



Nyai Bei Mardusari, a Wife of Mangkunegara VII
and a famous Surakarta Dancer and *Pesindhèn* (1936)



Singer-dancers (*talèdhèk*) with small
gamelan at roadside warung (1955)

WHO IS THE *PESINDHÈN*?
NOTES ON THE FEMALE SINGING TRADITION IN JAVA

R. Anderson Sutton*

Those who have attended performances of gamelan music in Central Java can be in no doubt that the solo female singer (*pesindhèn*) is accorded a role of special prominence. Usually situated conspicuously in front of the gamelan, she is set off from the male instrumentalists for all to see. Amplifiers often blast her voice at peak volume over the full gamelan ensemble. In the performance of many pieces she is given solo passages (*andhegan*), which draw all attention exclusively to her. One of my teachers in Java, Suhardi, used to tell me that there was no sense in playing gamelan if there were no *pesindhèn*. Although for some pieces he would adopt the "loud-playing" style, with no vocal or soft-sounding instruments of any kind, he was like most Javanese performers and listeners in his fondness for the "soft-playing" style--in which a *pesindhèn* is an essential component.

Commercial cassette recordings of gamelan music, almost without exception, feature the vocal line of the *pesindhèn* at a much higher dynamic level than that of any instrumental part. On the covers of cassettes appear the names and often the photographs of the *pesindhèn* (usually several)¹ who sang in the recorded performance. The names of these singers are generally well known, and buyers often choose a particular cassette because it features one of their favorite *pesindhèn*. Other musicians, aside from the gamelan director and occasionally a male vocalist, are to my knowledge never listed. The playing of the drums and the *rebab* (spiked fiddle), as the locus of rhythmic and melodic leadership, are more crucial to the flow of the performance, but it is the famous *pesindhèn* who attract buyers. Similarly, sponsors of private gamelan performances will spend large sums of money to have one or more famous *pesindhèn* sing. In 1979 a well-known *pesindhèn* could earn well over US\$100 for one performance--not high by American standards, to be sure, but spectacular in comparison to instrumentalists, most of whom received from fifty cents to a few dollars (at that time Rp. 300 to Rp. 2,000).

Individual instrumentalists may gain reputations for excellence over the years, but they are not on display individually as they perform, nor are their names nearly so widely known as those of the professional *pesindhèn*. Though there is usually a solo instrumental introduction (*buka*) to an ensemble piece, such solo passages are otherwise unheard of, barring a few recent experiments which are perceived by most to be outside the tradition. In general, gamelan music does not feature one instrument over the others.

* I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Sumarsam of Wesleyan University (currently on leave at Cornell University) with the *wayang* excerpts used in this study. Comments on earlier drafts by Judith Becker are also gratefully acknowledged.

1. I am following the conventions of Indonesian and Javanese language in not marking plurals unless they are unclear from the context.

We are told by some observers that the pesindhèn's part is simply one of many in the musical texture blending into the communal whole, and that it is not qualitatively different or more important than any of the other melodic lines.² This may have been true for a period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,³ but one would be hard pressed to argue it today. One senses among Western observers a feeling that the earlier practice is more beautiful and even more "correct." Could it be that Westerners prefer the pesindhèn's voice to be somewhat covered up by the other more "soothing," less strident parts in the gamelan texture? Or that Westerners are not likely to follow the poetic texts sung by the pesindhèn and therefore feel that her part is of no greater aesthetic significance than the others? To those familiar with the tradition of a soloist in Western art and popular music it seems that the pesindhèn is becoming more and more like a star, with the gamelan merely providing background accompaniment.

What I wish to address in this paper is the question of the pesindhèn's special prominence, her role and image in Central Java. Attempts to attribute her prominence entirely, or even primarily, to Western influence seem to me to be incorrect. The indigenous historical antecedents of the present-day pesindhèn need to be taken into account, as do indigenous perspectives on aesthetic perceptions of the pesindhèn's role.

Reports from the nineteenth century indicate that gamelan music was often performed without vocal parts, and that—at least in the court tradition—pieces with vocal lines were performed by a chorus singing a single melodic line in unison (what is now known as *bedhayan* style).⁴ The singers, referred to as pesindhèn, from the old Javanese word *sindhi* (to sing), were both male and female. But the tradition of a solo pesindhèn, now exclusively female, seems not to have derived from this courtly chorus. Javanese today draw a sharp distinction between the pesindhèn chorus—normally associated with the formality of the courts—and the solo pesindhèn, whose musical style and ethos are more "of the people [*rakyat*]."

Nevertheless, something like a solo pesindhèn has existed for centuries, albeit in a different guise. No soloist sat with the gamelan members and sang in the manner so common nowadays, but one could hear gamelan with solo female singing from a female singer-dancer, known variously as a *talèdhèk*, *ronggèng*, *ringgit*, *lènggèr*, or *tandhak*.⁵

2. See, for example, Mantle Hood and Hardja Susilo, *Music of the Venerable Dark Cloud* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. 35. See also Judith Becker, "Traditional Music in Modern Java" (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1972), pp. 35–36.

3. J. Groneman, *De Gamelan te Jogjakartā* (Amsterdam: Muller, 1890), p. 44.

4. See Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, 2 vols. (1817; reprint ed., Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1978), 1: 470–72; and Margaret Kartomi, "Javanese Music in the Nineteenth Century" (Paper delivered at the Sixth International Conference on Asian History, International Association of Historians of Asia, Yogyakarta, August 26–30, 1974).

