition” of gong kebyar itself, but rather the sanctioning of women’s active involvement in that tradition. Kehidupan legitimizes the Balinese women’s gamelan movement with reifying force, establishing women’s kebyar as an integral feature of a modern, progressive, emancipated Balinese musical culture. The study legitimizes something else as well, however, namely, the same double-edged marginalization protocol observed in the Indonesian political, theatrical, and musical domains analyzed by Douglas, Hatley, and Scott-Maxwell, respectively: an imperative of patriarchal authority underscored by marginalizing assessments of female ability and character.

On the issue of male authority, an eleven-page appendix (see Yasa et al.:147-57) listing all teachers and coaches (pembina and pelatih) employed in 1991 and 1992 rehearsals of Badung groups in the Bali Arts Festival women’s kebyar contest is most revealing: not one woman’s name appears among the dozens of individuals listed. Also noteworthy is the fact that while two of the three principal informants consulted in the Kehidupan study itself were women (Desak and Ibu Ketut Arini), all five co-authors of the report were men. Thus, in the making of music and its study alike, the “voices” of female gamelan musicians are seen to be directed, mediated, and controlled by men.

A rationale for this evident subordination of female musical expression to male authority can be inferred from the one-page Abstract (Abstrak) of Kehidupan (Yasa et al. 1993:viii). The Abstract begins with a preamble in which “The emancipation of women which was ignited by Raden Adjeng Kartini in the nineteenth century and developed rapidly during the twentieth century” is hailed as a proud achievement of the Indonesian nation. The accomplishments of celebrated Indonesian women in a variety of professional areas are cited in support of the position that emansipasi has in large measure already been achieved. Mention is made of female doctors and professors, a university president, the national
government's Minister of Social Affairs, a foreign ambassador, and even an astronaut. Next, Indonesian emansipasi's debt to the Western "women's liberation" movement is acknowledged, but the use of the word "radical" (radikal) in connection with that movement -- a term with pejorative connotations in Indonesia -- suggests a subtle condemnation of the extremity of Western views: "Overseas the form of women's emancipation has been known for a long time as Women's Liberation," write the authors. "Certainly they are sufficiently radical, that is: [there are] equal rights between women and men in a broad range of areas, as well as equality in professions, careers and economic power."

Following the preamble, discussion turns to the subject of the women's arts community of Denpasar (Badung), which, we are informed, was formerly limited to involvement in "the arts of dance, weaving and painting," but has more recently come to encompass musical activity as well through the formation of approximately eighteen active gamelan clubs, "in which all of the instruments in the gong kebyar ensemble are played by women."

This development, however, has not occurred without considerable challenges. "The journey of women's gong kebyar has not been as smooth as that of the men's gong kebyar," write Yasa and his colleagues. "Certainly it is widely known, that the obstacles as well as problems which have interfered have been complex enough. Several among them are: the busy schedules of women, where Hindu religious obligations have rendered establishment [of the women's gamelan movement] difficult; a view held by society which holds that the women's community still constitutes a weak community; and ethical problems of propriety and impropriety (pantas/tidak)."

These three major "obstacles/problems" -- practical constraints on women's time and freedom, the relative lack of self-sufficiency and solidarity of the women's arts community, and issues of propriety relating to women crossing over into men's domains -- are identified at the outset by Yasa et al. with specific reference to Balinese women's gamelan. Through the remainder of the study they come to serve as foundations for the rationalization of a seeming paradox: the marginalized status of women in an ostensibly emancipated musical world. They in turn come to support and to be supported by broadly held, "common sense" notions that (1) Balinese women lack the inherent capacity to play gamelan with anything approaching the competence of men and (2) whatever musical potential Balinese women do possess in the area of gamelan performance will not likely be fully realized without the direct guidance and assistance of men.
Thus, the case for women’s kebyar appears similar to that described by Scott-Maxwell in connection with Javanese women’s gamelan groups. It is not change in the role and status of women, but lack of such change, that is fundamentally reinforced in the women’s kebyar world. As in Java, the newness of the form does not imply a form of radicalism or the overturning of social conventions (see Scott-Maxwell 1996:3); on the contrary, women’s kebyar symbolically supports long-accepted beliefs in women’s inferiority in traditionally male domains and justifies the authority of patriarchal institutions over women’s emansipasi-defined activities and programs. In these ways, women’s kebyar supports the dominant position of Balinese cultural traditionalists and Indonesian cultural nationalists alike, legitimizing the appropriateness and “naturalness” of sociopolitical hierarchies in which women’s empowerment and liberation are celebrated in symbolic life while being carefully limited, monitored, and controlled by a male-dominated order.

**Beleganjur Wanita: Unjustifying Gender’s Margins**

With respect to the ideological functions it serves, the overall profile of women’s beleganjur closely resembles that of women’s kebyar, and Javanese women’s gamelan as well. In all three cases, the deference of women to patriarchal authority is deemed justifiable by the power of prevailing mythologies to codify the status of women as marginal. But while the generalities are the same, beleganjur wanita’s specific dimensions render its position in the women’s gamelan world unique.

Paradoxically, by placing women at the most extreme reaches of a male-dominated and defined musical terrain, women’s beleganjur strengthens the case for Balinese women’s musical marginality while at the same time threatening the established sociocultural order within which the terms of gender are constructed and negotiated. On the one hand, the definitive masculinity of beleganjur’s character essentially assures that women who play the music will be perceived as less competent and less convincing in their performances than their male counterparts. Even female musicians who may in fact possess the inherent capacity to achieve levels of musical force and physical robustness comparable to those which define the proper style, energy, and aesthetic of men’s beleganjur cannot afford to fully realize their potential in these areas, since to do so would be to violate the most basic norms of appropriate female decorum, to cross lines that are not to be crossed even in the most “emancipated” of cultural frameworks. In order to protect the integrity of their womanhood, women who play beleganjur must do so with less force and bravura than men; and since force and bravura are essential components of good beleganjur performance, women’s beleganjur cannot avoid assessments of inferiority. The symbolic impact of this situation strengthens public perceptions (or misperceptions)
that women are unable to function equally with men in formerly gender-exclusive domains, and thus reinforces belief in the need for men to oversee women’s musical activities. The case is similar in the kebyar world, but beleganjur magnifies more glaringly the appearance of a fundamental disparity between male and female musical aptitude.

