



FOCUS ON  
WORLD MUSIC SERIES

# FOCUS: GAMELAN MUSIC OF INDONESIA

THIRD EDITION

Henry Spiller and  
Elizabeth A. Clendinning



# FOCUS: GAMELAN MUSIC OF INDONESIA

*Focus: Gamelan Music of Indonesia*, Third Edition, introduces the emblematic music of Southeast Asia's largest country, as sound and as cultural phenomenon, highlighting the significant role gamelan music plays in the national culture, the teaching of Indonesian values, and in modern-day life. Despite Indonesia's great diversity—a melting pot of indigenous, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Portuguese, Dutch, British, and modern global influences—a forged national identity is at its core. This volume explores that identity, understanding present-day Javanese, Balinese, Cirebonese, and Sundanese gamelan music through ethnic, social, cultural, and global perspectives.

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- Listening examples now posted as online eResources

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## FOCUS ON WORLD MUSIC

*Series Editor: Michael B. Bakan, Florida State University*

The **Focus on World Music Series** is designed specifically for area courses in world music and ethnomusicology. Written by the top ethnomusicologists in their field, the Focus books balance sound pedagogy with exemplary scholarship. Each book provides a telescopic view of the musics and cultures addressed, giving the reader a general introduction to the music and culture of the area and then zooming in on different musical styles with in-depth case studies.

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# **FOCUS: GAMELAN MUSIC OF INDONESIA**

Third Edition

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## Series Foreword

Recent decades have witnessed extraordinary growth in the arena of ethnomusicology and world music publishing. From reference works such as the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* and *Grove Music Online* to a diverse array of introductory world music textbooks and an ever-growing list of scholarly monographs and hefty edited volumes, the range of quality published sources for research and teaching is unprecedented. And then there is the Internet, where YouTube, Spotify, websites, blogs, social media, and countless digital platforms for music delivery, multimedia production, and music-related metadata have fostered a veritable revolution in the realm of all things musical, from production and reception to public access, commodification, and practices of listening, reading, and viewing.

Yet for all that has come along and all that has been transformed, there has long been a conspicuous gap in the literature. For those of us who teach entry-level area courses in world music and ethnomusicology subject areas—the kinds of courses that straddle the divide between the introductory world music survey and the advanced graduate seminar, the ones that cater to upper-division undergraduates or to new graduate students who have a basic foundation in the field but are not yet ready for the highly specialized studies of, say, a Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology-based reading list—available options for appropriate core texts have remained slim at best.

It is to the instructors and students of these types of courses that the Routledge *Focus on World Music* series is primarily directed. *Focus* books balance sound pedagogy with exemplary scholarship. They are substantive in content yet readily accessible to specialist and non-specialist readers alike. They are written in a lively and engaging style by leading ethnomusicologists and educators, bringing wide interdisciplinary scope and relevance to the contemporary concerns of world music studies. While each volume is unique, all share a commitment to providing readers with a “telescopic” view of the musics and cultures they address, zooming in from broad-based surveys of expansive

music-culture areas and topics toward compelling, in-depth case studies of specific musicultural traditions and their myriad transformations in the modern world.

When you adopt a *Focus* book for your course, you can count on getting a work that is authoritative, accessible, pedagogically strong, richly illustrated, and integrally linked to excellent online musical and multimedia supplementary resources. Threading the needle between pedagogical priorities and scholarly richness, these are texts that make teaching specific topics in world music and ethnomusicology meaningful, valuable, and rewarding. I am delighted to be part of the team that has brought this exciting and important series to fruition. I hope you enjoy reading and working with these books as much as I have!

Michael B. Bakan  
The Florida State University  
Series Editor

## Preface

While *Focus: Gamelan Music of Indonesia* is not a textbook per se, it is quite useful either as the central text for college-level courses focusing on Javanese, Balinese, and Sundanese gamelan music or as a supplementary text for courses with wider scopes. It is certainly sufficiently technical for music courses, and the wealth of cultural information it contains makes it a suitable ancillary text for courses in dance, anthropology, cultural studies, and other fields as well. The goals for the accompanying Listening Guide are to provide pointers to complete examples of most of the genres that the book discusses in detail and to illustrate technical points made in the book with detailed listening notes that are keyed to the recordings. Of course, teachers and students should supplement their listening experiences with additional recordings.