5. One finds the term *talèdhèk* used in and around Yogyakarta and Surakarta in Central Java, the term *tandhak* in East Java, and the term *lènggèr* in the Banyumas and Kedu regions of west-central Java and in Gunung Kidul, southeast of Yogyakarta. *Ronggèng* and *ringgit* both appear in Javanese literature of the nineteenth century and before. It is not known whether these have always been synonymous, nor whether some of them have always been specific to particular regions. The

It seems very likely that the present solo pesindhèn tradition arose from that of the singer-dancer, though it is difficult to trace the history of this development.⁶ In Java, as in other areas of Indonesia, singer-dancers have been known for centuries. The fourteenth century poem *Nagara Kertagama* describes a female entertainer called *Juru i Angin* (mistress of the wind), who danced and sang simultaneously.⁷ Her performance consisted of two contrasting parts.

The first part was essentially comical (witty, *cucud*) and perhaps erotic. The female dancer was accompanied by *Buyut* (Great-grandfather, and old man), probably a follower and astute servant (*pānākawan*) of the kind that is indispensable in Javanese plays.⁸

This part was performed "in the open air, probably near the countrymen's halls."⁹ The second part began with her entrance into the royal "Presence," where she joined the exalted members of the court in drinking liquor and where "Mantris (mandarins) and *upapattis* (assessors-at-law) equally are taken for companion by her, drinking liquor, singing *kidungs* (songs)."¹⁰

The description of *Juru i Angin* suggests a number of parallels with the talèdhèk tradition of the less remote past. Not only does each sing as she dances, but there are important similarities in the contexts of the performance. During the first part of *Juru i Angin*'s performance, according to Pigeaud's translation, men made gifts of clothing to her. A similar practice persists in the *tayuban* (= *nayuban*) tradition, in which one or more talèdhèk dance with men in turn and sing as gamelan music is played.

In modern Java in rural districts the custom for men to throw articles of their own apparel . . . on the floor at the feet of a female dancer as a token of admiration and erotic excitement still prevails, and in Javanese literature (*Cēṭhini*) it is described.¹¹

The description of the second part of *Juru i Angin*'s dance clearly mentions liquor, and the reference to men being "taken for companion" suggests sexual activity. *Tayuban* need not involve drinking or physical contact between the talèdhèk and any of her male partners, yet in many cases it involves a considerable degree of both. The well-known nineteenth century poem, *Serat Cēṭhini*, describes at great length a *tayuban* in which most of the participants wind up intoxicated and

terms *ronggèng* and *tandhak* appear to be interchangeable in the *Serat Cēṭhini*. Occasionally the term *gambyong* was also used, though now it refers, at least in urban circles, to a flirtatious dance performed by a female who does not sing as she dances.

6. For a detailed account of the singer-dancer as an important antecedent to current solo female dances, see Peggy Choy, "Reading a *Golèk*: A Perspective on a Javanese Dance Genre" (MA thesis, University of Michigan, 1982), especially ch. 2.

7. The *Nagara Kertagama* is translated and copiously annotated in Th. Pigeaud, *Java in the Fourteenth Century: A Study in Cultural History*, 5 vols. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1960-63).

8. Pigeaud, *Java in the Fourteenth Century*, 4: 316.

9. Ibid., p. 317.

10. Ibid., 3: 108.

11. Ibid., 4: 316.

some copulate on the dance floor.¹² While many Javanese today claim that *Serat Centhini* descriptions such as this are fanciful exaggerations, drinking and sexual license have been common practice at tayuban occasions.

It is . . . an astonishing spectacle for those who have the opportunity to attend a real, old-fashioned nayuban for the first time, to see the stately Javanese, who in ordinary life do not in the least appear to appreciate the use of alcohol, becoming fuddled to such an extent and to see them in a state of excitement in which they occasionally openly misbehave and allow themselves all kinds of liberties with the talèdhèk.¹³

In the Tengger area of East Java, singer-dancers (there called tandhak) often appear at festive occasions where great quantities of liquor are consumed. In their inebriated state, the men behave in a manner which would be unacceptable in more normal public encounters with members of the opposite sex.¹⁴

The role of the Buyut is also paralleled in the talèdhèk tradition. Pigeaud, Stutterheim, and Brandts-Buys have written of the *canthang balung*--men who dressed strangely and danced for the ruler (*susuhunan*) of Surakarta and his entourage.¹⁵

They had a place amidst the gamelan players whenever *bedhaya* or *srimpi* dances [female-style ensemble dances of the court] were performed in the *kraton*. Then they fulfilled the role of *badhud* (jesters) and let the *senggak* calls [short vocal interjections] be heard against the gamelan music. It is said that whenever they succeeded by their dances . . . to make the Rijksbestuurder laugh, he forfeited a penalty (*kena dhendha*).¹⁶

These canthang balung wore unusually tall *kuluk* (fez), painted the upper half of their bodies, and sported long beards. They drank strong liquor and acted inebri-

12. The description is found in the early twentieth-century publication of the *Serat Centhini* in romanized form: R. Ng. Soeradipura et al., eds., *Serat Tjenthini: Babon Asli Saking kiṭa Leiden ing Negari Nederland*, 8 vols. (published as 4) (Betawi [Jakarta]: Ruygrok, 1912-15), 7: 3-30. The same text is quoted in full in Ben Suharto, *Tayub: Pengamatan dari Segi Tari Bergaulan serta Kaitannya dengan Unsur Upacara Kesuburan* (Yogyakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1980), pp. 82-111.

13. W. F. Stutterheim, "A Thousand Years Old Profession in the Princely Courts on Java," in *Studies in Indonesian Archeology* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1956), p. 99. (Original in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, uitgegeven door het Koninklijk Instituut* 92 [1935]: 186-96.)

