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Sean Williams

*Evergreen State College*

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# Sonic Liminalities of Faith in Sundanese Vocal Music

Sean Williams

Sundanese sung poetry of West Java, Indonesia, has long represented a rich set of elite values that often reflect Hindu, Buddhist, and animist ways of understanding the world. In a region known for its current adherence to Islam, the continuing presence of songs that directly reference Hindu deities and narratives from hundreds of years ago seems like both a startling anachronism and a commentary on the ways in which song can transcend contemporary religious and political identities.

This article has as its focus the changing relationship between Hinduism and Islam as manifested in the performance of two Sundanese songs—*Ceurik Rahwana* (The tears of Rahwana) and *Hamdan* (The praised one)—over thirty years of study of *tembang Sunda*, a genre primarily associated with the hereditary aristocracy. In examining a song that reveals an older local connection to Hinduism (*Ceurik Rahwana*) and contrasting it with a contemporary popular song reflective of Muslim beliefs (*Hamdan*), the article highlights the overall changes in a musical genre and the ways in which those changes are indicative of changes in Sundanese society.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the article reveals the ways in which the singers who perform the songs reflect a liminal level of engagement with Hindu and Muslim cosmologies, respectively, in both lyrical and musical materials.

Because Indonesia is renowned for the diversity of its people, its beliefs, its performing arts, its bioregions, and other important

markers, it is no surprise that the national motto “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” (Unity in diversity) is based on the lived experience of its citizens. In their introduction to *Divine Inspirations: Music and Islam in Indonesia*, coauthors/editors Anne K. Rasmussen and David D. Harnish note that “[some communities] embrace unique mixes of select Islamic principles with Hindu-Buddhist or indigenous animist practices.”<sup>2</sup> Though Islam came to the Sundanese region hundreds of years ago, it encountered a foundation of Hindu-Buddhism deeply connected with local animism.<sup>3</sup> As is often the case in Indonesia, the practice of Sundanese belief tends to be layered, with little separation between religions, leading to easy justification for their coexistence. These codependent systems of faith allow multiple points of access to the sacred.

## Liminal Beliefs among the Sundanese

The Sundanese are Indonesia’s second most populous ethnic group. Inhabiting the island of Java, just south of the nation’s capital, Jakarta, they bear some similarities in language and culture to their neighbors to the east, the Javanese.<sup>4</sup> Historically associated with Hindu-

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the skills of Viviane Sukanda-Tessier in her translations of the songs *Ceurik Rahwana* and *Kulu-Kulu Bem*, which appear in the liner notes of the compact disc *Tembang Sunda: Sundanese Classical Songs* (Nimbus NI 5378, 1993).

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<sup>2</sup> David D. Harnish and Anne K. Rasmussen, eds., “Introduction: The World of Islam in the Music of Indonesia,” in *Divine Inspirations: Music and Islam in Indonesia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Wessing, “Sundanese,” in *Muslim Peoples: A World Ethnographic Survey*, vol. 2, ed. Richard Weekes (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 730.

<sup>4</sup> The Sundanese number approximately 40 million; the Javanese, on the same island but further east, number over 100 million.

Buddhist practices,<sup>5</sup> the Sundanese became adherents to Islam in a gradual process that remains somewhat incomplete, based on some of their folkloric and ritualistic practices. Since the end of the twentieth century, however, much of western Indonesian—and, by extension, Sundanese—culture has tended to emphasize the influences of Islam and deemphasize the vestiges of Hinduism and Buddhism. As the Sundanese have come to lean on increasingly outward expressions of their Islamic faith—through the use of the Islamic headscarf and specific kinaesthetic cues to one another, as well as through musical means—it has been Sundanese women who have consistently provided the most public expressions of West Java's increasing Islamization. Among those women who sing, regardless of the genre, the presentation of beliefs, priorities, and faith traditions are on full display through both the lyrics and the musical elements of the songs. As Anne Rasmussen points out, Indonesian women are significantly involved in public and popular expressions of Islam,<sup>6</sup> as visual signifiers of Islamic identity in both rural and urban regions of West Java, women publicly delineate boundaries of belief.

Locally sung poetry of various types tends to highlight elements of Sundanese history (animist and Hindu-Buddhist), the natural world, spirituality, and heartache. With a landscape that features volcanoes, rice fields, bamboo and conifer forests, and significant rivers and hot springs, it is a small step to imagining the ways in which some of these important natural resources might appear in songs, and how they might connect with an

older spirituality that includes ancestor worship and reverence for the natural world, including animals such as tigers and birds.<sup>7</sup> This is the Sundanese foundational belief system, overlaid with layers of other religious traditions and practices. Influences from Hinduism began to appear by the first century c.e., and Buddhism was established locally by the sixth century. In general, the influence of Hinduism is part of a larger syncretic pattern that affected all of Java by the tenth century.<sup>8</sup> Islam is estimated to have arrived in Sundanese territory by the fourteenth century c.e.,<sup>9</sup> becoming established by the eighteenth century.

The golden age of Sundanese cultural history is locally believed to have arisen during the Hindu kingdom of Pajajaran (1333–1579). This was a time of economic interdependence and strength for the Sundanese, as the area's pre-Islamic highland regions developed a rich trading culture. Although the area's leadership was continually in competition and sometimes conflict with Majapahit, the East Javanese Hindu kingdom, the era is seen as a time of considerable health and prosperity, and of connectedness with both the spirit world and the ancestors. In short, it is the time that people remember most fondly through the performance of *tembang Sunda* songs.<sup>10</sup>

Javanese rulers colonized the Sundanese highlands after a battle (Pasunda Bubat)

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<sup>7</sup> See Robert Wessing, Robert, *The Soul of Ambiguity: The Tiger in Southeast Asia*, Monograph Series on Southeast Asia, Special Report No. 24 (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Tarling, *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, vol. 1: *From Early Times to c. 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 178.