On the other hand, however, beleganjur wanita groups, merely by virtue of the brash defiance of gender expectations they embody, are radical and do overturn social conventions, perhaps in ways that the kebyar and Javanese groups do not. Scott-Maxwell has observed that within the constraints of their marginalized status, Javanese women’s groups challenge and redefine “...certain images and meanings of gamelan performance that are perpetuated by the essentially male, [sic] mainstream of the gamelan tradition” (Scott-Maxwell 1996:228). The same might be said of women’s kebyar groups.

In women’s beleganjur, though, the transformation of conventionalized, male-defined gamelan-related images and meanings appears to go beyond the level of challenge and redefinition, to the point of bordering on subversion. For example, the involvement of women in kebyar instrumental performance can be seen as representing a radical departure from gender conventions, but it can alternatively be viewed as an expansion -- albeit a rather significant one -- of pre-existing gender roles. As dancers and singers, women have long had a direct and intimate connection with kebyar music; in one sense, for them to play the musical instruments of the gong kebyar ensemble is merely an extension, or alternate manifestation, of their long established involvement with the genre.

In beleganjur, there is no real precedent for women’s involvement in musical performance. Moreover, turning again to dance aspects of performance, the choreography of the modern kreasi beleganjur style -- with its war-like postures and maneuvers evoking martial, masculine images -- is completely out of character with any culture-grounded Balinese aesthetic of appropriate female demeanor. Bali’s historical and mythological histories do include legacies of female warriors (e.g., the warrior-heroine Srikandi of the Mahabharata, wife of Prince Arjuna), but even female warriors are not idealized in terms of the kinds of martially heroic masculine values of character embodied in beleganjur’s symbolic universe. On account of its relatively greater distance from a perceivable connection to established cultural precedents, women’s beleganjur treads closer to a subversive position relative to foundational conventions of gender in Bali than does women’s kebyar. This perhaps helps to explain the serious concerns of critics such as Beratha and Dibia, who appear to conceive of women’s beleganjur not only as a somewhat awkwardly constructed symbol of emansipasi, but as a genuine threat to Balinese cultural integrity.
To paraphrase Margaret Wiener (1995:489), the women’s *beleganjur* phenomenon, as a product of nationalist discourse, harnesses Balinese ethnicity and tradition through the symbolic potency of *beleganjur* sound and image, using a text of the past (*beleganjur*) in a new text indexical of the present (women’s *beleganjur*) to serve the interests of the modern state and its projects (*emansipasi*). Such a form of discourse, Wiener notes, “does not recreate and rework the past in order to understand more richly and act more effectively in the present; rather it evokes the past in order to subvert it, transforming it into a manipulable object” (Wiener 1995:489). Subverted past and mediated present collide in *beleganjur wanita*’s world, exacerbating tensions at the border of culture and nation and unjustifying the established margins of gender. The core of *beleganjur* has become somewhat unraveled in the face of a women’s performance medium, generating enthusiasm countered by derision, opening new doors while galvanizing efforts to keep the old ones firmly shut, and creating confusion — at least in the minds of certain men in the upper echelons of the Balinese arts community — over whether Balinese women are beneficiaries or victims of nationalist *emansipasi* agendas.

**Balinese Viewpoints: An Interpretive Perspective**

*Beleganjur wanita*’s unlikely and uneasy synthesis of a Balinese cultural symbol (*beleganjur*) and a national ideological agenda (*emansipasi*) exposes disparities between the purported intentions and underlying motivations of an ideologically grounded musical phenomenon. Let us now turn our attention to how individuals at various levels of the women’s *beleganjur* world define the genre’s complex, multilayered musical and ideological terrain. Through an interpretive examination of the expressed views and opinions of female *gamelan* musicians, male teachers and coaches of women’s groups, and high-ranking members of the Balinese arts community, the following discussion explores how particular people negotiate conventional constructs of gender — gender myths, as it were — in relation to the ideological and cultural implications of a musical phenomenon that largely confounds such myths.

Following Douglas (Douglas 1980:153), I employ the term myth here “... not in the sense of an erroneous belief, but rather in the sense of a belief widely enough shared and highly enough valued that it helps integrate the political culture,” or in this case, the musical culture. In their implicit engagement of certain gender myths and certain modern musical realities within particular frameworks of ideas and perceptions, the individuals discussed below address the following questions: Is it proper for women’s *gamelan* groups to use men’s musical performances as models for their own aesthetic and stylistic priorities? Do women have the inherent capacity to play as well as men? Do they possess the strength of character to be as
musically self-reliant? How much impact does the issue of “visual appeal” have on public attitudes towards female musicians and the reception of their music?

What emerges from the ensuing discussion is a composite “dialogue,” in which the views of certain Balinese individuals towards women’s beleganjur (and women’s gamelan more broadly) are contextualized within a set of culture-grounded gender constructs that guide and influence but do not necessarily determine personal attitudes, actions, and opinions. The distinction between influence and determination is an important one, since neither traditional assumptions nor modern ideologies can fully contain or account for the range of responses presented here.

The people whose voices are invoked on these pages speak within, around, and in some cases beyond the prevailing mythologies and hegemonic prerogatives that ideologically frame women’s beleganjur. As Ward Keeler notes in reference to Java, “Blanket characterizations of females do not constrain individuals’ actions completely. Yet by the same token, no individual can really undercut these categorical statements, which constitute a system of gender constructs” (Keeler 1990:148). The accounts that follow suggest that the same is true in Bali’s beleganjur wanita world.

Part I -- Girls Will Be Boys? Issues of Appropriate Style in Beleganjur Wanita Performance

In 1995, the fundamental debate about women’s beleganjur that I encountered through my research concerned the basic question of whether or not beleganjur wanita should even exist. While women’s kebyar was by that time an accepted reality of modern Balinese musical life, even among culturally conservative factions, women’s beleganjur was not. This difference rested on more than the fact that women’s kebyar had simply been in existence for many more years than women’s beleganjur. Deeper matters were at stake.