14. Personal communication from Robert Hefner, 1980.

15. Th. Pigeaud, *Javaanse Volksvertoningen: Bijdrage tot de Beschrijving van Land en Volk* (Batavia: Volkslectuur, 1938); Stutterheim, "Thousand Years Old Profession"; and J. S. Brandts Buys, "Tjanṭang-baloeng's, een duidelijke beschrijving gegeven van het hedendaagse optreden der Soerakarta'se Tjanṭang-baloeng's met hun castagnetten (kěprak tjålåpitå)," *Djåwå* 13 (1933): 258-62.

16. My translation of Pigeaud, *Javaanse Volksvertoningen*, p. 59.

"Zij hebben ook een plaats onder de gamelan-spelers wanneer er bẽḡåjå- en srimpi-dansen worden uitgevoerd in de kraton. Dan vervullen zij de rol van baḡoed's (narren), en laten het senggak-geroep tussen het gamelanspel door horen. Men vertelt dat, wanneer zij erin slaagden bij hun dans . . . den Rijksbestuurder te doen lachen, deze een boete verbeurde (kẽna ḡẽḡḡå)."

ated in public. In addition to their role as entertainers, reminiscent of the Buyut, the canthang balung and other similar officials played an important role in the patronage of singer-dancers in the courts and elsewhere (see below, p. 125).

It is clear from various accounts, past and present, that the singer-dancer tradition is closely associated in Java with the notion of sexual freedom, prostitution, and the power to attract the male. Ben Suharto points out that the word *talèdhèk* partakes of the same root as *nglèlèdhèk* ("to tempt, lure, attract").¹⁷ The *talèdhèk* is expected to behave in a coquettish manner and, with her movements and singing, to entice men to dance with her. Raffles, writing in the early nineteenth century, mentioned the low reputation of the singer-dancer (he used the term *ronggèng*):

Their conduct is generally so incorrect, as to render the title *ronggeng* and prostitute synonymous [*sic*]; but it not infrequently happens, that after amassing considerable wealth in the profession, they obtain, on account of their fortune, the hand of some petty chief. In this case, they generally, after a few years retirement and domestic quiet, avail themselves of the facility of divorce, and repudiating their husbands, return to their former habits.¹⁸

Whatever the associations, the singer-dancer tradition is given a measure of legitimacy by a Javanese folk tale:

Three artisans, a wood carver, a goldsmith, and a tailor, were instruments of the divine will. The Lord Allah ordered the wood carver to make a statue of a beautiful woman and install it beside a little-traveled path. Passing by, the tailor took pity on the statue's nakedness and dressed it with his unsold wares, a *sarong*, a chest cloth, and a *kebaya* (blouse). Later, the goldsmith came by and adorned the statue with rings, bracelets, earrings and a necklace. All three, upon return home, fasted and prayed arduously that the figure might be imbued with life. After forty days, a *wali* (one of the nine legendary holy men who introduced Islam to Java) came upon the statue and to him Allah's will was revealed by an angel. The statue became animated. The wali led the beautiful woman to the house of the wood carver. The goldsmith and the tailor had already arrived here having been told by a *tjitjak* (household lizard) to do so. Each of the three men, seeing the lovely woman, recognized his share in her creation and claimed her for himself. But the wali ordered all three to accompany the woman, who was to dance and sing, wandering through the country. The woodcarver was to play the *rebab* (one-string violin), the tailor was to beat the drum, and the goldsmith was to play the gong, *ketjrek*, and *ketuk* (all percussion instruments). They obeyed and the four wandered out and on to Majapahit. And thus it was shown that the dance girl does not belong to one but to many.¹⁹

From this legend, it appears that the singer-dancer's patronage (outside of the court described in the *Nagara Kertagama*) would have been the general public. It is noteworthy that she traveled not alone, but in the company of men. Though rare today in Central Java, one still finds an occasional itinerant *talèdhèk* with a few musicians, to my knowledge always male, wandering the streets of even the larger

17. Suharto, *Tayub*, p. 47.

18. Raffles, *The History of Java*, 1: 342.

19. Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 113.

cities. They are usually looked down upon by the general populace as beggars, and the talèdhèk as prostitutes. Not all singer-dancers fit this lowly category, however. Some may work in other capacities during most of the year, and perform as singer-dancers only for occasional ritual tayuban parties. In this case, the patron might be a villager of substantial means, one wealthy enough to engage the services of the singer-dancer with a group of musicians, and to provide refreshment for performers and others in attendance.

Whether as a beggar or as a participant in a ritual, the singer-dancer is expected to perform in a manner alluring to men. While this has long been the case, it is worth pointing out that singer-dancers have sometimes been men playing the role of women. This sort of role switching is not at all unusual in Java, and is seen, for example, in the *ludruk* theater tradition of East Java.²⁰ In the Yogyakarta kraton, the female-style bedhaya dance was often performed by boys in female dance costumes, until the practice was abolished in 1914.²¹ Female roles in the Yogyakarta *wayang wong* dance-drama tradition were also performed by males. And in an apparent reversal of this practice, the *langendriyan* dance-drama tradition of the Mangkunegaran court has all roles, male and female, played by women, who both dance and sing.