### How This Book Is Organized

*Focus: Gamelan Music of Indonesia* is a revision of a book originally published under the title *Gamelan: The Traditional Sounds of Indonesia* (ABC-CLIO 2004) and revamped in 2008 under the title *Focus: Gamelan Music of Indonesia*. For the 2008 edition, author Henry Spiller reorganized the book's contents into shorter, more manageable chapters, grouped into three parts. For this new edition, Spiller engaged co-author Elizabeth A. Clendinning to help update and expand the content and to overhaul the book's approach to musical examples. *Focus: Gamelan Music of Indonesia* begins with an introduction to some Southeast Asian musical processes in Part I (Chapters 1 and 2); these processes are, the authors argue, particularly Southeast Asian because they are intimately related to Southeast Asian geography and history. Part II (Chapters 3 and 4) discusses a sampling of gamelan ensembles and repertoires on the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali, all of which bring those musical processes to bear on different social systems with different values. Part III focuses on Sundanese music and dance from the western third of the island of Java. Chapters 5 and 6 present two rather different Sundanese

gamelan ensembles (gamelan *salendro* and *degung*), their music, and their social contexts in some depth. At times these discussions present minute technical details; these can be skimmed or skipped by readers more interested in the social and cultural aspects of gamelan music. Chapter 7 explores the role of dance in Sundanese society and addresses issues of change, authenticity, and meaning in the performing arts of West Java; the authors argue that some of the most traditional sounds of Indonesia are those that do not necessarily fulfill the Western expectation of exoticism. Chapter 8 revisits the musical processes introduced in Chapter 1 and reflects once again on what it means for music to be traditional in a changing world.

### New to the Third Edition

The third edition includes most of the material from the first edition, updated to reflect some recent developments and to correct some factual and typographical errors. Unlike previous editions, *Focus: Gamelan Music of Indonesia* no longer is packaged with an audio CD; instead, readers are provided with an online Listening Guide, which provides links to recordings readily available via YouTube and Spotify, along with listening guides, prepared by the authors, to help users engage fully with those recordings.

### A Word About Languages

Out of necessity, this book includes many terms in several foreign languages. Foreign terms are italicized at their first appearance, and thereafter presented in ordinary Roman type. Readers may refer to the glossary for brief definitions of these foreign terms. Since there are quite a few words in various Indonesian languages, it is worth taking a moment to mention a few salient facts about some of these languages. Virtually all Indonesians speak the Indonesian national language (called *bahasa Indonesia*, which English speakers usually render as “Indonesian”). Most English speakers can pronounce Indonesian words passably well if they learn a few simple rules. Most of the consonants are pronounced more or less as they are in English, with the exception of “c,” which is pronounced “ch,” and “g,” which is always hard, even when followed by an “e” or an “i.” Most Indonesian “r” sounds are rolled (as in Spanish). Indonesians pronounce “a” as English speakers do in the word “father,” “e” as in “bed” (or sometimes as in “batter”), “i” as in “pizza,” “o” as in “poker,” and “u” as in “dude.” If the same vowel appears two times in a row, it is pronounced twice with a glottal stop in between. An “h” at the end of a word calls for an audible aspiration (forceful exhalation of breath); a “k” at the end of a word is pronounced as a glottal stop.

Many Indonesians speak a regional language other than Indonesian among their families and friends, saving Indonesian for official situations or speaking to Indonesians from other parts of the country. The two most widely spoken regional languages in Indonesia are Javanese and Sundanese. Both of these languages have a few pronunciation peculiarities. Javanese distinguish between dental “d” and alveolar “dh” sounds; for the dental version, the tongue is right on the upper teeth, while for the alveolar version, the tongue is behind the upper teeth on the alveolar ridge, resulting in a slightly less explosive attack. Javanese make a similar distinction between dental “t” and an

alveolar “th”; a Javanese “th” is not pronounced as in “the,” but rather more like the “th” in the name “Esther.” Sundanese language includes a special vowel that is spelled “eu” and pronounced like the “eu” in French (as in “Pasteur”). A schwa sound, like the “e” in “the,” approximates the correct pronunciation; English speakers are not used to saying this vowel except in unaccented syllables, and so find many Sundanese words difficult to pronounce. A Sundanese word that ends in a vowel is pronounced with a glottal stop at the end.

Indonesian, Javanese, and Sundanese (along with many other Southeast Asian languages) belong to the Austronesian language family and share many words and grammatical constructions between them. They also have borrowed many words from the languages of other cultures with which they have come into contact, including Sanskrit, Arabic, Portuguese, Dutch, and English. Americans are frequently amused to come across an Indonesian word that has clearly been borrowed from English, but whose pronunciation and spelling have changed.

One common feature that many English speakers find startling about Austronesian languages is that they often make no adjustment to a noun to indicate whether it is singular or plural. Thus, the word *gamelan* might mean “one bronze percussion orchestra” or “many bronze percussion orchestras.” Native speakers rely on the word’s context in a sentence to figure out the meaning. Readers of this book will also have to rely on context; a sentence beginning with “the gamelan is” obviously is about one gamelan, while “the gamelan are” is clearly about more than one gamelan.

## Acknowledgements

If this book is at all successful in achieving its aims, the authors share that success with countless individuals who have helped along the way.

