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Deborah Wong; Rene T. A. Lysloff

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Threshold to the Sacred: The Overture in Thai and Javanese Ritual Performance

DEBORAH WONG
RENÉ T. A. LYSLOFF

POMONA COLLEGE, CLAREMONT
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Introduction

This study addresses a particular musical form performed within the larger context of ritual.¹ In English we might refer to this form as an “overture” because it constitutes a series of musical pieces played one after the other without pause as a prelude to a larger performance. Any overture has the practical function of letting the audience know that the performance is about to begin, but we would also argue that Thai and Javanese overtures do far more. They create an atmosphere, a mood, interrupting the everyday flow of time while establishing a special place for its audience. They initiate the unspoken contract between performer and audience: to suspend disbelief and, in fact, to step outside the common world for the duration of the ritual and/or performance. The overtures set up this dimensional shift by providing a transition from the mundane to the extraordinary.

At an even broader level, the overtures exploit two important abstract properties of musical sound: music exists temporally but not physically, and it is all-pervasive. In many ways, the overtures are “about” time and the framing of ritual time. An obvious aspect of ritual is that it is clearly demarcated or framed in contrast to everyday life, allowing its participants to step out of the realm of the ordinary and into the reality of the frame (Halpin 1983:220–21). Even in non-ritual contexts, music restructures and modifies our sense of time. As Rouget says, music is “architecture in time” (1985:121). In ritual, this quality becomes all-important: music is used to form sequences that transform our sense of “being-in-the-world” (*ibid.*). Music also fills space: its acoustical vibrations permeate space in a manner both

¹This paper is also published as two separate articles in Reed n.d. Our interest in comparing Javanese and Thai music was inspired by the work of Judith Becker, who outlined some formal ways in which these two traditions reflect a larger Southeast Asian musical archetype (Becker 1980:453).

ephemeral and inescapable. When music is made in a ritual context, the created space is sacred. The result is a new and extraordinary environment, a pocket of time and space within “real” time and space.

Ritual is almost always a multi-media event, and its different media are used to structure its progress (Tambiah 1985). One way that ritual structure is created is by concentrating specific media of performance at certain periods of the ritual progression (Kapferer 1986:195)—that is, by highlighting music, dance, the spoken word, and so forth, at different points. We would argue that the use of music alone, without dance or narrative, at the beginning of ritual events—as in an overture—is not coincidental. Before ritual time and space can be established, there must be a rupture of levels that makes possible communication across transcendent realities (Eliade 1988:107–8). Music is the ideal medium: generally used to structure ritual events as a whole, music has internal structure and coherence as well. Dance fills out the time structure of music, not vice-versa: music implies the dance, or the movement of puppets, because the music of Southeast Asian dance and drama is a performative act embodying movement. The music of the overture, then, creates not only the ritual frame, but constitutes an opening between dimensions: a threshold, a channel between alternate realities.

The following two case studies are each based upon our respective cultural/geographical areas of expertise, but our combined thought and experience has led us to some theoretical points broader than the particularities of our individual materials. After describing and contrasting our two overture traditions, we will conclude with some general points about the role of music in framing ritual-dramatic events and, indeed, in isolating the time and space within which ritual performance can occur. We must emphasize that the roles and functions of the Thai *homrong* and the Javanese *talu* are *not* synonymous, nor are we looking to reduce these two musical traditions to a common platitude. Rather, we seek parallels that may contribute to our understanding of the place of music in the Southeast Asian ritual event.

The *Talu* in Javanese Shadow Puppet Theater²

René T.A. Lysloff

Throughout Java, *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theater) is generally performed as part of a larger ritual celebrating life-cycle, calendrical, and

²The research for this essay was generously supported by grants from Fulbright-Hays and the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

³In more urbanized areas, *wayang* is sometimes performed in secular contexts (for example, radio broadcasts, conservatory recitals, and so forth); however, I would be reluctant to consider even these performances completely secular.

other events.³ Accompanying music defines ritual space and time, sacralizing the place of performance, filling the air with potent sound, and creating the bustling carnival atmosphere so important to Javanese celebrations. It places the event in a time out of time,⁴ a narrative past with its own unique temporal logic. The music of the gamelan is crucial to Central Javanese *wayang kulit* because it impells the performance, providing abstract but commonly understood aural metaphors that represent the various moods and movements associated with certain scenes and characters. It also provides structure for the narration, punctuating various sections of the narrative, and even framing the entire performance. Indeed, the performance is made into a cohesive whole through musical mode, or *pathet*. The three major divisions of the narration, what we might call “acts,” are designated according to *pathet*, each with its own distinctive musical and dramatic characteristics.⁵

The *taluh* (overture) opens just about every performance of *wayang kulit* and lasts anywhere between ten to forty minutes, culminating in the puppeteer’s ascension to his place before the screen, where he will sit for the next eight hours or so. It is the only music of *wayang* not cued by the *dbalang* (puppetmaster); in fact, it signals the *dbalang* and his audience that the story is about to begin. Additionally, it provides the *dbalang* a means for hearing the tuning of a particular gamelan and assessing the abilities of his accompanying musicians, since he may not necessarily have come with his own troupe and set of instruments.⁶ According to one source (Sutrisno 1984:67), the *taluh* may also tell the audience something about the nature of the *wayang* story that follows it, although I have never noticed such an association during my own research in Central Java.⁷

The idea of *taluh*—that is, music performed specifically as an overture to shadow-puppet theater—is found throughout Java and even in the Malaysian state Kelantan,⁸ suggesting that it may have existed for a considerable

⁴In speaking of the festival, Falassi describes “time out of time” as “a special dimension devoted to special activities. . . not so much to be perceived and measured in days or hours, but to be divided internally by what happens within it from its beginning to its end . . .” (1987:4)

⁵For a detailed examination of gamelan music and *wayang kulit*, see Lysloff 1990.

⁶Most *dbalang*, however, have at least one or two musicians that regularly perform with them on instruments such as the *gendèr* (a metallophone with keys suspended over individual resonators on which complex polyphonic melodies are softly played with two padded beaters) and *kendhang* (one or more two-headed conical-shaped drums).

⁷For example, the *taluh* that begins with the piece *Lambang Sari* (a literary term for sexual intercourse) may refer to a story about the marriage of a hero. I did find that the *dbalang* often chose an appropriate story for the particular celebration in which he performed. (For example, if the celebration was a wedding then the *dbalang* often chose a story that was concerned with the marriage of a hero.)

⁸In East Java it is called *patutan* (Soenarto Timoer 1985 [III]:31) and in Kelantan it is known as *lagu bertabuhan* (Wright 1980:96).

time.⁹ It is not clear how long ago the *taluh* was introduced into *wayang* performance since there are few references to it in palace literature.¹⁰ The following account, by the renowned Javanese musician and scholar Martopangrawit (as told to me by Marc Perlman), places the origins of *taluh* in the mid to late nineteenth century:¹¹

Once, Sunan Lawu came to Paku Buwana IX (in a dream) asking to borrow a *dbalang* and a group of *penabuh* [musicians].¹² Paku Buwana IX sent a *dbalang* Bagong (a *dbalang kadipatèn* [resident court dhalang]). Once at Mt. Lawu, however, the *dbalang* could not start (at the time appointed) because there were *sétan-sétan kecil* [small evil spirits] pounding on the gamelan. To make them stop, Sunan Lawu told the *niyaga* [musicians] to play *srepegan* and *sampak*. They did so, and Sunan Lawu told the *anak-anak sétan* [literally, children of satan] to go home because "*wayangnya sudah bubar*" [the *wayang* is all over].

When the *dbalang* returned to Solo, he told Paku Buwana IX what happened, who then proclaimed that (outside of the *kraton* [royal palace]) they should play *taluh* before *wayang* so that the *sétan-sétan* waiting around would go home and not disturb the performance.

The nineteenth-century instructional manual for Solonese court *dbalang*, known as *Serat Sastramiruda*,¹³ does not discuss *taluh* in its section on the history of *wayang*, but elsewhere does mention that "after the puppets and the gamelan are put in order, a *taluh* follows" (Kamajaya and Hadisutjipto 1981:189, my translation). Other nineteenth-century sources also mention the *taluh* but do not go into detail.¹⁴ It may be that the pieces included in the earlier forms of *taluh* were not fixed and musicians simply performed an

⁹According to Kunst, *taluh* means "signal, announcement, or start" and *gamelan taluh* referred to special gamelan that were played to signal the arrival of important guests (1973:265). Furthermore, Kunst mentions elsewhere that a three-tone gamelan called *Kyahi Patalon* (from the root *taluh*), is found in the royal palace of Surakarta (ibid.:263). According to the *Wédha Pradangga*, a *gamelan monggang patalon* (perhaps the same gamelan mentioned by Kunst) was created by the first king of Mataram in 1614 (see Becker and Feinstein 1987:62). The author mentions that the word *patalon* is borrowed from *wayang*.