In the opening pages of the Romanized version of the *Serat Centhini*, there is a lengthy description of two young men, Mas Cebolang and Nurwitri, who take the roles of male singer-dancers (*ronggèng lanang*).²² Each item of their female attire is described, as are the movements of their dance and the sounds of their voices--all even more enticing and feminine than those of a real woman. The male host of the evening's entertainment, referred to as Ki dipati, is infatuated. Their beauty overwhelms him. He talks suggestively with them, flirting and touching, and winds up with both of them in his bed. Pigeaud also mentions the tradition in the Yogyakarta region of wandering male talèdhèk, dressed in female attire and accompanied by a few male musicians. Apparently, such entertainers were not uncommon prior to the Japanese occupation.²³

The special powers of attraction of the male playing a female role are still displayed today in the *ludruk* tradition, but for most Javanese men an alluring female role is best filled by a woman. Nevertheless, the essential attribute of the singer-dancer is that she (he) be sexually attractive.

Among those attracted by singer-dancers in the past were the Central Javanese rulers, who took talèdhèk as court servants, mistresses, and sometimes as wives.²⁴ These women came to be known as the "pesindhèn talèdhèk." The addition of the name pesindhèn is significant, for at least as early as the late nineteenth century, and perhaps much earlier, the women sang without dancing.²⁵ Musical pieces from

20. See James Peacock, *Rites of Modernization: Symbolic and Social Aspects of Indonesian Proletariat Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

21. Pigeaud, *Javaanse Volksvertoningen*, p. 299.

22. Soeradipura et al., eds., *Serat Tjenthini*, 1: 3-22.

23. The male talèdhèk was, it seems, still current at least as late as the publication in 1938 of Pigeaud's *Javaanse Volksvertoningen*; see p. 299.

24. For example, Mas Ajeng Rantamsari was a talèdhèk who became one of the wives (*selir*) of Sultan Hamengku Buwana II of Yogyakarta, who reigned from 1792 to 1810. (Suharto, *Tayub*, p. 44.)

25. Groneman reports females who sang without dancing in the late nineteenth

the talèdhèk repertoire were introduced into the courts, along with the style of drumming associated with her dance. A well-known Yogyakarta treatise on gamelan music (the *Pakem Wirama*, initiated in 1889) notates these pieces, describing them as *gendhing talèdhèk* ("talèdhèk pieces"). Presumably the pesindhèn talèdhèk would sing them in a talèdhèk style (solo). The style was evidently pleasing enough for solo female vocalists to begin singing other pieces in the courtly repertoire, as is now standard practice.

The pesindhèn talèdhèk enjoyed a substantially higher status than did the itinerant street talèdhèk. Nevertheless, she was subject to the desires of the nobility whom she served. Most directly responsible for the pesindhèn talèdhèk were the canthang balung (in Surakarta) and the *lurah* talèdhèk (in Yogyakarta and elsewhere). These men located prospective pesindhèn talèdhèk in the villages and saw to it that these women (or girls) were educated and trained as performers. Writing of the canthang balung in Surakarta, Pigeaud states,

. . . it is said that they formerly held the position of leaders of the dance women. . . . According to my information from Solo, they had the rights simply to consider as their own subordinates women or girls who caused public scandal through immoral conduct and who were not married or subordinate to a master or lord. Whenever a man appeared who wanted to marry one of these women or take her as a servant, he had to buy her freedom.²⁶

Concerning the situation in Yogyakarta, an entry under "Dances" (*Dansen*) in the *Encyclopædie van Nederlandsch-Indië* (cited by Pigeaud) reads:

Also in the Principalities, especially in Yogyakarta, similar ronggèng are met with, called talèdhèk, who are linked to the king, living in one separate kampung under a single head or *lurah*, and enjoying a fixed salary. These kampung are at the same time brothels: notwithstanding, these ronggèng enjoy some respect and are not so disdained as public whores. This is partly the result of their higher education.²⁷

century (*De Gamelan te Jogjakarta*, p. 44). In a late eighteenth-century poem from the Mangkunegaran palace in Solo, one finds frequent mention of gamelan and singing (*sindhènan*, *sisindhèn*, *sidhèn*, *sisidhèn*, etc.): Ann Kumar, "Javanese Court Society and Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century: The Record of a Lady Soldier," *Indonesia* 29 (April 1979): 14, 17, 18, 23, 24, 41. In the only instances in which the sex of the singers is mentioned (pp. 23 and 24) they are described as male. Whether the other references are to female singers or to mixed groups cannot be determined.

26. My translation of Pigeaud, *Javaanse Volksvertoningen*, p. 59.

"... naar verluidt hadden zij vroeger de positie van hoofden van de dansvrouwen. . . . Volgens mij verstrekte inlichtingen uit Sala hadden zij het recht vrouwen of meisjes, die openlijk aanstoot gaven door onzedelijk gedrag, en die niet getrouwd of ondergeschikt aan een meester of heer waren, zonder meer als hun onderhorigen te beschouwen. Wanneer zich een man voordeed, die een dier vrouwen wilde trouwen of als dienaars in huis wilde nemen, moest hij haar loskopen."

27. My translation of the passage from J. Paulus, comp., *Encyclopædie van Nederlandsch-Indië*, 2nd ed., vol. 1: A-C (The Hague/Leiden: Nijhoff/Brill, 1917): 571.

