

Calung Banyumasan: Shaping Bamboo, Sounding Identities

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Abstract

Calung Banyumasan: Shaping Bamboo, Sounding Identities is an ethnomusicological documentary film about the *gamelan calung*, bamboo xylophones ensembles typical of the Banyumas Regency (Central Java), on which the author is currently focusing his doctoral studies. The documentary – shot during a semester of field research, from March to August 2019 – should be considered as a collective creation, since it is the result of a close cooperation with local musicians, who actively participated in choosing its form and contents. *Calung Banyumasan* explores various socio-anthropological and musicological issues in connection with the *calung*. The daily lives of the three main protagonists (a teacher, a *calung* maker and an expert performer) and the stories they tell reflect the importance of this musical tradition as a central element of the local cultural identity. The film considers the indigenous artisanal knowhow, provides an account of the ever-increasing presence of these ensembles in educational institutions, and reveals some of the contexts in which *calung* performances are held. Although a few international scholars have dealt with this topic, to date no extensive and in-depth audiovisual documentation of the *calung* has been carried out by ethnomusicologists. The author therefore decided to present this musical practice in an original and widely accessible documentary film that could be of interest to a wide-ranging audience and lead to a deeper understanding of this subject.

Calung Banyumasan: Shaping Bamboo, Sounding Identities è un documentario etnomusicologico sui *gamelan calung*, ensemble di xilofoni in bambù tipici della Reggenza di Banyumas (Giava Centrale), argomento al quale l'autore sta dedicando i suoi studi dottorali. Il film – girato nel corso di un semestre di ricerca sul campo, tra marzo e agosto 2019 – è il risultato di una stretta collaborazione con alcuni musicisti locali, che hanno attivamente partecipato alla scelta del format e dei contenuti, e deve quindi considerarsi una creazione collettiva. *Calung Banyumasan* esplora diverse tematiche socio-antropologiche e musicologiche connesse alla

pratica del calung: le attività quotidiane dei tre protagonisti (un maestro, un costruttore di calung e un musicista di professione) e le storie da loro raccontate riflettono l'importanza di questa tradizione musicale come emblema dell'identità culturale di Banyumas; il film dedica ampio spazio al sapere artigianale autoctono (costruzione e intonazione degli strumenti), mette in luce la sempre maggiore presenza di questi ensemble nelle istituzioni scolastiche e rivela alcuni dei contesti in cui si svolgono le performance di calung.

Sebbene alcuni studiosi internazionali abbiano trattato l'argomento, ad oggi la pratica del calung non è stata ancora documentata in maniera estensiva in ambito etnomusicologico. Per questo motivo l'autore ha voluto rappresentare questa tradizione musicale attraverso un documentario originale e largamente accessibile, che possa interessare un'audience eterogenea e stimolare ulteriori approfondimenti.

Film: *Calung Banyumasan: Shaping Bamboo, Sounding Identities*, directed by Daniele Zappatore and Yusmanto, 45', 2020.



FIGURE 1. Screenshot from *Calung Banyumasan: Shaping Bamboo, Sounding Identities* showing a performance of the gamelan calung led by Yusmanto.

Introduction And Genesis Of The Project

The *gamelan calung* is a bamboo xylophone set that is particularly widespread in Banyumas (a regency in the southwestern part of Central Java) and in the homonymous cultural area, including the neighboring regencies of Cilacap, Purbalingga and Banjarnegara. The *calung* is the main subject of my doctoral research,¹ which involved a semester of intensive fieldwork in the abovementioned territories, from March to September 2019.

¹ The research is funded by the doctorate in Music and Performing Arts of the Sapienza University of Rome, currently coordinated by professor Giovanni Giuriati.