¹⁰Sutrisno (1984:66), referring perhaps only to Surakarta, states that traditionally the *taluh* was not played in *kraton* (palace) performances of *wayang kulit*.

¹¹Marc Perlman kindly provided this account drawn from his notes of a conversation he had with Martopangrawit in February 1985. Except for my bracketed text and italicization, it is taken directly from Perlman's notes.

¹²Paku Buwana was crowned king of Surakarta in 1861 (see Becker and Feinstein 1987:140). I am not clear who Sunan Lawu is, but I suspect he is a place spirit; the title *Sunan* indicates that he is (or was) either a monarch or an Islamic saint and *Lawu* apparently refers to the name of the mountain where he resides.

¹³Written by Pangéran Aria Kusumadilaga; in 1930, a printed version (in Javanese characters) was published in Solo through Uitgeverij en Boekhandel Stoomdrukkerij De Bliksem. The more recent version by Kamajaya and Hadisutjipto (1981) contains both a transliteration and translation (into Indonesian) of the original text.

¹⁴See, for example, Roorda: "Sasampuning taluh gunung kalorod . . ." (After the *taluh*, the *kayon* [tree of life *wayang* character] is removed [from the center area of the screen]. . .) (1869:3).

introductory concert (*uyon-uyon* in Yogya and *klenengan* in Solo) before the *dbalang* began his narration.

Symbolic and Mystical Elements in the Talu

More recent sources (books about “*wayang* philosophy,” as well as various *dbalang* and musicians interviewed) ascribe a great deal of symbolic significance to shadow-puppetry.¹⁵ The *taluh* is particularly rich in meaning, perhaps because of its abstract nature (being made up only of sound) and its allusion to and anticipation of the larger issues in Javanese cosmology presented in a performance of *wayang*. Whether in written sources or through interviews, all of the metaphysical discussions I have come across focused upon the most widely known *taluh* in Central Java, a medley made up of at least seven pieces all in the *pathet* (or mode) of *manyura*:

- 1) *Gendhing Cucur Bawuk*¹⁶
- 2) *Inggah Paréanom*
- 3) *Ladrang Srikaton*
- 4) *Ketawang Sukmailang*
- 5) *Ayak-ayakan [Patalon]*
- 6) *Srepegan [Patalon]*
- 7) *Sampak [Patalon]*

Several *dbalang* I spoke with felt that this *taluh* had particular symbolic significance, referring to the cycle of human life. As the scholar-*dbalang* Sutrisno writes, the *taluh* tells teaches us that “one lives only one life.”¹⁷ He mentions that the first four pieces in the *taluh* symbolize the various stages of human existence: *Cucur Bawuk* represents birth, *Paréanom* youth, *Srikaton* to adult, and *Sukmailang* death (Sutrisno 1984:67). The *dbalang* I interviewed had more elaborate interpretations extracted from the gloss of each title in the medley: the expression *cucur bawuk* refers to the impregnation of the virgin womb (from *cucur*, “a kind of delicacy,” and *bawuk*, “female genitals”); *paré anom* to the fetus (from *paré*, “a kind of vine,” and *anom*, “youth or young”); *sri katon* to birth (from *sri*, “his/her majesty,” and *katon*, “to be visible”); and *sukma ilang* to death (from [or *sukma*], “soul, spirit,” and *ilang*, “lost, gone”).

The *dbalang* Ki Sugito Purbacarito of Banyumas, on the other hand, stated that *cucur bawuk* referred to afterbirth (in this case glossing *cucur* as “that which gushes forth”), *paré anom* to youth, *sri katon* to adulthood (from “visible greatness” [another meaning of *sri*]), and *sukma ilang* to old age and

¹⁵See, for example, Mangkunegara VII (1957).

¹⁶Generally, the term *gendhing* means “gamelan composition,” but here, however, it refers specifically to a musical form. The terms *inggah*, *ladrang*, *ketawang*, *ayak-ayakan*, *srepegan*, and *sampak* also refer to specific musical forms. (For more on these forms in particular and the structural features of gamelan music in general, see Vetter 1977.)

¹⁷My translation of the phrase “orang ‘hidup sekali hidup’.”

death.¹⁸ Another *dbalang* added that the last three pieces, *Ayak-ayakan*, *Srepegan*, and *Sampak*, refer to a quickening in the approach toward death.¹⁹ He noted that it is also significant for the *taluh* to be in the musical mode, or *pathet*, of *manyura* since the order of *pathet* in *wayang* begins with *nem*, followed by *sanga*, and concluding with *manyura*. Indeed, several *dbalang* mentioned that these three *pathet* not only form the structural underpinnings of *wayang* but also refer to the life cycle: *pathet nem* to youth, *sanga* to adulthood, and *manyura* to old age and death.²⁰ Since the *taluh* is in *pathet manyura* and also begins the performance, it closes one cycle even as it opens another, signifying the continuous rotation of the great cosmological wheel of life.²¹

The popular Indonesian *wayang* expert Sri Mulyono, takes this idea even further and attaches religious meaning to the *taluh*. He argues that the *taluh* represents a preordained *scheme* for the different stages of the human life-cycle:

Thus, these pieces are played before the *wayang kulit* performance begins [because] they are meant to represent the manifestations of existence determined [even] before man is born into worldly being. [The *taluh*] suggests a scheme for the stages of the human life-cycle ordained long before in the realm of the eternal (1978:102; my translation).

In another book Sri Mulyono departs somewhat from this view and applies an additional mystical perspective to his interpretation. His discussion becomes entangled in an unusual theosophy, with elements of Buddhism, Javanese concepts of *kebatinan* (the divine self), and Islamic mysticism—all inspired by symbolic numerology. The basis for his sometimes convoluted, sometimes opaque, mystical explication of *taluh* is the significance he infers from the number seven. The seven pieces of the *taluh*, he writes, are meant to signify the seven levels of “divine incarnation” or the seven ranks “[of existence]” (1983:107). Sri Mulyono adds that, until the *taluh* finishes, the *dbalang*—representing the divine spirit (*roh*)—is not visible. That is, he is not yet incarnate. When he ascends the stage, with the beginning of the story, he then becomes visible and thus gives life to his puppets (*ibid.*).²²

¹⁸Mangkunegara VII (1957) presents a similar interpretation.

¹⁹The self-styled mystic, Sėno-Sastroamidjojo (1964:179–80), also evokes the cycle of human existence in his singular interpretation.

²⁰The late musician-scholar of Yogyakarta, Sastapustaka, once used this personal interpretation of *wayang*. Already an elderly man in 1979, he referred to himself as being in *pathet manyura*. Ward Keeler also seems to have come across this interpretation in his own research (see Keeler 1987:244).

²¹This was first pointed out to me by Sastapustaka during a discussion in 1979.

²²Sri Mulyono's interpretation is, at least to me, the strangest I have come across, especially in view of his practical background. According a brief biography on the back cover of one of his many books (1978), Sri Mulyono (born in 1930) has a degree in engineering and was a general in the Indonesian air force. It also mentions that he is a performing *dbalang* and pursuing a degree in philosophy at Universitas Indonesia in Jakarta.

It is clear from these examples that interpretations of *talū* (and *wayang*) are similar in one basic theme: it symbolizes the cycle of life. In general, Javanese exegeses of both the *talū*, and the *wayang* that follows it, tend to be curiously uncritical. It doesn't seem to bother the Javanese I have spoken with that other pieces are sometimes used for the *talū*, and that these pieces do not carry the kind of symbolism associated with the *Cucur Bawuk* medley. Keeler notes that Javanese exegesis of *wayang* is "stunningly reductive" with the aim of halting further and more detailed interpretations of most performances.²³

Every performance becomes perfectly equivalent to every other. To take the progress of all performances as Everyman's passage through life accomplishes this closure with particular efficacy, since it limits the meaning of the whole to the experience of only one person, and it posits the universal validity of that experience, at least as an ideal. Exegetes are thus saved from the implications of any particular lakon [story], and from any relevance of wayang to the rest of life except as expressed in the most domesticated of homilies. They are saved, in a word, from exegesis (1987:245).

Similarly, exegeses of *talū* are reduced to variations on an "Everyman's" life-cycle theme extracted out of the *Cucur Bawuk* medley. As far as I could determine, no such elaborate interpretation exists for any other *talū*. The *Cucur Bawuk* medley has come to represent the ideal *talū* and other medleys are simply subsumed under its symbolic domain. One *talū* medley I sometimes heard in the Banyumas region (west Central Java), for example, is a completely different collection of pieces, all in the mode (*patbet*) *sanga*:²⁴

- 1) *Gendhing Gambir Sawit*²⁵
- 2) *Inggab*²⁶
- 3) *Ladrang Gonjang-ganjing*
- 4) *Ketawang Rajaswala*
- 5) *Ayak-ayakan*
- 6) *Srepegan*
- 7) *Sampak*

Furthermore, a *talū* medley may be varied in several ways. Some pieces may be replaced by others, or deleted altogether, or pieces may be added through infixing. For example, the *Srepegan* may include one or more

²³There are of course notable exceptions. Classic stories like *Déwa Ruci* and *Arjuna Wiwaha*, for example, are often discussed in great length by Javanese (and Western) *wayang* experts, but they make up only a very small part of the repertory. Keeler (1987:244) argues that the commentary on these *lakon* (stories) "does not constitute an exegetical approach applicable to other *lakon*."