"Ook in de Vorstenlanden, met name in Djokjakarta, worden dergelijke ronggèngs aangetroffen, talèdhèk geheeten, die aan den vorst verbonden zijn, in eenen afzonderlijken kampung onder een eigen hoofd of loerah wonen en eene

The professional singer-dancer and her overseer apparently did not only appear in the major courts. Pigeaud reports that the *Serat Cabolang* (a poem dating probably from the late nineteenth century)²⁸ mentioned a lurah talèdhèk in Kota Gedhé (east of Yogyakarta). He goes on to cite several other instances known to him:

That these functionaries [the lurah talèdhèk] are well known outside the area of the present-day Principalities appears from a report from Karanganyar (Bagelèn), which says that there was a lurah ronggèng. . . . Also in some villages of the regency of Kebumèn such a functionary still appears to have existed around 1870; he had the title: *kepala* [head] of the female dancers, enjoyed exemption from *désa*-service obligations, but still had claim to a portion in the division of the village fields [*sawah*].²⁹

How early this institution existed is difficult to determine. Pigeaud cites a report, "Statistiek van Grisse, 1822," by Cornets de Groot, who mentioned female dancers (referred to as tandhak or ronggèng):

"They live by themselves or, in groups of two or more, are housed by others who feed and clothe them, against two fifths of their wages, while, moreover, they must still give a fifth to the owner of the gamelan and a fifth to the musicians, whereby they only keep a fifth for themselves." This gives the impression that there was a somewhat fixed arrangement.³⁰

It was only relatively recently that the functions of solo female dancer and solo female singer became separate in courtly and urban contexts of gamelan performance.³¹ Teachers with whom I studied, some of them only in their early forties, remembered

vaste bezoldiging genieten. Deze kampongs zijn tevens bordeelen; desniet-tegenstaande genieten deze ronggengs eenig aanzien en worden niet zoo geminacht als gewone publieke vrouwen. Dit is voor een deel wel het gevolg van hare hoogere ontwikkeling. . . ."

28. Pigeaud, *Javaanse Volksvertoningen*, p. 60. The dating of the *Serat Cabolang* is given by Th. Pigeaud, *Literature of Java*, 3 vols. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1967-70), 1: 228.

29. My translation of Pigeaud, *Javaanse Volksvertoningen*, p. 60.

"Dat deze functionaris ook buiten het gebied van de huidige Vorstenlanden bekend is (geweest), blijkt uit een dialekt-opgave uit Karanganyar (Bagelèn), die zegt, dat daar een loerah ronggèng bestond. . . . Ook in sommige dorpen van het regentschap Këboemèn schijnt nog omstreeks 1870 zulk een functionaris bestaan te hebben; hij had de titel: kepala van de dansvrouwen, genoot vrijsteeling van verplichte desa-diensten, maar had toch recht op een aandeel in de te verdelen dorpsakkers."

30. My translation of the passage from Cornets de Groot, "Statistiek van Grisse, 1822," as quoted in Pigeaud, *Javaanse Volksvertoningen*, p. 60, and Pigeaud's comment following.

"Zij wonen op zich zelve, of worden, bij getallen van twee of meer, gehuisvest door anderen, die haar, meestal tegen twee vijfde van haar verdienste, voeden en kleden, terwijl zij voorts nog een vijfde aan den eigenaar van het gamelanspel en een vijfde aan de muzikanten moeten afgeven, waardoor zij slechts een vijfde voor zich behouden." Dit maakt wel de indruk, dat er een enigermate vaste regeling bestond."

31. In fact, the separation has never been complete. A number of forms of dance-drama (including *langendriyan* and portions of *wayang wong*, mentioned previously) require the actor-dancer to sing some or all of the dialogue.

attending performances in which a female vocalist--called *pesindhèn*, but sometimes also *talèdhèk*--would get up to dance and sing at some point during the evening. While this is no longer the norm, many of today's best-known older *pesindhèn* were famous as *talèdhèk* in their youth. Like the *runggèng* described by Raffles, some have married and divorced a number of times.

Indeed, the *pesindhèn* retains much of the sexual image of the singer-dancer. As will be elaborated below, she is expected to be flirtatious in performance and responsive to the male musicians and other men in attendance. However, the current system of patronage is quite different from the days of the *pesindhèn talèdhèk* and before.³² In the courts and rural localities, a singer-dancer was known by her appearance and her sexual reputation, as well as by her artistic talents as a singer and dancer. Those who had grown too old, though still capable as singers or dancers, were either dismissed or maintained as teachers and servants, but not as performers.

As the courts encountered increasing difficulties, both political and financial, from the late 1920s onward, artists began to seek income from other sources. This period coincided with the introduction of radio and recording technology and the expansion of commercial performances in Java. In particular, the communication media--first radio (beginning in the 1920s), then the dissemination of 78 rpm disc recordings (beginning in the 1930s), and now the veritable explosion of commercial cassettes (since the late 1960s)--have enabled the *pesindhèn*'s audience to disassociate her physical appearance from the sound of her voice. Since the 1920s, *pesindhèn* have been heard in public performances and through the media by many who can never dream of a personal, sexual encounter with them. The success of a *pesindhèn*, then, has come to depend to a considerable extent on her ability to develop a recognizable, individual vocal style--one which can establish her place in the competitive musical marketplace. So long as the *pesindhèn* continues to sing well, she will remain popular, even if she is not, or no longer, physically attractive. Nevertheless, her voice must retain its allure. And while the marketplace has diminished the actual sexual demands on the *pesindhèn* in comparison with the singer-dancer, the importance of maintaining an image of sexual attractiveness and promiscuity still prevails, as I shall attempt to demonstrate below.

I have mentioned that *pesindhèn*, if well known, can make a very good living from their art, in comparison with that earned by most other performers of traditional arts. An important exception is the shadow puppeteer (*dhalang*), who can command very high fees for a night's performance if he has an established reputation. While the *dhalang* is the supreme entertainer, he is also much more. Wayang's ties with ritual³³ are not as strong as they once were, but many performances today are given in conjunction with ritual events, such as marriage and circumcision. The *dhalang* is a spiritual teacher, revered by the general populace. Moreover, he is considered to be *ampuh*--endowed with supernatural powers--in tune with the cosmic realm, the realm of the ancestors, and the everyday world, bringing them together in his demanding all-night performances.

