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Laos' Plain of Menhirs

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Laos' Plain of Menhirs
Hintang Archaeological Park: a work in progress

The formal conservation process for the Houaphanh menhirs has been underway for nearly twenty years. What has actually been accomplished during this period, and how are the material condition of the landscape and the artefacts now, compared with the situation between 1999 and 2002 when the authors did research on the menhirs and designed/installed interpretive signage at the site? **Alan Potkin** and **Catherine Raymond** report.

At least 1,500 years ago, people whose origin and fate we know almost nothing of have erected hundreds of menhirs along 10 km of summit trails atop forested mountains in the present Houaphanh province, eastern Laos. Three lower saddles were favoured for the main menhir fields, linked one to the next by isolated menhir clusters. The menhirs themselves, in the form of long and narrow blades, are plaques of cut schist erected upright, one behind the other, with the tallest often in the middle. Interspersed among the groups of menhirs, in no discernable order are burial chambers set deep in the bedrock. Access to the

opening below was often through a narrow vertical chimney equipped with steps. Each of these was covered by an enormous stone disk up to several metres in diametre.

In 1931, the sites around San Kong Phan were surveyed and partially excavated by a team from Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), led by archaeologist Madeleine Colani (Colani 1932). With four decades of bitter warfare soon to follow, the Houaphanh menhirs were not further researched until 2001, when it became known that an international development project providing vehicular access to isolated upland communities that had been dependent on opium production, inadvertantly caused substantive damage – both directly and indirectly – to several of the menhir sites. Accordingly, a Lao-American impact assessment team was mobilized to re-survey the primary menhir sites; to erect in situ interpretive signage; and to devise an implementable long-term conservation strategy. A subsequent plan to gazette the

San Kong Phan menhirs cluster, Ban Pacha, Houamuong District, Houaphanh, Laos (1999)

Houaphanh Menhirs and the much-better-known Plain of Jars (ca. 90 km to the southwest, in Xieng Khouan Province) into a single prospective World Heritage Site was abandoned when the UNESCO Office of Culture in Bangkok concluded that the requisite inter-provincial co-operation would likely prove impracticable. In 2010, the Netherlands Development Organisation (SVD) prepared a draft management plan for Houaphanh site as 'the Hintang Archaeological Park,' and also formally nominated it for inclusion in the World Monument Fund's "most endangered sites" list. The formal conservation process for the Houaphanh menhirs has now been underway for nearly twenty years, so what has actually been accomplished during this period, and how do the material condition of the landscape and the artefacts compare to the situation between 1999 and 2002 when the authors worked on the site?

In January 1931, intrigued by a sketch map dated 1903 of Houaphanhh Province, within the then-French Protectorate of Laos, on which a local notable had written "cut stones", the Hanoi-based French archaeologist Madeleine Colani initiated an expedition to Houaphanh's Muang Peun region, some 100 km northeast of the Plain of Jars, where Colani had undertaken a major archaeological survey two years earlier. Her findings at both sites, including extensive field notes, maps, and photographs, were published by EFEO in 1935, entitled 'Mégalithes de Haut-Laos' (Hua Pan, Tran Nin); the two-volume edition was neither substantively translated into either Lao or English nor subsequently revised or re-published.

By the time she got there, the chambers contained, for the most part, nothing but alluvial clay that had gradually washed into the cavities. It appears that they had been originally occupied by several individual burials separated by low walls of schist plaques. Very few artefacts were recovered by the Colani expedition, apart from fragments of bones found outside of rather rough funerary urns; a number of terra cotta pots; certain objects in stone, evidently ceremonial; hanging pendants in crude ceramic; and several very simple bronze bracelets.

While the Plain of Jars became a rather well-known tourist site with the opening, finally, of Laos to international travellers in the late 1980s, the Houaphanh menhirs (the Breton word commonly used by the French for Stonehenge-like standing megaliths) remained almost completely unknown, except to local people and the handful of francophone archaeologists and cultural conservationists who were familiar with Colani's magisterial work (Giteau 2001). The Plain of Jars, in contrast, is redolent with mystery and exoticism, and was one of the most intensively bombed battlegrounds of the Second Indochina War (ca. 1962-1975).

The much-better known Plain of Jars

Following the revolutionary victories across the Indochina war zone, and the consolidation of political power by the communists in Laos in 1975, the American diplomatic situation there differed considerably from those in postwar Vietnam and Cambodia in that the US Embassy in Vientiane never ceased operations: although for the following three decades, it was certainly downsized compared to its heyday during the "Secret War" (its chief of mission was downgraded to a chargé d'affairs, until a full ambassador was eventually appointed in the 1990s).

The Secret War, a large-scale CIA-led counter-insurgency conducted largely under the cover of the US Agency for International

Development (USAID) – as well as the post-1975 Laos regime – never authorized the re-establishment of USAID operations in the country, even though much of that Agency's earlier activities were of the relatively innocuous ODA (i.e., Official Development Assistance) genre. While American support to the military units of the former Lao Royal government was certainly considerable, the hard core of the Secret War counter-insurgency was comprised of ethnic-Hmong guerillas working in close cooperation with the CIA, and plausibly covertly, the US Air Force, given the nominal neutrality of the old regime.

The Hmong paid dearly for their participation in the American war efforts, with at least a hundred thousand Hmong refugees eventually re-settled in the USA; thousands more cycled through the communist "seminars" or re-education camps; and a comparatively fraught political, social, and economic situation for the ethnic Hmong that continues till now. The Hmong armed resistance is marginalized, and little is accurately known about it, except that it is lent zero official American material or diplomatic support (notwithstanding all that, it should be noted that the remaining Hmong – about 8% of the country's overall population – certainly comprise the most economically prosperous, socially confident, and internationally best-connected minority within the country).

Given this history, it is somewhat anomalous that perhaps the largest postwar ODA activity undertaken by the Americans inside Laos (although assuredly not under the aegis of USAID), was what was called the 'Lao American Project' (1989-1999). The main geographic locus of the project was the former Muang Peun area, now the Houamuang District, of Houaphanh, whose local beneficiaries were largely upland, predominantly Hmong, ethnic minority peoples.

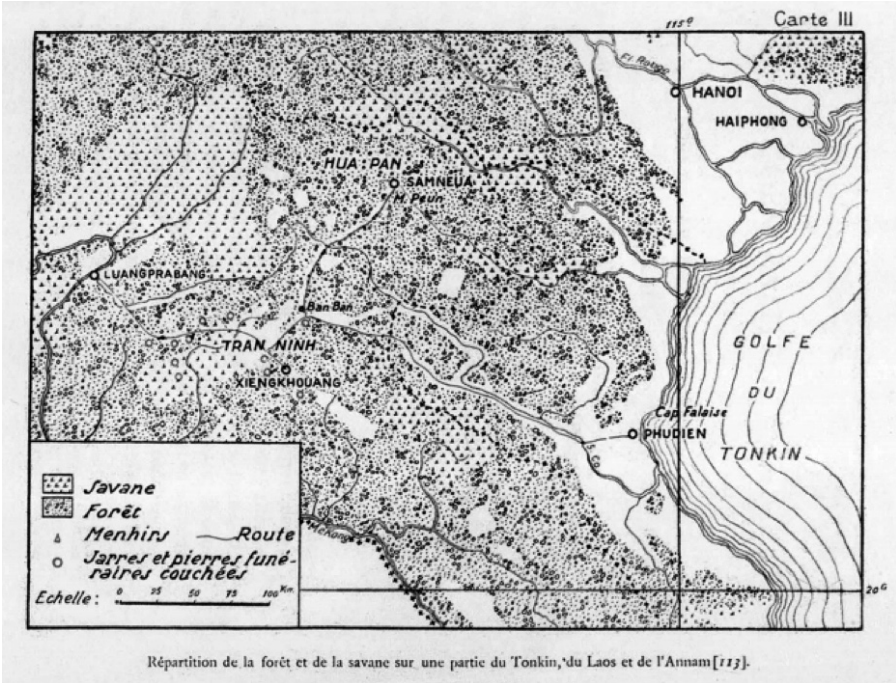
American interests in suppressing the international narcotics trade were central to the eradication strategy of facilitating the emergence of alternate upland livelihoods to replace poppy cultivation (Laos had always been a nexus of the trade, coming

third after Afghanistan and Burma). A key element was the construction of new penetration roadways to isolated mountainous regions where the absence of transport had made raw opium, with its high value-to-weight ratio, the only agricultural commodity worth carrying out on foot or packhorses. One of those new penetration roads cut southwards of Highway 6, about 15 km in length, generally running on the ridgeline above the Houay Peun river.

Presumably, both the contractors and local officials, that excluded US personnel, at the district and provincial levels would have been routinely queried about problems with the Peun south right-of-way, e.g. environmentally or culturally sensitive sites. This was obviously not a priority consideration, and a definitive impact assessment for the roadways component of the Lao-American Project did not seem to have been conducted.

When the project was completed, generally with mixed results, although the small hydropower element successfully electrified parts of the northern Peun Valley around the Houamuang District town, the US Embassy in Vientiane became uneasily aware that the new Peun ridgeline road through and beyond the small village of Ban Pacha may have "inadvertantly" damaged important archaeological resources, of which very little was known. Indeed, Ban Pacha was at the epicentre of the San Kong Phan site, which was the base camp of the Colani expedition in 1931, and the venue of the greatest concentration of menhir clusters and the associated burial chambers.

Quite by coincidence, in 1999, Dr. Potkin undertook a consultancy preparing the preliminary environmental impact assessment for a different penetration roadways project in Houaphanh, about 20 km east of the menhirs region, for implementing another combined opium suppression project by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Familiar with Colani's monograph on the Houaphanh Menhirs, and having gotten wind of the possible recent damage



Route of the Colani expeditions 1931-32

to the Peun ridgeline sites by the Lao-American project, French archaeologist/art historian Catherine Raymond, then also based in Vientiane, requested Dr. Potkin to informally photograph the San Kong Phan area.

It was immediately obvious that the Lao-American south Puen ridge roadway had been closely aligned with the original trail mapped out by Colani, and that considerable damage had been done to a number of menhir clusters. In some places, bulldozed, broken menhirs lay alongside the new road, while in other cases local people had taken the initiative to re-erect several menhir groups out of the right-of-way; or less admirably, had incorporated displaced menhirs, menhir fragments, and even circular stone tomb lids in their homestead structures.

On returning to Vientiane, the Public Diplomacy Officer at the US Embassy and Dr. Potkin submitted an application for a report on the existing situation at the San Kong Phan menhirs, and

a conservation project proposal for the larger menhirs region, under a prospective US State Department Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) grant. The grant application was successful, and the first phase of the fieldwork was initiated in early 2002.

Recent significant damage to several key sites, both related and unrelated to the Lao-American road project, has been observed. In the first category, a logging operation was well underway, partly to salvage a tremendous amount of low-value (compared to tropical hardwoods) pine which were damaged by a windstorm, but while the portable mill and crew were in place, more still standing pine were also taken down, which sometimes entailed felling large trees right onto menhir clusters throughout the site complex.