²⁴However, the Solonese style *talū* (*Cucur Bawuk*, etc.) is by far the most popular among the troupes I've seen.

²⁵*Gambir Sawit* is also often performed in Yogyanese-style *talū*.

²⁶Unlike the *inggab* (called *ndawah* in Yogya) of the Solonese *talū* piece *Cucur Bawuk*, this second section does not have a different name.

palaran, a type of composition featuring one singer and in which the main melody instruments drop out. On the other hand, the *talu* may consist only of the last three pieces of the medley (*Ayak-ayakan*, *Srepegan*, *Sampak*). Generally, however, whatever the choice of pieces, the only firm rule is that a *talu* medley follow the formal sequence of larger to smaller musical structures. Thus, I believe it is the idea of *talu* (that is, a “*wayang* overture” with a specific musical formal progression) that has come to symbolize the human life cycle. The *Cucur Bawuk* medley either may have been the original inspiration for the idea or it simply serves as a convenient illustrative example.

The Talu and the Supernatural Realm

Following Eliade, my discussion now embarks from the premise that myth in traditional Java is based upon a narrative form grounded in cultural legend. Eliade writes that, because the myth is sacred, “it becomes exemplary, and consequently repeatable, for it serves as a model, and by the same token as a justification, for all human actions” (1967:23).

Wayang kulit presents a mythical past to its Javanese audiences: it traces a direct line from the modern Javanese aristocracy to the kings of Majapahit, further back to the legendary saint Jayabaya, and into an even more remote past peopled by gods, heroes, ogres, and demons.²⁷ Its highly stylized puppets depict characters that form the models for Javanese behavioral standards and its stories posit complex ethical and moral dilemmas open to multiple interpretations. The character Bima, for example, is not only a person who appears in many *wayang* stories, he is a powerful cultural symbol of virtue and valor. *Wayang*, then, forms a cultural wellspring from which the Javanese constantly draw to define themselves individually and as a people.

The *talu* provides an abstract frame for the mythical world of *wayang kulit*, allowing the audience to traverse freely between the ordinary and the extraordinary. It is the initial step in bringing together and transforming the realm of the situational and the realm of the mythical. This transformation does not necessarily require belief on the part of audience members—to argue that the Javanese must “believe” to partake of this mythical world of *wayang* would be naive. Instead, the audience needs only to suspend disbelief, to accept. Music plays an important role here, and its power over the subjective mind was often noted by my Javanese friends. The music of the gamelan, informants tell me, can enrapture or transport its listeners (*nganyut*) and, although the pieces in the *talu* seem to have no particular qualities that distinguish them from other pieces in the gamelan repertory,

²⁷See further Brandon 1970. Many Javanese books on *wayang* genealogies in fact begin with Adam and Eve.

the celebratory context of a *wayang* performance imbues them with a power far beyond those compositions played in concert settings. Indeed, in some rituals, such as *èbèg* (hobby-horse dance), the music of the gamelan can send participants and even some audience members into ecstatic trance and possession.²⁸

On the other hand, music can define situations—it surely does in *wayang*. The first four pieces of the *taluh* belong to a family of forms simply called *gendhing*, played to create static scenes when the *dbalang* describes a place, person, or situation.²⁹ The *Ayak-ayakan*, *Srepegan*, and *Sampak*, on the other hand, belong to a genre of gamelan pieces known as *gendhing lampahan*, or “movement gendhing.”³⁰ These pieces accompany the movements of puppets as they dance, fly, journey, or engage in battle. *Ayak-ayakan* is used only for the most refined and highest ranking characters: kings as they arrive at or depart from court or gods as they descend from or ascend to heaven. *Srepegan* is heard in the battles, journeys, and flights of most of the other characters, while *Sampak* accompanies the most furious battles as well as the movements of ogres, demons, and other extremely vigorous characters. Most audience members are very much aware of the kind of puppet movement associated with these last three pieces.³¹

My notation (see Appendix I) of the main melody, or *balungan*, shows that the *taluh* is a medley of progressively smaller forms. With each successive form, the gong cycles become progressively shorter and the various other punctuating instruments are sounded more and more frequently denser (see Figure 1).³² The *taluh* thus moves from large to small forms, from sparse to dense punctuation, and from relatively calm to violently agitated.³³ In the last three pieces, beginning with *Ayak-ayakan*, the main melody (*balungan*)

²⁸For example, in Banyumas, where I conducted my most recent field-study, I often observed audience members go into trance along with the dancers. I was told that these people had, at some point in their lives, given themselves over to indigenous beliefs and practices (therefore, turning away from Islam) and were resultantly susceptible to the powers of the music, going into trance even against their will.

²⁹The term *gendhing* refers either to any piece composed for or played by the Javanese gamelan or to a category of gamelan musical form characterized by the absence of strokes on the punctuating instrument *kempul*. For more on the formal aspects of Central Javanese gamelan music, see Vetter 1977.

³⁰This genre of gamelan music has recently also been the subject of considerable debate (see Susilo 1988, Hughes 1988, Perlman 1983, Becker and Becker 1983).

³¹Indeed, it may be that all the pieces that make up a *taluh* simply prepare the audience for the various kinds of gamelan music they will hear in the subsequent *wayang* performance.

³²Colotomic instruments include large horizontally-suspended gongs, *kenong*; vertically-suspended gongs, *kempul*, the small horizontally-suspended gong, *ketbuk*; and of course the great vertically suspended gongs, *gong ageng* and *gong siyem* (or *gong suwukan*).

³³The fourth piece, *Sukmailang*, is an exception since it is relatively calmer than the piece that precedes it and, though the gong cycle is smaller, the density of other punctuating instruments is the same.

becomes increasingly simpler, with fewer leaps and more motivic repetition, until in the final piece, *Sampak*, the *balungan* seems to be less a melody than simply a series of loudly reiterated pitches. Indeed, the *talu* also undergoes several distinct shifts in texture, progressing from a diffusion of musical activity among the soft-style elaborating instruments and vocal parts to the successively clearer and more rhythmically marked but thinner textures of the last three pieces.³⁴ By the final piece, the soft-style instruments and the singing have all dropped out and the texture is made up of hardly more than *balungan* and punctuating instruments, pressing rapidly toward the final stroke of the great gong (*gong ageng*).

Viewed from a somewhat different perspective, the increasingly closer occurrences of the gong stroke adds to a sense of intensifying focus and direction. The gong, I was often told, is at the center of gamelan music and it is sometimes seen as the source of all sound.³⁵ Ward Keeler notes that “the gong . . . fits into a *gendhing*’s diffuse context as a massive, form-determining stroke, contrasting with other instruments by the enormous range of its overtones. It thereby drives all the other instruments out of hearing. As its sound diminishes, the sense of diffuseness and equilibrium returns” (1987:227).

It is no surprise, perhaps, that the terms *gong* (for the instrument), *agung* or *ageng* (“great”) and *gunung* (“mountain”) are all etymologically related.³⁶ The gong, according to Judith Becker, is both a physical and an aural symbol for the great forces of nature and is in turn associated with traditional authority.

Through homologous associations with autochthonous energies of nature, gong ensembles and their music became metaphors for natural forces and became the instruments for the control of natural forces. Fused with the imported Indic metaphor of female power, *sakti*, these interpretations endowed the gamelan ensemble with a special aura that forged the link to figures of authority, to the kings and princes of the realm (1988:385).

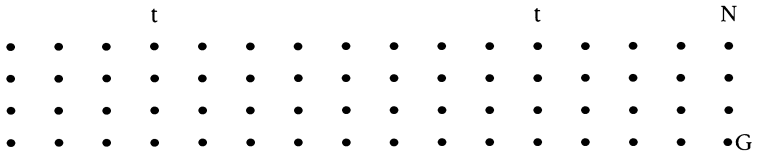
As gong strokes occur more frequently and closer together, the mood of the music changes from calm and restrained to lively and playful, even violent and forceful by the end of the *talu*. Further, most *gendhing lampahan* (those pieces that accompany movement)—*Ayak-ayakan*, *Srepegan*, and *Sampak*, are generally irregular in form. That is, gong strokes

³⁴By diffusion of focus, I do not mean to imply that the music is vague. Rather, its texture is thick with elaborating melodies and no single part is featured above the other parts.

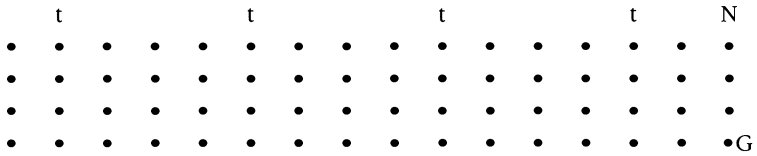
³⁵For example, McDermott and Sumarsam write that “the low sound of the gong is the protean element of Central Javanese music, the beginning and ending of pieces, the single most important sound out of which all other sounds are said to arise and to which they all descend in return” (1975:237).