It might seem farfetched to equate the *pesindhèn* with the *dhalang*, but some similarities warrant consideration. To begin with, both are addressed with honorific titles: *Ki* for the *dhalang* (a male honorific), *Nyi* for the married *pesindhèn*;

32. I am indebted to Benedict Anderson for suggesting this coverage of the *pesindhèn*'s patronage in the twentieth century.

33. By ritual I mean a formal event that involves a more or less fixed order of acts whose aim is to communicate with the realm of the sacred.

and *Ni* for the unmarried *pesindhèn*). The *dhalang* is the main focus of attention during much of shadow-puppet performance; so, too, is the *pesindhèn* in gamelan music performances which do not incorporate dance or theater. The *dhalang* is very much "in command" of the musicians at a shadow-puppet performance; he indicates which pieces are to be played and guides their tempo and dynamics with aural signals given during the performance. The *pesindhèn* does not normally exercise the same authority, and in gamelan performance today, it is the gamelan director, normally the drummer or rebab player, who determines the pieces to be played. Nevertheless, accounts of the *talèdhèk*'s role at *tayuban* parties during the early twentieth century show gamelan musicians then following the wishes of the *talèdhèk* concerning which piece to perform.³⁴ Even today the *pesindhèn* is considered by some to be endowed with special powers of attraction, and, like the *dhalang*, might even be said to be *ampuh*.

Ampuh is the very word used by two female clown-servants in a recording of a shadow play by the *dhalang* Ki Anom Suroto to refer to the art of the *pesindhèn*. A close look at some of their discussion provides a perspective on the *pesindhèn* tradition not found in treatises or instructional manuals dealing primarily with vocal technique. One clown, the skinny *Cangik*, is suggesting that the other, the hefty *Limbuk* (*Cangik*'s daughter), become a *pesindhèn*.

Cangik: The *pesindhèn* is supernaturally powerful [*ampuh*], you know, if she is really full-fledged [*wis ndadi*]. If she is full-fledged, she is supernaturally powerful. But there is this to bear in mind. If you want to become a *pesindhèn*, in order to be famous, there are certain conditions.

Limbuk: What conditions? Huh?

Cangik: Four things: (1) skill [*guna*]; (2) voice [*swara*]; (3) property [*bandha*]; (4) appearance [*rupa*].

Limbuk: Why don't you clarify what these mean?³⁵

Cangik then responds to *Limbuk*'s request. She explains that "skill" implies that the *pesindhèn* must be at home with her material; she must memorize many pieces and demonstrate accuracy in her pitch and pronunciation. For this she must rehearse, and not just go out performing and earning money all the time. At this point the explanation veers from what one might expect to be included within the category "skill." *Cangik* says that in rehearsals the *pesindhèn* must be friendly and outgoing to the other musicians (the *niyaga*, who are male). She should not be indifferent; if she has anything, she must offer it to the others. Furthermore, she must be respectful towards the musicians, as they are her teachers. If called upon to rehearse, she must join in. *Cangik* suggests that she choose a musician as her husband. "Young or old?" asks *Limbuk*. "Old," replied *Cangik*, explaining that young ones leave home a lot and furthermore are stingy with their money.

Concerning voice, *Cangik* expounds on the need to master chest voice, head voice, and so forth, to sound bright on the high tones and mellow on the low tones.

34. Jakub and Wignyarumeksa, *Layang Anyurupaké Pratikelè bab Sinau Nabuh sarta Panggawéné Gamelan*, Commissie voor de Volkslectuur, No. 94 (Batavia [Jakarta]: Pirmah Papyrus, 1913), p. 102.

35. My translation of a passage transcribed from a commercial cassette recording of a shadow puppet performance: Ki Anom Suroto, puppeteer, *Wahyu Purba Kayun* (n.p.: Kusuma Co., 1979), tape 2, side A.

To preserve the vocal chords, a concoction of citrus (*jeruk*) and herbal root (*kencur*) is advised.

The third requirement is property, which Cangik immediately explains as clothing, describing all the details of proper *pesindhèn* attire, including hair ornaments and pocketbook.

The fourth requirement, appearance, incorporates the idea of apparel, but goes beyond it to include makeup. A *pesindhèn*, says Cangik, must be a good dresser, and must know how much makeup to wear (more at night than during the day).

Once these four requirements are met, Cangik adds, the *pesindhèn* must sit properly, not with her legs outstretched. She must not wiggle or sway around much, but neither should she look sullen or gloomy. She must have a sweet facial expression.

No such portrayal is available, to my knowledge, in printed form. While one might be wary of giving credence to clown-servant descriptions, they clearly strike a responsive chord among Javanese listeners. This would be impossible if the picture were off the mark. Physical appearance is clearly at issue here, though I must qualify the sense in which it is important. Ki Anom Suroto's portrayal through his clown-servants is, I believe, that of the ideal *pesindhèn* in the minds of most Javanese men. While looks may be important in this, they do not overrule voice. It is for this reason that older *pesindhèn*, such as Nyi Tukinem, Nyi Sumarmi, and Nyi Tjondrolukito, continue to be popular. The sounds of their voices, so far as can be determined, still suggest the ideal *pesindhèn*--young, alluring, beautifully attired, and, as evident in the clown-servant Cangik's description, friendly and open with the male musicians.