While kebyar’s legacy as a men’s music is indisputable, its character and the circumstances of its origin have made it relatively amenable to adaptation as a vehicle of women’s performance. The case is the opposite for beleganjur. Gong kebyar is an invention of the twentieth century that has essentially defined the terms of innovative, experimental musical modernity in Bali. Women’s performance of kebyar music can thus be rationalized as an adventurous extension of a broadly experimental kebyar aesthetic. Furthermore, as has already been noted, as dancers and singers, women were already intimately connected with kebyar long before the advent of women’s kebyar groups. Gamelan beleganjur, on the other hand, even in the kreasi styles of modern beleganjur contests, retains an identity tied to its
masculine roots in an ancient martial past, as is evident from the first section of this article.

The inherent affront to conventions of feminine character and beauty posed by women’s beleganjur presented problems not only for those individuals with whom I spoke who claimed categorically that the genre should not exist, but for those who acknowledged its right to a place in the Balinese musical pantheon as well. For the latter group, the fundamental dilemma posed by the huge chasm separating conventional femininity from conventional beleganjur was whether or not efforts should even be made to bridge that chasm: Should women who play beleganjur act like women when they perform or should they in effect act like men, emulating the musical and performance styles of men’s ensembles to the best of their supposedly limited abilities? Given an awkwardly difficult choice of options, is it preferable for women to compromise the integrity of female character by appropriating the style and energy of a male performance aesthetic or, alternatively, for beleganjur’s character to be compromised by concessions to femininity implicit in the notion of a distinctive women’s style? Such questions of propriety engendered disparate and sometimes ambiguous responses, disclosing beleganjur wanita’s problematic status relative to an ideology that essentially conflates gender equality and women’s marginality.

For Ni Madé Puspawati, who at eighteen performed as a drummer with the Kencana Wiguna beleganjur ensemble in the 1995 Bali Arts Festival opening parade, emulating male performance models unquestionably represents the proper aesthetic ideal for women’s beleganjur, despite the “fact” that practical achievement of such an ideal is unattainable. According to Puspawati,

We want to play like that, with all the flashiness and the moves of the boys. It’s not that we’re embarrassed [to play that way], it’s just that we lack the ability.... We have to concentrate just on the playing. We can’t think about doing [choreographed movement sequences like the boys do] and other things. You know, we can have more action and movement during [the less technically demanding] slow passages, but not in the fast sections.

Puspawati’s principal teacher, Suandita, expresses similar views in the following interview excerpt:

Bakan: If you could get the girls to play and move exactly like the boys [when playing beleganjur], would you?
Suandita: Yes, of course. That is the ideal; that is the model. That’s how it should be. But it’s impossible. Maybe if I had a whole year to prepare [a women’s group it would be possible]. But yes, that’s the goal.”

Bakan: So you don’t see a need for a distinct “women’s style”?

Suandita: No. Beleganjur is about masculine energy and style. That’s what you strive for. That’s the ideal. For boys or girls.

Suandita reported to me that teaching women to play beleganjur presented formidable challenges and was in many respects more difficult than teaching them to play kebyar. Especially problematic for him was trying to deal with the choreographic aspects of women’s beleganjur performance, as is suggested in the remarks which follow:

Suandita: [I]n beleganjur, you need more action [than in kebyar]; it’s about heroic feeling and the playing has to be strong, too. You have to play with so much energy and move that way also to get that. But in kebyar, the music, if played right, sort of takes care of itself more. Therefore, as far as style, energy, and action are concerned, it is much more difficult to teach girls beleganjur, even though teaching the music itself is easier. For the boys, it’s easy to get that energy, that action, but for the girls, doing choreographed sequences [like those seen in men’s beleganjur performances] makes them a little embarrassed, a little nervous. Because of that, I try to create special choreography appropriate for the girls.

Bakan: How is it different?

Suandita: Of course, men are very comfortable with being bold and strong (keras). That’s what it’s like being a boy. For the girls, it has to remain feminine. The movement must be slower, and the music, too. If it’s a little slower, it’s more appropriate.

Ni Nanik Kormaniati, a government employee in her mid-thirties, who is married, has two children, and has performed for Badung annually in the Bali Arts Festival women’s kebyar contests since 1986 (as a drummer since 1988), is one of Bali’s most accomplished and well-known female kebyar performers.20 In 1994, she was the lead drummer for the government group that first introduced women’s beleganjur to the Balinese
public at the opening parade of that year's Bali Arts Festival. As the following passage indicates, Kormaniati's opinions on the matter of how women should represent themselves in beleganjur performance are complex, suggesting a certain degree of ambivalence:

Bakan: Why don't the girls dance like the boys when they play beleganjur?

Kormaniati: Because we lose our concentration. We can't play and dance at the same time like the boys can.

Bakan: But you would if you could?

Kormaniati: Oh, yes.

Bakan: And if you could do that, the style and energy [you would strive to achieve] would be the same as [that of] the boys?

Kormaniati: Well, it depends on the situation. Sometimes, it's embarrassing to be like that. Sometimes we need to be more feminine -- more like women, to keep a more composed (polos) expression, to be more refined (halus). Maybe in rehearsal, we can be more like the boys, but in front of a committee, or honored guests, we can't be like that. There are moments when we could probably perform with the energy of the men, just as there are in kebyar. When we play Topeng Keras [a masked dance], it has that strong, masculine feeling, but generally, yes, the appropriate style is going to be a little different for women than it is for men.

From I Wayan Dibia's perspective, women's gamelan style not only should but must be different than men's style. As we saw earlier, Dibia considers beleganjur to be so fundamentally at odds with the basic qualities of feminine character that development of an appropriate women's beleganjur style is in his view highly unlikely. In the following remarks, he locates the specific source of the basic problem, although in doing so he at least acknowledges some tentative, speculative possibilities for improvement.

"You have to give [women] more space to demonstrate what is special about women," Dibia explained to me in contrasting beleganjur with other Balinese arts forms, such as kebyar and wayang (puppet theater), where he sees distinctive women's performance styles having been developed with far greater success. "This is why I reject the idea of
developing women’s beleganjur. There’s just no room for that to happen. Maybe if they developed a form of beleganjur with smaller drums and smaller cymbals, and if they used a slendro [instead of pelog] scale, that would make it appropriate... If it has to develop at all, it should be developing as something different that allows for the cultural expression of women to emerge, through its instrumentation, compositions, and so on.”

