



**INTERCULTURALISM AND THE MOBILITY OF THE PERFORMING ARTS
SOUND, MOVEMENT, PLACE – CHOREOMUSICOLOGY OF HUMANLY
ORGANIZED EXPRESSION
NEW RESEARCH: REVITALIZING AND CONSERVING TRADITIONS**



**Proceedings of the 3rd Symposium of the ICTM
Study Group on Performing Arts of Southeast Asia**

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Mohd Anis Md Nor**

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Patricia Matusky, Tan Sooi Beng, Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, Made Hood**

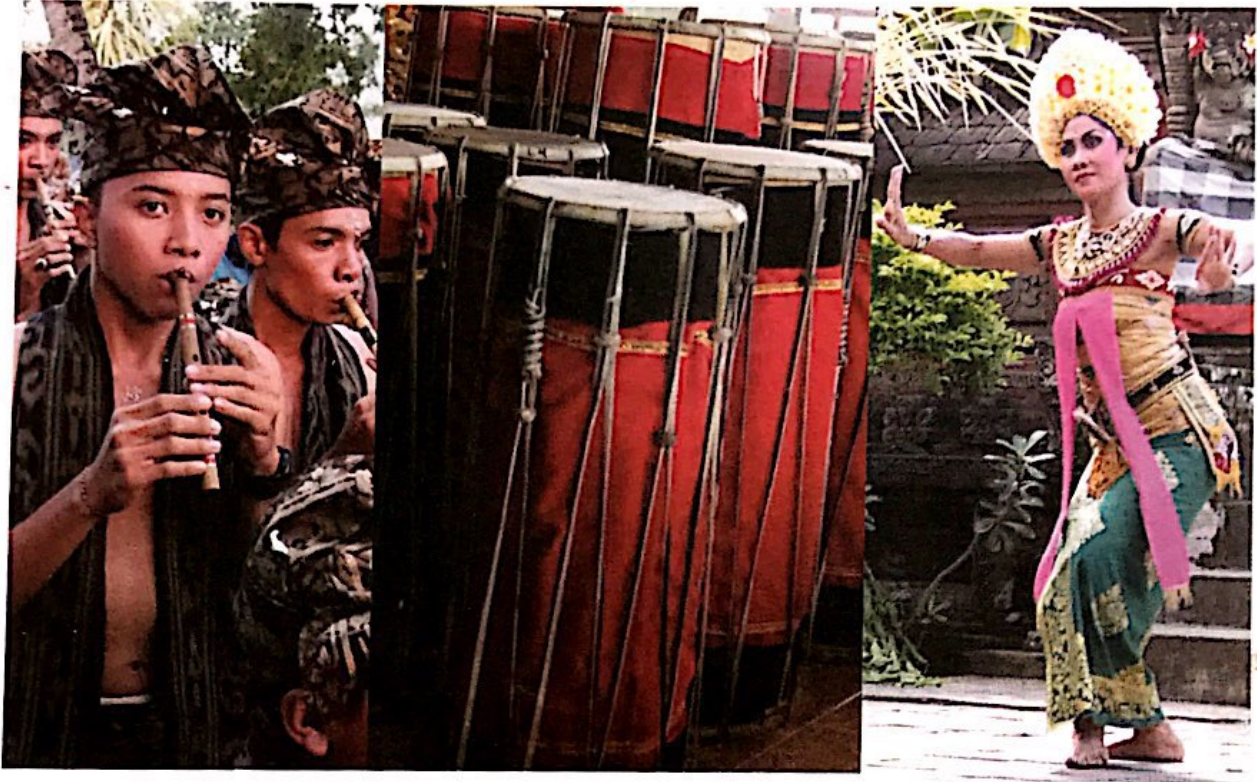
**Production Editor
Hafzan Zannie Hamza**



**Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI)
Denpasar, Bali
2015**

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RECONTEXTUALIZING *PASANTIAN*: FROM ELITIST RELIGIOUS CHANT TO MAINSTREAM BALINESE VOCAL MUSIC IN POST-NEW ORDER INDONESIA