I am especially grateful for the friendship, help, support, and instruction that two remarkable Sundanese musicians living in the United States—Undang Sumarna and Burhan Sukarma—have lavished on me over the years. My teachers and friends in West Java have generously shared their knowledge and feelings about Sundanese music and dance. The late Otong Rasta, Ade Komaran, Yus Yusdianawijaya, the late Entis Sutisna, the late Tosin Mochtar, and members of two *lingkung seni*—the Bandung Zoo's *ketuk tilu* group and the Rawit Group—all spent hours teaching, playing, and discussing music and dance with me. I also express gratitude to the late Abay Subardja, the late Enoch Atmadibrata, the late Sujana Arja, Irawati Durban Ardjo, the late Nugraha Sudiredja, Ana Mulyana, the late Nano S., Tjetjep Supriadi, Idjah Hadidjah, the late Euis Komariah, Hasibun Arief, the late Salam Mulyadi, Edi Kusnadi, Abdul Rozak, Asep Suparma, Dohot Tarmana, Aep Diana, the late Tati Saleh and members of her group, Tati Haryatin, Ismet Ruchimat, the late Hardja Susilo, Midiyanto, Santosa, Endo and Marjie Suanda (along with their entire family), Matt Ashworth, and Hendrawati. I also acknowledge a host of fellow non-Indonesian disciples of Indonesian performing arts who have contributed immensely to his research, including the late Ben Arcangel, Randal Baier, Andrew Bouchard, Benjamin Brinner, Simon Cook, Michael Ewing, Kathy Foley, Lisa Gold, Richard North, Margot Prado, Rae Ann Stahl, the members of Pusaka Sunda, Suzanne Suwanda, Andrew Weintraub, Sean Williams, and Benjamin Zimmer.

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University of California Berkeley Center for Southeast Asian Studies, the UC Berkeley Graduate Division, the American Association for Netherlandic Studies (AANS), a Kenyon College faculty development grant, UC Davis, and a Fulbright senior scholar fellowship. For specific information, I thank Richard North, who provided much useful information about Cirebonese *gamelan sekaten*; Rob Hodges, who generously read and commented on the paragraphs covering Toba Batak music; and the late Nano S., who provided the text for his song, “Lindeuk Japati,” along with an Indonesian translation. The wonderful transcription and translation of an entire *wayang golek* play by Andrew Weintraub and his colleagues (originally published by Lontar Press) provided a similar enhancement for the “Sinyur” track.

The editorial staff at ABC-CLIO, including Alicia Merritt, Jane Raese, Carol Estes, and Doug Pibel, did an exemplary job of shepherding this book from its inception to the publication of its original edition. Series editor Michael B. Bakan provided excellent editorial and organizational suggestions on the early drafts, as well as specific help and guidance with the sections on Balinese music. For subsequent editions, Routledge staff, including editor Constance Ditzel, provided valuable guidance in revising the book. Annie Jackson, of The Running Head Limited, greatly clarified the prose that persists into the current edition.

My partner, Michael Seth Orland, has been and remains a source of emotional and moral support since the inception of the project; this book’s completion owes much to his constant encouragement and sympathetic ear. His keen readings of many parts of the text provided a much-needed outsider’s viewpoint that enhanced the readability and sensibility of many chapters as well.

Henry Spiller

When I read the first edition of this book at the age of twenty, it was perhaps the second volume I had ever read about gamelan music. Yet, in part due to this early encounter, gamelan and global Indonesian performing arts communities have become an integral part of my professional and personal life. Therefore, I first want to thank Henry Spiller for introducing countless individuals to gamelan music through the first two editions of this text and for inviting me to join this project for this third edition.

Revising an established text as an additional author is a different process from composing an original work. In approaching this revision, my primary questions were: Is the information still accurate and relevant? Are the examples provided durable—do they represent artistic approaches and cultural values in a way that honors the past, embodies the present, and is likely to remain relevant in the near future? And finally, do the book and its resources speak to the increasingly globalized audience of individuals who may pick up an English-language text to learn about gamelan?

My approach relied on a broader understanding of Indonesian arts (and Southeast Asian arts more generally) developed through numerous encounters with people, performances, and texts across many years as well as specific conversations or events during the editing process for this text. I am thankful for my teachers and colleagues, Indonesian and American alike, who have shaped my understanding of Indonesian music and particularly of Balinese culture and performing arts. In approximate chronological order, these include Michael Bakan, Andy McGraw, Michael Tenzer, I Ketut Gede Asnawa, the members of Gamelan Çudamani (especially Dewa Putu Berata and Emiko Saraswati Susilo), the members of the Tangkas family (especially I Made Lasmawan, Ni Ketut Marni, and I Putu Tangkas Adi Hiranmayena, who gave specific

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I am grateful for many opportunities to travel to Indonesia over the past decade through support from the US Department of State Critical Language Scholarship, Florida State University, Emory University, and Wake Forest University. The support of my Wake Forest colleagues in music, at the Humanities Institute and at the Interdisciplinary Arts Center, has also been instrumental. Members of ensembles Sekaa Gong Hanuman Agung, Gamelan Tunas Mekar, the Emory Gamelan, Gamelan Giri Murti, Rumpit, and Sanggar Manik Galih have shaped my work as a performer and an educator in the United States and beyond.