Even in the far more hospitable medium of kebyar, Dibia finds fault with an increasing tendency of women’s groups to be pressured into appropriating unbecoming aesthetic goals based on the models of men’s groups:

... [T]he problem is that [women] can’t play fast. Some instruments -- reyong, drum -- they can’t play well. [Interlocking melodic patterns] are also difficult for them -- at least that was the situation during the early days -- but now the tempos are almost like those of the boys, because the teachers are always pushing for that. But I disagree with that [tendency of the teachers to push the girls], because you lose the artistic expression. You lose the identity of the women’s groups.

If it’s going to be like that, why not just have men play? Why bother with women’s groups? It should be distinct. There should be a separate style of gamelan playing for women. They shouldn’t push the tempo of the music. New pieces should be created with women in mind: pieces with slower tempos, different ornamentation. Seeing women play so fast, it hurts my feeling because it’s pushing the limits. Maybe that’s sexist, but I’m concerned about the artistic expression. It’s like watching women body builders. You know they’re women, but they don’t have feminine identity. I don’t like that they are subject to this pressure to play like the men. It is gong kebyar, but it is gong kebyar [performed] by women.

I Ketut Gedé Asnawa also feels that the emulation of men’s performance styles by women’s groups is unsuitable. In contrast to the more skeptical Dibia, however, he sees real possibilities for the development of distinctive, appropriate women’s styles not only in kebyar, but in beleganjur as well. For Asnawa, the fundamental problem is located less in the act of women playing beleganjur than in the limiting position, held by most Balinese, that the correspondence between beleganjur and masculinity is essentially an absolute one. Advocating the adoption of more flexible perspectives on beleganjur’s representational parameters in the
following passage, Asnawa offers an interesting view of how a path towards a more appropriate women’s beleganjur style might be forged:

[T]he gamelan beleganjur does not only play the strong character (keras) music. There are also softer styles, [even] in the traditional beleganjur music. We have to create music that is appropriate for the women. That is the challenge. I think if you take strong, masculine music and have women play that music, it’s nonsense. It has to be appropriate.... We have to create appropriate forms and appealing presentations; the etiquette of how women carry the drum, how they walk, their costumes, these are important. The biggest problem is probably the carrying of the gong. How can you have women carrying gongs [and still being feminine]? I don’t know. As for the costume, maybe it can be something “semi,” between man and woman. That’s going to take some work.

For the women’s beleganjur, we can keep the form of beleganjur, but the theme should be different. The “heroic” theme is appropriate for the [men] but for the women, we have Srikantri, the female warrior [of the Mahabharata]. She’s an appropriate symbol for the women; still heroic, but heroic “women’s style”.... In terms of theme, I don’t care. We can establish new ones [that are more consistent with appropriate images of women]; for example, [themes related to] beleganjur accompanying wedding processions or for Dewa Yadnya[-type ceremonies, such as temple festivals, where slower, less intense styles of beleganjur are played].

From Asnawa’s standpoint -- problematic details of gong carriers and costumes aside -- neither the integrity of Balinese women nor the integrity of beleganjur need be sacrificed for the sake of the other in beleganjur wanita, since, as the above passage suggests, the tradition of beleganjur itself is not nearly so monolithic in its aggressively masculine identification as conventional wisdom proclaims it to be. Alternate symbols, such as the female warrior Srikantri, and alternate “themes,” such as different types of religious ceremonies that move beleganjur away from its usual immediate identification with martial heroism of the masculine type, can be employed to bridge the semiotic chasm of “women” and “beleganjur.”

In Asnawa’s view, women need not look out-of-place, inappropriate, or incompetent playing beleganjur; that they have tended to appear thus is a consequence of a lack of sensitivity and imagination on the
part of those who have been responsible for *beleganjur wanita*’s conception and development. A suitable “women’s style,” according to Asnawa’s theory, should not be modeled on the aesthetic priorities of men’s style; nor should it represent a caricature of such priorities. The key to finding an appropriate women’s *beleganjur* style is to be found in a more creative dialogue with *beleganjur*’s own past, one that facilitates the avoidance of, or at least diminishes the centrality of, the fundamental dichotomy inherent in a forced integration of feminine character and masculine music.

**Part II -- Strength, Talent, and Marginality**

As the above accounts illustrate, opinions concerning whether female *beleganjur* groups should strive to emulate men’s groups in their performances are rather diverse. Opinions on whether or not they can actually do so successfully are far more uniform. Regardless of their views on other matters, my interview respondents, female and male, were generally consistent in asserting that women lack not only the ability but also the innate capacity to play as competently, as expressively, and with as much strength and power as men.

Female *gamelan* musicians, according to Puspawati, are simply “weaker than men. The difference is in the power and expression. Girls have less power; we cannot play very fast. But it doesn’t matter. If I can’t play strong or fast, it’s still okay for me. I love playing *gamelan*.”

“It’s just different,” states Mardiani, echoing Puspawati’s position. “Boys are just stronger. They can move their hands faster. I think even if a girl started from a very young age, same as boy, the boy probably would still be better. It’s physical.”

Even Kormanjati, whose musical proficiency clearly exceeds that of many Balinese male *gamelan* players, and who has performed *kebyar* both in Bali and abroad with government-organized ensembles otherwise composed of men, supports this marginalizing notion. When I asked her if *gamelan* competitions featuring mixed-gender groups might emerge in Bali’s musical future, Kormanjati laughed, shook her head, and replied: “Not possible. We’re too slow. We can’t keep up with the boys.”

Emiko Susilo, an American woman who has studied and performed Balinese *gamelan* extensively in both the United States and Bali as a member of Gamelan Sekar Jaya and other groups, contends that the issue of physical strength is actually secondary to that of *bakat* -- that is, aptitude or inherent talent -- in the consistently marginalizing assessments of women’s *gamelan* performance that one encounters in Bali. According to her,
Everyone [in Bali] acknowledges that the women’s groups are inferior, though there are some really bad men’s groups. But the best women’s groups are not even close to even the middle-level men’s groups. I don’t think they think of [the difference] as really being a matter of physical strength -- although there is a big concern that women are not supposed to lift heavy instruments. I think they believe the central difference is a matter of bakat, that in the women’s gamelan, there is simply less bakat.