Also striking was the frequent employment of archaeological relics in local facility construction. Menhirs were also sometimes incorporated in livestock corrals; however, these practices, while degrading the sites, did not further damage the objects themselves, given that they had evidently already been broken by road graders.

The most important deliverable of the first AFCP project was large site signage, which was installed at San Kong Phan. The signage design was largely based on Colani's drawing and photographs of exactly that same location, originally produced in 1932. The approximate size of the main panel was 1.5 x 3m, and the construction was of digitally printed UV and water-resistant vinyl glued to

Tomb lid used as staircase landing stone, Ban Pacha (2002)

Logging operations (2002), dropping trees directly on menhir clusters

galvanized steel, with steel framing and a wood shingle narrow roof (the bilingual Lao-English panel was not vandalized or cannibalized for its materials and is still in reasonably good condition a full decade later, and the erection of a nearly identical bilingual panel in Lao-French nearby has been proposed).

The following year, another AFCP grant was made directly to the Department of Archaeological Research (DAR), Ministry of Information and Culture. By this time, a plan had been established to create a national archaeological park, and to put the menhirs site on the tourist map. Since UNESCO and the Lao PDR government were considering the establishment of the Plain of Jars World Heritage Site in Xieng Khouang province, it was argued that the prospective Houaphanh Menhirs archaeological park should be included in the new World Heritage Site, even though the sites were hardly contiguous (about a full day's drive apart, actually) and would entail negotiating the funding and management modalities between Xieng Khouang and Houaphanh provinces (under international donor pressure, "decentralization of governance" in Laos had been in effect for several years, and the authority of the national adminstration on matters of cultural conservation was comparatively limited).

The keystone of the DAR's AFCP project was the erection at Ban Pacha of a rustic sala, a traditional Lao shelter, built most often along pilgrimage routes or inside monastery grounds for religious travellers. The sala interior was to be largely covered by additional interpretive materials, which were indeed produced by the DAR, although never actually installed. The sala had not been commissioned, even though it was constructed on schedule. The initial problem seemed to be that diplomatic protocol required that the Houaphan provincial government formally accept the completed sala from the US Embassy, before it could be opened to the public. There were various delays, reportedly because of "banditry" in the region: an euphemism sometimes used for the ethnic, i.e., Hmong, armed resistance to the Lao PDR regime, which had never been totally suppressed in the northern part of the country.

AFCP-funded sala (pavilion) at San Kong Phan (still closed to the public)

By the time the security situation had re-stabilized, the weathering and deterioration of the unused sala, which was largely open to the elements on three sides, were significant. The DAR evidently felt that it was insufficiently presentable, and there were no funds available under the original grant for the required repairs. The US Embassy were not aware of this imbroglio, and it was not until 2008 that a ranking Embassy staffer was able to get up to Xam Neua to arrange a formal turnover to the Houaphanh provincial governor.

By this time, the UNESCO Office of Culture in Bangkok concluded that the hassles entailed in gazetting a bi-provincial World Heritage Site were just not worth the trouble, and the original Plain of Jars-only proposal was ultimately submitted. This is

presently still under negotiation, in cooperation with the Lao National Office for UNESCO, although it is not necessarily impossible that the Houaphanh menhirs element could be restored to the World Heritage Site concept, if a constituency for that was elicited. One element, potentially, of such a constituency is the prestigeous New York-based NGO, the World Monuments Fund, which in 2010 designated the Hintang archaeological landscape on its online 'current watch sites'.[1]

Other positive developments included the implementation in late 2010 of the 'Houaphanh Provincial Tourism Development Strategy', with the assistance of the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV). The strategy addressed the menhirs as a "major tourism resource".[2] The SNV project has already expanded the menhirs site signage, including trailside markers extending along the touristic footpath, and replacing/rehabilitating the Highway 6 turnoff panel that was erected by the first AFCP project in 2002, and severely damaged by a storm in 2009.

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[1] "Scattered across 72 different locations along a remote mountain ridge, the Hintang Archaeological Landscape is a collection of prehistoric megalithic sites in northeastern Lao PDR. Hidden throughout the region's lush jungle vegetation and nearly inaccessible to the outside world are 1,546 upright standing stones, 153 large stone disks, and under ground chambers dating back to the Bronze Age. Mysterious yet undoubtedly deliberate, the clusters of stone offer glimpses into an earlier era. Much is still unknown about the area's prehistoric inhabitants, but the significance of the landscape lies in the potential for cultural, ecological, spiritual, and archaeological discovery. Today, the site remains important sacred ground for the indigenous communities, who engage in rituals and make offerings to Hat Ang, a religious idol thought to be the guardian of the surrounding lands…A recent survey found that approximately one-third of the archaeological site is in a state of disrepair. Natural elements, including wind and water, have eroded the stones as well as the sites surrounding them. Further, man-made threats, including looting, uncontrolled tourism, and some road development, have placed the landscape at risk. Fighting, including the Vietnam War (known locally as the Second Indochina War) during the 1960s, left the area damaged. Unexploded ordnances remain in the area and not only threaten the safety of local inhabitants and visitors, but also hinder conservation efforts." [source http://www.wmf.org/project/hintang-archaeological-landscape]

[2] "Hintang Archaeological Park is a major tourism resource in the province. There is a need to conduct further surveys to learn more about the site and use this information for further development and interpretation. Conservation zones around the sites should be designated. There is also a need to fence the main site, renovate the sala, install washrooms, install interpretation materials in the sala, and facilitate local communities to provide food and beverage and handicraft sales. The site is closely associated with the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khuang Province. Close liaison should be maintained between the Provincial Tourism Office and the current heritage tourism project at the Plain of Jars so that Hintang may be included in the nomination for world heritage status that is being proposed for that site…"

As mentioned in the SNV report, in addition to renovating the sala at Ban Pacha, a critical issue is installing washrooms. This is easier said than done, given that modern sanitary requirements include lavatory sinks with running water, and the nearest existing surface supply is a small reservoir about 2 km upslope from the San Kong Phan site. Conceivably, a gravity piped system could be installed, although the water quality (and quantity, seasonally) is unknown.

More preferable would be to drill a tubewell as close to Ban Pacha as possible, which would have to use either a conventional windmill pump, or a solar installation of some kind (there is no mains power within 6 km of the site). Presumably, the well would have to be of sufficient capacity to also be practicably usable by the local villagers. Since the menhirs are all up on ridgelines, local groundwater hydrology might need a rather deep well that requires a relatively powerful pump. No cost estimate has been established as yet.

As things stand now, in June 2011, the US Embassy has agreed to underwrite an upgrade and modest expansion of the site signage, but will only release the funds when formally requested to do so by the appropriate Laos agency. The ambassador of France to Laos, always supportive of French efforts in the service of cultural conservation, is likely to fund installation of the Lao-Franco version of main San Kong Phan site signage. The relevant Lao agencies within the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Provincial Offices of Information and Culture, and the Lao National Tourism Agency (LNTA) are unlikely to take the initiative until the immediate obstruction to commissioning the sala is overcome, i.e., installing a reliable water supply so that sinks and toilets there are made feasible.

Meanwhile, there has been intense lobbying to resolve the water supply issue that will revive the long-stalled menhirs archaeological park project. The New Zealand bilateral aid agency (NZAID) has just launched a tourism project with the LNTA, but Houaphanh

"is not a target province". The Asian Development Bank (ADB) does have a tourism project underway in Houaphanh, but the focus has been on the Vieng Xay caves and the associated revolutionary historical sites, along with the Vieng Hong hotsprings. The LNTA and the Houaphanh Tourism Department, which has discretionary authority over infrastructure investment, allocated a budget for the September 2011 phase. Although considerable interest at the national level exists, and in particular within the Department of Archaeology, the Plain of Jars has not been listed yet as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the prospective Keo Hintang Archaeological Park has not even been cited in the most recent discussions (KPL 2013).

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Images courtesy of Alan Potkin and Catherine Raymond

Alan Potkin holds a doctorate in environmental planning from the University of California, Berkeley (USA), following previous post-graduate training in limnology and estuarine ecology. In 1995, he founded the Digital Conservation Facility, Laos (DCFL) which is affiliated with the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Northern Illinois University (USA), where Dr. Potkin is an Adjunct Research Fellow. Having lived and worked for decades in South and Southeast Asia, he's been continuously developing "artisanal", i.e., low-tech/constrained budget, and interactive visualization and virtual reality tools for ecological and cultural conservation relevant to impact assessment, heritage preservation, museological and site interpretive materials, public participation, government agencies, multilateral development banks, corporations, and NGOs.

Catherine Raymond received her Ph.D. in Art and Archaeology and in Indian and Southeast Asian Studies from La Sorbonne (Université de Paris III), where she was trained under Jean Boisselier (Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam); Madeleine Giteau (Cambodia and Laos); and Denise Bernot (Myanmar). She also holds a Diplôme de recherche et d'études appliquées from National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations. Her research largely focuses on the iconography of Theravada Buddhism, with special interest in the arts of Myanmar. Presently, Dr. Raymond is Associate Professor of Art History at Northern Illinois University (USA); Director of the Center for Burma Studies; and Curator of the Burma Collections. She has been developing innovative digital approaches in archiving and conserving heritage sites throughout South and Southeast Asia.

Dancing between the Traditional and the Contemporary with Digital Media

Sarah Rubidge explores the potential of digital media in traditional performance practices. Although digital choreography is a new artistic medium, it can provide a means of expressing issues relevant to 21st century societies if integrated into both contemporary and traditional dance forms. This article[1] provides an overview of the forms of digital choreographic practice that have been developing since the mid-1990s. It introduces some of the thinking that lie behind the works that digital choreographers and artists have been creating in this new artistic field. In the latter part of the article, referring to a digital installation recently created by the author,[2] the article shows how a hybrid of digital and choreographic practices can embody the principles of both contemporary and traditional art forms to create new ways of expressing the interplay of traditional and contemporary values in Southeast Asian culture.

This article discusses the possibilities that digital media offers to choreographers in the 21st century. A brief overview of the rapid development of the use of digital media for choreography since the early 1990s will be followed by a discussion on the ways in which the processes and structures of digital media can open up a range of artistic themes that allow artists from all dance traditions to explore issues concerning the world they live in and their place within it.

[1] This is a slightly modified version of a keynote paper of the same name given at the World Symposium on Global Encounters in South East Asian Performing Arts, Bangkok University, February 1st - 3rd 2013.

[2] Sarah Rubidge is a digital choreographer and freelance artist. She was also Professor of Choreography and New Media at the University of Chichester, UK during 2010-2013.

Digital Dance

Digital dance is one of the more contemporary forms of choreographic practice in the 21st century. Although contemporary composers had been using computer technologies in their work since the mid-20th century, as is evidenced in the work of composers such as John Cage, David Tudor, and Peter Schaeffer, choreographers were slower to embrace the use of computer technology as a means of generating alternative choreographic forms. It was not until the 1990s that choreographer Merce Cunningham, who had already been extending the boundaries of traditional choreographic forms in radical ways for some forty years, began to explore the possibilities offered to choreography by computer technology. He initially began by using a computer animation programme, Lifeforms, as a choreographic tool. Lifeforms was the first computer animation programme to have been designed with dance-makers in mind.[3] Cunningham used it in several of his stage works in the 1990s, including *Trackers* (1991) *CRWDSPCR* (1993) and *Ocean* (1994).[4] However, more significantly, at the age of 70, Cunningham recognised that, just as video technologies had generated a new platform for choreographic endeavours in the 1980s, the radical increase in the capabilities of computer technology offered even more new directions for choreography.