<sup>9</sup> M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1300*, 2nd ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Van Zanten, *Sundanese Music in the Cianjuran Style*, 71.

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<sup>5</sup> Wim Van Zanten, *Sundanese Music in the Cianjuran Style* (Providence, RI: Foris Publications, 1989), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 16.

between Majapahit and Pajajaran in 1357. The later collapse of Pajajaran in the sixteenth century occurred just as Islamic ideas and beliefs were becoming established in Central Java in the kingdom of Mataram. The Dutch East India Company gained control over the Sundanese highlands in 1677, when the Javanese ruler of the Mataram kingdom ceded the region to them as part of a favor he owed. That territorial gain provided the company with much-needed plantations for tea, indigo, coffee, and other trade goods. One of the ways in which the Dutch (who ultimately nationalized the Dutch East India Company in 1800) furthered their aim of colonization in the region was to support local performing arts and the layers of social hierarchies, including in West Java.<sup>11</sup> This support—financial, social, and political—kept the Sundanese class levels in place. The hereditary aristocrats learned to speak Dutch as well as Sundanese, and many were able to function fluidly in colonial society as local rulers under colonial law. Because the Dutch were interested primarily in local natural resources rather than in large-scale religious conversion, the Sundanese maintained their layered religious practices of animism, Hindu-Buddhism, and Islam for several hundred years.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of the forms of Sundanese performing arts that are still performed today were becoming established and codified; among them were genres that tended to celebrate animistic or Hindu-based mystic spirituality side by side with those more closely aligned with Islamic viewpoints. This musical syncretism reflects a local blend of both

religious traditions—with deep influences from much older animist beliefs—that work specifically in a Sundanese context. For example, the Sundanese play several types of *gamelan* (bronze gong-chime) ensembles, which date from pre-Islamic days. They also play tuned bamboo rattles called *angklung*, which invoke the rice goddess, Nyi Pohaci (or Dewi Sri), in order to ensure the continuing fertility of the rice fields upon which their lives depend. The rice goddess functions as a liminal figure between animism and Hinduism; she simultaneously features prominently in the earliest Sundanese origin myths, while having taken on the name of the more recently imported Hindu goddess of agriculture.<sup>12</sup>

Mainstream Sundanese Muslims are *not* Hindu, but their history does include Hinduism, Buddhism, and animism. In understanding contemporary Sundanese usage of *tembang Sunda* and its inclusion of frequent references to the Hindu kingdom of Pajajaran, however, it is helpful to remember that many adherents to Sundanese Islam continue to appreciate aspects of their collective past that help them to feel strong, locally vibrant, and sophisticated. If that past includes references to Hinduism, and if celebrating Pajajaran as the golden era of Sundanese culture serves as a uniting element among the Sundanese, then contemporary Muslims will include it in their cultural performance practices.

When Indonesia declared its independence in 1945, the old system of arts patronage under the Dutch collapsed; many instrumentalists and singers moved into the regional colonial capital city of Bandung to find work. As a result of that dramatic shift, formerly royal genres

<sup>11</sup> Ernst Heins, “Goong Renteng: Aspects of Orchestral Music in a Sundanese Village” (Ph.D. diss., University of Amsterdam, 1977), 36.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Wessing, “Bamboo, Rice, and Water,” in *The Garland Encyclopedia of Music*, vol. 4: *Southeast Asia*, ed. Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams (New York: Garland, 1998), 52.

became associated with the city, including *tembang Sunda*. The hereditary aristocracy that had supported the performance of sung poetry since at least the nineteenth century set down new roots in the post-colonial regional government, and in that chaotic milieu, its performers and enthusiasts celebrated what they remembered of their aristocratic Hindu past through performances of *tembang Sunda*. By the end of the twentieth century, much of Indonesian society was moving toward an increasingly conservative Islamization that called its longstanding syncretic religious practices into question.

### ***Tembang Sunda* in Theory and Practice**

*Tembang Sunda*—the genre featuring aristocratic sung poetry accompanied by the boat-shaped *kecapi* zither and *suling* bamboo flute—is one of the primary sonic tools used for remembering—and commemorating—the feudal era of Hindu Pajajaran (see Fig. 1). Wim Van Zanten describes *tembang Sunda* as a “mystical practice conducted not by seclusion but rather by doing things properly in daily life.”<sup>13</sup> The proper performance of *tembang Sunda* includes local customs of politeness, standards of performance that are upheld by competitions and specific teachers, and the use of precisely detailed systems of vocal ornamentation, instrumental choices, and behaviors. *Tembang Sunda* simultaneously reinforces the class divisions between members of Sundanese society, and celebrates the highest classes as the people

most deserving of the past spiritual glories of Pajajaran, transmitted to the present.<sup>14</sup>

Sundanese society has historically been divided into different levels; these levels include divisions in language, kinaesthetic signifiers of status such as body language, and sound. Sundanese societal divisions are reflected in musical choices. Among the dozens of locally generated musical performance practices, *tembang Sunda* is most closely connected to the upper classes. In its contemporary context of connecting the upper classes to the time of Hindu gods and, further back, a spiritual connection with animist elements such as tigers, *tembang Sunda* embodies the continuing stratification of Sundanese society without necessarily making it explicitly Hindu.

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<sup>13</sup> Wim Van Zanten, “The Discourse on Islam and Music in West Java, with Emphasis on the Music Group, Ath-Thawaf,” in *Divine Inspirations: Music and Islam in Indonesia*, ed. David D. Harish and Anne K. Rasmussen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 244.

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<sup>14</sup> Upon hearing the news that the author was studying *tembang Sunda*, multiple Sundanese people on separate occasions burst into song, singing the word *Pajajaran*, which—not coincidentally—begins the first song of the evening.