Ironically, the musical talent and competence of accomplished Western gamelan musicians, such as Susilo himself, Rachel Cooper, Lisa Gold, and Sarah Willner -- whose abilities oftentimes equal or eclipse those of their male peers -- have prompted some Balinese musicians to devise alternate theories to support their marginalizing opinions of Balinese women who play gamelan. For example, Emiko Susilo reports that Dewa Ketut Alit, a well-known Balinese musician who has worked with the Sekar Jaya group, has been very impressed by the bakat of certain female members of the ensemble, has suggested that the inferiority of Balinese women musicians may have less to do with physiology or an inherent bakat deficiency than with attitudes rooted in the processes of enculturation they experience. In his view, Balinese women, in contrast to both Balinese men and American women, are not taught to be bold (berani) and therefore suffer from fears that “they shouldn’t do things that men do, like playing gamelan.”

Most exceptional among the individuals with whom I discussed the matter of women’s putatively inferior musical attributes was Suandita, who takes the “nurture-over-nature” concept implied in Alit’s gender “theory” one step further, going so far as to suggest, at least tentatively, that Balinese women may indeed possess the inherent potential to play as well as their male counterparts.

“I think the [family] lineage issue is more important [than gender],” claims Suandita. “If a girl comes from a musical family, growing up in that environment and starting to play from a young age, she could very well end up a better musician than a boy from a less musical family. But we don’t have girls playing from a young age like that yet.22 I don’t really know how to answer the question [of whether women are innately less gifted as musicians].”

Against the backdrop of a seemingly near-universal societal presumption that Balinese women are categorically deficient in musical capacity, Suandita’s willingness to express uncertainty and openness-mindedness on the issue of women’s bakat (i.e., because there is insufficient evidence at present to reasonably do otherwise) represents a progressive, even radical, perspective. As we will recall from Hatley,
however, apparently egalitarian conceptions of gender relations in Indonesia typically embody assumptions that are far from egalitarian in nature (Hatley 1990:182). Her assertion is substantiated by the following comments of Suandita:

There is a big difference between teaching girls and boys. Teaching the boys is easier. You give them the piece directly. Teaching girls is different. They take a much longer time to learn, and they don’t have the power [of boys].... Another problem: for the girls, the teacher tries to make the arrangement of the music really easy, something simple they can play. How to make the music simple and good? That’s a challenge and a problem....

If I’m teaching [girls], I have to be calm and gentle. The girls don’t know the patterns [or] the arrangement. You have to be very patient.... You have to speak slowly and be calm.23 The girls, when they start, are embarrassed.... [Y]ou have to always be encouraging and comforting. Also, [in teaching the Kencana Wiguna women’s group], I used several [male] assistant teachers, so there could be more one-on-one attention. It’s very difficult to deal with twenty-four people when they’re learning like that. With the boys, I just go straight in.

Despite his earlier-cited pronouncement that “Girls and boys have to be treated on the same level,” Suandita’s views on the practicalities of teaching suggest otherwise. The future is one thing, the present another. One infers from Suandita’s remarks that female gamelan players in the here-and-now must be treated with a certain patronizing benevolence, since they lack self-reliance and physical power and are both slow to learn and easily embarrassed. Such assessments affirm that in order for women to survive and thrive in the “emancipated” modern world of Indonesian Bali -- where ideology, if not practical perception, dictates that “anyone can do anything, boy or girl,” even play beleganjur -- the guidance, direction, and wise counsel that only men can reportedly provide is still deemed essential. The success of emansipasi, paradoxically enough, is depicted in such a view as dependent on women’s submission to a benevolent patriarchal authority, and the structure of the women’s gamelan world bears this out, as clearly in the beleganjur wantitua realm as anywhere.

With respect to the issue of musical ability and inherent capacity, the myth of Balinese women’s musical marginality is pervasive and unifying. What is rather remarkable to the outside observer is that it persists so tenaciously in the face of abundant contrary evidence, evidence emerging not only from beyond Bali’s borders or in vague speculations about
possible future developments, but from within present-day Balinese realities as well. In the women’s kebyar world, at least, leading female musicians such as Suryatini and Desak play as well as or better than many male musicians and have achieved prominent positions in the music teaching profession; the top women’s groups equal or surpass in quality many mid-range men’s groups; and, as Sarah Willner notes, “... the issue of strength is questioned after seeing [Balinese] women construction workers carry[ing] 100 pound sacks of cement on their heads...” (S. Willner 1996[1992]:3).

The marginalizing stereotypes persist under the guise of a common-sense body of public gender knowledge not because they are necessarily true but because they are framed by a thick protective layer constructed from the raw materials of female essentialization. The flexibility of these essentializing materials assures their resilience. Keeler notes a similar pattern in the employment of gender stereotypes in Java:

That such stereotypes do not prevent women from attaining fairly high rank in the bureaucracy follows from the very flexibility of the system; that such women do not challenge anyone’s impressions of females follows from the resilience of its categories. If women achieve success, they are seen to possess those qualities usually thought lacking in women. No one need wonder at that, nor reconsider their stereotypes (Keeler 1990:148).


In Bali, societal acceptance of a gender-based mythology of disparate musical potential and ability supports and affirms broader structures of patriarchal hierarchy that exist at many levels, from family organization to village politics and national governmental affairs. Acceptance of this myth reinforces public faith in a system that defines sociopolitical change in the realm of gender as being comprised of increased female involvement and prominence in conventionally male domains where women are still denied the opportunity to significantly alter their subordinate status.

Maintaining the prevalent notion that women cannot play gamelan as well as men is a social and political priority at the levels of both local Balinese and national Indonesian interest. Beleganjur wanita powerfully supports such a priority by placing women in a musical context that highlights gender disparity to a degree verging on the bizarre. While official rhetoric espouses the virtues of women’s beleganjur in terms of its embodiment and projection of emansipasi ideals, public responses to
performances, and to the phenomenon as a whole, in actuality center far less on issues of musical quality or progressive symbolism than on either beleganjur wanita’s “strangeness” or the peculiar attractiveness of women playing music that defies any logical association with femininity. Relative to the first type of response, Dibia states that “We have a word, soleh, meaning ‘strange.’ Sometimes things that are soleh, like women’s beleganjur, are used to attract people’s attention. It’s something unusual so people will take notice ....”

