



Binary Division, Cyclic Recurrence and Dynamic Musical Interaction in Javanese Gamelan

Sumarsam

Wesleyan University

Binary division and cyclic recurrence have been identified accurately as hallmarks of melodic and formal structure of Javanese gamelan. Appropriately, scholars have used these musical concepts in the study of both gamelan composition and gamelan as a socio-cosmological metaphor. Beyond identifying the cyclic nature and binary-ness of the music, this paper will discuss other ways in which both concepts play out in the overall, complex stylistic, multi-layered processual nature of gamelan performance. Previous scholars have revealed a great deal about compositional processes and the interactive nature of different instruments in the ensemble, but there are some issues that need further elucidation. For example, I will explore the ways in which binary taxonomy provides a conceptual framework for musical interaction. The function of instruments according to binary division, such as skeleton/ornamentation and *pamurba/pamangku* (authority/upholder), will be examined for their significance in the dynamics of musical interaction. I will also examine the significance of the sound of the large gong in marking the most important structural points in the music and its relevance to dynamic musical interaction. My analysis will make reference to the work of historian and anthropologist in their studies of binary division and cyclic recurrence in Javanese social and cosmological order.