**Figure 1:** *Tembang Sunda* vocalists Teti Affienti, Mamah Dasimah, and Tintin Suparyani (left to right), accompanied by Rukruk Rukmana on the *kacapi* zither and Burhan Sukarma on the *suling* flute.

In its intimate, late-night performance contexts with just a few insiders present, *tembang Sunda* is intended to celebrate all that is good about the Hindu past—for the upper levels of society—even as it laments love lost in the present, which on the surface level represents a risk for the members of society as a whole. On a deeper level, love lost reflects a type of longing for spiritual connection with one's ancestors and with God.

An evening of *tembang Sunda* often begins with the performance of *Lagu Rajah* (Song of the king), to ask permission for performing from the Hindu ancestors. Next, before beginning the first set of songs in *pélog* tuning, the singer—usually female—sings, “Daweung ménak Pajajaran” (Now we will consider the noblemen/god-kings of Pajajaran). In other

words, the evening performance is set in a context that celebrates and honors the Hindu past, not the Muslim present. Van Zanten notes that “in *tembang Sunda* songs with historical references it is mainly the Hindu kingdoms that are mentioned. The historical events after about 1600 are hardly commemorated in the texts. Apparently, the poets were not inspired by this period of colonization by the Javanese and the Dutch.”<sup>15</sup>

What follows is a series of sets of songs: one or more free-meter songs, often focused on Sundanese history (both literal and mythological), followed by a single fixed-meter song that usually connects heartache with an aspect of the natural world. For example, in the

<sup>15</sup> Van Zanten, *Sundanese Music in the Cianjuran Style*, 77.

historical song *Salaka Domas*, a very powerful man wants to fight against every weapon or opponent he encounters. Sundanese instrumentalists and singers both describe this man—like them, the descendent of the very powerful King Siliwangi—as “the modern Sundanese man, hampered by his current circumstances but ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice to defend himself and his *nagara*, or Sundanese nation-state.”<sup>16</sup> More directly, on five separate circumstances during multiple experiences of fieldwork in West Java, the author heard men in positions of power referring to *themselves*, specifically, as “King Siliwangi.” King Siliwangi was the last ruler of Pajajaran, and his disappearance—rather than his death—has led generations of Sundanese to believe that he will return one day, as strong as ever. Van Zanten states that “most noble families claim to descend from King Siliwangi.”<sup>17</sup>

*Kadia banteng bayangan*  
*Sinatria pilih tanding*  
*Toh pati jiwa jeung raga*  
*Seja angkat mapag jurit*  
*Najan di luhur langit*  
*Hamo burung rek disusul*  
*sumujud ka ingkang rama*  
*Prabu Agung Siliwangi*  
*Layang domas, layang domas*  
*Didamel jimat nagara.*

Like a fabulous [mythical] water buffalo  
 A heroic figure without peer  
 Sacrificing his soul and his body  
 Ready to depart in search of war  
 Even at the highest reaches of the sky  
 It will be sought out  
 He will pay his respects to his father  
 The great King Siliwangi  
 [layang domas = powerful heirloom]  
 Made as a symbol of the nation.

<sup>16</sup> Sean Williams, *The Sound of the Ancestral Ship: Highland Music of West Java* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 221.

<sup>17</sup> Van Zanten, *Sundanese Music in the Cianjuran Style*, 78.

In the performance of *tembang Sunda*, both the lyrics and the performance practices reflect an outer manifestation (*lahir*) of a deeper and more important inner life (*batin*). The subject of many lively Sundanese discussions, these two concepts revolve around the idea of public and private belief systems. When the Islamic holy month of Ramadan comes to a close, many Sundanese people send cards with the phrase “*mohon ma’af lahir dan batin*”—asking forgiveness not only for one’s physical and emotional wrongdoings, but also for both intentional and unintentional errors. On that final day of Ramadan (known as Lebaran), people visit friends, family, and important people in the neighborhood to wish each other well and to ask forgiveness. In these words and actions, there is an understanding that humans have an inner life and an outward manifestation of that inner life, and that the two may be different in character.

Because so many songs celebrate both the mundane and the spiritual, the corporeal and the emotional, and the power of the natural world (including frequent use of the words *lahir* and *batin*), it is clear that Sundanese composers and musicians acknowledge the connection between the two. That the sound of the instruments and the sung poetry serve to weave those two together is an important transcendent function for the genre.

The *kacapi* zither functions as a type of spiritual gatekeeper or *kuncen* in that by supporting the work of the singer, it connects contemporary urbanites with aspects of their rural past.<sup>18</sup> Its boat shape, referred to as an “ancestral ship” by *kacapi* player Rukruk Rukmana, is said to carry people back to the time of the ancestors when they listen to it, regardless of the context. In referring to it as a

<sup>18</sup> Williams, *The Sound of the Ancestral Ship*, 212.

*kuncen*, or key-bearer, players note that it serves the function of a guard of a sacred place. Someone who plays the *kecap* is the one who—together with the singer—serves as a go-between.

An evening of *tembang Sunda* goes through several different subgenres (*papantunan*, *jejemplangan*, *dedegungan*, and *panambih*) and at least two (if not three) different modes (*pélog*, *sorog*, and *saléndro*). It is the songs of the *papantunan* subgenre—the oldest, most historical of the subgenres—that tend to highlight the Hindu past, the golden era of Pajajaran, and the connection of the Sundanese rural past with the present. They are considered very difficult to sing in terms of technique, vocal pressure, and ornamentation, and are quite serious in content. The modes of *pélog*, *sorog*, and *saléndro* reflect the time of night, mood, lyric content, instrument tuning, and song choices.<sup>19</sup> *Papantunan* songs are always performed in the *pélog* mode, at the beginning of the evening. Songs from the other subgenres tend to highlight love and loss; they are saved for later performance in the evening. They may be in *pélog* or *sorog* or, more rarely, in *saléndro*. However, only the *papantunan* songs reflect an orientation toward or acknowledgment of Hinduism.