CALUNG BANYUMASAN

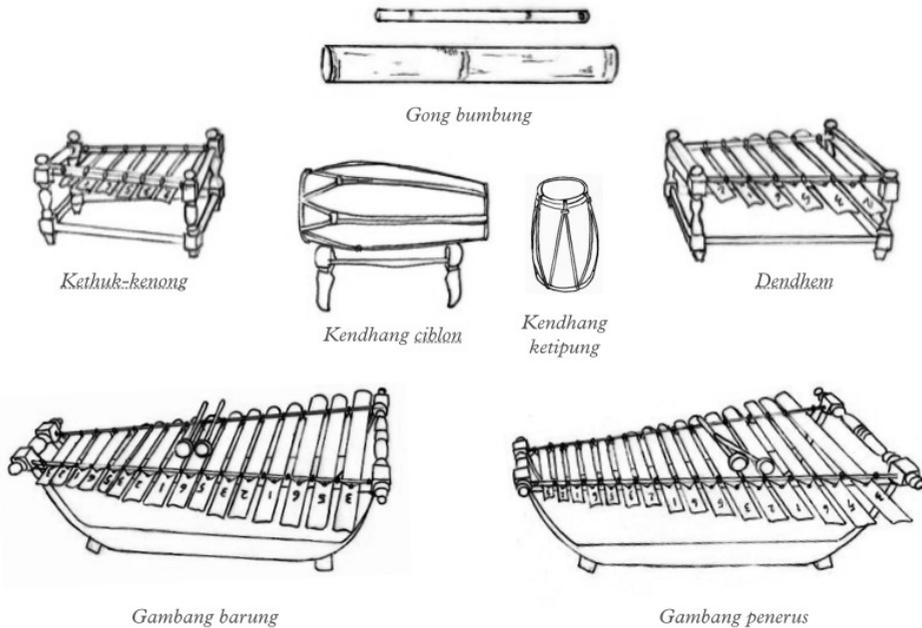


FIGURE 2. Elements of the *calung banyumasan*, illustration made by the author.

Calung sets primarily consist of instruments made of *bambu wulung* (Javanese black bamboo), an essential natural resource for the populations of the area. A *calung* set typically includes: two single-octave bamboo xylophones (the *dendhem* and the *kethuk-kenong*) which respectively play a principal melody and its colotomic punctuation; an end-blown bamboo tube (the *gong bumbung*), which marks the strong beat of the rhythmic cycles that characterize this music; a pair of multi-octave bamboo xylophones (*gambang barung* and *gambang penerus*) which elaborate the central melody through interlocking patterns and formulaic ornamentations; and two double-headed barrel drums – the medium-sized *kendhang ciblon* and the smaller *kendhang ketipung* – which lead the shifts in tempo, dynamics and density (or rhythmic ratio).

One or more female singers and dancers (*sindhèn / lènggèr*) always accompany *calung* performances, interacting with the musicians and the audience. Instrumentalists, who are usually (but not exclusively) male, also intervene vocally by means of musical exclamations (*senggakan*), and by responding to specific lyrics and rhythmic cues with short, stylized vocalizations. *Calung* music, which is mainly based on the regional repertoire of Banyumas (*gendhing banyumasan*), is characterized by dense interlocking patterns, comical vocal exchanges, energetic drumming and sudden shifts in its tempo and density (see Sutton 1991); it is played in diverse contexts and on various celebratory occasions, ranging from the all-



FIGURE 3. The author performing with his teachers during the *Sadran* (a Javanese celebration held in remembrance of the ancestors) in the village of Gumelem (Susukan, Banjarnegara), 27th April 2019 (photo: Sri Muliyah Susanti).

night *lènggèr* performances – a local tradition that has been accurately described by Lysloff (2001) – to several kinds of staged competitions (*lomba*), concerts and music festivals. The variety of its performative contexts reflects the openness of this musical practice which, although it is closely related to the cultural identity of Banyumas, is now undergoing a profound modernization and hybridization, with the emergence of new creative modalities.

When I began my fieldwork in Banyumas, my initial intention was to extensively document *calung* music in its context, in order to collect materials that I could analyze in my doctoral thesis. At that time I saw audiovisual recordings primarily as a sort of ethnographic notebook and research aid, in the context of an analysis-oriented methodological approach with its roots in the seminal work of the ethnomusicologist Gerhard Kubik. In line with my objectives, I spent the first few months of my research establishing a relationship of mutual respect and trust with several local musicians, by practicing the *calung* every day, playing alongside my teachers, and recording a number of performances and interviews.

During the preparatory phase of my research, while studying the scientific literature, I noticed that in-depth contributions on this musical practice were lacking and that very few scholars had examined the subject, most of them dealing with it only marginally.²

² These include Kunst 1968, 1973; Sutton 1986a, 1986b, 1991; Lysloff 1992. Although these contributions are undoubtedly interesting, they are now rather dated and *calung* music therefore needs to be reconsidered in the light of the transformations that it has recently undergone.

I also learned that no significant and systematically presented audiovisual documentation existed. This led me to consider the possibility of making an ethnomusicological documentary on the *calung*, an idea that implied a radical change in terms of methodological approach. I was stimulated to attempt this task by my interest in audiovisual ethnomusicology and by my awareness that audiovisual media offer an excellent means for describing, analyzing and disseminating musical cultures belonging to oral traditions. I therefore drafted a project and presented it to the musicians I was studying with, and they welcomed my idea very enthusiastically.