³⁶Becker notes that “The word for mountain, *gunung*, comes from the same root as the word for gong, i.e., *gung*” (1988:387).

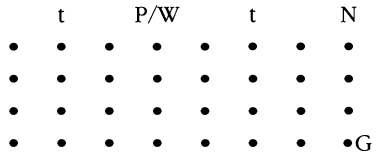
1) *Cucur Bawuk*



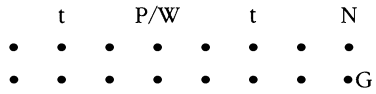
2) *Paréanom*



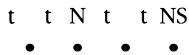
3) *Sri Katon*



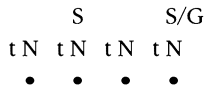
4) *Sukmailang*



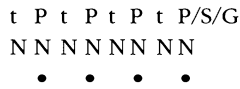
5) *Ayak-ayakan*



6) *Srepegan*



7) *Sampak*



Key: G = gong; S = *siyem*; N = *kenong*; P = *kempul*; W = *wela* (*kempul* rest); t = *kethuk*; • = meter

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the talu structure.

do not occur with formal predictability.³⁷ This feature might be associated with the random quality of the elemental forces of nature: thunder, rain, volcanic activity, and so forth are not regular in occurrence. It is perhaps no wonder that a *talu*-like sequence of such music also introduces the *gara-gara* (cosmos in turmoil) section of *wayang* in some regions of Java—functioning, then, as a frame within another, larger frame.³⁸ *Gara-gara* is a comic interlude that represents cosmic upheaval in the world of *wayang*. After the *dbalang* introduces this section of the *wayang*, describing the violence of a world in chaos, there follow *Ayak-ayakan*, *Srepegan*, and *Sampak*, reflecting (I was told) the increasing violence of powerful natural forces in motion. Seen from this perspective, then, *talu* refers to the elemental forces of nature; it imposes, in a way, order upon an unpredictable and potentially violent cosmos through the structuring of sound.

The Evening Overture in Hindu-Buddhist Thai Ritual³⁹

Deborah Wong

Three overtures are at the heart of the Thai ritual repertoire, named for the times of day they can be performed. The *Evening Overture*, or *Homrong Yen*,⁴⁰ is literally played in the evening, preceding evening performances⁴¹ and night ritual events such as the ordination ceremony for Buddhist monks, and other ceremonies involving monks' evening chants.⁴² The *Morning Overture* (*Homrong Chao*) and *Daytime Overture* (*Homrong Klang Wan*) are used for daylight performance and ritual events, but musicians acknowledge that the *Evening Overture* has a special precedence and importance.

I will make a case for the preeminence of the *Evening Overture* by exploring several kinds of evidence, including (1) the underlying metaphors implicit in the Thai vocabulary surrounding the overture, (2) its importance

³⁷However, the Solonese-style *Ayak-ayakan*, *Srepegan*, and *Sampak* played in the *talu* discussed in this paper make up three of the very few *gendhing lampaban* that consist of regularly recurring gong strokes.

³⁸In some styles of *wayang*, the *gara-gara* is an optional scene (a great warrior, burdened by worries, stops to rest in a deep and dark forest) while in others it is an interlude to mark the middle of the night and relieve potentially dangerous tension generated by the story.

³⁹The research for this essay was supported by grants from the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies, Title VI Foreign Language and Area Studies, the Asian Cultural Council, and the University of Michigan Alumnae Council.

⁴⁰I have generally used the system of romanization suggested by the Royal Institute of Thailand, but without the diacritical commas and macrons that modify certain vowels. See Appendix II for brief definitions of Thai vocabulary.

⁴¹Almost all kinds of Thai dance drama have their own specific overtures, but most overlap considerably with the *Evening Overture* and, in fact, the *Evening Overture* is often used instead.

⁴²See Pranee 1973:74–79 for more on the role of music in merit-making ceremonies.

for initiation in the performing arts, (3) its presence in a major ritual for musicians and dancers, and (4) a similar series of pieces played in Khmer ceremonies. Exploring the function and meaning of the overture sheds light on the epistemology of Thai music and its relation to the sacred world. I should make it clear that this interpretation is strictly my own: it is not one that is verbalized by Thai musicians, but most Thai musicians don't spend a lot of time talking about why they do what they do, and I found that only a few had any inclination towards abstract theorizing and explicating. The great Thai teachers of music and dance who are ritually sanctioned to understand and explain the sacred repertoire in this way are fully aware of the power of such knowledge, and therefore tend to keep silence.

The very concept of *homrong* or overture is at the heart of the ritual repertoire and exemplifies the potential power of Thai music and dance. By learning these overtures, a musician gains entry into a repertoire that brings him or her into close proximity with a different realm. The *Evening Overture* is part of a specialized repertoire, but it is not an obscure piece of music known only to a few. It is part of the basic equipment for many rituals, and its sound has strong spiritual associations for Thais.

The *Evening Overture* is a special medley of pieces played at the beginning of many Hindu-Buddhist rituals, and (traditionally) at the beginning of every dramatic performance accompanied by the musical ensemble called *pi-phat*. The *pi-phat* is a small but usually very loud ensemble with a core of five instruments: the *ranat ek*, a xylophone; the *khaung wong yai*, a circle of knobbed bronze gongs; the *pi nai*, an oboe-like instrument; the *klaung that*, a pair of large barrel-shaped drums struck with heavy beaters; and the *taphon*, a double-headed drum that is a symbol of the first teacher of music and thus considered sacred. The *ching chap*, a small pair of hand cymbals, delineates the metric structure. Other xylophones and gong circles can be added to this core of five, but its basic sound is loud, penetrating, and percussive; it never includes string instruments. Religious rituals in central Thailand are accompanied by this ensemble and no other, and its characteristic sound is part of its efficacy.⁴³

The *pi-phat* ensemble provides the musical accompaniment for a number of related dramatic forms, including the court arts of *khon* (masked dance-drama), *nang yai* (the great shadow puppet theater), and *hun krabauk* (hand puppet theater). These three theater traditions employ the *pi-phat* ensemble and share a special repertoire of musical works. It has in fact been speculated that *khon* and *hun krabauk* evolved from the older

⁴³In fact, Thai musicians refer to the Javanese gamelan as *pi-phat Chawa*, or "the Javanese *pi-phat*," and Thais probably draw this parallel from its sound as well as its potentially ritual function. See Becker 1988 for more on the iconicity of sound and the Javanese gamelan.

shadow puppet theater.⁴⁴ But the *pi-phat* is not found only in the courts: it also accompanies the popular dance drama tradition called *like*, although the fast, whimsical performance style of the *pi-phat* in this context is much ridiculed by classical musicians.⁴⁵

The Musical and Conceptual Sphere of the Evening Overture

The late Uthit Naksawasdi wrote that the three ritual overtures invite the many gods and sacred beings to congregate in the area of a ritual or performance and to give their blessings to the host, the guests, and the performing musicians (2530/1987:101).⁴⁶ Montri Tramote, now ninety years old and probably the greatest scholar of Thai classical music, has described the *Evening Overture* as “like a gathering of gods reciting magical formulae” (2526/1983:2).⁴⁷ He adds that the *Evening Overture* has a meaning and import beyond other overtures: it is, he says, “the foundation” (ibid.). This phrase, “the foundation” (*pen lak*), is frequently used by musicians when talking about the *Evening Overture*, though they rarely say the foundation of what. Similarly, Pranee Jearaditharporn wrote that “[the] *homrong yen*, or the evening prelude, seems to be the basis or standard for all other preludes” (1973:75). In fact, several kinds of evidence point to the *Evening Overture* as both the core of, and the threshold to, the specialized ritual repertoire of dance-drama.

The special musical sphere of the *pi-phat* ensemble is a body of about two hundred pieces that are quite possibly the oldest in the classical repertoire.⁴⁸ Musicians variously call them the sacred pieces, the high pieces, or the teacher’s pieces.⁴⁹ Their proper name is *phleng na-phat*, or the *na-phat* pieces. These powerful works are the basis of dance drama as well as many Hindu-Buddhist rituals. They portray characters’ movements and actions, such as walking, flying, sleeping, weeping, reviewing troops, and so forth. Sangat Phukhaothaung, a noted scholar of classical Thai music, describes them as follows:

The pieces that perform actions [*phleng prakaup kiriya*, another name for *phleng na-phat*] . . . replace actions, events, movements . . . : the animate or inanimate, people, animals, or objects, the corporal or incorporeal, the real or the

⁴⁴See Dhaninivat 1975 for more on the relationship between *nang yai* and *kbon*.