He extended his experiments with the medium in the latter years of the 1990s with digital artists Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar of *Riverbed*. Together they created early computer-based choreographic installations. Kaiser and Eshkar used new computer-based

[3] A sophisticated animation programme, Lifeforms allowed choreographers to manipulate an animated human figure to create and compose movement on the computer. Now known as Danceforms, it is easy to use and intuitive for the dancer, and facilitates experimentation with new ways of moving and choreographic ideas for hours at a time without tiring the dancers in a rehearsal context. (Information on Danceforms can be retrieved from on http://www.charactermotion.com/products/lifeforms/index.html).

[4] Details of Cunnngham's choreographic work can be found on http://www.merce-cunningham.org/choreography/

technologies such as Motion Capture[5] to generate the data for the digital imagery. Using a circle of up to eight video cameras and placing white markers on dancers from Cunningham's company, the dancers' movement was captured and recorded as numerical data to render details of the movement available for use in other softwares.[6] The data generated by the motion-capture system was fed into custom-built software, and then processed by *Riverbed* to create abstract animations that maintained the shaping, timing and quality of the dancers' movements as well as presented them visually in a more abstract form (Figure 1). These were presented initially in digital installations, rather than in stage works. *Hand Drawn Spaces* (1998),[7] a 3-screen digital installation by *Riverbed* and Cunningham, showed the 'virtual' dancers performing what was unmistakably Cunningham's movement material.

Fig 1. Hand Drawn Spaces 1998 (choreography: Merce Cunningham, digital imagery: Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar, Riverbed)

[5] For technical details of the technical principles underlying motion-capture systems, refer to the paper Motion Capture by Maureen Furniss (MIT Labs USA) access on http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/furniss.html

[6] Motion Capture (Mocap) is used in disciplines as diverse as biomechanics, the Hollywood movie industry, art installations, and stage performances. Mocap systems have advanced rapidly, resulting in many less cumbersome systems now available, including wireless motion capture suits.

[7] Details of this work are available on http://openendedgroup.com/artworks/hds.html

Later, they began to experiment with coupling digital imagery and live movement in Cunningham's stage work. In *Biped* (1999), computer-generated virtual dancers and abstract kinetic graphics were integrated in the live choreography.[8] The virtual dancers were projected both onto the cyclorama and onto a scrim at the front of the stage to generate a sense of the avatars inhabiting the same space as the live performers. To the audience, the virtual dancers appeared to be dancing *with* the live dancers rather than merely dancing behind them. It was through high profile work such as this that a gradual adoption of digital choreography as part of the culture of contemporary dance in the West slowly began to take place.

Although renowned contemporary dance artists such as Merce Cunningham brought digital performance to public attention, a small New York-based dance company called *Troika Ranch,*[9] co-directed by Mark Coniglio and Dawn Stoppiello, has perhaps had the most significant impact on the development of the field in dance. In order to realise Troika Ranch's ambitious artistic ideas, Coniglio, a computer programmer as well as artist, developed a bespoke computer software with interactive capabilities in the early 1990s. He called it *Isadora* (after early 20th century modern dancer pioneer Isadora Duncan).[10] *Isadora* is now used extensively by choreographers, visual artists, composers, and VJs to create installations and performative events.

The form of choreography made possible by the application of computer software to dance is gradually spreading among dance communities in Asia. Taiwan, for example, has a nascent digital dance community, which includes Hsieh Chieh-hua of Anarchy Dance Theatre and Su Wen-Chi of YiLab. Korea has its own multimedia

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[8] Details of this work can be accessed on http://openendedgroup.com/artworks/biped.html
[9] For further information and images of the company's work, visit www.troikaranch.org
[10] Further details of Isadora can be found on http://troikatronix.com/isadora/about/

dance-theatre group in CcadoO, and Japan is becoming adept at developing computer software for dancers, for example, the RAM Dance Toolkit by the YCAM Lab.[11]

Digital choreography encompasses a multiplicity of forms. It includes live performances featuring digital imagery as part of the scenography[12]; interactive performances in which the audio-visual elements of a performance are activated by the interplay between live performers and new media technologies;[13] and telematic theatre performances, which see dancers perform in two or more venues or cities simultaneously, with video images of their performance transmitted over the internet instantaneously to enable the performers to dance together across time and space.[14] Digital choreography also includes interactive installation performances that are live performances in a large-scale installation environment;[15] and interactive installations that are designed to be shown without formal performances taking place within them.[16] In these works, the visitors generate the audiovisual environment in real time, becoming an installation and an informal live choreographic event simultaneously. In interactive works, the performative space is electronically sensitised by an intricate computer system that tracks and records the details of the movement of those who enter the performance or installation environment. It then sends the data gathered from their movement to an interactive performance

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[11] The YCAM Lab is based in the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media in the Japanese city of Yamaguchi.
[12] Cunningham's Biped, 1999; Liz Lea and Sarah Rubidge's Eros~Eris, 2007.
[13] Kurt Obermaier and Desirée Kongerød's Apparitions, 2000; Troika Ranch's 16 [R]evolutions, 2006; Carol Brown and digital architect Mette Ramsgard-Thomsen's The Changing Room, 2004, and SeaUnSea, 2006; Anarchy Dance Theatre's Seventh Sense, 2011; and CCadoa's Traces, 2011.
[14] Company in Space's Escape Velocity, 2000.
[15] Gretchen Schiller and Susan Kozel's trajets, 1999-2007; Sarah Rubidge and Alistair MacDonald's Sensuous Geographies, 2003; and Rubidge's Thai Tracings, 2013 are examples of interactive installations.
[16] Susan Kozel and Kirk Woolford's Contours, 1999-2000; Igloo's Winterspace, 2001; Sarah Rubidge and Hellen Sky's global drifts, 2006.

system which initiates certain actions within the system in response to what amounts to the spatial and dynamic details of the movement. This data generates in real time the modulations of any audio-visual digital imagery that appears on a stage or in an installation, allowing performers and/or participants to actively manipulate, that is control, the sound or visual imagery in 'real time',[17] generating the very features of the installation environment to which they are responding. This is a form of improvisation. Indeed, it could be said that in such installations the visitors become both creators and performers as they improvise and create the choreographic world they are experiencing.[18]

Barely two decades after the first experiments in digital choreography, an increased availability and affordability of sophisticated software and powerful computers has opened up an extraordinary range of new artistic possibilities for the dance artist, many of whom are now programing the digital elements of their work using software such as Isadora or Quartz. The experimentations and those who continue to collaborate with digital artists and computer scientists are opening up the field of digital choreography wider as they adopt the nonlinear structures of computer programming and video processing capabilities to create complex digital choreographies and installations that have as much variety as the dance seen in the theatre.

Creating Digital Traces in Performance

By digitally processing[19] video imagery of dancers in motion in real time, choreographers and dancers instantaneously create intricate

[17] 'real time' is a term used to indicate that there is no discernible delay between a users' input and the programed response of the software to that input.
[18] Interactive installations are sometimes known as performative installations (Rubidge 2009) as they are designed to be simultaneously activated and viewed by visitors who create a unique performance of the installation's visual and audio content.
[19] Electronic manipulation of visual or audial imagery through various softwares.

digital effects on stage and in installations, along with equally intricate virtual representations (avatars) of the dancers. Additionally, performers have been generating their own video double on stage or in installations using simple real time video-capture technology.[20] The captured image of the performer can be projected instantly onto a stage or installation environment to give the impression of a live dancer performing in unison with her digital self. In addition, more intricate effects can be created if the projection of the video image is delayed by a second or two. A choreographic structure can be established between the movement of the live and the digital performer (for example a canonic effect) or, if the delay is longer, an improvised duet can take place between the live and the digital performer.

In some performances and installations, the interactive software is programmed in such a way that, by moving in particular ways, the live dancer can manipulate the appearance of their digital double by making it change size, direction, tempo, and texture. For example, moving faster or slower might alter the speed of the movement performed by their double, moving to the left might make the digital double move to the left with the live dancer, or even move away from them to the right. The size of the digital double could be increased or decreased by moving towards and away from the 'capture' camera, which can give the impression of the digitally generated figure moving forwards and backwards in the performance or installation space. All these devices can be used to create new expressive content. Other techniques also allow for choreographic intricacy. For example, bringing each digital double to visibility, perhaps changing the facing of some of the images to set up

[20] This is achieved through the use of video camera that captures a video image of the dancer in real time; transfers it directly into a digital software programme; and in milliseconds transmits that image to a data projector to reveal a double of the live dancer on the stage. Although often created by choreographers, such works are often generated or initiated by digital artists, both with or without collaborating dance artists: Simon Biggs, Halo, 1998 and Klaus Obermaier, Apparitions, 2004 are examples.

different directional orientations between 'dancers', create structures that can give rise to an intricate danced conversation for a duet, trio or group of dancers who straddle the real and virtual worlds.

The Digital Other

This simple technique of doubling up the performer's visible image expands new possibilities for artistic content in dance performance. As Steve Dixon (2007) points out, there are implicit philosophical meanings in the very act of a performer dancing a duet with their digital double, especially if the appearance of the double is delayed to create a visible 'memory' of themselves as they were in the recent past. If supplementary pre-recorded imagery of other performers is used, live performers can also dance a duet with an inhabitant of past worlds (as in *Thai Tracings*). As such, the digital double is much more than a mere digital shadow, but it has a rich potential for deepening the artistic content of a work on its own right.

Through some of the techniques described above, the digital double can be taken as a form of a digital 'other' (to adopt terminology that emerged with mid-20th century European philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault), with all the philosophical implications embodied in that concept. Additionally, such techniques can make explicit Henri Bergson's concept of *durée,* the subjective perception of time, or *lived* time (Bergson, 1889). *Durée* allows us to explore the interplay between past, present, and future that colours our being in the present, as well as in our future and even our past. At its simplest level, memories recalled in the present are but traces of the past. Yet even as they seep into the present, our memories have been modified over time as we unwittingly imbue them with the traces of our past experiences. Even an anticipation of what might happen in the future can affect our experiential present as we look forward whilst being in the moment.

These observations give rise to a number of questions. Is it the past that is in control of the present, or does the present interrogate the past by bringing to bear its experience of the world of the 'now'?

Is the future affected by our present, and conversely can the potentialities inherent in the future colour our present? Issues such as these dominate questions concerning the site of our personal, social, and cultural identity, and can become the source of artistic work in any medium.

Identity or Identities?