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*Elizabeth A. Clendinning*



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# **PART I**

## **Music and Southeast Asian History**



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## Southeast Asian Musical Processes

*The appeal of gamelan instruments and gamelan music to non-Indonesians is persistent and undeniable. One of this book's co-authors, Henry Spiller, recounts his own introduction to gamelan as follows:*

It has been more than forty years since I first heard the exotic sounds of a *gamelan* ensemble emanating from somewhere in the performing arts building at the University of California at Santa Cruz, where I was a first-year music major. I was sitting in an ear training class, practicing singing and identifying intervals with my classmates, when all of a sudden an unearthly, ponderous, utterly unidentifiable noise penetrated the walls. It wasn't particularly loud, but it was quite distinctive and strangely compelling; it certainly made a startling contrast with the weak singing sounds my fellow students and I were making. "It sounds like they got the gamelan going," the teacher commented, and I wondered to myself, "What on earth could a gamelan be?" I made it a point to search out the room in which this strange thing was kept, where I discovered that a "gamelan" was a collection of odd-looking percussion instruments. (Somehow, I knew instinctively that the term referred to the whole collection of instruments; I never asked the question I have since heard countless first-timers ask—"which one is the gamelan?") Unlike the musical instruments to which I was accustomed, such as pianos and guitars, with their neat symmetry and manufactured perfection, there was a sort of Fred Flintstone quality about these gamelan instruments—each key and pot was irregularly shaped and sized and attached to the intricately hand-carved stands with uneven nails or rustic-looking ropes. The golden metal from which the keys and pots were made seemed to glow mysteriously. I found the whole package to be invitingly inscrutable; it looked timelessly ancient, mystical, and most definitely exotic.

While I thought the gamelan was quite fascinating, I didn't succumb to its exotic appeal until many months later, when I discovered that a number of fellow students with whom I wanted to be friends played in the university's gamelan ensemble. I didn't realize it at the time, but socializing is also the motivation for many Indonesians who

become involved in playing gamelan music. Of course, gamelan instruments don't strike Indonesians as particularly exotic, nor do they find the sounds unfamiliar or strange, but since Indonesians tend to value gregariousness, they often find themselves attracted to the social aspects of playing gamelan.

The parts I learned were not really very difficult, and at first I quickly became bored with them. It gradually dawned on me, however, that the most important question to ask when I learned a new part was not "how interesting can I make my own part?" but rather "how does my part affect all the others?" Over time, I began to conceive my role in the gamelan ensemble as somebody who "fits in" rather than somebody who "stands out."

Gamelan music of all sorts is about playing together with other people in a unified group in which mutual cooperation is rewarded with harmonious music. Expert gamelan musicians use their knowledge and skill not so much to stand out and shine in the group, but to blend seamlessly into the complex musical texture and make everybody shine—an approach to exerting power in all social interactions, which Indonesians tend to value highly. I did not realize it at the time, but even from the very beginning of my involvement with gamelan music, the musical processes required to play it were retraining my body and mind to think and act in accordance with these values.

Almost fifty years later, gamelan music no longer sounds especially exotic to me. In fact, I can't imagine my own life without it. Studying gamelan has taken me around the world, introduced me to a host of fascinating people, and led me to hear and play music in new ways. It is humbling to realize that the musical processes that undergird gamelan music—the conventions and techniques by which it is conceived, composed, played, and heard—have so profoundly formed and shaped my own personality and values. Of course, music and musical activities are among the most meaningful expressions human beings can produce—it should come as no surprise that the music we hear and play affects who we are, what we think, and how we perceive the world around us.