Introduction

This study examines the vocal genre *pasantian* from the perspective of cultural studies. Etymologically the word *pasantian* consists of the root word 'santi' which means tranquility, harmony, and peace of mind (Zoetmulder, 1995: 1017). Paired with the prefix 'pa' and suffix 'an', the term connotes in performance, the stylized recitation of literary works. Idealistically participants in *pasantian* activities join with the expectation of peace of mind for themselves and their surroundings. This is particularly significant because prior to the 1990s, the tradition of *pasantian* was an art favored by a handful of people, mostly the elderly. Youth were largely not interested in pursuing the vocalization of literary works, especially when many young people were embarrassed to practice what was considered archaic and old-fashioned. These older forms of literary vocalization were a cultural activity considered centrist, restricted and elitist because they were reserved for Balinese upper class gentry. These negative perceptions of the art form gave rise to inequalities and discrimination and until recently, *pasantian* saw limited growth. Moreover, given the limited avenues for self-expression, the public was less critical of the artform's possibilities for reinterpretation, re-orientation and relocation that would eventually transpire after the 1990s. Undeniably, when in the 1970s, the three-tiered upper class elite called *triwangsa* made the traditional knowledge of localizing literary works or *mabebasan*, this achieved a higher social standing than those from the commoner class. As a result, the activity of *pasantian* only thrived in traditional cultural centres, such as culturally elite and exclusive contexts such as palaces, temples and religious centres. Based on the above description, issues to be examined in this study include: (1) Why did a re-contextualization of *pasantian* occur in Bali?; (2) How did the re-contextualization of *pasantian* formulate?; and (3) What is the impact and meaning of a re-contextualized *pasantian*?

Background

After the fall of the Suharto's New Order in 1998, the freedom of uncensored and open expression in the media enabled the *pasantian*'s rapid growth and expansion. Unheard of in the history of the development of Balinese art and culture, people from all walks of life from virtually every corner of the island began to read, recite and perform traditional literary works. The splendor and enjoyment of *pasantian*, not only in the context of ceremony, has also been recontextualized in numerous media formats and social contexts. Now in Indonesia's era of reform, political and social restrictions no longer hold true for the activity of *pasantian*, and literary material draws from a variety of sources. The solemn and subdued presentation of *pasantian*'s predecessor called *mabebasan*, which tends to be passive and serious, has been replaced with the more passionate and dynamic presentation of *pasantian*, which is visually attractive and entertaining. This shows that *pasantian* has been transformed with the agenda of penetrating temporal and spatial boundaries. These boundaries previously limited access through the restrictions of caste and professional status. However today, *pasantian* has appealed to a large cross section of the populace by embracing aesthetic tastes rooted in arts for presentation and performance spectacle while maintaining creative substance and meaningful content.

Foundation of Thinking

The discussion surrounding the recontextualization of *pasantian* in this paper is also intended as a way to see the phenomenon of *pasantian* activity in different contexts of Balinese social situations after the New Order era. Understanding "context" as a concept can be defined as a situation that has to do with an event (KBBI, 1990: 458). According to Ahimsa Son (2000: 414) art as a social phenomena that appears in a specific context may be connected or have relationships with a variety of other

phenomena in a given society. Art may be associated with a situation or political activity, with ecology, and with various changes that are happening.

The definition of the recontextualization of *pasantian* is clearly no longer fixated on the concept of it serving, or being intended for, a single context. With this regards new meanings are not just uncovered through different contexts, but through 'semiotic dismantlings' of existing, and firmly rooted meanings (Hoed, 2011: 120). The dismantling of a given phenomenon, which has become a myth and ideology, can open up opportunities for the emergence of various interpretive responses that produce new forms of creativity with different contexts. For example, *pasantian* which was originally synonymous with lengthy and complex vocal forms called *pepaosan sekar ageng*, are presented in the context of rituals in temples/palaces, where previously sacred and elitist connotations are no longer the artform's singularly constructed dominant meaning. The format of today's *pasantian* evidences a trajectory of dynamic development largely through the utilization of popular, and more easily accessible vocal forms such as *tembang macapat*. For example, the presentation of technically tense forms of singing such as *kakawin* poems only makes up a small portion of performance, the remainder taken up by the more popular *macapat*. These conditions indicate the recent phenomenon of *pasantian* expansion may be largely attributed to the fact that *tembang macapat* is at its core. Even in regional cultural centres such as Denpasar and Gianyar, for example, *tembang macapat* has grown faster still in *pasantian*'s innovative sub-genres, such as *pasantian gita shanti*, *arja negak*, *taman penasar* and *tembang guntang*.