The incorporation into *tembang Sunda* performance practice of a popular song celebrating Islamic elements has begun not only to alter the specifically Hindu aspects of the genre, but also to cause a shift in genre-based class distinctions. Just as women form the foundation of the Sundanese home—celebrating the Hindu rice goddess with small shrines in their kitchens, and dominating the interiors

of houses and stages in this matrilineal society—women are the ones making the change in this Hindu-based repertoire through the musical incorporation of Islam.

### Celebrating the Hindu Past with *Ceurik Rahwana*

The two great Hindu epics—the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*—are performed all over Southeast Asia, and West Java is no exception. The *Ramayana* in particular appears in various Sundanese performing arts in a variety of ways, one example of which is in *tembang Sunda*. In the story, the king Rama and his brother chase after a golden deer that Rama's wife, Sinta, desires, leaving her vulnerable. She is tricked and abducted by Rahwana, and—after a significant battle—is reunited with her husband.<sup>20</sup> It is a popular story and, like the *Mahabharata*, is often divided into small pieces, performed in sections because everyone is familiar with the entirety of the story.

The *tembang Sunda* song *Ceurik Rahwana* (Tears of Rahwana) highlights the moment in the *Ramayana* Hindu epic when Rahwana, struck down by King Rama, comes home at the edge of death and apologizes to his wife, Banondari. Rahwana (known as Ravana in India) begs her forgiveness for the fate that led him to pursue another woman. After Rahwana's death, Banondari sings a lament titled *Kulu-Kulu Bem*, in which she begs him not to leave her. Within the *tembang Sunda* genre, *Ceurik Rahwana* is an important song requiring both a male and a female singer with significant vocal skills. Its presence—and the presence of other specifically Hindu songs—in Sundanese musical life has colored the ways in which *tembang Sunda* performers and audience

<sup>19</sup> The *pélog* mode uses the equivalents of the pitches F, A, B-flat, C, and E. *Sorog* uses the pitches F, A, B-flat, D, and E. *Saléndro* uses a relatively equidistant tuning of F, G-sharp, B-flat, C, and D-sharp.

<sup>20</sup> These two sentences may well serve as the shortest summary of the *Ramayana* in print.



members think of the *Ramayana*, yet it is *only* in Sundanese music that Rahwana experiences regret, asks for forgiveness, and weeps. In every other rendition of the *Ramayana*, he dies after the battle with Rama.

*Ceurik Rahwana* (and *Kulu-Kulu Bem*, Banondari's lament that follows it) was written by a woman, Saodah Harnadi Natakusumah (1922–1981). It engages the Hindu *Ramayana* epic in ways unique to Sundanese culture, reflecting a locally relevant ethos. According to *kecap* player Rukruk Rukmana, this song is the only one that “allows Rahwana to express his emotions, which include irritation, joy, losing one's patience, grief, and the fear of crying.”<sup>21</sup> In the lyrics, Rahwana says that he is fated to die, but before he perishes, he begs to be forgiven, body and soul. He says he was drawn to another, enchanted by Sinta, and—in a nod to the Hindu belief in karmic retribution—that the suffering one inflicts on others returns to oneself. The fact that Ms. Natakusumah led the *tembang Sunda* ensemble at Radio Republik Indonesia in Bandung from 1950 to 1958, and was a respected composer of many songs and an accomplished performer, meant that her compositions and choices of songs to perform had a strong impact on the development of the genre during the middle of the twentieth century.

In the accompanying transcription of *Ceurik Rahwana* (Ex. 1), please assume that there is much more than meets the eye. Sundanese vocal music has five named types of vibrato, each of which occurs in specific places in this song. For example, in certain places, the vibrato sounds as if the singer is punching out notes in rapid succession (*rengbak*), while in other places there is an actual rapid microtonal pitch variation (*vibra*, from the English word

*vibrato*). The places of strong vibrato usage in performance practice are referred to as *tekanan*, or pressure. These technical features are important aspects of *tembang Sunda* performance practice.

Rahwana:

*Banondari anu lucu, bojo kakang anu geulis*  
(*geuning, duh anu geulis*)  
*Kadien sakeudeung geuwat, akang rek mere pepeling*  
(*aduh geulis, mere pepeling*)  
*Geura sambat indung bapa, sameme akang pinasti.*

Banondari who is beautiful, wife of mine who is lovely (oh, who is lovely)  
Here, just a second, emergency, I wish to give a message (oh lovely, give a message)  
Go summon mother and father before I perish.

Banondari:

*Aduh engkang buah kalbu sembabeun lahir jeung batin* (*geuning, lahir jeung batin*)  
*Aya naon pengeresa tara-tara ti sasari* (*aduh geuning, ti sasari*)  
*Nyauran ragrag cisoca, abdi mah saredih teuing.*

Oh beloved fruit of my heart, dedicated body and soul (oh, body and soul)  
How should one feel from now on? (oh, from now on)  
Calling, streaming down tears, I am far more than sad.

Rahwana:

*Aduh Enung anu ayu nu geulis pupujan ati* (*geulis, pupujan ati*)  
*Akang tangtu ngababatang, sameme akang pinasti*  
(*aduh geulis, akang pinasti*)  
*Arek menta dihampura, lahir tumeka ing batin.*

Oh Darling who is so delicate, who is so lovely, praiseworthy heart  
I am fated to die, but before I perish (oh my lovely, I perish)  
Let it be that I ask to be forgiven, body as well as soul.

<sup>21</sup> Rukruk Rukmana, personal communication with the author.

