

Indonesia



Jennifer A. Fraser, *Gongs & Pop Songs: Sounding Minangkabau in Indonesia*

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INTERNATIONAL ethnomusicological studies on Indonesian traditional music, especially those dealing with idiophone musical instruments, have concentrated mainly on Javanese and Balinese gamelan. For centuries, Western scholars gave the outer islands such as Nusantara much less attention than other regions until the appearance of Jennifer Fraser's book. Fraser became fascinated by *talempong* after travelling to West Sumatra, the homeland of the Minangkabau, the last remaining prominent matrilineal society in a twenty-first century world dominated by patriarchal societies. Fraser spent a year in 1998 studying at the Academy of Indonesian Traditional Music (now Higher Institute of Indonesian Arts, STSI) in Padang Panjang under the Dharmaiswa exchange program sponsored by the Indonesian government.

Since then, Fraser seems to have fallen in love with *talempong*. Her interest in this Minangkabau traditional gong-chime ensemble, however, differs from that of other foreign anthropologists, who are more interested in the Minangkabau ethnic group's matrilineal kinship system, especially its coexistence with Islam. Nine years later, Fraser's strong fascination with *talempong* bore a dissertation entitled "Packaging Ethnicity: State Institutions, Cultural Entrepreneurs, and the Professionalization of Minangkabau Music in Indonesia," submitted to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. *Gongs & Pop Songs* is adapted from her dissertation, which she calls "a culmination of two years of research in West Sumatra lasting over a sixteen-year period" (ix).

In *Gongs & Pop Songs*, Fraser, now an associate professor of ethnomusicology and anthropology at Oberlin College, explores the transformation of Minangkabau *talempong*. She traces in detail how *talempong* music "has changed over the last sixty years

and how it was transformed in response to a number of different forces, including political events, the institutionalization and the related professionalization of the arts, and the pressures of a free-market economy” (216).

The book consists of six chapters accompanied by audio and video examples, as well as images that are available online (listed on 255–58). Chapter 1, “Ethnicity, Gongs, and Pop Songs” (1–36), is an overview of the main chapters of the book. It shows how *talempong* “is shaped in different styles that come to articulate different understandings of Minangkabau ethnicity” (35–36) by sketching its position in Minangkabau traditional arts and society. The chapter also explores *talempong*’s recent incorporation in Minangkabau pop songs as a consequence of the professionalization and monetization of Minangkabau music that, in turn, has brought about changing perceptions of it. The author also provides theoretical considerations using a cognitive perspective on ethnicity to define who the Minangkabau are. This introductory chapter offers the core ideas of the book: “the ways [*talempong*] music expresses ethnic sentiments and the ways that expression is shaped by social, political, economic, and cultural currents at the local, regional, and national level” (36).

Chapter 2, “Talempong and Community” (37–88), describes *talempong* practices in the *nagari* (village federation) of West Sumatra. In the *nagari*, the author found two original *talempong* styles: *talempong duduak*, which is more likely to be performed by women, and *talempong pacik* or *talempong bararak* which is mostly performed by men. Both are “broad stylistic categories that transcend differences in performance practice from one *nagari* to the next” (49). The author describes in detail how to play both *talempong* types and the different melodies each contains. However, the repertoire of *talempong* practices in this *nagari* has changed with the passage of time. For example, “the musicians in some *nagari* choose to incorporate pop songs and *dendang* [any indigenous Minangkabau song composed in *pantun* verse] into the repertoire of both *talempong pacik* and *talempong duduak* ensembles” (64). But most of them are still performed in their original function: as music to enliven the celebration of weddings (*baralek*). The author extensively describes the processions and cultural significances of this major rite of passage in Minangkabau life (67–80). Though weddings are the most frequent occasions for *talempong* performance in the *nagari* under investigation, the music is also performed in other ceremonies and communal events, such as a child’s first ritual bath, circumcision ceremonies, and *batagak panghulu* (installation of a lineage leader). Sometimes *talempong* is also performed at sports events, festivals, and government functions outside of the *nagari* (80). The *talempong pacik* seems to have been performed to accompany villagers while working voluntarily (*gotong royong* or *kerja bakti*) to build or restore public facilities (ANONYMOUS 1953). The last part of this chapter discusses the monetization of *talempong* in the *nagari* along with the increasing influence of money culture in Minangkabau society, which, to a certain extent, has decreased the sense of communalism.