In a recent book by Linus Suryadi, entitled *Pengakuan Pariyem: Dunia Batin Seorang Wanita Jawa* ("The Confessions of Pariyem: The Inner World of a Javanese Woman"), we find another view of the *pesindhèn*. The central character, Pariyem, is a servant girl who works for a noble family in the city of Yogyakarta but hails from a village area to the southeast. As the writer is a male, the light in which the *pesindhèn* is cast is somewhat ambiguous. One cannot but see Suryadi's fascination with the *pesindhèn*'s powers of sexual attraction. (The entire book is written in a mixture of prose and poetry the author calls *prosa lirik*--"lyric prose.")

So, being a *pesindhèn* has its risks, you know
First, bad names tend to accumulate
 pinned on her by her social surroundings
 Sexual license, alias adultery
 as her basic motivation--
 Inevitably it is the *pesindhèn*, the woman
 who is accused first.
 Her status and moral character are brought low
 as a source of disruption in the household
 Whereas it is men who like to enjoy
 and forget their daily obligations
 When a man is already crazy about a *pesindhèn*
 wherever she sings she will be followed by him
 Far, she will be overtaken; long, she will be awaited
 not caring about the derision of the neighbors
 Just to behold the face of the *pesindhèn*
 and her voice is all he imagines

Second, there is a connection with number one
 It is normal that she become a topic of conversation

a pesindhèn is famous because of *susuk* [metal in the form of a hairpin which, through magic, is entered into the body to give beauty and invulnerability]³⁶
 She goes to a *dukun* [healer, magic practitioner] who is willing to insert the *susuk*:--
 Susuk of brass and of silver
 and most especially *susuk* of gold
 With the burning of incense and the uttering of *mantra* [magical incantation]
 even with all sorts of abstinence
 And the *susuk* affixed in a part of the body adds to the attractiveness of the face of a pesindhèn
 Ah, yes, in parts of the body which are important at the central points of a woman's beauty
 Cheeks, eyelids, and the edge of the chin
 or the edge of the lips and the hips
 Even the nipples and the whadyacallit (*anunya*), oh: absolutely right, no mistake about
 Her intention, to tease the men
 and as an amulet insuring the pesindhèn's popularity
 The *susuk* indeed has magic power, you know
 a man who experiences it will be charmed and seduced
 His heart will palpitate, his head will throb
 he will be overwhelmed by a feeling of infatuation

Third, the pesindhèn must be strong in faith
 Yes, faith in the world of the pesindhèn
 Ah, just coming out into view appears
 a new name, given a path, slowing rising
 Before you know it, she is nabbed by a man she adores
 who pulls her from her ascent.
 Once pregnant, the world of the pesindhèn is neglected
 and then is silently left behind
 In the end she works in the kitchen at home
 works overtime in her husband's bed
 --signifying the ending of her life [as a pesindhèn]
 a memory of a moment past
 The world of the pesindhèn remains only a shadow
 like a knife scratching one's inner self
 O, God, where would there be tolerance
 a man willing for his wife to be a pesindhèn
 While usually making love late at night
 in fact even servicing the venerable dhalang
 Mouth open, singing in a high, clear voice--relaxed--
 in the world of performance
 in the world of festivities, celebration
 The world of women and the world of pesindhèn
 Like cat and dog
 incapable of harmony, incapable of matching

36. Linus Suryadi's definition of *susuk*, given in the glossary of Javanese terms he provides. Suryadi, *Pengakuan Pariyem: Dunia Batin Seorang Wanita Jawa* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1981), p. 220: "Logam yang berbentuk seperti tusuk konde, dimasukkan ke dalam tubuh dengan menggunakan sihir, untuk kecantikan atau kekebalan."

Like oil and water
incapable of mixing, incapable of agreement
Always coming to blows--quarreling--
always going their separate ways.³⁷

Though her grandmother was a talèdhèk, Pariyem herself is not a pesindhèn, nor does she intend to become one. We sense she feels some sympathy for the pesindhèn. Still, Pariyem is well aware of the pesindhèn's reputation as both attractive and active sexually. The man infatuated by the pesindhèn will follow her anywhere, oblivious to normal social constraints, forgetting even the dangers of losing face through derision from the neighbors. The susuk only intensify the powers of attraction, making resistance out of the question.³⁸

A feature article in *Tempo* presents a view of modern-day pesindhèn which only substantiates the views already presented.³⁹ The several pesindhèn interviewed acknowledge the need to flirt with the men in the audience in order to be successful. The claim by one that "not all pesindhèn have low morals" only confirms their general image as promiscuous.

Not all pesindhèn relish this image. Some express great distaste at having to act in a coquettish manner in public. A few of the more established singers, such as Nyi Tjondrolukito, even cultivate a well-behaved image, relying on vocal style alone to sustain popularity. She will not perform without a family member present to ensure that no one bothers her, and she warns young pesindhèn to beware of flirtation and seduction. But by all accounts, it is difficult for an aspiring pesindhèn to gain recognition without cultivating a flirtatious image. And most face teasing and taunting both from male musicians and from their male audiences. The ethos of the promiscuous talèdhèk and the uncontrolled tayuban parties underlies the current cultural conception of the pesindhèn.

Suryadi's description, like that given by Ki Anom Suroto through his clown-servants, emphasizes the pesindhèn's appearance and powers of attraction more than her vocal technique. The distinction which we might claim in the West between sexual attraction and aesthetic delight--certain pop singers notwithstanding--is much less clearly defined in Java. Far from being a new development, this view of Javanese aesthetics is present in indigenous literature from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Robson has suggested this insightfully in his discussion of the duties of one of the courtly ranks, that of the *Dëmung*:

. . . the range of activities over which the Dëmung had control . . . included the performing arts: singing, dancing, instrumental music and drama, excursions to enjoy the beauties of nature, not to mention hunting; the producing of fine clothing; and the enjoyment of the company of women. . . .