Post-New Order *Pasantian*

The phenomenon of post-New Order *pasantian* is interesting to research because it has seen several significant changes in activities. First, in terms of literary text, *pasantian* has shown generative capabilities in related genres. This can be observed through the adaptation of *mabebasan* vocal format transformed into *gita shanti*, *parks penasar*, *arja negak*, and *song guntang*. Secondly, *pasantian* performance used to only involve unaccompanied vocal music (songs), but has now been combined with elements of instrumental accompaniment with drums, percussion and bamboo flutes called *gaguntangan*. Gamelan orchestras such as the seven-toned *semar pagulingan*, among other ensembles has also been used to accompany *pasantian*.

Third, contextually *pasantian* is not only performed in ritual contexts, but has changed dynamically in presentation from sacred religious to secular presentations, as well as in aesthetic presentation. Fourth, *pasantian* is no longer solely an affirmation of 'form follows meaning' with ideological significance but has shifted to include 'form follows fun' (as a form that follows fun, entertainment, and popularity in, and of self).

In addition to these developments, *pasantian* also has demonstrated quantitatively a spread to almost all corners of villages in Bali. The development of *pasantian* during the New Order was very slow. But after the reform era its development chart shows that in 1992 there were 606 *sekaa santi* groups (Bandem, 1992) and in 2011 a staggering 3,141 groups scattered throughout Bali (Sudirga, 2012).

Expansion and growth phenomena make *pasantian* interesting to research, not only for its textual aspects that have evolved, but also for its religious aspects and social context that has changed dynamically. As a cultural product, although local communities have not been able to keep pace with a rapid modern art market, *pasantian* activity has risen steadily in the last three decades and has shown fantastic development, both quantitatively and qualitatively. This phenomenon cannot be separated from reinterpretation, repositioning, revitalizing, and re-contextualization through modification of the creative process, resulting in variant forms of *pasantian* innovation. Unprecedented in the history of the development of Balinese art, there has never been such a widespread expansion across multiple tiers of society as we witness today. Re-contextualized, *pasantian* is not only an important part of the ritual tradition – where virtually all Hindu Balinese ceremonial activities include *pasantian* performance-- but also has become part of pop culture. It can be enjoyed simultaneously by the public through electronic media including both radio and television and other social media formats.

Forms of Re-contextualized *Pasantian*

Pasantian in the form of re-contextualization of this article can be observed through the three domains, namely *pasantian* in the context of electronic media space, *pasantian* contestation and competition, and *pasantian* in multiple social spaces.

Pasantian in the Context of Electronic Media

The effects of globalization penetrate numerous aspects of community life, and cause concern for the majority of people in Bali because the effects may undermine their local community's cultural values through the introduction of new values and runaway global culture. However, contrary to blindly adopting new global views, Balinese tend to take advantage of, for example, advances in information technology to revitalize local cultural potential that may be abandoned by a younger generation. Adler as cited by Suryabrata believes that every person is the configuration of specific motives, traits and values that are distinctive, where every action taken by a person will bring a distinctive pattern of individual lifestyle (Suryabrata, 1990: 217). In this regard, traditional Balinese artists have been able to pack art forms full of relevant meaning to a subsequent generation where initially these were only associated with ritual contexts. These artists have helped extract the essence of, for example, vocalizing text, into an activity that thrives in the spectacle of art (aesthetic presentation). What stood out in reestablishing this 'distinctive pattern' was the emergence of *pasantian* as presentation art in the realm of social and electronic media.