The Protagonists

A musician, journalist, teacher and expert on the performing arts of Banyumas, Yusmanto (born in 1967) has been actively engaged in the practice and promotion of *calung* ever since he studied for a Master's degree at the *Institut Seni Indonesia* in Surakarta (one of the most important art universities in Central Java). Soon after graduating, together with his wife Sri Multiyah Susanti he founded the *sanggar* (artistic center) of Seni Sekar Shanti, with the aim of teaching music and dance (traditional as well as original artistic creations) to the children of Karangjati (Susukan District, Banjarnegara Regency) and the neighboring villages. During my stay in the field, Yusmanto was always a fundamental point of reference for me, becoming my *calung* teacher and a close friend, as well as the co-director and protagonist of the film. In his *sanggar* I met many of the musicians who would participate in the project, including Kistam and Hadi Sumarto, both of whom had already collaborated with Yusmanto for about twenty years.

Kistam (born in 1957) is a *calung* maker and performer from Kedawung (a kilometer west of Karangjati), who was my main reference person for the processes of cutting, drying, tuning and assembling the bamboo sections into musical instruments. Kistam has been honing these traditional skills since the mid-1970s and his all-round workmanship and technical abilities are widely recognized by local musicians, who particularly appreciate the timbre, loud and clear tone and excellent quality of his instruments. Thanks to these skills he has also acquired a certain fame outside the local area and the regency of Banjarnegara where he lives and works.

Hadi Sumarto (also known as Pakel, or “fresh mango”) is a musician by profession from Karangjati, who has performed in Banyumas and the neighboring regencies since the early 1970s, when he joined the Sri Murni lènggèr troupe, led by his uncle. Thanks to studying and talking with Pakel I was able to gain a deeper understanding not only of the most relevant stylistic and practical aspects of local performing practices, but also of the socio-economic conditions of the indigenous musicians (*pengrawit*), and the way they earn a living in rural areas. His tenacity, his deeply human qualities and his musical skills were a great inspiration for me.

Methodological And Technical Issues

The documentary film *Calung Banyumasan* is based on a close collaboration with my teachers, who actively participated in its process of realization. From the very beginning of the project I adopted a participatory approach, as I felt that the musicians – rather than myself in the role of ethnomusicologist – should have decided its contents, according to what they thought would be most interesting to represent and how they wanted to do so. In addition to getting them more interested and involved, this approach allowed me to explore various issues that would probably not have arisen from interviews or the practice of participant observation alone. I was also able to reflect on the way in which one's methodological choices can influence certain techniques and possibilities of representation of the ethnomusical datum, within an intercultural context where collaborative working models are applied. In adopting this approach (which has a long tradition in the history of ethnographic filmmaking)³ I primarily relied on the theoretical contributions of the anthropologist Martin Gruber, who stated that «Participatory Ethnographic Filmmaking gives the participants the possibility to shape their own media image and generate new forms of collaborative knowledge» (Gruber 2016: 15). In making *Calung Banyumasan*, I tried to combine my ethnomusicological perspective with my interlocutors' point of view, so as to respect their ethnographic authority (as the experts and custodians of the local musical culture), while emphasizing the dialogical dimension of fieldwork within my research methodology.

In the initial coordination phase I organized several meetings with the protagonists of the film, in order to reflect on the issues that needed to be addressed and to agree on a shared working strategy. On these occasions, we drew up a basic screenplay that could give the documentary a clear and coherent structure, while ensuring that all the participants would feel adequately represented. We decided to focus above all on the techniques of construction and intonation of the *calung*, while also leaving room for the protagonists to deal with issues such as the central role of this musical practice in shaping the cultural identity of Banyumas, its increasing use in educational institutions, and its close connection to *lènggèr* performances.⁴ In order to achieve this, we choose to dramatize some scenes, a decision that would have shown its potential. As Gruber pointed out:

[...] the introduction of a fictional layer not only has an effect on the protagonists but also changes the relationship between protagonists and filmmakers: they become players of the same (Rouchian) game rather than being bound into the more rigid hierarchical

³ The concept of participation – both the ethnographer/filmmaker's participation in his/her interlocutors' everyday life, and their participation in the filmmaking process – is a crucial aspect of anthropological filmmaking. Forms of collaborative and dialogical filmmaking were already popular in the '70s. Many of Jean Rouch's films, for instance, are based on a principle of mutual exchange with his "informants" (Rouch 2003). This was also perceived as fundamental in the production of observational and biographic documentaries (see Baily 1989; Elder 1995; MacDougall 1995).