For Dibia, this soleh quality is cast in negative terms relative to women’s beleganjur, which, he claims, panders to a prurient public fascination with things bizarre but offers little beyond such fascination. Asnawa sees women’s beleganjur in a more positive light, but he too recognizes that the genre’s achieved public popularity has had relatively little to do with its musical attributes. He cites novelty value and the visual appeal of women as beleganjur wanita’s two strongest selling points. In the following comments, it is evident that Asnawa views these extramusical matters as keys both to the genre’s own success and to its potential contribution to the revitalization of a somewhat stagnant beleganjur scene:

The challenge now for creators of kreasi beleganjur such as myself is how to make beleganjur music more attractive and to give it more variation. I think the [men’s] contest style kind of reached a plateau in the early 1990s; you know, [with] the [championship] groups like Sedang [in 1991] and Meranggi [in 1992]. Since that time, it’s gotten a bit stale. In many cases, people are already bored. That’s why we need innovation: use beleganjur to accompany dance, have women’s beleganjur, mix the standard beleganjur instruments with other instruments like bamboo instruments, put beleganjur on stage rather than in a procession, things like that.... [With women’s beleganjur] the audience doesn’t just want to hear music, but also to see the beautiful women. That’s [human] nature. So I think if we have women playing beleganjur, people will come to see [them].

Objectification of the female musician as a beautiful, sexually desirable, and/or strange physical presence devoid of real musical significance most certainly plays into the broader processes of marginalization that undercut emansipasi’s ostensible aspirations for change in the status of Indonesian women. The consensus position of all women musicians with whom I spoke, however, was that emphasis on their visual appeal served as a form of empowerment, not marginalization. To be on stage, I was told -- and especially to be in the public eye doing something as profoundly attention-grabbing as playing beleganjur, where feminine beauty
is highlighted by its juxtaposition with masculine musical sound -- increased one’s attractiveness greatly.

In Bali, where a young woman’s perceived worth is gauged largely in terms of her marriage prospects, the practical advantages of such enhanced powers of attraction are considerable. According to Kormaniati, playing *gamelan*, whether *beleganjur* or *kebyar*, is an excellent way to assert one’s desirability to prospective husbands. “That’s a good reason for women who don’t have boyfriends to play *gamelan,***” she explained to me on one occasion, quickly qualifying her remark by adding, “Of course, I’m married. I have children.”

Even for female *gamelan* musicians who already have boyfriends, playing *gamelan* can be a useful social asset. It “[... makes us more attractive to everyone!" exclaims Kormaniati’s close friend and drumming partner Ni Nanik Sujati, a single woman in her late twenties who works for a bank in her native village just outside Denpasar. “And especially if there’s someone special out there [in the audience]. When my boyfriend is out there, he sees me play [and] I think he gets a little jealous because he knows all the other boys are looking at me (laughter).”

Sujati’s claim that playing *gamelan* increases a woman’s attractiveness “to everyone” suggests possible parallels between the public image of the female *gamelan* musician and that of the *branyak/kenes* heroines of Javanese *kethopurak* theater alluded to earlier in the discussion of Hatley’s work. *Branyak/kenes* characters are admired for being “glamorous and flirtatious, spirited and vivacious, direct and assertive of speech” (Hatley 1990:188). The popularity of this image “[... can perhaps be explained in terms of its multifaceted appeal. For male audience members it affords glamour, flirtatiousness, and sexual daring; for women, dynamic assertion of a woman’s perspective; for the modern-minded, suggestion of potential progressiveness” (Hatley 1990:197). And yet, recalling our earlier consideration of Hatley’s position, these heroines are dramatically important only in their relationships with male characters; their self-assertion becomes manifest only in their relations with men (Hatley 1990: 204).

**Throwing Off the Blankets: Integrity In Spite of Marginality**

In Javanese *kethopurak* theater and in Balinese women’s *gamelan*, one is presented with images of assertive, modern, emancipated women whose assertiveness, modernity, and emancipation are mediated by male control and valuation. As I have argued throughout this article, this central paradox is manifest in the specific instance of women’s *beleganjur* and in the culturalized appropriation of *emansipasi* symbolism and rhetoric generally. *Beleganjur wanita* represents one of many examples of a
prevalent *emansipasi* pattern, in which gender myths function to marginalize women and render them subordinate to patriarchal authority in contexts ostensibly designed to highlight and celebrate women's independence and liberation.

To overlook the sociopolitical manipulations evident in *beleganjur wanita* or to deny their hegemonic implications would be naïve and irresponsible. To conclude this discussion without directly addressing how that which is at stake and that which is valued in *beleganjur wanita's* world may transcend these manipulations and implications, however, would be negligent. Women who play *beleganjur* (and other forms of *gamelan* as well) claim to derive real benefits and genuine pleasure from doing so; there is no reason to question the sincerity of their claims. Dilemmas of proper musical style and demeanor, assessments of inferior musicianship, prescribed dependence on the leadership and guidance of men, and the privileging of visual appeal over musical performance do not change the fact that women who play *beleganjur* take pride in the music they make and in the musical organizations to which they belong.

Regardless of what machinations and manipulations underlie women's *beleganjur*, compelling the critical theorist to "deconstruct" it, the genre possesses meaning, significance, and power — real meaning, significance, and power — for those who are most directly involved. In this era of critical ethnomusicological thought, it is crucial to remember that what musicians do, what they feel, and what they care about still truly matter.

"Since childhood, I had a feeling I really wanted to play that music," Puspawati told me of *beleganjur* as we sat together on a bench in her family's tiny roadside food stall in Kehen. "I saw the boys playing and I thought, 'I really want to try.' But initially, the head of the village didn't allow it. 'Maybe wait a couple years and we'll make a [women's] group,' he would say."

And eventually he did, and now Puspawati plays *beleganjur*, and this makes her happy. The desire, she says, "... comes from a feeling in myself. I did it for myself, but I wanted to play with good players, the best possible. The quality is important. It must be the best it can be."

Puspawati's sentiments are heartfelt and impassioned. It means a great deal to her both to play *beleganjur* and to have the opportunity to do so. Whether or not she is implicated in some grand scheme designed to ensure the continued vitality of modern versions of age-old forces of marginalization is not the issue from her perspective; playing *beleganjur* is.

In the end, we might consider the possibility that the power of "blanket characterizations" of gender to effectively confine women's rights,
opportunities, and prospects in Bali (and throughout Indonesia) is significantly limited by the inability of such characterizations to “...constrain individuals’ actions completely” (Keeler 1990: 148). If women enjoy playing beleganjur and find in the experience something that is meaningful in their lives and relevant to their personal desires and aspirations, perhaps beleganjur wanita has achieved some of its purported emansepsih goals in spite of itself. Perhaps the ramifications of marginalizing assessments of female musicality, and of the presumptions of a need for patriarchal control stemming from such assessments, are neutralized -- even rendered irrelevant -- in contexts where women express little concern about whether their music-making is taken seriously or whether they have autonomous control over the activities of their musical lives.