Efforts to proliferate *pasantian* through electronic media (radio) are not new, but has been done since the 1970s. At this time the Cultural Advisory Council For Education (LISTIBIYA) had already been established but, according to Darma Putra (2011: 256) *pasantian* promotion was not successful. The reasons for this included limitations in effective communication technology for the public, which were passive and not interactive. It is reasoned when developing information technology tools so rapidly, people can communicate from anywhere, such as offices, markets, or on the street. Today through the ease of technology it is not surprising that in every radio and television station has launched an interactive program for *pasantian*.



Plate 1. An advertisement excerpt of commercial television broadcasts for *Pasantian Tembang Guntang* from Dewata TV
(Photo: Koleksi Dewa Ngakan Gede Suastika, 2010)

It is now commonplace to see the utilization of modern communication media being fully integrated into traditional *pasantian* social networking. When modern society established networking through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Black Berry Message (BBM) and various internet sites, *pasantian* was embraced as a means of binding the community through traditional networking. Through their activities *pasantian* participants know each other at various intersecting levels from village, sub-district, and district to merging linear clans or soroh, and even cross cultural connections (Jawa/Bali/Lombok).

Its important to point out media's hegemony in the operations of this lively '*sekaa santi*' or *pesantian* club interaction. Media as a magnet for the community attracts political spectacle and political imagery. Through politics, those groups are simultaneously being seen and creating the habit of watching TV as each group would like to be watched by other people (Atmaja, 2010: 99). When the media is controlled and underpinned by various ideological interests, then the media is often accused of being the formulator of the reality or the mirror of reality. The operation of the ideology behind the media is not free from obscurity and unconscious mechanisms, which is the success of an ideology. That is, an ideology that infiltrates and embeds itself in media influences subtle and hidden agendas that change the perception of each person unconsciously (Piliang, 2004: 138).

Pasantian in the Contestation and Competition Context

In contrast to the traditional presentation of *pasantian*, in the context of contestation both in media and in the public space, *pasantian* participants utilize contestation to show off skills, gain fame, wear trendy fashion, as well as reinforce self-images that instil individual and group pride. Competition among groups often involves who has the most lavish costumes. Various motivations and desires appear on stage when participants perform in front of the camera especially during close-ups, when they want to show their identity as fashion concious, but somehow devout and religious.



Plate 2. The Gianyar District Cultural Department's gaguntangan ensemble during the *Pasantian* Suara shanti RRI Denpasar competition, December 11-12, 2009
(Photo by the author)

Other models of competition can be observed in the presentation of *pasantian* competitions held in tandem with events such as sports and arts fairs (Porsenides), students sport and art events (Porsenijar), Competition of Dharma Gita (UGD), *pasantian* radio broadcast competitions, among others. The repackaging of *pasantian* as competition is the hybrid construction of various elements from inter-genre borrowing that is cultivated to high levels of detail and intensity. This can be seen in such

competitions as as the Sandiyagita Festival Gong Kebyar (FGK), Shanti Gita Contest, the Taman Penasar *pasantian* competition,. In many *pasantian* genres such as Sandiyagita and Gegitaan, creativity and innovation are more strongly emphasized where the artistic aspects of musical composition are combined with the choreography of performative expressive movement based on folk and classical Balinese dances. *Pasantian* compositions that prioritize these artistic aspects set the benchmark for appreciative audiences that reach capacities of over 8,000 people on the Ardha Candra Taman Budaya Denpasar stage.

***Pasantian* in the Context of Social Space**

The prevalence and frequency with which *pasantian* appears in the social sphere of Balinese contributes significantly to the expansion of *pasantian* activity. This can be seen in the context of social activities such as wedding ceremonies and anniversary celebrations for social organizations, radio events, business development exhibitions, and socialization propaganda rallies for government programs. In addition to providing wholesome entertainment, *pasantian* performance in a social context can provide enlightenment and educational alternatives to the community about values and local wisdom.