⁴ These themes are presented in the final film, although they are not addressed in great depth, as well as other strictly musicological issues. Rather than focusing on a specific topic, we tried to provide a general overview of the subject.

relationship between observer and observed that is characteristic of more conventional documentary filmmaking. (*Ibidem*: 21)

During the making of *Calung Banyumasan*, the protagonists were often asked to reenact or improvise situations from their daily life, in ordinary contexts that were intended to make the acting of these dramatized elements more natural and spontaneous. Furthermore, since our intention was to appeal to a very diversified range of audiences (local as well as international, including ethnomusicological specialists as well as generic viewers), the creation of a “fictional narrative” helped us to make the final product more appealing and accessible to all.

After planning the project, between May and July 2019 we dedicated ourselves to shooting the film, in the regencies of Banyumas and Banjarnegara. Since I dealt with the audio and video recordings personally – with the help of some local technicians only on the occasion of the *lènggèr* performance at the end of the film – I was able to stick to a very low budget, using semi-professional equipment in different combinations and with techniques that varied constantly, according to the specific contexts and the practical requirements of the film. I shot it prominently using available or natural light, in accordance with the usual conventions of realism in documentary films.

Equipment used for realizing the film

Photo/Video

- Sony FDR-AX33, 4K camcorder
- Sony a6300, compact mirrorless camera (SELP 16-50mm lens)

Audio:

- Zoom H4nPro Multitrack digital recorder
- Neewer 2-Pack Pencil Stick Condenser Microphone (Interchangeable Capsules)
- Rode Stereo videoMic Pro Rycote (On-camera)

Accessories (used only for shooting the night-time *lènggèr* performance)

- Zhiyun Weebill S, 3 axis stabilizer for mirrorless camera
- Moman LED Video Light, bi-color, 3000k-6500k

While shooting the film I tried to ensure that, although the camera and the ethnomusicologist were obviously present, they were never intrusive, in order to leave a substantial amount of expressive freedom to the protagonists, whose voice (whether in the scene or off the screen) guide the narrative and explains the images. I tried to use the audiovisual technology in a way that could best reflect the protagonists’ values and outlook and their attitude towards local music and culture. They were always free to use any language they



FIGURE 4. The author and the performers during the shooting of the last scene of the film at Kedawung village (Susukan, Banjarnegara), 26th August 2019 (photo: Bayu Prasetya).

wished during the filming (Indonesian, Javanese or their own local dialect), so that they could adopt whichever one best suited their mood and the specific context. For the more technical descriptive sections, the protagonists were asked to view the footage and to provide a commentary on the action, as a separately recorded voice-over.

We completed all the audio and video recordings in August, and then systematically organized the vast amount of audiovisual data collected (in total about 100 hours of video footage). After returning to Italy, I worked for a whole semester on the selection and editing of these materials, applying the conventions of documentary realism and ethnographic film, as well as my own aesthetic preferences. This phase of the work also involved constant communications and discussions with the protagonists of the film, as well as with my friends, colleagues and supervisors, to whom I showed several different versions, with the aim of improving them, based on the feedback and advice received. The version herewith presented, lasting 45 minutes, is the result of this lengthy process. It consists of a series of interviews, informal dialogues, moments in real life, reenactments and improvised scenes, which represent the daily activities of my teachers through the stories that they recount. Besides being primarily a thematic and organological documentary, therefore, *Calung Banyumasan* also includes biographical elements, combined to create a narrative that prioritizes life stories in order to better understand complex musical and socio-cultural phenomena.

The innovative nature of this documentary is due to the way its contents have been elaborated by its protagonists in a participatory way. Given the lack of studies that concentrate

extensively on the *gamelan calung*, a film monograph of this type clearly advances the state of our knowledge on the subject, within the wider field of research on Javanese performing arts and local bamboo music, which require further analytical studies. As it is the result of a process of intercultural exchange and dialogical collaboration, *Calung Banyumasan* invites to consider the benefits of a participatory approach to ethnomusicological research and filmmaking. Our ultimate aim is to disseminate this musical tradition by means of an original and widely accessible documentary film, which can stimulate reflection on topics of interest in contemporary ethnomusicological and audiovisual debate.

Technical specifications

Title	<i>Calung Banyumasan: Shaping Bamboo, Sounding Identities</i>
Director	Daniele Zappatore
Co-Director	Yusmanto
Year of production	2019/2020
Running time	45 minutes approx.
Aspect ratio	1:1.85
Sound	Stereo
Shooting format	Full HD
Colour format	Full Colour
Original language	Indonesian / Javanese / Bahasa Ngapak (Banyumas dialect)
Subtitles	English
Location	Banyumas Regency, Banjarnegara Regency (Central Java)

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