Banondari:

*Duh engkang panutan kalbu, teu kiat abdi wawarti  
(geuning, abdi wawarti)  
Ulah sok ngumbar amarah antukna kaluli-luli  
(aduh, geuning, kaluli-luli)  
Nu matak mawa cilaka, kaduhung ngajadi bukti.*

Oh you object of my heart, I am not strong, I  
warn you (I warn you)  
Don't so follow anger, resulting in forgetting all  
(oh, forgetting all)  
Which apparently leads to catastrophe, regret  
becomes proof.

Rahwana:

*Kaduhung kakang kaduhung, kataji nu lain-lain  
(geulis, nu lain-lain)  
Kaiwat goda rancana, kagembang ku Sintawati  
(aduh geulis, ku Sintawati)  
Geuning kieu karasan, malindes malik ka diri.*

Regret, I regret, I was drawn by an  
extraordinary other (an extraordinary other)  
Ensnared seduced temptation, enchanted by  
Sita (oh lovely, by Sita)  
This is how it feels, the suffering [that one  
inflicts] returns to oneself.

Banondari's lament, *Kulu-Kulu Bem*, follows; it is very challenging to sing because of its broad range and vocal ornamentation, but the women who know it and listen to it have told me that they could only wish for such a heartfelt apology from their own straying husbands. In this lament Bonandari uses liminal imagery from the natural world, such as the rays of the dawn and flashes of lightning, to describe his presence, his abrupt end, and ultimately his disappearance from her life. She hopes only to be remembered with love. The lyrics are added here because *Kulu-Kulu Bem*, in its historical connection with *Ceurik Rahwana*, is another point that sets the *Ramayana* story apart from all other (non-Sundanese) performances.

First verse:

*Geuning bet siga balebat, sumping teh ngan sajorelat  
(dub) sumping teh ngan sajorelat  
Padahal ditunggu lami, dianti-anti ti wengi manis  
dianti-anti ti wengi  
Engke ulah waka angkat, ulah waka kebat ngejat  
dunungan, ulah wakada kebat ngejat;*

Just like dawn-rays, his presence was only brief  
(oh), his presence was only brief  
After all I waited for long, waiting since last  
night, love, waiting since last night  
Wait, don't just leave, don't just hurry to depart  
my lord, don't just hurry to depart;

*Horeng ari nu nungguan tetela ambon sorangan  
Sugan teh rek dipitineung, sugan teh rek dipibeman,  
dunungan  
Manis, dub, boreng ngan ukur salivat, ngan ukur  
matak tibelat.*

Here is one who waits for one-sided affection  
One would hope to be remembered, one  
would hope to be loved, my lord  
Beloved, oh, here [and gone] just like lightning,  
just like a memory

*Manis, ke heula atuh ke heula iklas teh kabina-bina  
Lab, alah . . . ulah miyuni balebat endah basa  
samemeuh liwat  
Ke heula atuh antosan, ulah waka luluasan, ayeuna  
mah geuning, ulah waka luluasan.*

Beloved, oh, first wait, oh, first wait; apparently  
I have been too nice  
Ah, oh . . . don't become like dawn-rays:  
beautiful just before they depart  
First wait oh wait, don't just go onward (Lord  
sir), now don't just go onward.

Second verse:

*Cimata abdi saksina yen abdi lama satia (dub), yen  
abdi lama satia  
Yen badan abdi buktina, kapan sakieu resakna,  
manis, kapan sakieu resakna, geuning  
Hate teh awut-awutan ku lami puyang-payengan,  
dunungan, ku lami puyang-payengan.*

My tears are my witness to my long loyalty  
(oh), to my long loyalty

Oh my body is the proof, when it's breaking,  
 sweetheart when it's breaking  
 My heart is all confused because we are long  
 torn apart, lord, long torn apart.

*Kapan saur ti kapungkur, dagoan satutup umur  
 Ayeuna abdi ngantosan, sugu nu nilar rek mulang,  
 geuning  
 Manis, duh, sugu teh jangji rek jadi, mo gajilig, ti  
 saur tadi.*

When it was said from before, [we would be as  
 one until] the close of life  
 Now I wait; maybe the one who left will come  
 home  
 Sweetheart, maybe the promise will come true,  
 you can't go back on your promise.

*Manis, kukupu gegeleberan sugu teh anu ngiberan  
 Lah, alah . . . Rek sumping nu diantosan jangji teh  
 rek ditedunan  
 Sataun abdi ngantosan, geura paparin putusan  
 (panutan)  
 Ayeuna mah, geuning, geura paparin putusan.*

Sweetheart, a butterfly flutters past, maybe  
 someone might come  
 Ah, oh . . . He who is awaited will come [and  
 the] promise will be kept  
 A year I have been waiting, let it pass quickly,  
 this separation (immediately)  
 Now let it pass quickly, this separation.

In discussing this song with various Sundanese artists, nothing seems unusual about the fact that Rahwana offers an abject apology to his wife; in fact, a number of Sundanese men privately noted that “men have plenty to apologize to their wives for.” While everyone understands the importance of local tradition and interpretation of the two major Hindu epics, it is nonetheless a phenomenon unique to Sundanese culture that Rahwana apologizes, and weeps. Because the image of a man weeping is locally considered undignified, it is clear that Rahwana has been destroyed and is

dying; those tears are the sign of his final defeat.

### Understanding *Hamdan*

The related genre of *kawih*, which is also accompanied by a zither and (sometimes) other instruments, is believed to be older than *tembang Sunda* at least partly because term is mentioned in some of the earliest texts, written on palm leaves.<sup>22</sup> While the original meaning of *kawih* was close to the idea of knowledge or skill, and it was the earliest word used to refer to Sundanese singing, in contemporary usage it denotes (primarily) fixed-meter popular sung poetry performed primarily by women. It is locally considered in contrast to the more refined genre of *tembang Sunda*, and its performance practices accordingly use less elevated language, vocal skills, and imagery. Furthermore, the genre is open to new compositions, lively *kacapi* playing and singing, and a continual infusion of popular influences. In its lyrical content it is much more flexible in that it can refer to contemporary themes outside the traditional boundaries of *tembang Sunda*. In doing so, the genre of *kawih* speaks to a much larger population than the much more closely circumscribed performers and audience members of *tembang Sunda*.