Finally, we should not too readily dismiss beleganjur wanita’s potential power as a force of substantive social change. As Guinness reminds us, “Despite the New Order’s intent to appropriate cultural meanings and symbols to the purposes of national integration... [the] government has found it difficult to manage all aspects of the social and symbolic order” (Guinness 1994:299). If ideological prescription and actual social practice are seemingly frequently at odds, as Hatley suggests, one does not necessarily guide the other; their relationship is dialectical. If the experience of performing beleganjur brings strength, power, solidarity, or even just a sense of joy to the women who play it, that which is internalized will likely be projected outward as well. The image may become the reality; ideological symbol may inform a transformation of social and political practice, if only to the extent that women may eventually gain greater control over the creation and production of the music they make.

The radical incongruity of beleganjur wanita brings to the genre a power to effect change that is perhaps unequaled in other spheres of the women’s gamelan world. It is a phenomenon with no reasonable place in a well-ordered and sensible Balinese beleganjur culture, for the simple reason that beleganjur, on its surface and at its core, is generally conceived of as a categorically male form of expression and a formal expression of maleness. Beleganjur wanita is thus a musical reality that defies cultural logic in the eyes of most Balinese. As such, it is a destabilizing force operating in a rapidly changing culture, a conspicuous and compelling anomaly that lives among people committed to shaping and defining their identity within the context of a nation whose political future is by no means certain or secure.

“The significance of representations,” writes Wiener, “depends far more on the way they are received than on the aims of their creators” (Wiener 1995:497-98). Paradoxically, women who play beleganjur have been cast as both recipients and agents of the musical and ideological messages they deliver, but not as the creators of those messages; in its
representational significance, women’s beleganjur has primarily been a creation of the hegemonic aims of a male-dominated political order committed above all else to its own preservation and continued strength.

Nonetheless, as public performers, female beleganjur musicians are active agents rather than passive recipients of their designated cultural/ideological roles. They therefore possess an inherent creative capacity to interpret and negotiate the received terms of their own representational significance, and in turn to influence the perspectives of others and to promote real change: musical, social, even political. Beleganjur wanita may have emerged out of the hegemonic soil of patriarchal Indonesian nationalism and its underlying mythologies, but at this critical juncture in Indonesia’s history, the prospect that it may help to promote new agendas of gender, informed and inspired by the values and expressive desires of women in their efforts to represent themselves, is by no means untenable.

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Notes

The main field research for this article was conducted in Bali in July and August of 1995. Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted passages from interviews that appear in the text (including the epigraph) are from that research. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Florida State University Council on Research and Creativity, which funded this study; to Sean Williams, Richard Wallis, Douglass Seaton, and Rita Bakan for their careful readings of earlier drafts of this article and for their many insightful and helpful comments and suggestions; to I Ketut Gedé Asnawa and I Madé Lila Arsana for their invaluable help in the field research project and their assistance in interview translations; and to all of my friends and colleagues in Bali who were kind enough to take part in the research. All interviews were conducted in bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian), with the exception of those with Asnawa, Dibia, and Ni Putu Oka Mardiani, which were conducted mainly in English. Note that the presence of “I” before a Balinese name indicates that the individual is male; “Ni” indicates a female.


2 The wording of this translation of the term beleganjur (originally a Kawi
[i.e., Old Javanese] word, balaganjur) was provided by I Ketut Gedé Asnawa.

3 Principal among these authorities were Asnawa, I Wayan Beratha, and I Nyoman Rembang. The particular event that initially inspired my interest in the idea of “women’s beleganjur,” even before such a thing existed in Bali, was a men’s beleganjur contest I attended in Denpasar in 1992, at which a performance by a group including three female musicians was presented, shocking the audience and leading to a minor scandal following the event. The three women played “easy” instrumental parts (ponggang and kempli, as in gamelan Adi Merdangga), did not participate actively in the choreography, and were stationed at the back of the performance area; yet despite their marginal role, their impact on the audience was tremendous. Witnessing this performance led me to openly speculate on the prospective future of a “women’s beleganjur” phenomenon during my subsequent 1992 fieldwork, but everyone with whom I discussed this matter (i.e., several high ranking men in the Balinese musical establishment, all middle-aged or older) assured me that no such development could ever take place, that the performance I had seen (which was always discussed in the most disparaging of terms) had been nothing more than an anomaly devoid of significance for future developments.

4 See S. Willner (1996[1992]) for a concise but informative discussion of the women’s kebyar phenomenon in Bali. See Yasa et al. (1993) for a more detailed historical account that focuses primarily on the development of women’s kebyar organizations in Badung. (Yasa et al. also briefly discuss the legacy of Balinese women performers on the gendér, a keyed metallophone used in the accompaniment of shadow puppet plays; see p. 52). For studies of women’s instrumental music performance traditions in Java, see Scott-Maxwell (1996, 1993) and Soedarsono et al. (1993) on the modern women’s gamelan movement in Central Java; Weiss (1993) on Central Javanese female gendér players; and S. Williams (1996 and 1997) on Sundanese gamelan degung of West Java and other forms. For perspectives on historical relationships between women and gamelan in Indonesia, see Vickers (1985), Sumarsam (1995:27, 60), and Perlman (in press).

5 The group was organized by and represented Pemda Badung (Pemerintah Daerah Badung), the Badung regency division of the Indonesian national government. All members were Pemda employees (the majority in the Department of Education and Culture). It seems relevant and important to note at this point that in the Indonesian political system, all government bureaus and agencies beyond the level of village (desa) politics operate under the central authority of the national government, which is based in Jakarta, Java. Thus, even ostensibly localized, region-specific cultural
events and institutions that operate under government sponsorship are effectively implicated in the political agendas of New Order nationalized cultural ideology.

6 See Guinness (1994) for an informative discussion of how adat functions as a force of mediation between the localized cultural beliefs and expressions of specific Indonesian societies (e.g., Bali) and nationalist appropriations of such beliefs and expressions in terms of New Order ideology. See H. and C. Geertz (1975) and Wikan (1990) for detailed studies that address the implications of Balinese adat on women’s lives in Bali from quite different perspectives.