⁴⁵For more on the *pi-phat* ensemble and *like*, see Surapone 1980:167ff.

⁴⁶See note on the Buddhist calendar at the beginning of References Cited.

⁴⁷All translations of Thai source material are my own.

⁴⁸The *pi-phat* ensemble can also play pieces from outside this repertoire, but these two hundred pieces are off limits to other kinds of ensembles. When asked how old these works might be, most musicians say over two hundred years old, that is, that they date back to the Ayuthaya period [fourteenth-eighteenth century].

⁴⁹*Phleng saksit*, *phleng sung*, or *phleng kbru*.

supposed, the past or present, and things of the imagination, such as gods and ghosts and demons . . .

Dancers must follow the [notes of] these pieces—that is, they must hold onto the pieces as onto a post. This suggests that the musical works came first and the dance positions were devised later . . . (2532/1989:211, 214).

These works are performative acts in their own right: it is clear from the way Thai musicians talk about them that these pieces do not simply accompany action, they create and embody it—they are action. Most importantly, some pieces are more sacred, powerful, and even more dangerous than others: the entire repertoire is divided into five levels, and only the most devoted and committed performers attain the highest.

It is worth pausing and looking at three important words with closely related meanings that underscore the guiding metaphors behind this music. The word *hom* (the first word in the compound word *homrong*) is of Sanskrit origin (Chit 2522/1979:101) and is strongly associated with the Hindu-Brahman ritual of purificatory fire worship. In ancient Cambodia and contemporary Thailand, this ritual was (and continues to be) part of several royal ceremonies conducted by the Court Brahmins, a small group of ritual specialists who have for centuries maintained the non-Buddhist ceremonies surrounding kings.⁵⁰ A Khmer inscription from the ninth century describes King Yasovarman conducting a ritual called *kotiboma* (Wales 1931:59) that involved the worship of fire, and a ritual called *homa* (or *kralahom*) is also part of the contemporary Thai ceremonies surrounding the King's coronation and New Year's rituals.⁵¹

This purificatory ritual is also performed in Cambodia. Sam-Ang Sam, a contemporary Khmer musician, writes that “the word *hom* . . . originated in a religious sacrifice to god by the Brahmins, in which milk is sprayed into the fire. It has since been commonly used to signify a religious sacrifice or offering” (1988:267). *Hom* thus implies ritual purification. *Rong* means “building” or “structure”: the compound word *homrong*, or “overture,” then, suggests sacralizing an area, but in this context with sound rather than fire.⁵²

⁵⁰The ritual authority of the Brahmins was central to the *devaraja* cults of both Thailand and the Khmer empire. The Brahmins came to mainland Southeast Asia with Indian contact, and wielded considerable power in Cambodia by the ninth century or even before. Their ritual activities were a mixture of Vedic Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism (Wales 1931:59–60). Brahmins were imported to Thailand from Cambodia along with the “appurtenances of Khmer royalty” (ibid.), and were central to Thai court ritual by the fourteenth century if not before. Their descendants have intermarried with Thais, but the contemporary Court Brahmins still have Indian facial features and continue to conduct the royal ceremonies. See Thakur 1987 for more on this subject

⁵¹The *homa* sacrifice was formerly performed in connection with the *Con Parian* [Feast of Lamps] and New Year Festivals. In the former case it was abolished by King Rama IV [r. 1851–68], but still survives in the New Year and Coronation Ceremonies (see Wales 1931:72).

⁵²Although *homrong* is a noun, Thai musicians also tend to use it as a verb in conversation, suggesting that its older meaning still reverberates.

Both the words *pi-phat* and *na-phat* contain the Sanskrit root *-phat*,⁵³ defined by the dictionary as “instruments that *prakhom*” (Manit 2528/1985:666). In fact, both *-phat* and *hom* are associated with the word *prakhom*, which means “(1) to blow, sound (a trumpet), (2) to beat (a percussion instrument), (3) to herald (with drum-beat or fanfare), (4) to play a prelude, and (5) to proclaim” (Haas 1964:302).

Prakhom thus has a cluster of related meanings, including to proclaim or herald someone with the wind and percussion instruments reserved for royal or divine beings.⁵⁴ The words *hom*, *prakhom*, and *-phat* have meanings that converge on purifying a ritual area and heralding high sacred beings with instrumental musical sound, and this metaphor underlies the words for “overture,” the pieces in it, and the ensemble that plays it (*homrong*, *pi-phat*, and *na-phat*).

The Repertoire of the *Evening Overture*

The *Overture* has from twelve to twenty pieces (depending on how they are counted), and can take from eight to forty minutes to perform (depending on how much time the musicians have). It can, in other words, be expanded or contracted: the number of pieces included in the performance may be changed, and sections of pieces can be repeated if desired. The overture is always played without break; some of the pieces are elided through short bridge passages, and others come to a stop with a very brief pause before the next piece begins. All these pieces are regularly used in dance drama where they have similar meaning, but their order in the *Evening Overture* creates a series of performative acts strung together to form a bridge between two separate realms: it literally brings a series of Hindu gods and divine beings from the sacred realm down to ours,⁵⁵ where they oversee and sacralize the performance or ritual event.

The order of the pieces in the *Overture* (as I was taught them) can be seen in Appendix III at the end of this article,⁵⁶ but the sequence of pieces

⁵³The Thai word *phat* comes from the Sanskrit word *vadya*, which means a musical instrument or instrumental piece (as contrasted to sung music). My thanks to Professor Madhav Deshpande for an explanation of the Sanskrit origins of this and related words.

⁵⁴These instruments include the *traesang* (a metal horn with a short, curved shape and no valves) and the *maborathbuk* (a bronze drum similar to the *Dongson* drums found all over Southeast Asia), still sometimes played to announce the King and other high-ranking nobility (Dhanit 2530/1987:89–90, 64–71). See Cooler 1986 for more on the *maborathbuk*. It is also worth noting that *prakhom* is defined by the dictionary of the Royal Institute in terms of the word *hom* (Manit 2528/1985:554).

⁵⁵Thai musicians say the pieces “invite” (*an choen*) the gods to descend. The word *choen* is also used in everyday speech between hosts and guests to exhort someone to come in or sit down, and so forth.

⁵⁶There are a number of sources (mostly in Thai) listing various *na-phat* pieces and their meanings, though none claim to be complete. For sources in English, see Krebs 1975:223–27, Dhanit 2517/1974:11–13, and *Pbleng Chut Homrong Yen*.

and their implied actions are as follows. First, the event is framed as Buddhist with the high sacred piece called *Satbukan*. Then (in pieces 4 through 6) the divinities assemble in the heavens—both greater and lesser deities as well as demons (who represent an additional kind of power necessary to most rituals). The deities then form a procession and depart from the heavens in pieces 7 through 9, travelling the long distance to the area of the imminent ceremony. The great gods Shiva and Narai (Vishnu) arrive with piece 10, *Klom*, and give their blessings to the event with *Chamnan*, piece 11. Finally, the great demons arrive along with the lesser gods in pieces 12 and 13 (*Krao Nai* and *Ton Khao Man*). The *Overture* concludes with the entire divine host assembled during the final piece, and it is believed that they stay for the entire event.⁵⁷

Initiation in the Thai Performing Arts

With this overview in mind, we can take a closer look at two pieces—the first and second—to explore some of the hidden meanings of the *Evening Overture*. At this point I am moving out of the realm of common musicianly knowledge and into the realm of esoteric knowledge. The following thoughts are drawn from my personal experience with lessons and initiation as well as conversations with knowledgeable ritual musicians.

All Thai musicians and dancers undergo ritual initiation into the performing arts.⁵⁸ When they begin study, or as soon after as possible, all beginning students must participate in an annual ceremony called the *phithi wai kbru*, or the ritual to honor teachers.⁵⁹ In the first part of this ceremony, respect is paid to three kinds of teachers: the living, the dead, and the divine. Following this, the teacher who leads the ceremony initiates each new music student in a second ritual called the *phithi kbraup*.⁶⁰ He does this by accepting from each student a small bowl of prescribed offerings,⁶¹ by writing a secret power sign on the student's forehead, and then by leading the student through the beginning of a piece. This final part of the initiation is called “grasping the hands” (*cap mu*), and the teacher literally holds the

⁵⁷The same travelling piece, *Choet*, sends both deities and high ranking humans “out” of ritual events at their conclusion.

⁵⁸For more, see Myers-Moro 1988:319–27.

⁵⁹*Phithi*, “ceremony, ritual”; *wai*, “to salute by placing the hands palm to palm and raising them toward the face”; *kbru*, “teacher” (from the Sanskrit word *guru*).

⁶⁰*Kbraup* means “to cover”: the initiating teacher briefly “covers” each student's head with several dance masks as part of the ritual. *Kbraup* is commonly translated as “to initiate,” or even “to transmit knowledge” (Manit 2528/1985:191). While it is possible to conduct a *wai kbru* ceremony without a following *kbraup* ceremony, the *kbraup* ceremony must be preceded by the *wai kbru* ceremony since the first ritual assembles the spirits and gods necessary for initiation to take place.