In recent years, the more contemporary *kawih* song *Hamdan* (The praised one), written by the composer Koko Koswara (1917–1985) and containing both Arabic words and melodic markers, has gained popularity to the point that it appears in contexts formerly and formally associated only with *tembang Sunda*. It is accompanied by the *kacapi* zither, as are most *kawih* songs. As a composer of pop songs—

<sup>22</sup> See Dr. Saleh Danasasmita and Dr. Atja Danasasmita, *Sanghyang Siksakandang Karesian* (Bandung: Proyek Pengembangan Permuseuman Jawa Barat, 1981).

including, for example, the very popular *Badminton*—Koswara was well acquainted with both the *kawih* and the *tembang Sunda* social, status, and musical worlds. The song illustrates in every way what the Sundanese ethnomusicologist Deni Hermawan describes as *musik islami*, Sundanese music with an Islamic flavor. It has a simple melody, like many *kawih* songs, and is easy to sing (particularly its chorus).

While *Hamdan* is not entirely in Arabic, it contains enough Arabic words to firmly locate it *outside* the genre of *tembang Sunda*. By performing *Hamdan* with its Sundanese and Arabic words—rather than Sundanese and Sanskrit, as in aristocratic *tembang Sunda*—the song bears multiple signifiers of the middle class, of Islamic practice, of group prayer, and of Islamic popular song. It is a twentieth-century middle-class Muslim song within a several-hundred-years-old aristocratic Hindu-based genre within a diverse contemporary Muslim societal context.

The late *tembang Sunda* vocalist Euis Komariah was frequently asked to teach *Hamdan* to groups of women who would not normally have anything to do with either *tembang Sunda* or its aristocratic context. They would come to her house and cluster in groups of ten or more as she led them through the song phrase by phrase. She also traveled to gathering places where she would teach groups of women to sing it. As she explained, *Hamdan* was for women who could not see themselves singing popular Islamic songs with electric instruments and plenty of hip swinging such as they saw on television; it was more dignified and “sounded older” to them than *tembang Sunda*, even though it is a twentieth-century composition (Ex. 2).

The lyrics for *Hamdan* are ones of praise for God, and they describe His attributes as the

Hearer and Knower, blessing Muhammad the Messenger, his family, and his companions.

*Hamdan lirobbil ‘alamin*  
*Allohu rohman warrohim*  
*Qod koruba fatul mubin*  
*Innahu huwas samiu’l alim*

Praise to Lord of the Universes  
 God the Most Gracious and Merciful  
 Qod koruba, the sign of victory  
 For Him, He is the Hearer, Knower

*Puji kagungan pangeran*  
*Nu Maha Welas tur (tus) Eman*  
*Gusti mangka buka pura babagja*  
*Alloh ya Robbi Mantenna Maha Uninga*

Praise to the Lord  
 Most gracious and Most Merciful  
 The Lord will open happiness  
 The Lord who understands

*Solawat, solawatan*  
*Barokat barokatan*  
*A’la Muhammad Rosulih*  
*Wa’ala alih wasobbih*

(recitation of praise)  
 Bless Blessed  
 For Muhammad the Messenger  
 And his companions

*Salam sinareng solawat*  
*Muga netes ka Muhammad*  
*Natrat ka para Karabat*  
*Para ahli jeung sababat*

Peace and praise  
 descending to Muhammad  
 and also for his family  
 and his companions

The performance of *Hamdan* in a Hindu-based *tembang Sunda* setting speaks not only to the idea that it is welcoming to people outside of a *tembang Sunda* performance, but also to issues of class.

Example 1: *Ceurik Rahwana*, first verse

Ba - non da-ri, a-nu lu- cu\_ bo-jo ka-kang a-nu geu lis\_ geu ning\_

4 \_\_\_\_\_ ; duh a-nu geu- lis\_ ka - di-eu sa-keu deung geu- wat\_ a -

9 kang rek me-re pe-pe ling, a duh geu lis\_ me-re pe-pe-ling;

13 Geu-ra sam-bat in - dung\_ ba - pa\_

16 sa-me meh, a- kang\_ pi\_ na - sti.

Example 2: *Hamdan*, first verse

6 Ham-dan li - rob-bil 'a - la - min, Al - lo - hu

11 roh-man war-ro - him; Qod ko - ru - ba fa - tul mu-bin,

In - na - hu\_ hu-as sa - mi - u'l\_ a - lim.

In performances, members of the audience, including the sponsors of the evening (but not the instrumentalists), are assumed to belong to the hereditary aristocracy. My teacher, Euis Komariah, spent considerable time discussing exactly how *Hamdan* was a necessary addition to the aristocratic context, even as it remained outside the genre of *tembang Sunda*. First, its status as a *kawih* song meant that it belonged to a much larger proportion of the Sundanese populace, and could cross social and class boundaries in a way that a song such as *Ceurik Rahwana* could not. As she put it, “Many more Sundanese people have become Muslims these days, and they want to know that there is a place for them too.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, locating a song of the *musik Islami* type in a Hindu-based genre is simply a reflection of larger movements taking place in Sundanese society that emphasize public expressions of Islamic faith, such as attending mosque on Friday, dressing in a more Islamic way, and using more Arabic-based conversational customs such as the expression “*Ālḥāmdulillāh!*” (الله الحمد, “praise God!”) when one is grateful for the cooler temperature inside one’s home on a hot and humid day.