The author suggests that contemporary understandings of personal and cultural identity can be articulated, and even questioned, choreographically through the use of digital media. For some years now it has been argued that we do not have just one core identity, personal or cultural, but embody multiple identities in both spheres (Sarup 1996; Bhabha, 2004). It is suggested that the multiple facets of an individual's identity are in a state of co-existence, sometimes at ease with one another, sometimes in conflict. Were we to find ourselves exploring ideas such as this in dance, there is more than one technique available to the digital choreographer. For example, different facets of a person's identity can be presented by using different video processing techniques to modify the texture or colour of a video image. These will produce a range of modified images, each of which conveys a quite different sensibility or character; or digital processing might produce imagery that is transformed to such an extent that an abstract digital image is created to offer the impression of being an ephemeral trace of a live dancer's movement rather than representing its source, as two of the authors' recent collaborative works, *global drifts* (2006)[21] and *Eros~Eris* (2007), have shown. In Figure 2, for example, which shows a section of *global drifts,* the two performers dancing in the lower right-hand section of the image are generating in real time the digital image displayed on the screen above them, whilst Figure 3 reveals a digital avatar behind the female performer in *Eros~Eris.*

[21] *global drifts* was a work conceived and developed by Sarah Rubidge and Hellen Sky in collaboration with digital artist Seo Hyojung and digital composer Kim Seunghye from Korea. Their work featured in the interactive performance section of the work shown in Figure 2.

Techniques such as these can be used to generate a multiplicity of original video images derived from a single source.

Fig 2. global drift (Directors/choreographers: Hellen Sky and Sarah Rubidge, digital imagery: Sarah Rubidge)

We can go further, however. Through the use of the simultaneous projection of several images of a performer (or visitor to an installation), the impression of there being many different manifestations of a single individual in the space can be produced. This technique is important for exploring the notion of personal or cultural identity, i.e. by using examples of differently processed imagery of a single individual, issues of diversity within an individual's identity can be articulated. Different 'selves' can be presented in digital form by processing individual images in real time in such a way that each digital double exhibits a different density of image, or size, or colour, or texture. In this way, by accessing different processing techniques at different times a temporary prominence or reduced significance of one facet of a performer's identity can be articulated, as can the different sensibilities embodied by the original dancer. More radical techniques can also be used to give more complex variations to movement forms. If the images are processed in such ways as to create abstract traces, or new versions of the original image, new 'dancers' with different sensibilities seem to appear. Furthermore, issues concerning the impact of the present on the past, and the past on the present can be addressed by using time-based techniques. For instance, by delaying the projection of a real

time video image by, say, 45 seconds, a dancer can respond to themselves, and thus dance a duet with themselves as they were in the 'past', albeit a very recent past. Here the past would impact on the present, and also on the dancer's future movements.

Any number of artistic themes can be pursued using these techniques, and manifold interpretations of performance works made possible. This is achieved by video processing techniques that render a different texture to a video image, and with it a different emotional weight or nuance in terms of its significance. As an example, vigorous full colour 'real world' video could be displayed as a subtly faded blue video image, as a dark shadow, as an almost invisible blur of movement, or as a shimmering trace of a body in motion. If projected onto a series of surfaces placed in the performance space itself, even a small stage or installation can be populated with multiple versions of a single performer, bringing with it a raft of potential meanings that go far beyond the mere fact of the presence of the technological.

The author argues that by exploiting possibilities of the technologies, we now have available to us performers who can have a performance 'conversation' with digital manifestations of different 'versions' of themselves, and in doing so (perhaps) re-present the internal dialogue that takes place between the multiplicity of 'beings' from which they are constituted as individuals. This notion could be extended by artists to present and/or interrogate both the diversity and commonalities that are inherent not only within themselves, but also within their culture.

Digital Media and Traditional Dance

At first sight, it might seem that the use of digital media in performance and the interrogation of intricate philosophical concepts are incompatible with traditional performance practices. However, the possibilities digital media holds for engaging in an interrogation of some of the deeper implications that lie in dialogues between traditional and contemporary performance styles are worthy of serious consideration by both contemporary and traditional artists.

The use of digital media can be a powerful way of revealing a number of resonances between traditional and contemporary forms of expression, and concepts of cultural identity. One way of doing this does not, of course, entail the use of digital media. A culture's traditional ways of being, thinking, feeling, and behaving are preserved in traditional dance forms corporeally and in their narratives. These serve as visible evidence of a culture's history within contemporary society, a reminder of their social and cultural roots, and, for many, a means of countering the effects of colonisation[22]. However, traditional dance forms articulate an identity that reflects embedded social mores and belief systems which evolved in a world that no longer exists. In the 21st century, the exchanges between cultures are generating new forms of culture in which old and new become intertwined. The mores, values, and concepts embedded in the alternative lifestyles and ways of living that are accessed through television, digital media, social networks, tourism, travel, and education are infiltrating older values, creating new identities, and new questions as to the relationship between past and present. As a result, contemporary cultural identities have become increasingly hybrid. Artists such as Thai choreographer Pichet Klunchun and Sri Lankan-born UK choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh have long been experimenting with ways of articulating choreographically the impact of the new cultures on their identity as individuals, whilst acknowledging the place of the traditional in the formation of their contemporary identities in the 21st century. Their modulations of traditional movement embody corporeal resonances of the traditional ways of being that contribute to a culture's identity yet embrace new forms of movement expression, making explicit the ever present interplay between then and now.

[22] It is perhaps of significance that the play between cultures has also been running in the opposite direction, with the mores, beliefs, and values of the East infiltrating those of the West, particularly in the 20th century when there was a rise of interest in Buddhism and its accompanying meditation practices. This has resulted in many of the Western contemporary dance forms that were developed in the latter part of the 20th century being influenced by Eastern movement forms such as Tai Chi, Aikido, and Yoga. As such, Western contemporary dance forms are themselves already hybrid movement forms.

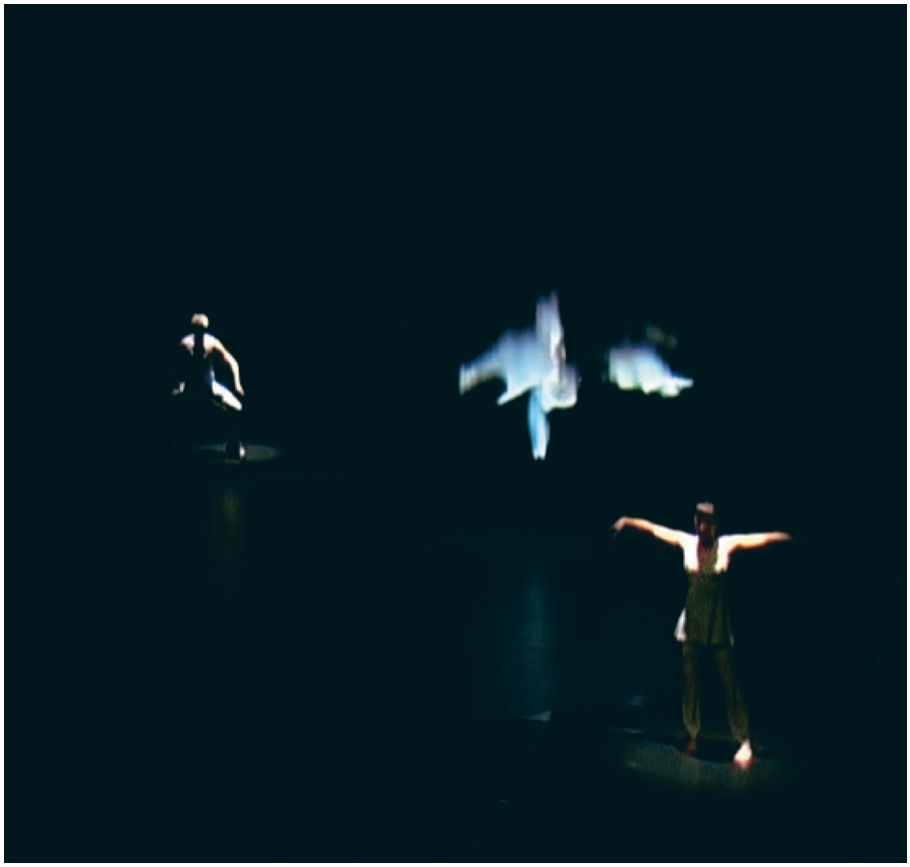

Fig 3. Eros~Eris, 2006 (choreography: Liz Lea, digital imagery: Sarah Rubidge)

Embarking on a conversation between the traditional and the contemporary today requires accommodating the multiple forms of movement expression that are being made available through cultural exchange across countries and societies. Initially, this has come through interrogating the impact such forms of expression might be having on traditional movement forms at a corporeal level, and exploring the impact of traditional movement forms on a culture's contemporary corporeality. However, digital media is an equally viable means of interrogating the relationship between the past and the present, in both individuals and cultures. It has also become clear to me that my works exhibit manifestations of the ways in which my artistic past have impacted on my artistic present.

In recent works I have begun to explore a number of ideas that, I now realise, have had an impact on my perception of digital media as a means of interrogating the dialogue between the traditional and the contemporary. This had its genesis in *Eros~Eris,* a work I co-created with choreographer Liz Lea. *Eros~Eris* featured live and digital choreography presented as equal partners on the stage. It also placed the projection surfaces *in* the performance space, rather than on the cyclorama or a scrim at the front of the stage. This allowed the imagery to become an integral part of the choreographic design, another dancer if you like.[23] In this piece, as the digital choreographer, I explored the potential of digital imagery to provide subtle supplementary meanings to the performance. The highly abstract digital imagery was generated by processing dance movement created by Lea, some of which came from the South Indian Dance form Bharata Natyam.[24] On the stage, this imagery seemed to dance in its own right, providing not merely a background to the more overtly corporeal activity taking place on the stage but also presenting to the audience an insight into an alternative sensibility, one that seemed to lie hidden within the live performer.[25]

In one section of *Eros~Eris*, a huge image of the face and upper body of the central female character, seemingly encased in fire, oversees the duets taking place between the live female performer and her male partner.[26] In such sections of the performance, the incorporation of this imagery could be subject

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[23] This was achieved by asking the scenographer Gabriella Csanyi-Wills to create as part of her design scenographic artefacts in the middle of the stage that could serve as projection surfaces for digital imagery. The result was a huge circular 'moon' and a pendulum placed within the performance space.

[24] Although of Caucasian origins, as well as being trained as a contemporary dancer, Lea is a professionally trained Bharata Natyam dancer. Like Shobana Jeyasingh and Pichet Klunchun, she too incorporates selected dance gestures and sequences from traditional dance forms in her contemporary dance work as a means of exploring the inter-relations between traditional dance and contemporary sensibilities. It is of interest that much of the movement used to create this transformation was traditional Bharata Natyam movement.

[25] Video footage of this section can be accessed on http://www.sensedigital.co.uk/EE1.htm (Excerpt 2).

[26] Video footage of this section can be accessed on http://www.sensedigital.co.uk/EE3.htm.

to any number of interpretations. It could be seen as creating a sense of the performers being observed by a virtual 'other' as they danced in the 'real' world of the stage; it could be interpreted merely as another presence entering the narrative journey that is taking place between the two dancers; as another performer sharing the stage with the live dancers, and subtly commenting on what is going on; or it could even be seen as the consciousness of a live dancer observing the activities of its fleshy 'host' who lives and breathes in the 'real' world.