*Over the past half century, Indonesia as a geographic region has become increasingly accessible to visitors from around the world. Even as localized gamelan practices in Indonesia remain vitally important within their own communities, gamelan enthusiasts from around the world are increasingly able to connect to each other virtually, and sometimes in person. Gamelan within Indonesia has increasingly come to be positioned as a part of global artistic heritage. The book's second co-author, Elizabeth Clendinning, describes her initial encounters with gamelan during the Internet era:*

I remember being similarly awed by the audiovisual presence of gamelan when I encountered it for the first time during a summer music camp when I was about twelve years old. However, the instruments never seemed particularly strange to me—not then; not in college at the University of Chicago, when I was assigned to visit the nearby community gamelan's rehearsal for class; and not in graduate school at Florida State University, when, nearly a decade after I first held a mallet in my hand, I began to study the music consistently for the first time. Though the gamelan was nothing like the Western classical instruments I had studied as a child, it was at most equally exotic as the African or South American instruments with which it shared a room, or the steel pans that lived down the hall. Compact discs of different musics from around the world had made appearances throughout my childhood, meaning that my perception of sound had already been allowed to widen passively over many years. Now, as an adult, I looked forward to the opportunity to study a wider array of musical styles for the first time.

Nonetheless, several aspects of studying gamelan were intensely new for me. One was the practice of learning music by rote; having always studied from scores written in Western notation, it took me some time to wrap my hands and my ears around the idiomatic passages that allow gamelan musicians to hold hours of repertoire in their memories. Another surprise was the array of physical and mental challenges that playing gamelan presented that differed wildly between instrument types. Some instruments required exceptional quickness and dexterity to play and others did not, but all required an immaculate sense of timing and the ability to perceive instrumental lines together. Finally, in studying Indonesian dance alongside music, I entered a performative world in which music, dance, theater, shadow puppetry, and other art forms are considered a part of the same whole. “Sacred” and “secular” too formed a continuum rather than a dichotomy. I had entered a new community whose very definitions of performing arts and their place in the world were vastly different from any that I had experienced before.

Yet, that world quickly came to overlap on a daily basis with my own. Internet connectivity grew by leaps and bounds between my initial and subsequent travels to Indonesia. Gamelan musicians around the world could increasingly exchange ideas in real time, their conversations and collaborations further cementing gamelan as a music that was both intensely local and increasingly global. This global interest seems to have simultaneously reinforced the importance of maintaining gamelan in traditional contexts while supporting constant artistic innovation and the emergence of new social contexts for gamelan, both across Indonesia and abroad.

To our minds, what qualifies music as traditional is not how old it is, but rather how well it teaches, reinforces, and creates the social values of its producers and consumers. Traditional music is not something that is stuck in the past; it grows and changes, just as the people who make and listen to it grow and change, just as the values they share with those close to them change (albeit a bit more slowly). Truly traditional music, then, exploits new resources, acknowledges new requirements, and responds to new situations. It provides a place for people to try out new approaches to their existing values, to experiment with new ideas, and to synthesize the new with the old. It is rooted in enduring musical processes—the general ideas about how people organize their musical activities—but is not limited to particular musical instruments, sounds, or repertoires. It is easy to forget, amidst the buying and selling of commercial recordings, each of which is the perfected production of superhumanly “talented” artists and advanced technological magic, that musical processes—the doing and sharing of musical activities—have profound meaning and power.

Ever since contact between the Indonesian archipelago and the West began many centuries ago, the Western imagination has been captivated by the region’s seemingly endless supply of exotic, even miraculous, things—spices, coffee, and rubber; orangutans and Komodo dragons; the name of the mysterious spy Mata Hari (“matahari” means “sun” in Indonesian; its literal translation is “eye of the day”) and a convenient word to describe lunatic behavior (“running amok”); unusual social practices ranging from matrilineal descent reckoning and headhunting to tooth-filing and ritual homosexual acts; the list goes on and on. Is it any wonder that the West expects—even demands—that music from the region be similarly exotic? And in many cases it is. Westerners as well as other listeners around the world have long found the bronze percussion ensemble music of Java and Bali—gamelan music—to meet and exceed expectations of exoticism. However, even initially exotic experiences can become familiar; it does not mean they lose their intrigue, their spark of magic.



This book attempts to move beyond the immediate attraction that the sounds of gamelan music exert on foreign listeners and investigate how the music works and how it is meaningful to Indonesian listeners. Most of this book is devoted to describing several kinds of traditional gamelan music from various parts of Java and Bali, with a special focus on Sundanese traditions from West Java. You should not infer from the focus on gamelan that such traditions are the only, or even the dominant, musical sounds in Indonesia; for many Indonesians, gamelan, other than being a “national music,” holds no personal significance. The book is not meant to provide a comprehensive survey of Indonesian music, but rather to explore the musical processes that characterize some specific gamelan traditions as well as gamelan music in general (and, in some ways, many other kinds of traditional Southeast Asian music as well). It is our hope that this introduction will not only make these extraordinary musical traditions seem less exotic and more meaningful to students, but that it will provide them with insights into how all music, regardless of its point of origin, molds individuals and societies; how musical values create, teach, reinforce, and even alter social values; and how musical change is an index of social change.