⁶¹A candle, incense, flowers, a small piece of white cloth, and some coins.

student's hands in his while leading him or her through the first phrase of a piece on an instrument.

All music students are initiated at least once in their lifetime (at the beginning of their study), and the piece they are led through in this first initiation ceremony is always *Sathukan*—that is, the first piece in the *Evening Overture*. *Sathukan* is the most sacred piece in the entire repertoire: it is played at the beginning of all kinds of ceremonies, and any Thai would recognize it even if they don't know its name.⁶² *Sathukan* is expressly Buddhist: many books say that it represents the worship of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (the institution of the monkhood). Sangat (2532/1989:216) writes that *Sathukan* means "bowing down in respect."⁶³ In any ceremony, the sound of the piece marks the lighting of candles and the participants' prostration before the presiding Buddha image. This most sacred piece also frames ceremonies (including the *wai khru*) that Thais openly describe as Hindu or Brahman: it creates a Buddhist envelope for any event, with the kind of ritual gesture that helps bring together so many disparate elements in Thai society.⁶⁴

For this first, most essential initiation, students are led through the first phrase of *Sathukan* on the *khaung wong yai* (great gong circle) no matter what instrument they are actually studying, because the gong circle plays the most basic version of the melody in any ensemble.⁶⁵ By playing this phrase, students salute all music teachers and are also recognized by them, and are thus given permission to proceed with their studies. Most musicians feel that this basic initiation is not only necessary and beneficial but possibly harmful if not observed.

Initiation into the music for dance drama, or the high sacred pieces called *phleng na-phat*, is much more involved. Only a minority of all musicians gains entry into this repertoire.⁶⁶ Musicians studying only string instruments are generally excluded from it, nor does every musician studying a *pi-phat* instrument opt to enter this special territory. But for those who do,

⁶²A recording of *Sathukan* can found on Morton 1968, with accompanying commentary (op. cit.:33).

⁶³The word *sathu* means "to salute" or "to make obeisance."

⁶⁴The origin myth of *Sathukan* also reflects this mixture of Hindu and Buddhist elements. It is said that Shiva challenged the Buddha to a game of hide-and-go-seek to see who was the greater. Shiva hid at the bottom of the ocean but the Buddha, who sees all, quickly found him. The Buddha then made himself very small and hid on top of Shiva's head, where of course Shiva couldn't see him. Admitting defeat, Shiva then created the piece *Sathukan* and played it to honor the Buddha (Dhanit 2509/1966).

⁶⁵The basic melody is called the *thamnaung lak* in Thai, and is similar to the Javanese idea of *balungan*. Most instruments in a musical ensemble play an ornamented version of the basic melody.

⁶⁶Today, most are university students or the children of musicians' families. The fifth and highest level is a single piece that can only be learned by men.

there are five levels of initiation into the sacred repertoire, and all of the *Evening Overture's* pieces (except for one) must be learned after the first, most basic initiation. The *Evening Overture* is thus the entryway into the higher repertoire of sacred pieces. In other words, a student must first be initiated with the piece *Sathukan* and then spend up to a year learning the rest of the pieces in the *Evening Overture*—except for its second piece, as will be discussed below—and cannot proceed until these pieces are fully absorbed.

When a student has finished learning all the other pieces in the *Evening Overture* and in the *Morning Overture* (which has just five pieces, only one not also in the *Evening Overture*),⁶⁷ she or he can then be initiated into the second level of the sacred repertoire. Once again, the student's hands are grasped by the teacher, but this time the student is led through the initial phrase of *Tra Homrong*, the second piece in the *Evening Overture*. *Tra Homrong* means “the divine overture,”⁶⁸ and is a single piece, not a set of pieces like the *Evening Overture*. With *Tra Homrong*, the first level of the repertoire is completed, and the student has entered the second.⁶⁹

That another piece called *homrong* is used as an entryway into the next level of repertoire supports the broader metaphorical meaning of *homrong* I suggested earlier: that is, it heralds closer proximity to the sacred. A musical phrase found in both *Sathukan* and *Tra Homrong* underscores this iconic association. All pieces in the *na-phat* repertoire are constructed out of a limited number of motives arranged in different ways. Learning the *na-phat* repertoire becomes both easier and more difficult the more pieces a student knows: the basic motivic material quickly becomes familiar but remembering its configuration in different pieces becomes more and more challenging. It is not unusual for a student to start out in one piece but end up in another by taking a wrong turn. The motive found near the beginning of both *Sathukan* and *Tra Homrong* (as played on the *khaung wong yai*, or great gong circle) can be seen in Figure 2. My teacher noted many times during our lessons that the beginning of *Tra Homrong* is exactly like *Sathukan*,

⁶⁷The *Morning Overture* and the *Evening Overture* overlap considerably: the only new piece in the *Morning Overture* is *Hau*. The *Morning Overture* consists of five pieces: *Sathukan*, *Hau*, *Rua La Dieo*, *Klom*, and *Chamnan*. The *Daytime Overture* is learned after the second initiation. It is much longer, consisting of fourteen pieces that generally include: *Krao Nai*, *Samoe Kham Samut*, *Choet*, *Chup*, *La*, *Tra Baungkan*, *Takbuk Ruk Lon*, *Chai Rua*, *Pluk Ton Mai*, *Khuk Pbat*, *Phan Phirap*, *Tra Sannibat*, *Sian*, *Choet-Prathom-Rua*, *Bat Sakuni*, and *Krao Ram* (Uthit 2530/1987:102–103). Obviously, the repertoire of the three overtures overlaps. There is no consensus on the exact configuration of each one, although their basic outlines remain the same. Differences consist of pieces added on or not included, and sometimes variant names of pieces. The *Daytime Overture* is the longest of the three, and seems to have the most variation.

⁶⁸*Tra* means divine and is probably of Khmer origin. All pieces whose names are prefixed with *tra* are by definition from the second level of repertoire or higher.

⁶⁹After this initiation, the student can learn all the pieces in the *Daytime Overture*.

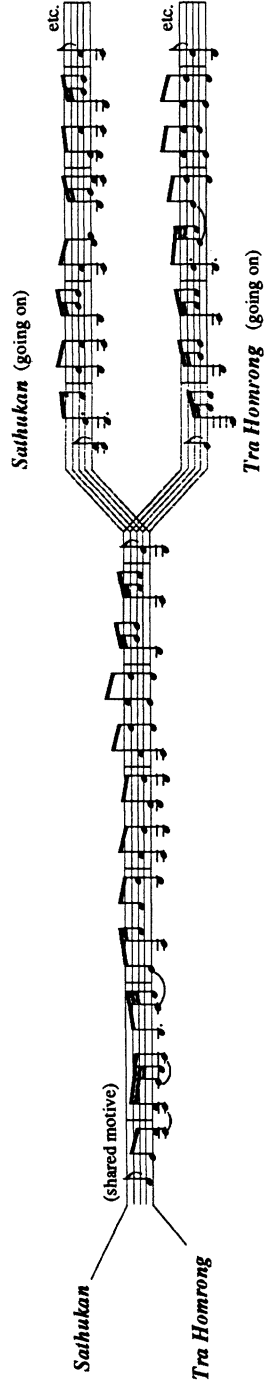


Figure 2. Musical motive found in both *Sathukan* and *Tra Homrong*.

making it both easy to remember and also problematic, because one must remember where the two pieces part ways.⁷⁰

The Evening Overture in the Ritual to Honor Teachers

I have just described how a piece called *Tra Homrong* is embedded in a set of pieces collectively called *Homrong*, and I briefly want to address another kind of embedding that accentuates the *Evening Overture's* function as a ritual frame. The entire *Evening Overture* is played in the *wai khru* ceremony that honors teachers, but its performance context is quite different. Here it is performed not in the evening (since the *wai khru* ceremony is always held in the morning) and not at the beginning of the ceremony but rather sometime during its first hour. When played as part of this ceremony, the *Evening Overture* is simply referred to as *Homrong*, and it took me several months of my fieldwork to realize that this was in fact the *Evening Overture* performed in its most abbreviated form. When I asked one ritual musician why it was inserted into the ceremony, he said "It invites the many sacred ones to descend to the ceremony. Besides, it's the basis, the foundation. Sometimes the *Morning Overture* is played before the ceremony starts, but you still have to have the *Homrong* later on."

Here there are frames within frames: usually used as a framing device, the *Homrong* itself is framed within the ceremony to honor teachers as, I would argue, one of the chief expressive and performative agents of the *pi-phet* ensemble and its repertoire. In this context, it is both causative (it brings the deities to the ceremony) and is itself an object of honor as it transports the divine earthwards, highlighted in a ritual that itself pays homage to the music and dance of power.