Public space in temples, community wards (*banjar*), schools, and offices have become new spaces for practitioners to develop their creativity. Without leaving sacred ritual spaces as the main base, this new social space provides a spirit for interaction and social contact with the new cultural channels being formed. Personal relationships, inter-group relations, between agencies, and social networks among others, have provided an opportunity and a chance for *sekaa santi* to interact with one another, in a different time and space to cultivate a spirit of *menyamabyara* or solidarity and unity.

In this context is the power of creativity that can evoke the spirit of the local culture in the middle of a noisy bustling churning out of global cultural products. The ability to uphold local culture when faced with often dominant exterior cultural forces is called 'local genius' (Megatsari, 1986: 56). Through *pasantian* activity, Balinese people take pride in their identity while wallowing in the middle of globality.

The Impact and Meaning of *Pasantian* Re-contextualization

Cultural impact

Pasantian's re-contextualization and numerous manifestations as a vocalized literary performance genre in the reform era has great impact and made outstanding contributions towards strengthening pride and resilience in the Balinese. Through the growing craze in the wider community to participate in *pasantian*, traditional Balinese literature has become vibrant and has witnessed a growth in interest. Many members of *sekaa Santi* who were not able to read Balinese script, after participating in *pasantian* activity have gradually gained facility in written forms of Balinese language. *Pasantian's* re-contextualization has generated a sense of pride in, and enhanced participant's sensitivity to their own cultural roots. Growing awareness of Balinese-ness in the nation's cultural arena strengthens locality while simultaneously registering national culture and national identity.

Social Impact

However, it must be recognized that the re-contextualization of *pasantian* has not just been about cultural roots. It has been able to promote gender equality and particularly encourage the participation of women in *pasantian* activity. The reality shows that women's involvement in the activity of *pasantian macapat*, women's roles in *pasantian* may be more dominant than men. One important point interpreters' or commentators previously dominated by men. Several talented women *pengartos* appear in prominent media including radio, television including artists such as Luh Camplung, Luh Ema, and Luh Suci.

Creativity Impact

Re-contextualizing *pasantian* in many cases can improve the spirit of creativity. The creative artists explore new sounds and express new ideas to modify an existing shape into a more artistic presentation. *Pasantian* has been an appropriate creative medium for new aesthetic outputs modified to satisfy a new generation's tastes and expressive palet. The form of its predecessor which was *mababoasan* was a male-dominated, elitist form that ignored change and nearly extinguished vocalized literary performance all together. But through the demands of 'new packaging forms' in *pasantian*, gamelan craftsmen and a new generation of vocalists are experiencing the establishment of a creative genre of which they themselves can take ownership.

Based on the above explanation, re-contextualization in this era of reform can be interpreted as resistance, emancipation, and deconstruction. We see resistance to the dominance of the traditional elite, especially those in control of traditional knowledge in the field of literature. This is clear as the presentation of *pasantian* is no longer blocked by a rigid social boundary imposed through the *tri wangsa* hierachy of feudal Bali. Emancipation has built an equal and harmonious footing for women in the field of *pasantian*. Deconstruction is done to dismantle the hegemonic concepts that perpetuate singular truths which moves participants towards a more humanistic and meaningful existence.

Conclusion

The re-contextualization of *pasantian* from feudal elitism to mainstream Balinese performativity repositions ritual tradition into the broader realm such as a media, contestation, and other social spaces. But it is also important to note how we can see *pasantian* as a cultural product that is able to evolve in the direction of democratization, penetrate the boundaries and limits of space and time.

Pasantian as a unique tradition, dignified, laden with the values of local wisdom, is an agent of social awareness, a character-forming pillar within multiple facets that make up Indonesian national identity. The growth of the collective consciousness of the Balinese sees the building of culture through local adaptation and global negotiations (glocalism). Revitalizing local cultural potential at the insistence of global cultural flows constitutes a Balinese affirmation of identity on parallel with other local reactions to global culture.

The formation of *pasantian* is not just based on the phenomenological aspects of performing arts. Rather the question of religion, culture, aesthetics, and values of solidarity are integrally attached to *pasantian* as a cultural phenomenon. Therefore, *pasantian* can be interpreted as one of the significant cultural building blocks in the construction of post New Order Balinese identity.

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