The range of the Dëmung's duties also tells us something about the Javanese conception of aesthetics. These are the things that give pleasure,

37. My translation of Suryadi, *Pengakuan Pariyem*, pp. 60-62.

38. For a view by a contemporary writer of the singer-dancer tradition, and its association with supernatural power and with sexuality, see Ahmad Tohari, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk: Catatan buat Emak* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1982). Tohari describes in Indonesian prose the special power of the young Srintil, an eleven year old ronggeng whose dance and *lagu erotik* ("erotic song," p. 10) not only entice her young friends, but safeguard a rural community. She also has susuk inserted into her body.

39. "Pesindhèn, di dalem dan di luar Pentas," *Tempo*, December 22, 1979, pp. 30-32.

and there is, it seems, no incongruity between the enjoyment of, say, music, poetry, natural scenery and the love of pretty women. There is in fact no distinction between aesthetic and erotic enjoyment.⁴⁰

Zoetmulder also talked of the feeling of "rapture" conveyed in early Javanese literature, which incorporates, for example, an erotic tone in the description of nature.⁴¹

One of my teachers in Java compared a full gamelan ensemble performance to a woman, well-dressed and bejeweled, ready for an outing. And at a discussion session on the tradition of the pesindhèn in Yogyakarta, the well-known male vocalist, the late Banjaransari, likened the singing of the pesindhèn to makeup or clothing.⁴² Furthermore, many musicians categorize musical pieces along a continuum from *regu* (subdued) or *klasik* (classical) to *pernès* (a term implying flirtatious sexual behavior, also "light-hearted"). Clearly the erotic dimension is still essential to the aesthetic experience in Javanese musical tradition. The solo pesindhèn may be a relatively recent phenomenon in Javanese musical history, but she partakes of an image and role already many centuries old.

In this paper I have attempted to trace the image and role of the female singer in Java from her roots in the singer-dancer tradition to her current status as featured solo vocalist. I have argued that the pesindhèn's special role in the gamelan and her image in society should be seen as part of a continuous tradition of Javanese culture, not merely a result of Western influence. If anything, her role is less prominent than that of her immediate ancestor, the singer-dancer, who clearly was no product of Western influence. Still, the pesindhèn is prominent and, like the singer-dancer, she must exude an aura of sexuality. In contemporary Java--where many of a pesindhèn's devoted fans may never have seen her in person, and may not be aware of her personal conduct or even her physical appearance--the singer's voice feeds the imagination, allowing the cultural image of the pesindhèn to flourish with little, if any, empirical reinforcement.

The image of the pesindhèn encompasses more than vocal technique and sexuality, however. There is something not quite real about her. She is not "normal" in the way that a *bathik* saleswoman is, or a peasant rice farmer, or an urban housewife. She is often referred to by the term *waranggana* (heavenly nymph, angel); and, as noted above, she may be seen as supernaturally powerful (*ampuh*). She must be born with special potential beyond that of ordinary women, but she is only *ampuh*, in the words of the clown Cangik, if *wis ndadi* (already full-fledged, fully trained, fully "become"). How does an aspiring pesindhèn achieve this state? Undoubtedly she learns a great deal about her profession from watching and listening to other pesindhèn. Yet most pesindhèn nowadays have male musicians as their teachers, and in the exchange between the clowns cited above, it is to the male musicians that they must not only be friendly, but also pay respect. In the folk tale, it is three men who make the singer-dancer. The wood carver literally creates

40. S. O. Robson, "Notes on the Early Kidung Literature," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, uitgegeven door het Koninklijk Instituut* 135 (1979): 302.

41. P. J. Zoetmulder, *Kalangwan: A Survey of Old Javanese Literature*, Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Translation Series 16 (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), p. 172.

42. "Cengkok sindhen dadi rembug," *Mekar Sari* 23, 24 (February 15, 1980): 4. He described the quality in terms of neatness (good) and sloppiness (bad).

her. The others adorn her; and, as we have seen, adornment is an essential aspect of the pesindhèn's total appeal. Moreover, the three men become musicians.

Some might argue against the idea that male musicians make the pesindhèn what she is, but in the minds of many Javanese performers it is beyond question. Cangik tells Limbuk as much in the interchange cited above. Ki Wasitodiningrat (formerly known as Ki Wasitodipuro and Tjokrowasito), who is well known as a teacher of pesindhèn, states his position on the issue as follows:

Those who make the pesindhèn more skilled in performing gamelan pieces are the gamelan players, and especially the rebab player. There is no capable pesindhèn without a teacher.⁴³

The rebab is the one instrument best suited to realize the subtle nuances of pitch and rhythm that the pesindhèn must learn, and it is often cited as the melodic leader of the gamelan ensemble. It may well be significant that in the folk tale, it is the wood carver, the one who created the singer-dancer in the first place, who becomes the rebab player. The solo female performer is powerful, but not without the help of male musicians and a male audience.

This discussion has focused on the cultural concept "pesindhèn," the pesindhèn of the imagination. Much remains to be said about how pesindhèn use their voices, what texts they sing, how their parts relate to the instrumental parts in gamelan music, and how their individual styles are distinguished. However, to investigate these more technical dimensions without being aware of the general image of the pesindhèn in Javanese society would, I suggest, be misleading for the outsider who strives for a culturally informed understanding of the gamelan tradition in all its aesthetic richness.

43. Ki Wasitodipuri, "Sindenana Yogya sudah ada sejak Mataram Pasargede," *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, April 22, 1980, p. 4.