Parallels with Music, Dance, and Ritual at the Khmer Court

Centuries of warfare between the Thai, Lao, and Khmer empires have left these modern nations with strikingly similar court traditions of music and dance, all affirming the divine power and charisma of the *devaraja* (Nidhi 1976). There is a great deal of specific overlap in ritual repertoire between Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia: that is, the repertoire called *na-phat* in Thailand is not unique to Thailand's court and ritual traditions. In fact, some of these pieces are efficacious in similar ways over a very large area cultural

⁷⁰The way my teacher taught me the two pieces, and how to remember their difference, also suggests that they overlay each other conceptually. In the *Evening Overture*, *Tra Homrong* begins right after *Sathukan* ends, with the same motive that begins *Sathukan*. During lessons, my teacher would at this point (without fail) say, "It's like *Sathukan*, right? But where exactly do they separate (*yaek*)?" His consistent use of the word *separate* almost implied that they are the same piece up to that point.

and geographical area.⁷¹ Both the names and melodies of many Thai and Khmer pieces are essentially the same although their specific regional forms (as performed) are quite distinct from one another.

One of the chief duties of the Khmer royal dancers and musicians was the performance of a Brahmanic ritual called *buang suang*, observed annually in Phnom Penh until 1975. Paul Cravath writes that the *buang suang* ceremony was held as a general blessing for the nation, and was usually performed in the throne room or in an important royal Buddhist temple.⁷² It was considered "the most powerful form of Khmer dance as offering," and invoked the aid of the gods (*tevoda*) in protecting the kingdom, overseen by the king himself (Cravath 1985:564,384). The royal *buang suang* consisted of a series of musical pieces and dances, with the dancers first making ritual offerings to the cardinal points and then performing set dances. Cravath points out that these dances were not esoteric in nature: they were from the standard classical dance repertoire. But in the context of the *buang suang*, these dances took on a deeper and more powerful significance because each one depicted a different set of deities.

The musical pieces that accompanied the *buang suang* bear a strong resemblance to those in the *Evening Overture*. When Jacques Brunet recorded a *buang suang* ceremony at the royal palace in Phnom Penh in 1970, he was told that the music for the ritual could be made up of any series of pieces selected from over three hundred titles,⁷³ but this latitude of choice is doubtful. In fact, the eighteen pieces⁷⁴ he recorded clearly correlate to several of the pieces in the Thai *Evening Overture* (Brunet 1970), and it seems more likely that the repertoire for the *buang suang* was drawn from a prescribed portion of the total dance drama repertoire.

Some Khmer musicians have pointed out extremely direct parallels between the *homrong* and the ritual to honor teachers of music and dance. Sam-Ang Sam writes that when this ceremony (called *piithi sampeah krou* in Khmer) is observed immediately before a masked dance drama performance, it is called *hom rong*: ". . . *Hom rong* is a sacrificial ceremony to open a hall, a place or an event . . . The *hom rong* ceremony is conducted to bless the stage, performance, performers, the masks, and the entire presentation" (1988:267–68).

⁷¹The extent to which Burma has similar repertoire, rituals, and beliefs about music and drama remains undocumented.

⁷²The *buang suang* is a propitiary ritual that can be done for any number of reasons and with varying degrees of elaboration. It can be performed on a national level (as described above) or as a personal offering made by an individual (Cravath 1985:383–84).

⁷³This is presumably the total dance drama repertoire (that is, the Khmer equivalent of the Thai *na-phat* repertoire, which consists of two to three hundred pieces).

⁷⁴Cravath suggests that in both the *buang suang* and the ceremony to honor teachers (*sampeah krou*), the eighteen pieces probably correlated to the eighteen main teachers of dance drama (1985:385,589).

For Khmer performers, then, the pre-performance ritual itself is called *homrong*, whereas the series of musical pieces is called *buang suang*. Sam notes that the *buang suang* series can be shortened by omitting some of the pieces, but that two of the pieces, *Sathukar* and *Trak*, must always be performed (ibid.). In other words, the two pieces so crucial to the Thai initiation process (*Sathukan* and *Tra* in Thai) are also mandatory for the Khmer ritual.

The Khmer evidence strongly suggests that the tradition of playing suites of powerful dance drama pieces in order to make contact with the sacred realm is widespread in mainland Southeast Asia. A comparison of Khmer and Thai titles for pieces further suggests that a core repertoire *within* the dance drama repertoire is the backbone of these suites, embodying certain ritually necessary actions between the temporal and sacred domains (see Figure 3, below).

<i>Evening Overture</i> (as taught to me)	royal <i>buang suang</i> (following Brunet 1970)	<i>buang suang</i> for teachers (following Sam 1988:268)
1) <i>Sathukan</i>	1) <i>Sathukar</i>	1) <i>Sathukar</i>
2) <i>Tra Homrong</i>	2) <i>Krao Nay</i>	2) <i>Trak</i>
3) <i>Rua Sam La</i>	3) <i>Kom Vean</i>	3) <i>Kamann</i>
4) <i>Ton Khao Man/ Khao Man</i>	4) <i>Rour</i>	4) <i>Thom Loeluk</i>
5) <i>Pathom/Thai Khao Man</i>	5) <i>Preab Thong</i>	5) <i>Choet Chhoeung</i>
6) <i>La</i>	6) <i>Phleng Chbar</i>	6) <i>Choet Muoy Chaon</i>
7) <i>Samoe</i>	7) <i>Banchos</i>	7) <i>Prathom</i>
8) <i>Rua La Dieo</i>	8) <i>Phleng Lea</i>	8) <i>Khlom</i>
9) <i>Choet</i>	9) <i>Phleng Smeu</i>	9) <i>Krao Nai</i>
10) <i>Klom</i>	10) <i>Yani</i>	10) <i>Smoeu</i>
11) <i>Chamnan</i>	11) <i>Phleng Klom</i>	11) <i>Lea</i>
12) <i>Krao Nai</i>	12) <i>Choet</i>	12) <i>Ruor</i>
13) <i>Ton Khao Man</i>	13) <i>Long Song Mon</i>	
14) <i>La</i>	14) <i>Reay</i>	
	15) <i>Chhoet Chhoeung</i>	
	16) <i>Reu Reay</i>	
	17) <i>Khop Khat</i>	
	18) <i>Chhoet Chhing</i>	

Figure 3. Comparison of pieces in the Thai *Evening Overture*, the Khmer royal *buang suang*, and the Khmer *buang suang* for teachers of music and dance.

Linguistic evidence and the configuration of the common details between Thai and Khmer ritual music suggests a Khmer origin.⁷⁵ On the other hand, the flow of influence was not one way by any means: it is well established that after the fall of Angkor in the fifteenth century, the Khmers borrowed extensively from the Thais. Franklin Huffman describes the two way process as follows:

When the Thais moved into the Chao Phaya River valley in the eighth to the twelfth centuries, they came into contact with an established Khmer civilization, and they borrowed heavily from Khmer religious, cultural, linguistic, and literary sources. Then, after the defeat of Angkor by the Thais in the fifteenth century, Khmer culture underwent a decline—a kind of ‘Dark Ages’—during which it nevertheless continued alive and well in Ayutthaya. During the Bangkok period [1782 to the present] the Khmers had to borrow back many aspects of their former art forms, literature, and language, frequently modified by the Thais (1986:199).

Clearly, this is an area in which much more research could be done, shedding light on what is certainly some of the oldest music in mainland Southeast Asia.

Closing the Frame: Conclusions

It is clear that both the Javanese *taluh* and the Thai *homrong* are special kinds of music, each a repertory of pieces closely associated with the ritual performance it introduces. *Gendhing Cucur Bawuk* is so closely associated with *wayang* that it is rarely played in any other context. When it is performed outside of *wayang*, such as in concert situations, it usually remains part of the still intact *taluh* medley. We might argue that the most striking feature of the *taluh* is its grounding in structure, or form, and the progressive changes in structure and texture. Through its changing textures and structures the *taluh* manipulates subjective time and defines space; in other words, it alters what Rouget calls the “experience of being” (Rouget 1985:121). We have seen earlier that the ritual framework and mystical symbolism of *wayang kulit* instill the music of the *taluh* with a special meaning. These ritual and symbolic elements, together with the peculiar properties of musical sound (that is, its abstractness and its pervasiveness), make the *taluh* a powerful vehicle for experiencing a transcendent reality. Thus, it provides audience members the means to suspend disbelief and traverse the mythical realm of Javanese shadow-puppetry.

⁷⁵H. G. Quaritch Wales (1931:315), a close observer of Thai court ritual, pointed out that “there can be no doubt that the Brahmanism which forms the basis of most of the Siamese Royal Ceremonies was derived from Cambodia, where similar Brahmanic ceremonies are performed to this day.”

The Thai *Evening Overture* is so fundamentally important to Thai ritual-dramatic events, to Thai musicians, and to the sacred Thai repertoire that its significance is generally left unexplained and unexplored. Musicians do not discuss how or why the *Overture* is “the foundation,” nor has the temporal displacement of the *Evening Overture* in the morning *wai kbriu* ceremony ever been addressed in any Thai source. Certainly the close semantic meaning of the words *homrong* and *-phat* is not common knowledge among musicians.