Other possibilities are revealed in the final section of *Eros~Eris*, when a gentle drift of mist is seen to rise behind the live (female) dancer at the front of the stage, and the second (male) dancer, who is at the back of the stage. This constitutes the final image of the piece. In terms of content, this combination of images could be offering a re-presentation of the corporeal identity of the female performer that flows from the surface of her skin, an identity that is imbued by all her movement experiences; it could be hinting at the escaping life energies of the performer as the partnership between her and the male dancer comes to a close; or it could also be reminding its audiences of the ephemerality of expressions of human thoughts that escape even as they are performed.

Fig 4. Eros~Eris (choreography: Liz Lea, digital imagery: Sarah Rubidge)

At different levels, other sections of this piece offered a subtle way of articulating the interplay between the past and present. The highly processed and abstract digital imagery that is projected onto a pendulum on the middle of the stage in *Eros~Eris* (Figure 4) is derived from video of movement material that had been choreographed for Lea in a previous work we worked on together, *global drifts* (2006). Re-using but radically modifying

this material allowed our past as artists to be brought visibly into our art of the present. In my choreographic mind, the use of this device becomes yet another example of the way Bergson's notion of *durée* has infiltrated my work.

Thai Tracings: Interrogating the dialogue between the traditional and contemporary, between past and present

Ideas such as these have found their way into *Thai Tracings,* an installation work created specifically for the International Performing Arts Festival in Bangkok that ran alongside an international symposium Global Encounters in Southeast Asian Performing Arts.[27] In *Thai Tracings*, I revisited ideas that had underpinned two very early choreographic installations created with collaborators in 2001, *Hidden Histories* and *Time & Tide*.[28] These two works explicitly address the notion that the past and the present intertwine. In those works I used video footage of movement that referenced the inhabitants of the sites through history.[29] In *Thai Tracings,* however, I found my work aligning itself with current artistic explorations of the interplay between histories that seem to lie at the heart of so many Southeast Asian cultures. It later became clear that it was also aligned with the thinking of the increasing number of scholars who presented their work at the symposium, for examples Krailas Chitkul (2013), Sawita Diteeyont (2013), Parichat Jungwiwattanaporn (2013) and Neneng Yanti K. Lahpan (2013). In *Thai Tracings*, I utilised a variety of means to articulate ideas concerning the impact of the past on the present as different cultures engage with each others' ways of being (Figure 5).

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[27] Held by Bangkok University's Department of the Performing Arts, the symposium attracted performers, scholars and delegates from across the world.

[28] These can be accessed on http://www.sensedigital.co.uk/ hh1.htm and http://www.sensedigital.co.uk/t&t1.htm respectively.

[29] The sites are in Winchester and Bosham (near Chichester) in the UK, both of which have a recorded history of human occupation extending back several centuries. More details on these works can be found on www.sensedigital.co.uk/choreography.htm

Fig 5. Traces of traditional dancers in a shopping mall (digital imagery: Sarah Rubidge)

Fig 6. Traditional dancers penetrated by Bangkok street scenes (digital imagery: Sarah Rubidge)

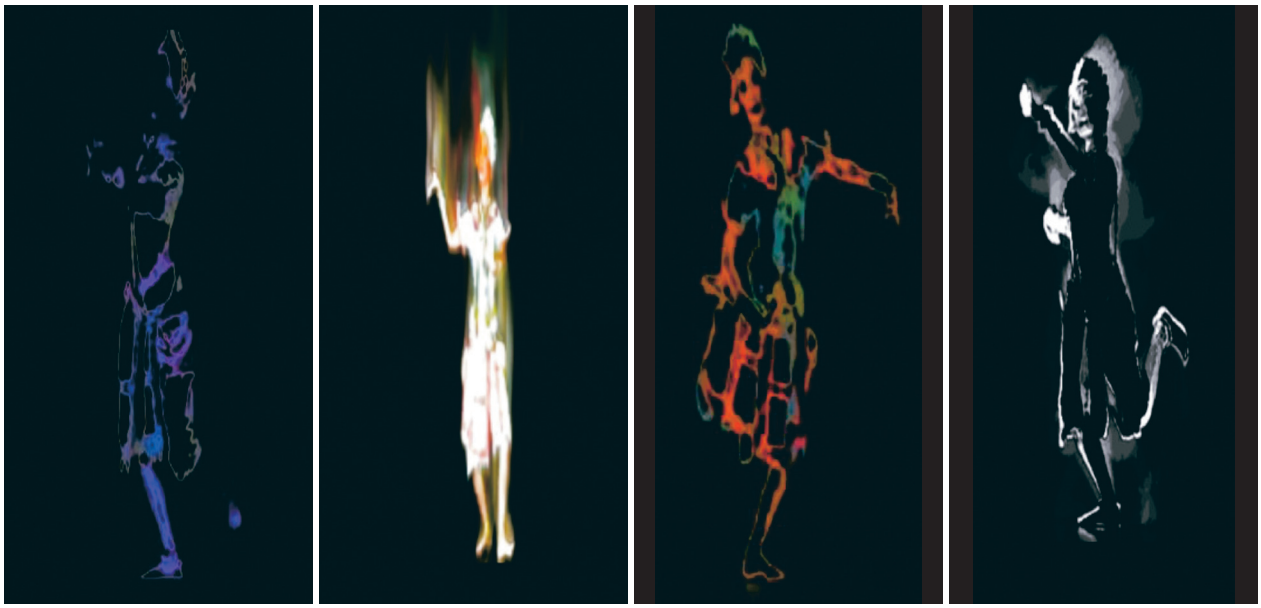

Fig 7. Thai Tracings: Examples of video processing on single source video (digital imagery: Sarah Rubidge)

Fig 8. Traces of a traditional dancer infiltrating modern Bangkok (digital imagery: Sarah Rubidge)

Using video footage of Thai traditional dancers as a basis for the movement content of the installation, I subjected the video to a variety of visual transformations by creating a number of bespoke video processing systems in *Isadora*.[30] Traces of traditional dance were superimposed on contemporary environments and the original video footage of traditional dancers (Figure 5, Figure 8), producing an effect that revealed the world of the present in the body of the past (Figure 6); or, as seen in Figure 7, transforming traditional dancers into live 'shadow puppets' (only a filigree of the form of the Thai dancers remaining when the video processing was complete) or into misty traces of their corporeal source. Such techniques allowed the dancers to become ghostly presences in the modern world (Figures 5, 8 and 9).

Fig 9. Traditional dancer leading the Bangkok Skytrain (digital imagery: Sarah Rubidge)

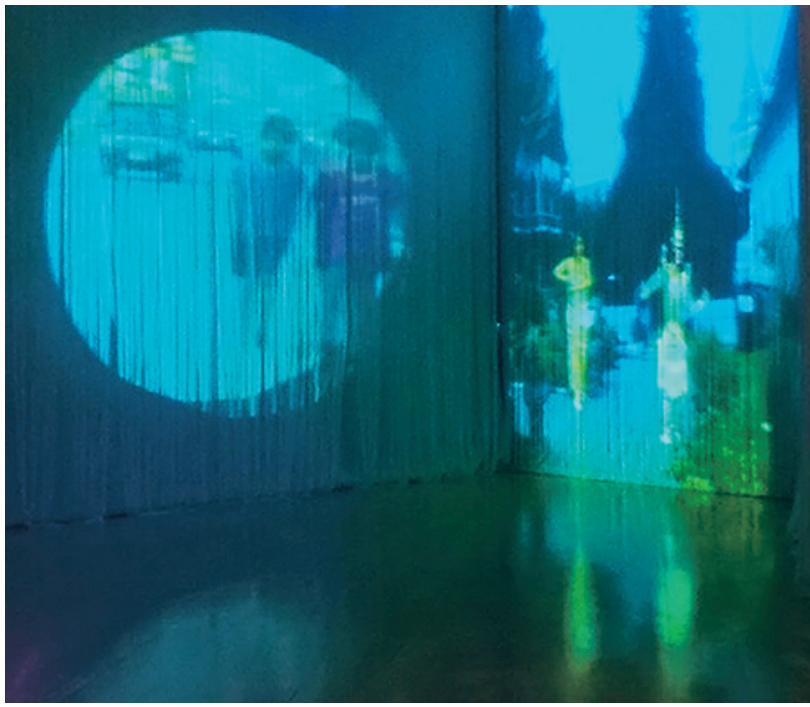

Fig 10. Traditional and modern dancers and street kids of Bangkok (digital imagery: Sarah Rubidge)

[30] In this software, any user can programme individualized video processing systems for their work.

Fig 11. Example of Live Video Capture in Thai Tracings
(digital imagery: Performing Arts Department, Bangkok University)

Through such visual transformations, the piece was able to address three issues. First, it allowed digital imagery to endow one dancer with any number of moods, or degrees of presence (or identities). Second, it explored the notion that a spiritual world accompanies us on life's journey (by no means a solely Asian concept). Third, by overlaying differently processed images of traditional dancers over the contemporary environment in which so many now live and work, the piece could hint at the continuing intervention of the past into the present that permeates contemporary Southeast Asian cultures. These interventions are presented as traces of traditional dancers floating above the flow of movement of customers in 21st century Bangkok (Figure 5, Figure 8); traces of a traditional dancer leading the mass transit 'Skytrain' vehicle that flows over and around Bangkok into a station (Figure 9); the spirits of the past dancing through the incessant flow of urban traffic; and vestiges of traditional performers with their contemporary counterparts in the grounds of Buddhist temples (Figure 10).[31]

[31] Video footage of many of the above images can be accessed on http://www.sense-digital.co.uk/ThaiT2.htm

Overlaying or pairing up images of contemporary and traditional dancers, street scenes and traditional dancers, and juxtaposing people and architecture of different eras create an overt image of the intertwining of past and present. Taking it further, the use of live video capture of visitors to *Thai Tracings* allow a direct interplay between the dancers in the present and the traces of dancers of the past (Figure 11).

It is through techniques such as these that works such as *Thai Tracings* are able to open up for contemplation the many different ways in which the past and present play against and with each other in contemporary society, and thus can impact on developing an approach to cultural identity that acknowledges and embraces the more subtle implications of the flows between cultures.

A new future in Traditional Dance Performances?

Approaching traditional dance using a digital lens can offer invaluable new ways of understanding the inherent potential for new expressive content within traditional forms, without compromising their underlying principles. The interrogations of the role of traditional dance in contemporary society that an increasing number of Asian dance artists have embarked on[32] could be enhanced and extended through the use of digital media. The presence of an active cast of digital dancers could, for example, be used as another way of giving a contemporary resonance to the narratives that underpin traditional dance forms. It could also provide another way of commenting on the relevance of those forms to artists who also live, work in, and breathe the culturally hybrid environments that are characteristic of the 21st century.

[32] Examples are the initiatives taking place in the Attakkalari Centre for Movement Arts in Bangalore; Pichet Klunchun's work in Thailand; Cloudgate Theatre's in Taiwan; and Sin Cha Hong's in South Korea.

