



**Representing Javanese Music:
Postcolonial and Cognitive Perspectives
on the History of *Gamelan* Notation**

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The music of the Central Javanese *gamelan* orchestra was an entirely oral tradition until the latter part of the 19th century. Starting in the 1870s, musicians in the court center of Surakarta developed a series of notational systems for their music, all indebted to Western models. These systems took a variety of approaches to the representation of meter. While the earliest ones made no efforts to represent meter at all, starting in the 1920s a notational format emerged depicting metric units using barlines. As in Western notation, time flows from left to right across the page, and the strongest beat of each metric unit—the downbeat—is placed at the extreme left of the graphic unit (the measure). However this system was soon replaced by the current system, in which a distinctly different convention is used to represent metric units: although the notation is still read from left to right, the strongest beat is placed at the extreme right of the graphic unit (the *gatra*).

Some ethnomusicologists have seen in the birth of Javanese notation a pattern typical of postcolonial societies, in which the colonial elite—or even indigenous musicians dazzled by the achievements of a supposedly superior musical culture—impose inappropriate Western concepts and practices on a local tradition to which they are alien. While it is clear that such impositions did occur in the development of *gamelan* notation, it is also clear that some Western notational practices were modified or rejected (a fact entirely consistent with postcolonial theory’s emphasis on the agency of the colonized).

To speak of the “imposition” of concepts, however, begs a question not usually raised by students of post-colonial societies: does the use of the colonizer’s concepts or practices *always* distort the traditions of the colonized? Or can some “alien” concepts in fact be appropriately applied to indigenous music? If so, how can we distinguish the appropriate from the inappropriate? For the ability to make such a distinction would seem to be a prerequisite for any postcolonial analysis.

I address this question with regard to the development of graphic devices for representing meter in Javanese music. I use an approach inspired by cognitive psychology to evaluate the potential fit between different aspects of the Western notational model and the Javanese tradition to which it was applied. Using a statistical analysis of Javanese melodic style, I establish a framework for interpreting the history of Javanese notation, showing how successive stages in its development can be seen to swing between mimicry of the West and sensitivity to the typical characteristics of Javanese melody.