The *Evening Overture* and the instruments that sound it stand betwixt and between, at a juncture necessarily powerful in its own right. It is, to paraphrase Geertz, the image of composed divinity (1980:131): as an ephemeral doorway through which deities can come and go, it is a frame of sound that is the sacred in action. Without this frame, deities could not be present and ritual events would not be sacred. The *Evening Overture* is powerful because temporal frames, transitions, and transformations are inherently powerful almost everywhere in the world. The *Overture* takes this a step further, transforming people into musicians and stages into sacred space. The play of meanings and nested contexts is thus not surprising.

While our respective studies show that the Thai and Javanese overtures are substantially different in how they mean what they do, we also feel that they are directed towards important trajectories, each within its own tradition. In one sense, the Javanese *talu* is “about” form, time, and the human life cycle, and the Thai *homrong* is “about” transporting deities and frames within frames. They are thus synecdochic: one aspect of a tradition, extracted, underlines some of the tradition’s most salient concepts, and is employed to signify qualities presumed to inhere in the totality (White 1973:34). We feel that this striking similarity of metaphoric function is not coincidence, and probably part of a broader pattern of sound and the sacred in Southeast Asia.

Appendix I

Talu

1) *Gendhing Cucur Bawuk kethuk 2 kerep*

Buka [introduction] *rebab* [spike fiddle]:

• 2 2 2 3 3 • 2 2 2 3 3 1 1 3 2 • 1 2 6G

				t					t					N		
• 6	• 6	• 6	• 6	3	5	6	ī	6	5	3	5					
• 2	• 3	3	3	• 5	6	5	6	ī	6	5	3	5				
• 2	• 3	3	3	• 5	6	ī	6	5	5	3	5	6				
3	5	6	ī	6	5	3	2	1	2	3	2	• 1	2	6G		
2	2	•	•	2	3	2	1	2	3	2	1	6̇	5	2	3	
•	•	3	6	3	5	6	1	2	3	2	1	6̇	5	2	3*	
2	2	•	•	2	2	•	3	5	6	•	ī	6	5	2	3	
2	1	2	•	2	1	2	3	6	5	3	2	• 1	2	6G		

* to *umpak minggab* (transitional section) at tempo change:

• 1	• 2	• 5	• 6	• 2	• ī	• 5	• 3
• 2	• 1	• 2	• 3	• 1	• 2	• 1	• 6G

2) *Inggab Paréanom (kethuk 4)*

t				t			t			t			N
• 5	• 3	• 5	• 3	• 5	• 3	• 1	• 2						
• 5	• 3	• 5	• 3	• 5	• 3	• 1	• 2						
• 3	• 2	• ī	• 6	• 2	• ī	• 5	• 3						
• 5	• 6	• 3	• 2	• 3	• 2	• 1	• 6G						

3) *Ladrang Srikaton*

t				t			N			t			N
• 2	• 1	• 2	• 6̇	• 2	• 1P	• 2	• 6̇						
• 2	• 1P	• 2	• 6̇	• 3	• 6P	• 3	• 2G						
• 5	• 6	• 5	• 3	• ī	• 6P	• 5	• 3						
• 2	• 1P	• 2	• 6̇	• 2	• 1P	• 2	• 6G						

4) *Ketawang Sukmailang*

t								t					t					N	
•	•	2	6̇	1	2	3	2	6̇	1	2	3P	6	5	3	2G				
3	3	•	•	3	3	5	3	6	ī	6	5P	ī	6	5	3G				
•	•	3	5	6	3	5	6	3	5	6	īP	3̇	2̇	ī	6G				
ī	ī	•	•	3̇	2̇	ī	6	3	5	6	īP	3̇	2̇	ī	6G				
3	3	•	•	3	5	3	2	6̇	1	2	3P	6	5	3	2G				

Appendix II

Glossary of Thai and Khmer terms

buang suang: Brahmanic ritual of renewal and protection found in both Thailand and Cambodia. Its performance was one of the chief duties of the royal dancers and musicians in the Cambodian courts.

devaraja: "God-king." Hindu-Buddhist belief in the king as the exemplary center of his kingdom.

hom (*homa*, *kralahom*): Hindu-Brahman ritual of purificatory fire worship performed by Court Brahmans for the Thai and Khmer kings.

homrong: In Thailand, a musical overture or prelude. The three most important are the Evening Overture, Morning Overture, and Daytime Overture, which are a series of pieces played without pause before rituals and performances. In Cambodia, this is a pre-performance ritual that blesses the event and its participants.

bun krabauk: Hand puppet theater.

kbbon: Masked dance drama of the courts.

kbraup: "To initiate," "to cover," or "to transmit knowledge." The *kbraup* ceremony of initiation follows the *wai kbbru* ceremony.

lakkbon: Unmasked dance drama.

like: Popular lower-class dance drama found all over Thailand in both urban and rural settings.

nang yai: Great shadow puppet theater of the courts.

na-pbat: The special musical repertoire of the *pi-pbat* ensemble, used in many dance drama genres but particularly in *kbbon*, *nang yai*, and *bun krabauk*. Also known as the sacred pieces, high pieces, or teacher's pieces.

phithi: Ceremony or ritual.

pi-pbat: Classical ensemble used in central Thai ritual and dance drama. Has a core of the following instruments:

ranat ek: xylophone.

khaung wong yai: large circle of pot gongs.

pi nai: oboe-like, but with a quadruple reed.

klaung that: pair of large, barrel-like drums.

taphon: sacred drum with two heads.

ching chap: pair of small hand cymbals.

pithi sampeab krou: The Khmer ritual honoring teachers of music and dance.

wai kbru: The ceremony to honor teachers. Observed by all practitioners of specialized knowledge, but is particularly important in the performing arts.

Appendix III

List of pieces in the *Evening Overture (Homrong Yen)*

- 1) *Sathukan*: Symbolizes the worship of the Triple Gem of Buddhism, and both pays respect to and calls to mind the Great Teachers. Is a physical or mental salutation of the heavenly spirits.
- 2) *Tra Homrong*: Any *Tra* movement is an invocation to the heavenly spirits, commonly performed at the beginning of any major undertaking.
- 3) *Rua Sam La*: A *rua* is a short opening or closing section in free meter, led by the *ranat ek* player. *La* means an ending or good-bye. This is “the *rua* with three endings,” used in drama to indicate prowess, but here it denotes the concluding act of salutation or *krap* in which the performer bows to the ground three times. It can also honor the *yak* (demon) teachers. In the *wai kbru* ceremony, it invites the teachers or demons who have sacred or magical power. In *khon* (masked dance-drama), it expresses magical power (*ittharit*).
- 4) *Ton Khao Man* [and *Khao Man*]: This piece and those following are descriptive of activities in the heavens. *Khao* means to enter, and *man* means curtain or drape. This piece indicates the entry of lesser divinities into the presence of the high Hindu gods to inform them of the invocation from earth inviting them to descend and give their blessings to the impending performance.
- 5) *Pathom/Thai Khao Man*: These two movements represent the marshaling of the celestial retinue that is to accompany the high gods to the

performance. *Pathom* is a march, and *Thai Khao Man* is the “end” of *Khao Man*.

- 6) *La*: In this case, the “ending” is the conclusion of the marshalling.
- 7) *Samoe*: Any *samoe* movement (there are many kinds) indicates movement over short distances. This signifies the exit of the high gods from their celestial palaces.
- 8) *Rua La Dieo*: This “*rua* with a single ending” indicates the departure and progress of the high gods from heaven to earth.
- 9) *Choet*: Any *choet* movement (there are many kinds) indicates physical movement or travel (cf. the Javanese *ayak-ayakan* or *srepegan*). This accompanies the high Hindu gods’ retinue as they travel to earth. *Choet* movements are used for any character moving quickly over a long distance or for battle scenes. *Choet* is an old Thai word meaning “to go forward.”
- 10) *Klom*: Indicates the arrival of a high god, in this case Shiva and Narai. In *khon*, it is used for deities who are walking, such as when the god Narai comes down to earth in one of his incarnations. It also invites the divine teachers of music and dance.
- 11) *Chamnan*: Indicates that the assembly of deities is blessing the event about to take place.
- 12) *Krao Nai*: Indicates the arrival of the highest, most sacred demon (*yak*). This piece is used for the inspection of demon troupes in *khon*. One source says that “this tune has echo, resonance, and a low tone which expresses greatness” (*Pbleng Chut Homrong Yen*).
- 13) *Ton Khao Man* [or *Ton Chup*]: Represents the entry of beings lesser than the high gods, such as the ritual expert officiating at this rite.
- 14) *La*: The conclusion of the invocation, indicating that the deities are now assembled.

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[Note: Thailand observes the Buddhist-era calendar. Thai sources below are cited by both the Thai- and Western-calendar year of publication, separated by a slash (/). Following Thai practice, Thai authors are cited and alphabetized by first name, not surname.]

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