Although this book’s main focus is gamelan (bronze percussion orchestra) music in Indonesia, it is important to establish at the outset that neither the modern nation of Indonesia nor gamelan music developed in a vacuum. Indonesia is a conglomeration of islands, peoples, and cultures; its modern form is the result of a history that involves not only the lands and peoples within Indonesia, but the surrounding areas as well. Ensembles called gamelan are most often associated with the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali, but similar ensembles characterize the musical traditions of the entire region. This first chapter will explore the history of the whole of Southeast Asia to isolate a few musical processes—general ideas about how people organize musical activities—that underlie a great deal of music-making throughout the area, by investigating a selected sample of Southeast Asian musical traditions.

## **Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asia’s position on a typical map of the world (see Figure 1.1) is deceiving: down in the lower right corner, it seems to be one of the most remote and marginal places on earth. From this satellite’s-eye view, Southeast Asia appears as a misshapen peninsula trailing a chaotic mess of ungainly islands, sandwiched between the more geographically impressive landmasses of China (to the north), Australia (to the south), and India (to the west). Conventional maps of the world arbitrarily place Europe or North America at the center; this Eurocentric vantage makes it easy to dismiss Southeast Asia as an out-of-the-way, insignificant place.

English-language histories, too, tend to be Eurocentric. They concentrate on the rise of civilization in Europe and the spread of European ideas throughout the world while ignoring the achievements of comparable civilizations in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Such histories generally ignore the cultural accomplishments of Southeast Asian societies, which include the development of many neolithic technologies that contributed to cultural developments throughout the world. Southeast Asia’s role in worldwide trading networks before the modern era, too, had far-reaching historical effects rarely acknowledged in modern histories (Lockard 1995: 7–8). In modern times, Southeast Asia has been ground zero for conflicts of world-dominating ideologies such as colonialism versus self-determination, capitalism versus communism, and minority rights versus nationalism. The integration of Southeast Asia into the world economy remains an issue of great



**Figure 1.1** Map of the world (Southeast Asia circled)

global concern. That seemingly far-off region has long been, and likely will continue to be, a significant historical, political, and cultural force in the world.

Modern national boundaries in Southeast Asia reflect recent geopolitical realities more than long-standing cultural politics. Most Southeast Asian countries are ethnically heterogeneous; borders are often accidents of history and don't coincide with cultural spheres of influence. Virtually all Southeast Asian nations include a variety of cultural, ethnic, and language groups. Some significant ethnic groups, such as the Hmong in Laos and Thailand, have no nation to call their own. Countries in mainland Southeast Asia include Myanmar (also known as Burma), Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Southeast Asian island nations include Indonesia, the island city-state of Singapore, the tiny sultanate of Brunei, Timor-Leste (East Timor, which declared its independence from Indonesia in 1975), and the Philippines. Malaysia includes territory on the mainland as well as on the island of Borneo.

Significant geographic obstacles effectively separate Southeast Asia from the rest of the world—expansive, deep oceans (the 6-1/2-mile-deep Marianas trench off the coast of the Philippines is the deepest point in the ocean) mark the south and east boundaries, while some of the highest mountains in the world (the Himalayas) fence off the north and west. The land areas bounded by these natural limits share a hot, wet climate as well as an abundance of water and (once upon a time) thick rainforests. The major islands of Southeast Asia are separated only by shallow seas; as recently as 10,000 years ago, during the ice ages, when much of the world's water was bound up in glaciers, some of the larger islands were joined to mainland Southeast Asia by land bridges; the result of this geographical past is a relatively uniform flora and fauna in the region (Cribb 2010: 7–8).

In contrast, the peoples and cultures of modern Southeast Asia exhibit a staggering variety of languages and customs. The prehistory of the region is rife with waves

of settlers from elsewhere, who brought with them markedly different physiognomies and language families. Sometimes the newcomers pushed the previous inhabitants into remote regions, but often they settled on top of existing cultures like sediments in a riverbed. Over the past few thousand years, influential religious missionaries and trade emissaries from India, China, and the Arab world came, followed by European colonial powers. Communities in various places adopted or developed sophisticated agricultural techniques and technologies. Great empires, whose rulers and subjects adhered to major world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, rose, conquered others, and fell, all the while adopting, adapting, and rejecting languages, ideas, and religions; all along, isolated communities cultivated their own idiosyncratic dialects and animistic religions. This great variety begs the question of whether it is sensible to speak of Southeast Asia as some kind of unit in human terms, despite its geographic unity.