7 Lev, quoted by Sears in her Introduction (“Fragile Identities: Deconstructing Women and Indonesia”) to Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia (Sears 1996:30). Lev’s reference relates to gender issues in Indonesia generally rather than in Bali specifically.

8 See Sutton (1991) and Becker (1980) for insightful discussions of the complex relationships that exist between government cultural development programs and gamelan traditionalism and regionalism in Java.

9 Writings by C. Geertz (1973:417-18, n.4) and H. and C. Geertz (1975:56) on Bali, and by A.R. Willner on Java (1980:189) present rather different interpretations in implying a basic consistency between ideology and social practice where matters of gender equality are concerned. Keefer (1990) in a sense mediates between the different perspectives of Hatley and these authors in engaging the complex dialectical tension of social practice and ideology implicated in Javanese constructions of gender. Such complexity is further explored from a variety of points of view and in relation to the particular circumstances and conditions of a diverse array of gender-defined cultural situations in the compelling collection of essays contained in Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia (Sears 1996). Other volumes of collected essays (which are not cited elsewhere in this article), including Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia (Ong and Peletz 1995), Forging New Paths: Feminist Social Methodology and Rural Women in Java (Beringhausen and Kerstan 1992), Why Gender Matters in Southeast Asian Politics (Stivens 1991), Creating Indonesian Cultures (Alexander 1989), Women of Southeast Asia (Van Esterik 1982), and Southeast Asia: Women, Changing Social Structure & Cultural Continuity (Hainsworth 1981) offer additional contributions to this dialogue.

10 This paradoxical relationship of female prestige and dependence has been addressed in several ethnomusicological studies of Javanese musical traditions. In addition to Scott-Maxwell’s work, which receives
considerable attention in the present article, Weiss’s “Gender and Gender: Gender Ideology and the Female Gender Player in Central Java” is especially notable on account of the author’s insightful analysis of how mythical and historical representations of women function to elevate the musical status and artistic freedom of the female gender player while simultaneously reinforcing and legitimizing the prevalent notion that it is impossible for women “... to be active participants in the hierarchies of male society except through association with the power of the men in their lives” (Weiss 1993:26). The prestige vs. dependence dialectics/dichotomies faced by Indonesian female musicians have also been addressed in studies focusing on vocalists; see, for example, Sutton (1984, 1987), S. Williams (1996, 1997), and W. Williams (1991:110-15).

11 The one notable exception is the performance domain of gender wayang, where, according to Sarah Weiss (1993), the musical abilities of female gender players are often more highly esteemed than those of their male peers, largely on account of the emotional depth attributed to women’s playing and their sensitivity to the direction of the master puppeteer’s (i.e., the dalang’s) performance. Such esteem, however, is paradoxically linked to prevailing myths concerning the essentially weak character of women, especially to the notion that women, unlike men, largely lack the capacity to control their emotions.

12 Both Suryatini and Desak are now employed as college music instructors (dosén) at STSI. As of 1995, they were the only Balinese women to hold such positions and to have achieved a professional status in musical careers. Some other female musicians (such as Kormaniati) have achieved what Sarah Willner (1996[1992]) terms “semi-professional status” by virtue of their prominent participation in the Bali Arts Festival women’s kebyar contest over many years, but these women receive virtually no remuneration (usually the equivalent of about $5.00 US per month) for their musical efforts.

13 It should be noted that prior to the advent of the inaugural Arts Festival women’s kebyar contest in 1985, a small number of women’s groups other than Puspasari were already active, including those of Krambitan (Tabanan) and Nusa Penida (Klungkung). A kebyar group directed by I Gusti Bagus Suarsana was also formed in Jakarta, Java; this group, like Puspasari, was featured in a television broadcast (in 1983). See S. Willner (1996[1992]).

14 Since that time, many of these women, along with current conservatory students, have continued to play on an intermittent basis as members of a government-sponsored women’s gamelan group operating out of STSI under the musical direction of Suryatini and Desak.
See Soedarsono et al. (1993) for a study of Central Javanese women’s gamelan conceived along similar lines.

I use the abbreviation Kehidupan here in reference to the study for the sake of convenience. All quoted passages from the work included represent my translations of the original bahasa Indonesia text.

The content, style, and spirit of this section of the Abstract of Kehidupan bear an almost uncanny resemblance to those of a work published forty years earlier: Wanda di Indonesia (1953), by Dato Toemenggoeng.

Between family responsibilities, professional obligations, and the time-intensive tasks of making offerings for and taking part in a multitude of ritual and ceremonial events, Hindu-Balinese women (and even girls) are left with precious little time for “non-essential” activities such as playing in a gamelan club. While performing gamelan has traditionally been an integral part of the Balinese male socialization process, this has not been the case for women. Critics (women and men) accuse women’s gamelan organizations of promoting an indulgent, superfluous cultural activity that occupies too much time and energy, preventing women from devoting sufficient attention to both their mandatory duties and more “worthwhile” and “appropriate” optional pursuits, for example, studying dance.

The limited musical role of women performers in gamelan Adi Merdangga (see Bakan 1993:143-46) alluded to earlier might be said to stand as a partial exception to this statement.

In addition to her high-profile performance activities with women’s groups, Kormaniati is one of the only women to have performed with government-organized gamelan groups otherwise composed of men, including one which toured Korea in 1991 (Bakan in press) and another that toured the United States and Canada in 1997.

I do not know whether Dibia’s advocacy of slendro rather than pelog for women’s beleganjur had specific aesthetic implications or was merely presented as an example of how contrast between men’s and women’s forms might be achieved. The “scale” (saik) typically employed in beleganjur is a four-tone derivative of the pelog-type saih selisir (see Bakan 1993, in press).

Since the time of this interview, an STSI children’s gamelan club including both daughters and sons of faculty members has been formed.

Remarks made to me by Mardiani suggest that the “paternal” mode of
pedagogy evidenced in Suandita’s approach to teaching women represents a
continuation of earlier practices. Recalling her experiences in the KOKAR
women’s kebyar student groups in the 1970s, Mardiani spoke of how
Beratha “… was much nicer when he taught the girls, not like when he
taught the boys, where he was very tough.”

24 See S. Williams (1997:8) for discussion of a similar situation in the
Sundanese musical culture of West Java.

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