*Hamdan* is sung at a comparatively high pitch register, which is not at all consonant with *tembang Sunda*. Many *kawih* songs such as this one are performed in a high register, which is a signifier of a lower class on the part of the singer and her audience. Whereas *Ceurik Rahwana* peaks at middle A (A4), the highest pitch of *Hamdan* is nearly an octave higher, on the pitch of high G (G5). If the higher register of the song—particularly its middle section—indicates lower class, then it is alien, in many ways, to the *tembang Sunda* context. The aforementioned composer and singer Saodah

Harnadi Natakusumah may well have established the importance of the lower range of *tembang Sunda* songs; in her many performances on Radio Republik Indonesia, she always preferred to be accompanied by lower-pitched instruments.<sup>24</sup> *Hamdan* also differs from most *tembang Sunda* songs, however, in its melodic material. Several Sundanese musicians with whom I spoke said that the “Arabic sound of the melody gave them chills” and reminded them of the “importance of Islam,” particularly for those who do not pray regularly.<sup>25</sup> Its ease of singing allows new access to *tembang Sunda* social and musical circles.

Singers performing *Hamdan* enjoy imitating the Arabic language as they sing, emphasizing the accents and back-of-the-throat sounds that Arabic affords them. For example, they might imitate what they perceive to be an Arabic accent while speaking Sundanese or Indonesian, the national language, or say “Allah” (God) with the double l’s in the back of their throats, accompanied by conspiratorial grins. *Tembang Sunda* singers of the upper classes jokingly tease one another about how Arabic they sound and imitate each other, but only within earshot of those who understand the jokes as insiders. Since the 1980s, the song’s strong increase in popularity has reflected an increasing societal interest in, and outward expression of, Islamic faith through the use of clothing, the popularity of Islamic music of various types, and in conversational topics. Yet, as Anne Rasmussen points out—in her book on women and Islamic music in Indonesia—women who become more outwardly Islamic are not retrenching or experiencing some kind

<sup>23</sup> Euis Komariah, personal communication with the author.

<sup>24</sup> Van Zanten, *Sundanese Music in the Cianjuran Style*, 116.

<sup>25</sup> The phrase “the importance of Islam” (*kepentingan Islam*) is usually spoken solemnly.

of revival of Islamism.<sup>26</sup> Instead, the women who perform *Hamdan* are choosing to transcend *both* religion- and class-bound rules of participation.

Because *Hamdan* has no connection to colonial feudal days and the strong divisions in societal hierarchies associated with those times, it is much more contemporary and close to the emotional surface in terms of how people regard it. Knowing it well allows one to play at being aristocratic in the liminal Hindu-Islamic context of *tembang Sunda*, without abandoning Islam as a central faith tradition. The combination of crossing class levels to be part of *tembang Sunda* and crossing faith boundaries while singing an emphatically Islamic song is immensely freeing for some of the women performing the song.

In a series of interviews conducted with women learning to sing *Hamdan*, several comments were quite revealing. One older woman said, “I have wanted to sing *tembang Sunda* ever since I first heard it as a little girl, but my father refused because it wasn’t Islamic enough.” Another, who enjoys singing pop Indonesian songs, said that she was learning *Hamdan* so that she could produce an Islamic song that would please her family. A third said, “I am a good Muslim and I want to sing a song that reflects the strength [*kekuatan*] of my beliefs without swinging my hips.” They all agreed that *Hamdan* was easier to sing than anything in the *tembang Sunda* repertoire.

### Expressing *Wa’as*

If there was ever a more liminal sensibility than *wa’as*, one would be hard pressed to find it. *Wa’as* is the perfect balance between the emotions of happiness, wistfulness, joy, longing,

nostalgia, and bitterness. English has no word for it, though “bittersweet” might account for how someone might experience *wa’as*.

Multiple Sundanese artists described it specifically, over time, in this way: One feels *wa’as* at the rural sights and sounds of sunset over terraced rice fields, as the farmer walks his water buffalo back home and a young child sitting on the water buffalo’s back plays the *suling* bamboo flute, with the Islamic call to prayer in the background. One feels *wa’as* during a late-night performance of *tembang Sunda* as the conflicting thoughts of colonial memories, the lost kingdom of Pajajaran, heartache over a once-urgent love, youth, and old age converge in one’s mind. *Wa’as* surges up in one’s heart as one smells the scents of one’s childhood—the foods, the neighborhood, the sounds, the voices—that one feels torn at having left behind for mixed reasons. Neither happy nor sad, but genuinely both and more, *wa’as* is precisely the feeling that *tembang Sunda* is supposed to generate.<sup>27</sup> Each of these descriptions arose from instrumentalists, singers, and composers during late-night performances of *tembang Sunda*, and collectively they represent a very local way of understanding the world.

*Ceurik Rahwana* and its accompanying lament, *Kulu-Kulu Bem*, create and express *wa’as* lyrically through the deliberate expression of simultaneous commitment and betrayal. In the lyrics, Rahwana’s apology, expressions of love, and recognition of *karma* are reflective of his continuing commitment to his wife into death, in spite of being “drawn by an extraordinary other.” In Banondari’s lament, she simultaneously expresses her joy in him and her despair in his violent passing. Musically, the shift back

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<sup>26</sup> Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur’an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia*, 20.

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<sup>27</sup> Many other languages recognize this sentiment and describe it with words such as *duende* (Spanish), *ṭarab* (Arabic), and *cumha* (Gaelic).

and forth between Rahwana and Banondari is a continuous repositioning of perspective from male to female and back, again and again. At no point in *Ceurik Rahwana* does the listener feel settled with one single perspective, but must always be unstable. The exceptionally wide vocal range of *Kulu-Kulu Bem*, and its challenge in effective performance, put it well out of the capability of anyone other than a committed practitioner of *tembang Sunda*. As is often the case with this genre, listeners hearing Banondari's lament feel her heartache in their own lives, no matter how happy they might otherwise be. The result, in performance practice, is that many of the listeners are moved to tears by both *Ceurik Rahwana* and *Kulu-Kulu Bem*: *wa'as* has been achieved.