Through exploring the ways, suggested in this article, and others that are available to the digital choreographer, digital media could make a valuable contribution to traditional dance forms as they begin to address the inevitable transformations of meaning that occur in the light of the contemporary sensibilities that permeate both performers and audiences. By bringing to attention the way in which the cultural and social mores articulated in traditional dance forms affect contemporary ways of being, dancing between traditional and contemporary choreographic sensibilities using digital media offers a means of creating in dance "an approach to cultural diversity which takes account of its dynamic nature and the challenges of identity associated with cultural change" (Kutukdjian and Corbett, UNESCO, 2009, p.5).

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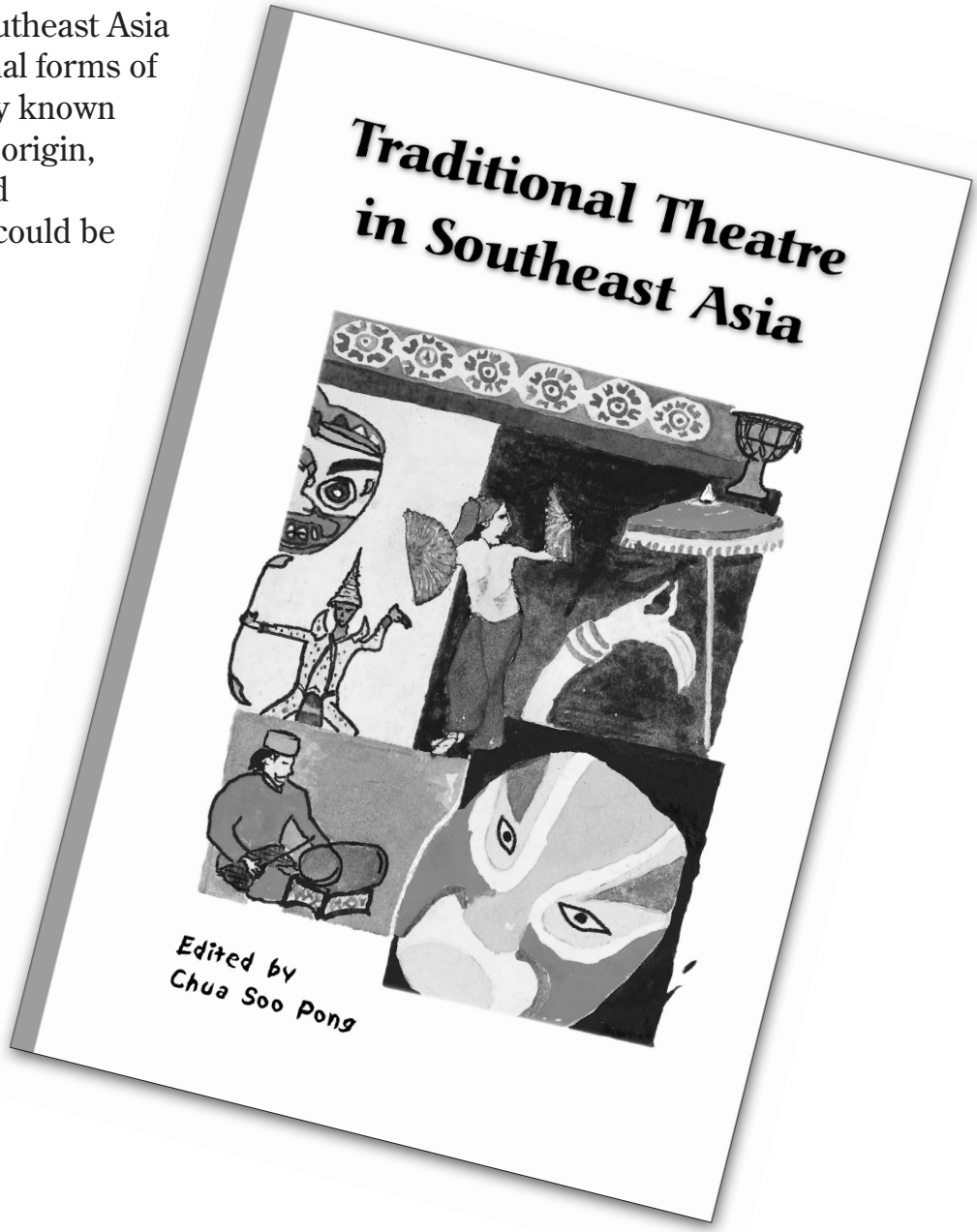

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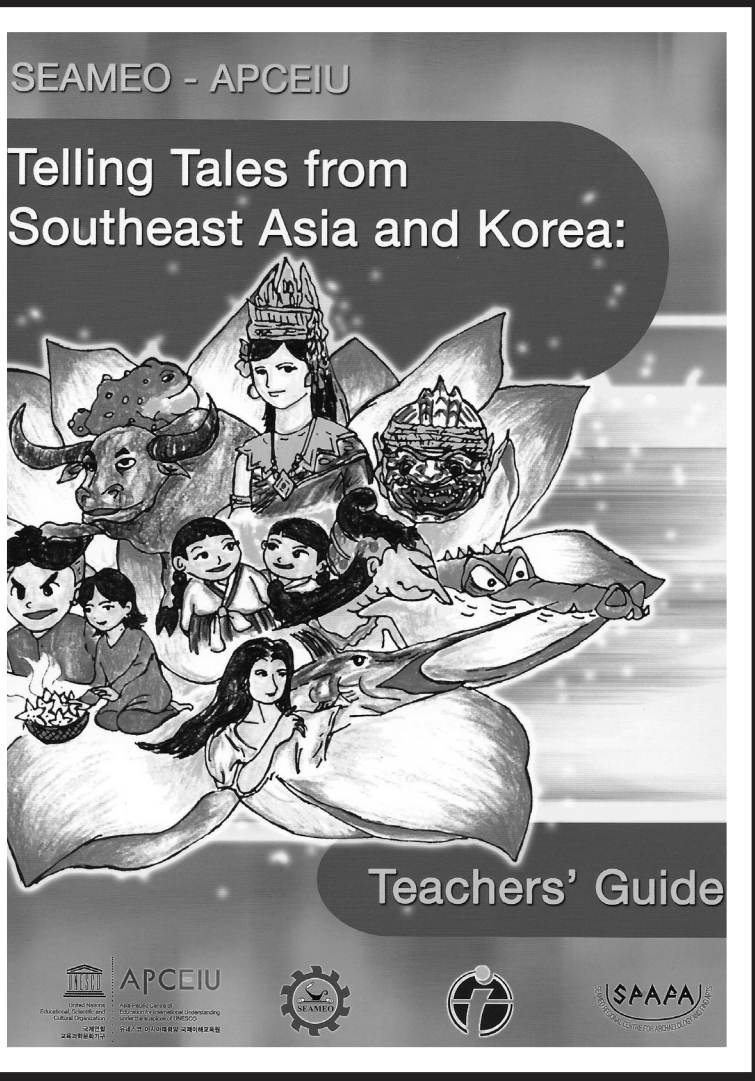

From Sundanese Traditional Music to Islamic Pop Genre *Cultural and Aesthetic Transformations*[1]

Neneng Y Kozanatu Lahpan examines the transformation of Sundanese traditional music into a new hybrid form of Islamic musical expression, both in the aesthetic and cultural elements. The hybridisation process is analysed in the context of contesting and negotiating the Islam-Sunda identity within the performance.

Introduction

Ath-Thawaf is a Sundanese music group located in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. This group has brought about a new music aesthetic that represents a process of cultural and aesthetic transformation from Sundanese traditional art into a new genre, Sundanese Islamic pop music. Inspired by the *Tembang Sunda* (a traditional Sundanese song), Ath-Thawaf combines traditional instruments of Sundanese music and Western elements, and adopts religious themes as its special mark.

This transformation of musical expression is considered a response to the great changes among Sundanese audiences with a tremendous taste for popular music instead of traditional music, particularly the younger generation that considers *Tembang Sunda* old-fashioned. It was for the young people that motivated Ath-Thawaf to create a new musical expression that would keep the spirit of *Tembang Sunda* alive.

[1] This paper is an extended version of article (Bahasa Indonesia) published in *Panggung Journal* of STSI Bandung (2009).

The author examines how this process of transformation happens, both concerning the elements of music and the cultural aspects of *Tembang Sunda* through which Ath-Thawaf produced a new musical hybrid. The process of hybridization is discussed within the context of how Ath-Thawaf has positioned and negotiated itself within Islam-Sunda identity discourses.

According to Piliang (2005, 2007), traditional performance in contemporary society is facing a paradox. On the one hand, in order to survive traditional performing arts need innovations and new creations sourced from their own tradition to make performances more attractive for contemporary audiences. On the other hand, to prevent the loss of the tradition itself, there is an expectation to maintain and keep expressions in their original form rather than making new ones.

Among Indonesian scholars and artists, there has long been a debate on the issue of traditional art conservation, between those who believe that the traditional arts should be conserved in their original forms to preserve their local values and identity, and those who think that it should be elaborated in new forms of expression as an adjustment to contemporary needs (Lindsay 1995, Kartomi 1995). This conservation theme, according to Kartomi, is closely related to 'debates in Southeast Asian countries about national identity, cultural policy, and dominant 'ethnicity" (1995, p.382).

In this situation, some traditional artists in West Java continue to try to create new concepts and creations in their work. Adapting to new surroundings has enabled these artists to create new expressions. They adjust to the new tastes of their audiences, while at the same time they endeavour to maintain their consistency in preserving traditional values through the performances. In doing so, these artists are changing their paradigms and tastes, and improving their insights in creating new forms of expression. This has been done by exploring possibilities in developing new relationships and networks with other artists from different backgrounds so as to elevate performance to a more complex aesthetic level.

Such new possibilities are embodied in various artistic forms that have mostly received positive responses from group audiences. One of these new artistic forms emerged as religious Sundanese pop music, named Ath-Thawaf. By choosing the Sundanese pop genre with its contemplative (religious) themes, Ath-Thawaf has unique characteristics that deserve study. Ath-Thawaf responds to mainstream or dominant pop music by contesting the meaning of Islam and Sunda at the same time. Moreover, this group has also focused on marking their music-projects by promoting the Islam-Sunda identity.

Problematic Issues concerning Islamic Music in West Java

The intersection between Islam and music has been identified for centuries, especially since the *walisanga* (the nine saints) noticed the use of musical performance in their mission of Islam (Dijk 1998, Simon 2010, Sumarsam 2011).[2] The way in which the *walisanga* used performance for prosetylization has become an important reference for those concerned with preserving music for Islamic *dakwah*.[3] However, in contemporary Muslim Indonesia, this encounter of Islam and music becomes more complicated when different interests and meanings meet each other, while the popularity of *Musik Islami* dramatically increases in various forms at the same time (Rasmussen 2011).

In Indonesia, there is a unique concept in defining Islamic music. There are two terms used for explaining the concept of Islamic music, namely *Musik Islam* (Islamic music) and *Musik Islami* (music inspired by Islam) which refer to different meanings and characteristics. *Musik Islam* is categorized as music that uses

[2] *Walisanga* are the notable nine saints who played a role as key Islamic figures in spreading Islam in Java in the 14th century.
[3] *Dakwah*: converting people to become believers in Islam.

