

Tides of *tagunggu*. Of Sama Dilaut lifeworlds, gongs, and plastic bottles

The so-called gong-chime belt of Southeast Asia is home to a great cultural diversity. Different cultural groups, sometimes occupying borderland areas and stretching over several sides of today's national borders, are connected with one another across this territory through their practice of different, yet recognizably related, styles of gong playing. Attempts to relate to one another musically, and how gong ensemble repertoire is a favored means to do so, can be observed on the occasion of the many cultural festivals held recurrently in the region. Here, cultural groups musically situate themselves in the larger region while at the same time emphasizing their usually localized musical uniqueness in order to firmly affirm their place within their wider cultural context.

Birgit Abels

HOWEVER, LOCALE IS NOT NECESSARILY a primary reference for identity construction. For the Sama Dilaut, for instance, inhabiting a heartland of the gong-chime belt, the Southeast Asian island world, the transformation of musical meaning is dependent on movement much more than on place: even more, through moving music, they make sense of their world. One of the Sama (or Sinama) speaking maritime peoples making up one of the most widespread cultural groups within Southeast Asia, they are also referred to as the 'Bajau Laut', especially in Borneo's Sabah: 'Sea Sama'. While other Sama communities characteristically identify with specific shoreline settlements of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, the so-called sea-nomadic Sama Dilaut feel at home in a territory that for them is defined by a set of sacred locations, kinship networks, and historical sites. The Sama Dilaut lifeworld stretches from the Southern Philippines to Eastern Borneo, with several small groups extending farther East and West. Customarily, the Sama Dilaut have been living on house-boats, scouring the Sulu and Celebes Seas for rich fishing grounds and continuously following their staple food's natural movement.

Today, this hotly contested region is affected by the politics of the nation states drawing their borders through the area across which the Sama Dilaut customarily move, Malaysia and the Philippines. In addition, the group's relationship with the shore communities, on which they depend economically, has been difficult. They face open discrimination and economic exploitation from their sedentary neighboring communities. This is one more reason for many Sama Dilaut to treasure their maritime mobility literally as an emergency exit open to them at all times, should they need to escape from violence. Integrating and negotiating categories that, for their neighbors, are incommensurable, the Sama Dilaut make sense of the world not by means of maps, historiographies, and status quo, but by means of itineraries, relationship networks, chains of events—and the performing arts, which enable them to carve out temporary musical niches of stability and belonging.

Cultural identity

In the construction of their cultural identity, therefore, music and dance play an important role. In this, *tagunggu* holds a special position, being the gong music that creates a space for the contemporary lifeworld of the Sama Dilaut

to be negotiated and acted out sonically. Music and dance are central to Sama Dilaut identity negotiation and maintenance of cultural memory: they have always moved with the Sama Dilaut and they continue to do so, encountering, challenging, generating, and (re-)constructing meaning along the way. For the Sama Dilaut, specific situations require the performance of specific repertoires, which are usually *tagunggu* music (listen to sound example 1).¹ With their life-ways continuously changing, *tagunggu* has also become a concept: *tagunggu* may at times be performed by two musicians each playing a *kulintangan* (gong) part on the same keyboard synthesizer, as they would when performing on a gong set, and the traditional drum *tambul*; in fact the *kulintangan* may even be replaced by empty plastic bottles if no instrument is around, as is often the case in the tiny communities living largely outside the wage labor system – for instance on boats or very small islets (listen to sound example 2). By broadening the concept of *tagunggu* to include a wider range of musical realizations of the repertoire, the Sama Dilaut are capable of keeping their transforming lifeworld and their traditional worldview integrated; in this way firmly situating themselves in the larger cultural context. Bridging individuals, groups, and the various spaces and places across which Sama Dilaut life unfolds, musical concepts such as specific melodic movements and rhythmic patterns may take on meanings that renew the old ones as well as the newly encountered ones.

Sama Dilaut cultural identity is floating, a metaphorical description that not only emphasizes its relationship to space, but also is in accordance with the role of the sea in the Sama Dilaut lifeworlds. Sama Dilaut identity is continually reconstructed in a mode of negotiation that finds its most relevant reference in a continuous movement, in a space that is intrinsically mobile. Music and dance are direct conduits for the expression of these reconstructions that localize the Self 'in-between' rather than 'here' or 'there'—as primarily ever-moving and secondarily interstitial, that is. Here, musical meaning, which is at the same time always musical meaning-in-the-making, is in this sense not found primarily in musical roots, but in musical routes, to paraphrase Paul Gilroy. In the case of the Sama Dilaut, it is not so much the stops on the way that make the 'route', but the experience of moving through perpetually changing interstices.

The musical meaning of *tagunggu*

This importance given to movement across interstices as the primary space in which cultural change takes place makes the Sama Dilaut performing arts a particularly suitable case study to sound out the usefulness of spatial theory in the analysis of musical transformation. In moving across interstices, the musical meaning of *tagunggu* is constantly being reconfigured, which is why *tagunggu*, perhaps more than any other Sama Dilaut cultural practice, makes audibly barely noticed, but nonetheless vital statements about 'who' the Sama Dilaut, at a given moment and place, feel they are. In linking the performative dynamics of cultural identity construction with traditional Sama Dilaut aesthetics of sound and movement (which are rooted in the sensory experience of traveling and making music) at sea, the sense-scape that they create by musicking and dancing reverberates with an alternative reality; a distinctly Sama Dilaut alternative reality. This, I argue, is based on a partly physical sensibility that is fundamental to an experiential truth which, for the Sama Dilaut, goes way beyond a contestation of public space. Not only is this reflected in music and dance; rather, music and dance serve as a means to perform Sama Dilaut cultural identity beyond geographical frames of reference.

At the same time, Sama Dilaut music continues to be very much alive. Melody-playing on gong instruments, and indeed tonal space in general, continues to be conceptualized and described in spatial terms: "Don't think about which gong you should be hitting, think about how your hands should be moving", a Sama Dilaut woman whom I call Sammaria told me. Then again, starting with the introduction of the keyboard synthesizer in the second half of the 20th century, the diatonic tonal system has become common in those genres of vocal music that are accompanied with it. But Sama Dilaut tend to appreciate pitch in terms of pitch spectrums rather than distinct pitches, which makes perfect sense when you conceive of melodic movement as based on the spatial hand movements afforded by gong instruments; the diatonic tonal system is easily accommodated within such traditional ways of structuring pitch.

What is more important than the intervallic implications of using a keyboard synthesizer though, in the case of Sama Dilaut music-making, is actual playing practice: usually, two musicians will be standing behind the keyboard, each playing with one finger of each hand, imitating the hand movement typical for *tagunggu* playing. Playing the synthesizer, in this way, becomes a performative evocation of both a traditional musical practice and Sama Dilaut alternative spatiality. This detail firmly contextualizes contemporary musicking, both musically and spatially, as distinctly Sama Dilaut—no matter whether you're playing on a carefully crafted *kulintangan*, a keyboard synthesizer, or that old plastic bottle. *Tagunggu* may be a musical genre, but perhaps more importantly, for the Sama Dilaut, it is a way of commingling with, and making sense of, the world.

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Note

¹ The two sound samples can be accessed from the online version of this article.



Below: *Kulintangan* (row gong).
Photo: Birgit Abels.