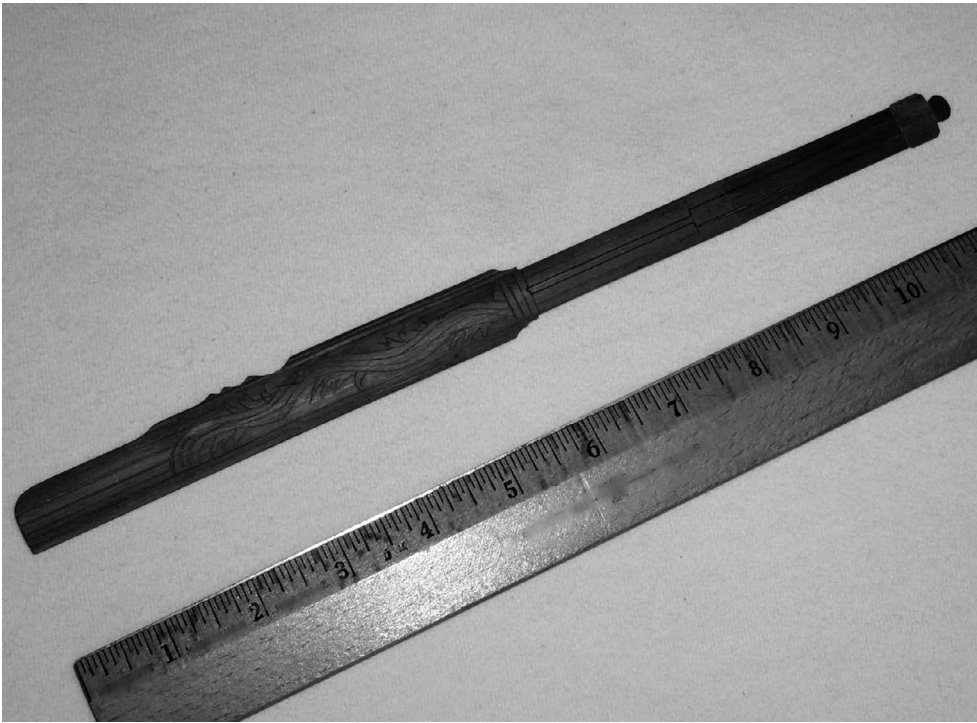
The answer is yes, for two reasons. The first is precisely the common environment: beset by similar environmental challenges, with access to similar resources, it is not surprising that different communities might adopt similar solutions to similar problems. The common exploitation of bamboo as a raw material and the ubiquitous cultivation of rice as a staple food are examples. The second reason is mutual contact among various Southeast Asian peoples and cultures. Different parts of Southeast Asia may have been relatively remote to the rest of the world in the past, but they have always been quite accessible to one another, especially those areas around rivers or bordering the shallow and easily navigable seas. Ideas, innovations, and inventions spread over the region through trade and maritime contact.

Historian Anthony Reid identifies several general social and cultural traits shared by many Southeast Asian cultures that are not characteristic of China and India: “the concept of spirit or ‘soul-stuff’ animating living things; the prominence of women in descent, ritual matters, marketing, and agriculture; and the importance of debt as a determinant of social obligation” (Reid 1988: 6). Reid also isolates a few more specific practices and technologies shared by many Southeast Asian cultures, including the use of a delicate finger knife to harvest rice, the popularity of cockfighting as a sporting pastime, and music played on bronze gongs (Reid 1988: 6).

This book focuses on bronze gong music, especially on gong music from the Southeast Asian island of Java (one of the many islands that comprise the modern nation-state of Indonesia). The various music cultures of Southeast Asia (including those of Java) incorporate an astonishing variety of ensembles that feature bronze gongs, each one sounding quite different from the others. Nevertheless, they all share some fundamental characteristics. Examining the different musical “surfaces” that emerge when various cultures adopt and develop these shared fundamental music-making principles provides an entry point to an understanding of the general traits of Southeast Asian cultures as well as the historical, political, environmental, and social differences among them. To understand the principles of Southeast Asian music-making is to understand the peoples and cultures of Southeast Asia a bit better.

### *Ecology, Culture, and Music*

Southeast Asia’s environment has had great impact on its residents’ economies and ways of life. Ecology has also exerted an enormous direct impact on the region’s musical traditions. For example, many varieties of bamboo grow throughout the region, and Southeast