The Sundanese characterize themselves as cheerful and fun-loving. They enjoy practical jokes, double entendre, and wordplay. Yet at their most private times—the late-night sessions when the children and the outsiders have long since gone to bed—this elite subset of Sundanese society *revels* in historical and mythical songs that awaken what they regard as their true Sundanese selves. The heartache celebrated in so many songs leads to tears of understanding during the evening, as they feel the loss of the Pajajaran kingdom as deeply as the loss of love in their own lives. The term *kasundaan*—the essence of Sundanese-ness—is every bit as important to them as the deeply Sundanese sense of *wa'as*, and achieving that Sundanese-ness through performance practice is a powerful pathway to personal and regional identity. By being simultaneously cheerful and deep, fun-loving and weepy, and public and private, the hereditary aristocracy of the Sundanese live their experience of liminality at all times, but feel and discuss it most keenly during all-night performances of *tembang Sunda*. For descendants of King Siliwangi and, prior

to the emergence of the Hindu kingdom Pajajaran, the mythical tigers that roamed the forests, it is the expression of *wa'as* that allows and supports the liminal place in which one sings in the tumultuous present, yet lives at least part of the time in the stable, feudal past. Indeed, performing that stable, feudal past is a way of connecting to, and receiving the approval of, the ancestors.

The relationship of *Hamdan* to the experience of *wa'as* is tied primarily to the Islamic calendrical cycle. At certain times of the year, such as the Prophet's birthday and the first and final days of Ramadan, all Sundanese are more mindful of being Muslims. On the last day of Ramadan in particular, people visit each other's homes, tidy the graves of their deceased relatives, eat very rich and delicious food, and reaffirm their social (and sometimes political) ties. It is a very happy time for all. By singing *Hamdan* during these times, feelings of *wa'as* in connection to one's family, childhood, and one's deceased relatives are common. Romantic heartache is not a part of this array of feelings, whereas it *is* deeply connected to *tembang Sunda*. What one feels at this time both *is* and *is not wa'as*. In the climate of increasing Islamization—socially and politically—the aristocratic Sundanese find themselves in the liminal place of being caught between regional identity issues that allow for variation of belief and the presence of multiple musical genres, and the national “project” that requires allegiance to the state and at least some kind of public allegiance to Islam in the name of political/personal advancement.

*Tembang Sunda* is a nineteenth-century genre in a twenty-first-century context. Many of the song lyrics date from the nineteenth century, the instruments date from the nineteenth century, and even the hairstyles—large *sanggul*, or wigs of thick hair in buns—date



from the pre-independence days when women still wore their hair very long and tied it up in buns for formal occasions. Most important, the hierarchies that divide the singers, especially, from the instrumentalists and everyone else are from a much earlier time. That time, referred to as *zaman feodal*, or “the feudal era,” is enthusiastically celebrated by those who stand to benefit from it the most. In *zaman keivari*—the present—the use of technology appears to have both simplified and complicated the existing blend of old and new.

What technology has done, in the larger sphere of *tembang Sunda* performance practice, is to simultaneously make learning songs easier while also awakening upper-class concerns about the possibility that some people from outside the older hierarchical divisions of society—in which the “Hindu-ish” Muslim hereditary aristocracy is above the solidly mainstream Muslim middle class—might be stepping above their station. The truth is that this type of transgression has always happened, but the wide-open nature of Internet access to formerly somewhat restricted song forms cannot be ignored. Several of the *tembang Sunda* singers interviewed for this article said that they “blame the Internet” for the growing popularity of *Hamdan*, a song from outside the genre and one that was written a little too recently for the maintaining of a liminal façade of nineteenth-century respectability. Whereas the liminal point between the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries sits easily in the body of the Muslim woman singing about the Hindu past, the inclusion of *Hamdan* pulls the singer well into Islamic territory.

### Thirty Years of Development

In 1987,<sup>28</sup> *Hamdan* was still relatively new—about twenty years old. A few people sang it, but they were thought of rather dismissively by those who sang *tembang Sunda* because it is so easy and has such a (low-class) high range. At the time, almost no Sundanese women wore Islamic clothing, preferring skin-tight blouses and skirts. By the mid-1990s, approximately 20 percent of women dressed more conservatively than before, and most older women wore *hijab*, the traditional Islamic head covering. In 2007, *Hamdan* was often performed toward the early part of the evening in a *tembang Sunda* session, and about half the women singing wore *hijab* and other signifiers of Islamic clothing, at least when they were outdoors. By 2017, most women were dressed modestly, wore *hijab* both indoors and outdoors, and sprinkled their conversations with Arabic words in the midst of any normal conversation in Sundanese. *Hamdan* had become a *tembang Sunda* standard, linked with the gradually increasing Islamization of Sundanese society.

The performances of both *Ceurik Rahwana* and *Hamdan*—often in a single evening of *tembang Sunda*—reflect the development of a liminal regionalism in Sundanese culture, in which multiple genres of music and multiple levels of society represented in the music can coexist in the same performance venues, performed by the same people. In particular, performing the relatively new song *Hamdan* has become a means by which middle-class Sundanese women may enter the rarefied air of the musical elite. Rather than reflecting a one-dimensional emphasis on any one religious tradition, Sundanese women’s musical performance practices are not only open to

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<sup>28</sup> The author’s initial fieldwork on the subject of *tembang Sunda* began in 1987, lasted two years, and was resumed multiple times over the next thirty years.

outside influences but also include specific places in which those influences may be revealed. Both the Islamic nature of *Hamdan* and the fact that *Ceurik Rahwana* contains the specifically Sundanese apology of a major Hindu character to his wife reflect the importance of a simultaneously Hindu-Islamic balancing act for the Sundanese, who wish only to be considered Sundanese above all else.