Arabic instruments, scale, tone, and particular stage display. Some people even categorize the music as *Musik Islam* because of the use of Arabic language in the lyrics (Berg 2003, Rasmussen 2005, van Zanten 2011).

While the term Islamic music is continually contested among Muslims, including in Indonesia, previous research has employed different terms in English to communicate the appropriate meaning of *Musik Islami* as represented in Bahasa Indonesia. Generally, this term translates as 'Islamic music'. However, the term 'Islamic music' in the Indonesian context has a different context and meaning to that in the Arabic. Some scholars use the term 'Islamic musical arts', 'music with Islamic flavour' or 'music that breathes with Islamic flavour', 'music with Islamic characteristics', 'music with Islam quality', and 'music inspired by Islam', respectively, to refer to various musical genres in Indonesia that are coloured by Islamic flavours. The term, Islamic music, is complex, open to debate, and not easily defined.

From literature, it can be concluded that the main characteristic of Islamic music in Indonesia is an Arabic element that is embedded strongly in the music. In general, there are two groups of people in Indonesia with different perspectives on Islamic music. The first group consists of those who look at Islamic music in how performance is displayed in terms of whether it is regarded as 'halal' or permitted under Islamic law, including taking into consideration the Arabic style of clothing performers, mostly regarded as 'Islamic', and that has become an important symbol of Islam in Indonesia. They also tend to generalize the 'Arab sound' as the 'Islamic sound'. The other group argues that Arabic music is not always 'Islamic' when its texts are secular, non-Islamic, and serves only the purpose of entertainment (Berg 2003, Rasmussen 2005).

Deni Hermawan (2005), a Sundanese ethnomusicologist, defined the concept 'Islamic music' in different ways. He distinguished between the concepts of Islamic music in the Middle East and Islamic music in Indonesia. According to him, Islamic music in the Middle East uses a Middle Eastern music scale (Arabic, Persian,

Turkey, Egypt, and their surroundings) with various themes, not only religious matters. Meanwhile, Islamic music in Indonesia uses a wide range of musical scales (according to its various regional cultures) but with a single theme, namely an Islamic religious theme. He argues that what is called Islamic music in Indonesia is more suitably regarded as *Musik Islami* rather than *Musik Islam*.[4]

Van Zanten (2007, 2011) and Becker (2011) also emphasize Hermawan's categories of *Musik Islam* and *Musik Islami* when lyrics and vocal are taken as an important aspect of music by which the aim of *dakwah* can be fulfilled.

These categorizations have led to another debate in which *Musik Islam* (Islamic music) or Islamic songs in Arabic are always regarded as *halal* (permitted) because of the Arabic symbols embedded within it, while *Musik Islami* (music with Islam characteristics) is defined in a different and more debatable way.

In fact, the concept of *Musik Islami* in West Java needs to be examined more extensively while the term itself is problematic. The categorization of 'Islam-Sunda, Sunda-Islam' adds to the complication in interpreting *Musik Islami* in the socio-cultural context of West Java.

Among Sundanese artists in the present day, including artists and scholars at the Institute of Indonesian Art (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia/STSI), Bandung, the term *Musik Islami* (music with Islamic characteristics) has gained prominence in its use to differentiate it from music with Arabic idioms. Most Sundanese

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[4] Deni Hemawan, *Musik Etnik Sunda Islami Ath-Thawaf: Sebuah Kajian terhadap Nilai-nilai Musikal, Kultural, dan Religius,* in *Journal of PANGGUNG STSI Bandung* No.XXXV, 2005. He explains the various forms of Islamic music in Indonesia which are classified into 5 categories: (1) music in which all of its musical aspects is the same as music in Middle East (its melodies, instruments, contours, vocals, costumes, lyrics, etc); (2) music which uses Indonesian style of music but adopting the musical scales of the Middle East; (3) music which does not use Middle East music style at all, except its theme of Islam; (4) mixture of musical aspects between Arabic (Middle East) and local colour of music, and (5) all of musical aspects that use local style.

artists are more likely to name their works as *Musik Islami* in which they use local artistic forms of music rather than the Arabic ones, although some Arabic instruments, such as frame drums (*rebana*), are still used. They may experiment in composing their works using the richness of local (Sunda) idioms of music, in its instruments and language of lyrics, but the main theme is one of Islamic learning. Dinda Upajabudi, a Sundanese music scholar, advised audiences against being confused by the term 'Islami', and that Islamic values in Sundanese arts (music) is not similar to those in Arabic music.[5] Dinda's opinion represents many Sundanese artists' and STSI scholars' view of the general concept of *Musik Islami*. However, the importance of lyrics to mark the music as Islamic is still commonly accepted by most Indonesian scholars and general public in defining Islamic music. A Sundanese music scholar, Oman Resmana, says: "If you play music without lyrics, nobody can recognize it as Islamic music (*Musik Islami*) whereas once you put lyrics on it, everyone will note that this music is *Islami*. So, *Islami* in the music is in the lyrics whatever the music genre is."

Apart from that debate, it can be concluded that in the Indonesian context, especially in West Java, the categorization of *Musik Islami* tends to be more general than *Musik Islam*. It refers to any kind of music, both traditional and modern, with the single theme that is Islam; whereas for *Musik Islam*, it commonly refers to Arabic music, regardless of the content of its lyrics. This definition and understanding of *Musik Islami* embodies the unique interaction between Islam and local culture in Indonesia, inclusive of the Sundanese community with their motto 'Islam-Sunda, Sunda-Islam'.

Is *Tembang Sunda* Islamic?

The problematic issues concerning the concept of Islamic music arise when the term *Islami* is defined in a wider context by some

[5] Interview *Yus Wiradiredja*, 8 April 2008. See Neneng K. Lahpan, *Ath-Thawaf*: Dari *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran* Ke Pop Sunda Religius (Perspektif *Cultural Studies*), Panggung Journal STSI Bandung, Vol.21 No.2 June-September 2009.

performers as not only about the instruments, tonal systems, or Islamic themes of the song but also recognising Islam as an inspiration for the whole musical form. Everything that is congruent with Islamic values can be categorized as *Islami*. Traditional art preservers such as scholars at STSI Bandung believe that traditional values in arts are in accordance with Islamic values, and as such, can be labelled *Islami*. This is the concern of Yus Wiradireja (*Tembang Sunda* singer, scholar, and the founder of Ath-Athawaf) in *Tembang Sunda*. He argues that *Tembang Sunda* songs contain Islamic values, as it deals with humankind's relationship with God (*hablum minallah*), humankind's relationship with others (*hablum minannas*), and humankind's relationship with the environment (*hablum minal alam*).[6] His position on the matter is further strengthened by the creation of *Tembang Sunda* in an Islamic environment; its performers, audiences, and patrons are all Muslims.

However, in Sundanese music, *Tembang Sunda* cannot be categorized as *Musik Islami* because there are no specific Islamic idioms used in it, and most importantly the work is not intended as 'Islamic' or 'to be Islamic'. In this way, 'Islami' in music should be symbolised by any kind of Islamic symbols, including how it is displayed on stage. That is the reason why Yus Wiradireja has motivated himself to create the Sundanese Islamic music group 'Ath-Thawaf'. He explained that he needed to express his idea using another medium to spread the inspiration of *Tembang Sunda* which he believes still has contextual meaning in this era. Through Ath-Thawaf, he hopes that this inspiration will still be recognized by the younger generation when *Tembang Sunda* itself has lost its appeal.[7] He transferred the spirit of *Tembang Sunda* to a new form of musical expression called 'musik etnik Islami' or ethnic music inspired by Islam, which combines traditional and modern idioms of music. He tries to deliver

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[6] Ibid, 8 April 2008. See Neneng K. Lahpan, *Ath-Thawaf*: Dari *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran* Ke Pop Sunda Religius (Perspektif *Cultural Studies*), Panggung Journal STSI Bandung, Vol.21 No.2 June-September 2009.

[7] Ibid, 8 April 2008. See Neneng K. Lahpan, *Ath-Thawaf*: Dari *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran* Ke Pop Sunda Religius (Perspektif *Cultural Studies*), Panggung Journal STSI Bandung, Vol.21 No.2 June-September 2009.

religious messages through easy-listening music, so that wider audiences in West Java can appreciate it.

This example leads to another issue relating to the use of the term *Musik Islami* in Sundanese music. It is not applied to designate/reject other traditional music as non-*Islami*, but rather to differentiate it in its use of Arabic (Islamic) idioms of music. They use the term *Musik Islami* not in rejection of other kinds of music but to differentiate it from other Islamic (Arabic) music. For example, *shalawat, rebana, berzanji, kasidah* are *Musik Islami*, while *pop-nasyid* or Islamic-pop song, and Islamic-traditional songs, are also *Musik Islami*. Accordingly, *Tembang Sunda* should not be labelled non-*Islami* music because of the absence of Islamic symbols as this traditional music is believed to incorporate Islamic values in its performance.

From *Tembang Sunda* to Ath-Thawaf

For Sundanese people, practising Islam is not only about religious activities but also an important mark of identity (Newland 2001, Millie 2009), as expressed in their popular axiom 'Islam is Sunda, Sunda is Islam'. This statement has been absorbed in many ways by Sundanese people in their daily life, including in the performing arts.

Ath-Thawaf is a transformation of the Sundanese traditional music, especially *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*, creating a new genre called Sundanese pop music, which has a different characteristic to Sundanese pop in general. Imbued by the spirit of *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*, Ath-Thawaf uses religious themes as its special mark, placing itself in a unique position in this pop genre. The group locates itself against dominant pop music using the same music genre, basically subscribing to the local spirit and Islam.

Founded in Bandung in 2001, Ath-Thawaf named its musical genre as an ethnic music inspired by Islam (*musik etnik Islami*), that is music that combines traditional and modern elements of music with Islamic themes as its special mark. The group uses traditional – much more than modern – instruments, reflecting the aim to voice local values and Islamic spirit.

Ath-Thawaf is created from the long creative processes and experiences of its founder, Yus Wiradiredja, who has devoted himself to learning *Tembang Sunda* since childhood. He grew up in the environment where *Tembang Sunda* was part of his life, in the upper-class community (*menak*) in Cianjur regency, West Java. As music produced by the upper-class community, *Tembang Sunda* is considered a contemplative and religious work. Due to this background, Yus believes that *Tembang Sunda* has different characteristics from other traditional performances rooted in and created by ordinary people, as its musical qualities and philosophical values attest to. Yus argues that the philosophical values in *Tembang Sunda* are still valid and relevant to the present time.[8] These philosophical values of *Tembang Sunda* have been embraced by Yus in creating *Ath-Thawaf*, the conceptualizations and performance of which have been influenced by his background as a *Tembang Sunda* expert.