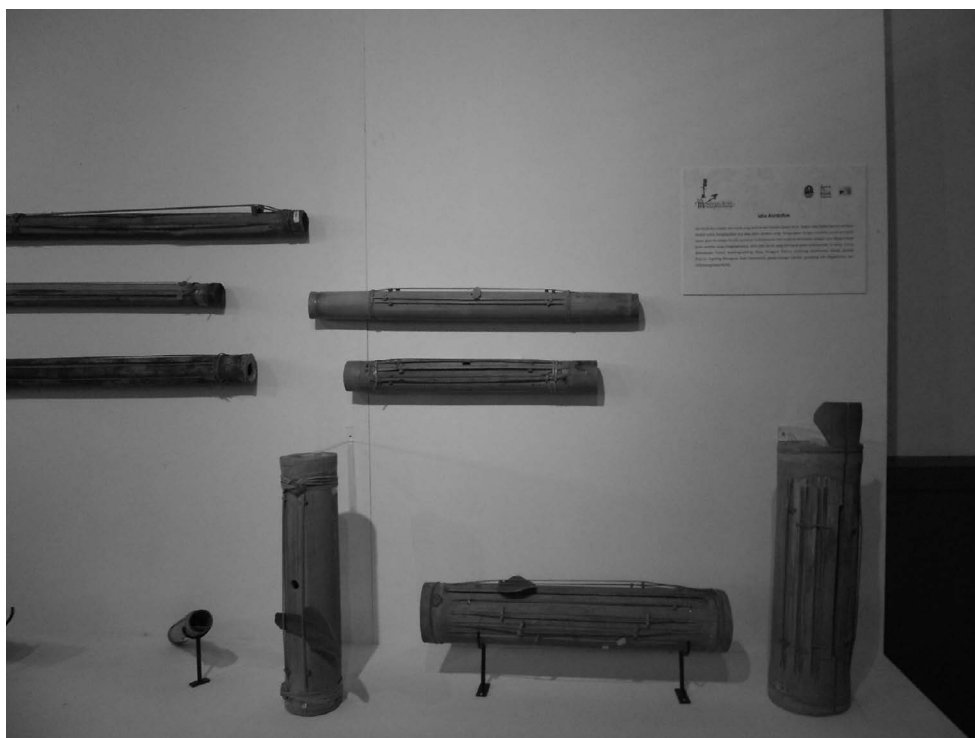


**Figure 1.2** Kubing (jaw harp) from the Philippines

Source: Henry Spiller

Asian cultures have long exploited its unique qualities for many purposes, including making music. Bamboo is already hollow, simplifying the process of making wind instruments, such as flutes, from it. It is quite easy to work with; using simple cutting tools, it is simple to make a *jaw harp* (see Figure 1.2) by cutting a tongue out of a strip of bamboo, or even a simple string instrument by slitting “strings” from the bamboo’s skin and inserting sticks as “bridges” to tighten the strings. A technical term for a string fashioned from the same material as its resonator is *idiochord* (*idio*-means “self,” and “-*chord*” means string); musicologists generically call this kind of instrument, therefore, an *idiochord tube zither* (see Figure 1.3). Bamboo’s naturally sonorous qualities also make it an ideal material for a variety of percussion instruments. Wood is more difficult to manipulate than bamboo, but also provides the raw material for several kinds of musical instruments. Like bamboo, wood is naturally sonorous. A common Southeast Asian musical instrument consists of a series of tuned bamboo tubes or wooden slabs; the generic musicological term for this kind of instrument is *xylophone*. Some scholars have suggested that the xylophone was a Southeast Asian invention (Miller and Williams 1998: 57).

Organic materials such as wood and bamboo deteriorate quickly in the hot, wet climate of Southeast Asia. Instruments made of readily available materials and requiring little investment of time to make, such as xylophones, jaw harps, and idiochord zithers, are well suited to this environment because they are easy to replace when they disintegrate. Such instruments have been important components of Southeast Asian music cultures for probably thousands of years and continue to be prominent in modern times.



**Figure 1.3** A variety of idiochord tube zithers from Southeast Asia in a museum display

Source: Henry Spiller

Unlike wood and bamboo, bronze holds up quite well in the moist, steamy environment of Southeast Asia. In contrast to natural materials, bronze requires sophisticated technology and expensive raw materials to make and work, but once forged and shaped it is very durable. It is not entirely clear whether the idea for bronze smelting was independently invented in mainland Southeast Asia or imported from China to the north, but ever since a distinctly Southeast Asian bronze tradition developed as long as four thousand years ago, the metal has been regarded as having magical properties (see Becker 1988). Perhaps its durability contributed to bronze's perceived mystical power and great value. Among the implements early Southeast Asian bronze smiths created were so-called bronze drums. Later, bronze became the raw material for a variety of percussion instruments, including gongs, gong chimes (a series of tuned gongs), and metallophones (a series of tuned metal bars). The contrast between bamboo and bronze begins to illustrate a principle that will assume great significance in the following discussion of Southeast Asian music cultures: the principle of *layering*. Bamboo and bronze belong to distinct layers of material technology that reflect different layers of cultural influence as well. Bamboo represents the technology of the earliest inhabitants of Southeast Asia; direct descendants of these aboriginal peoples have been pushed into marginal areas of Southeast Asia and often maintain traditions different from those of subsequent invaders (Matusky 1998: 594). Bamboo also represents the technology of the first proto-Malays who migrated southward from Taiwan into island Southeast Asia—the areas that are now the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia—and the Southeast Asian mainland. These settlers also brought with them techniques of