Yus explained that he needed a new medium of expression that would make *Tembang Sunda* more acceptable and appreciated easily by wider audiences. He said that the choice of adopting Sundanese pop genre with religious symbols in Ath-Thawaf is an option based on and influenced by the *Tembang Sunda*. The present Ath-Thawaf acts as a space where negotiation between Islam and Sundanese values takes place. It is important to note Ath-Thawaf is easily accepted by both camps of traditional arts preservers and new creative arts proponents.

The aesthetic and cultural transformation of *Tembang Sunda* into the Ath-Thawaf can be traced from its musical concepts including its composition, instruments, and songs. From a cultural perspective, it can be seen as a paradigm shift in understanding performance creation, which is a new art form (pop music) yet characterized by its traditional project of *Tembang Sunda* to cater to new audiences' tastes.

[8] Interview with Yus WR. Ibid.

Musical Form and Presentation on Stage

The concept for the musical form of Ath-Thawaf[9] is different to that of Sunda pop music in general. In its live-performance, the music is performed on stage, resembling an orchestra, by using a large number of musical instruments accompanied by choir-like vocals. Although there is a solo singer, backing vocalists always provide accompaniment. This concept is taken from the Western orchestra, even though traditional performances in West Java, such as in Gamelan or Wayang, also contain a large number of performers. Yus wanted to present Sundanese ethnic music in a different way, and in this creative process, he admitted that he had been influenced by the concept of the Western musical choir; although Sundanese music also involves a kind of choir called *Rampak Sekar*. However, according to Yus, historically the Rampak Sekar concept was influenced from the West. It is clear that Ath-Thawaf was created by combining both local and Western musical concepts.

Ath-Thawaf has a number of performers (all the instrumentalists are male). In total, the performing group has 25 members: 15 instrumentalists (men) and 10 vocalists (5 men and 5 women). The large group of performers contribute to a wide range of musical composition and harmony of sound.

Another philosophical value espoused by this group in presenting its music is attributed to the concept of *jamaah* or congregation. Literally, the Arabic word of *jamaah* means 'collection' or 'unity' or 'people who get together'. This congregation contains the spirit of helping one another, tolerance, empathy, and solidarity. In the congregation, there is a strong bond of brotherhood and friendship. It also means that working in 'togetherness' will be easier and lighter, and pertains to Islamic teaching on Muslim prayer which explicitly

[9] The name of 'Ath-Thawaf' is taken from 'thawaf' which is known as one of the mandatory requirements in pilgrimage (Hajj) in Islam. In fact, Yus has acknowledged that his initiative to form this music has been influenced by his journey from Mecca in 2000 – the group was formed soon after this pilgrimage (interview, 8 April 2008)

Figure 1. Large number of performers (similar to a Western orchestra)

states that a prayer in congregation is better than praying alone. In Islam, the spirit of congregation is very important and encouraged. This spirit is intended to be built in such a way to form a solid and strong music group.

In terms of its personnel, Ath-Thawaf has a composition of men and women, the musicians being all male. To keep their performance in line with the Islamic way, they try to preserve the gestures of the vocalists (*munsyid*) to avoid negative effects for performers, listeners, and audiences'.[10] The group's Islamic music has consciously followed Islamic rules that are regarded as 'true' for the Muslim majority in Indonesia. Hence, this 'Islami' musical identity project can be seen as a way to give it 'an acknowledged place in Indonesian Islam' (Harnish and Rasmussen, 2011, p.26).

Regarding their appearance, Ath-Thawaf adheres to local Islamic rules on clothing by ensuring that performers' costumes are 'coloured by Indonesian nuance in designs, motives, and using simple accessories, but still attract attention for the audiences which can bring them in improving their morality and piety...'[11] As a costume

[10] http://ath-thawaf.blogspot.com.au/2011/09/ath-thawaf-musik-etnik-islami.html, accessed on 15 October 2012.
[11] Ibid

is a very important element in symbolizing Islam, Ath-Thawaf has put local elements that are salient in their clothing style with attention to Islamic rules. Local symbols in costume rather than Arabic influences are promoted. This also underlines how Islam has been accepted through a dialogue between local values and Islam, and the interpretation of Islam that is based on local and not Arabic influences.

Figure 2. Clothing style accentuating local (Sundanese) elements by following Islamic rules on costume

Musical Instruments

To signify its musical project as 'Islami', Ath-Thawaf combines various musical instruments, both modern and traditional, which are incorporated to produce a new harmony of sound. These instruments include electric bass guitar, big Sundanese zither called *kacapi indung*, and small zither called *kacapi rincik*; string instruments include violin and the local instrument (modified Sundanese string instrument) called *renggana*; percussion instrument includes Sundanese traditional drums called *kendang* and *gembyung*, also *jimbe* and *conga* derived from Africa; Sundanese flute, and *puklung* (formed from popular instrument called *angklung* but with different way of playing) and Sundanase xylophone-like instrument known as *gambang*.

Some musical instruments such as *puklung* and *renggana* are made and modified by members of the group itself. *Puklung* is similar with *angklung* but is played by beating it, while *renggana* is an

adaptation of the local string instruments called *rebab*. Not every instrument is played at the same time in the performance. Rather, they are used on the basis of their suitability with the musical theme. The creative efforts in producing a new musical harmony serve to bring the Sundanese musical identity into prominence.

Figure 3. Various musical instruments are used, combining local and Western elements

Ath-Thawaf's exploration of these various types of musical instruments is not limited to musical instruments used in *Tembang Sunda*, such as *kacapi* (zither), *suling* (flute), or *rebab*, but also other traditional instruments, including those that come from the West. The exploration demonstrates Yus' experience and his extensive interaction with various types of music. He said that Sundanese musical instruments are used more than these of Western instruments, enhancing the project of promoting Sundanese ethnic music.

Lyrics and theme songs

The choice of religious themes in Ath-Thawaf, besides individual experiences, is also greatly influenced by the spirit of *Tembang Sunda*, which is, according to Yus, laden with spiritual values that are relevant now. As in *Tembang Sunda*, Ath-Thawaf songs are also created in a contemplative way, offering 'serious' themes accessible to many. The themes of divinity, humanity, and nature are presented in an easy listening musical style.

In general, the themes of the songs can be divided into three major groups: 1) the relationship between humankind and God, 2) the relationship among humankind, and 3) the relationship between human beings and the environment. These themes have emerged in three Ath-Thawaf's albums, namely *Jihad Tahmid* (2002), *Jamaah* (2003), and *Pancering Hirup* (2003). In addition, there are also a number of songs that have not yet been recorded and released. The aforesaid three themes, always presented in the *Tembang Sunda*, according to Yus, suggests that the spirit of *Tembang Sunda* is contextualized in Ath-Thawaf songs.

Yus is a professional singer in both types of music, and also a song-writer and composer. He wrote most of the lyrics for Ath-Thawaf as well as *Tembang Sunda*, and produced his own musical compositions. Most lyrics of both musical expressions have similarities in using Islamic vocabularies, such as the words, *iman* (faith), *Nu Maha Agung* (Almighty), *Gusti* (God), and so on. Meanwhile, the musical compositions are distinctive because of their different genres, although the first has affected the latter. As contemplative works, themes for both music are similar; examples include the following *Tembang Sunda* songs: *Sekar Wiwitan* that questions the origin of human creation; *Sang Wening Ati* (sincerity) *Sekar Aji* (self-reflection) and so forth, in which localizing these Islamic vocabularies is salient. In Ath-Thawaf, Islamic vocabularies can easily be found in song titles, such as *Jamaah, Jihad Tahmid, Silaturahmi, Al hadist,* and *Istiqomah*.

Religious themes in Sunda pop music are not new though. For example, Bimbo and Doel Sumbang, popular singers from West Java, have created very popular songs with these themes, such as *Dina Amparan Sajadah* (on the unfolded praying mat). However, the option to make religion the only theme, and consistently vocalised it in the music is the only choice for Ath-Thawaf group. In fact, by embracing Islam and Sunda together, Ath-Thawaf intends to touch its audience and mark its identity as Islamic music where Islam-Sunda discourses are contested and negotiated. The group states in its website:

> Ath-Thawaf is a Sundanese Islamic ethnic group, based on the awareness of Sundanese and Islamic values which combined together in musical art. This awareness is a result of our observation [of] social phenomena which have changed and [have been] developed recently, [leading] to negative practices.[12]

Conclusion

Some people are confronted with the paradox between the presence and position of traditional performance against a modern life and a contemporary culture. In their interaction with contemporary culture, traditional performance artists perform a variety of new creative art forms in order to keep traditional performances alive and contextual. These efforts include those of Yus Wiradiredja, who created Ath-Thawaf, to produce pop music using contemplative-religious themes.

Combining traditional and Western elements of performance, Ath-Thawaf is considered 'hybrid' music. Its musical concept, stage display, musical instruments, and lyrics can be seen as inspired strongly by the spirit of *Tembang Sunda* which is considered contemplative and spiritual. Using this new form of music, Ath-Thawaf has positioned itself as a space of negotiation where Sundanase and Islamic values meet.

There is an expectation that traditional performances can continue and have a voice in a global culture. Using new significations and meanings, Ath-Thawaf represents hope and opportunity in preserving the inspiration of traditional performance, offering a space to express local and Islamic values in the form of Islamic ethnic music.

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[12] Ibid

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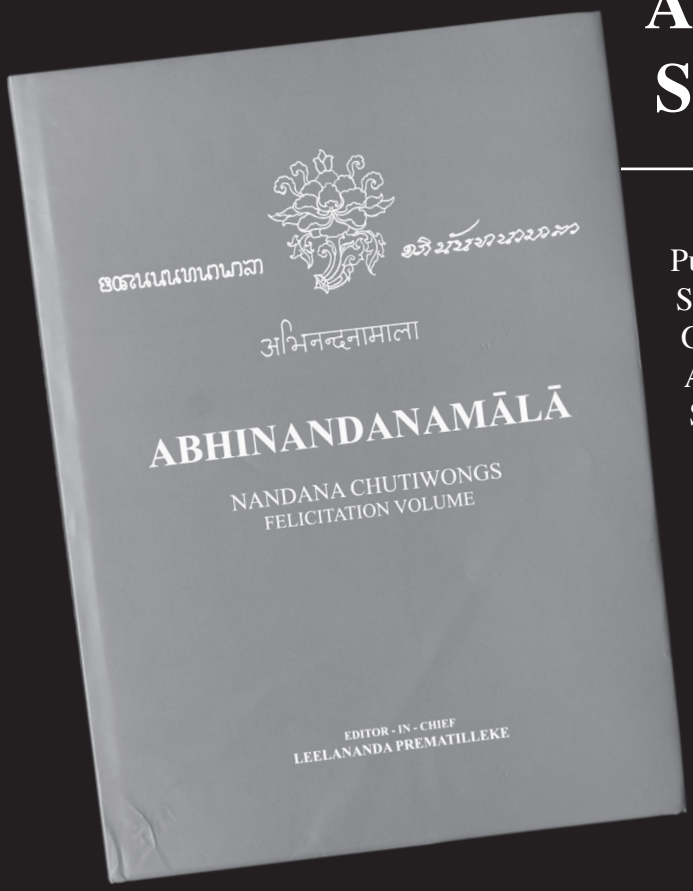

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