The author mentions that the monetization of *talempong* has engendered newer styles of such Minangkabau ensemble music. Chapter 3, “Institutionalizing Minangkabau Arts” (89–132), explores these new styles and processes and the principal factors that engendered them; namely, the formal training that has occurred since the 1960s in Minangkabau arts at special schools. The author looks at how educational institutions (such as the STSI Padang Panjang, the Indonesisch Nederlandsche School [INS] at Kayutanam, and the High School of Indonesia Traditional Arts [SMKI] in Padang)

and various performing arts troupes (*sanggar seni*) have become a primary factor in driving the transformation of Minangkabau indigenous *talempong*. These educational institutions are credited with standardizing *talempong* music and other Minangkabau indigenous art genres.

The two remaining principal chapters trace various new performance styles of *talempong*, as a consequence of the institutionalizing of this genre of music. The musicians graduating from such educational institutions for the arts, and those who work with them, have created new styles of *talempong* musical performances, which are shaped in professional performing arts troupes or musical groups. Chapter 4, “Performing Talempong” (133–75), looks at educational practices for *talempong*, especially at STSI Padang Panjang. It details the emergence of a new idiom: the diatonic *talempong*. This experimentation, carried out by ASKI instructors, has subsequently developed into *orkes talempong*. The author analyzes ethnomusicologically the musical structure of ornamentation of the *orkes* and the melody of its prominent piece “Kumbang cari” (not “Kambang cari” as incorrectly written somewhere else in the book, just as *jengkel* occurs instead of *jengkol* [pungent nut] on page 14).

In chapter 5, “Talempong in the Market Place” (176–215), the author continues her focus on modern diatonic *talempong*, and compels her to look closer at the practice of this new genre in the context of “money matters: how concerns of the market shape the arts [including talempong] or, put another way, how arts are modified and framed in order to be viable in the market place and respond to the needs of the paying clientele” (176). Looking at the effects of the free-market economy on the arts, in which artistic and cultural goods are exchanged for economic capital, especially at a time when tourism is an important source of revenue under the government’s policy of regional autonomy, this chapter traces the emergence of Minangkabau *sanggar*, which is now established both in the homeland (West Sumatra) and in the *rantau* (migration areas outside West Sumatra), the origin and musical characteristics of new styles such as *talempong goyang* and *talempong kreasi baru*, as well as their economic significance.

In the concluding chapter, “Multiple Ways of Sounding Minangkabau” (216–24), the author underlines two important points as logical consequences of the transformation of *talempong* due to the institutionalization, professionalization, and monetization of the arts in Indonesia. First, the teaching of Minangkabau indigenous arts by formal educational institutions has lowered the quality of indigenous arts, so the preservationist objectives of these institutions have failed. According to the author, the Institute of Indonesian Arts in Padang Panjang, the leading higher education institute of arts in West Sumatra, has done more to undermine than to preserve Minangkabau indigenous arts, including *talempong*: “First, by decontextualizing these arts and stripping them of embedded value systems; second, by pedagogical approaches to teaching these practices that dilute their aesthetic content; third, by producing a class of musicians who dismiss the value of rural practices and the accomplishment of indigenous practitioners; and last, by encouraging the development of indigenous arts and the creation of new musical styles nominally predicated on them” (219). Second, the transformation of *talempong* has changed this music from a sub-local musical practice to a new form that transcends *nagari* affiliations, therefore symbolizing a pan-Minangkabau identity. Like the commercial recordings of Minangkabau pop music (SURYADI 2014), these new *talempong* styles have actively fostered and created ethnic sensibilities, Minangkabau-ness in this context.

This book is academically rich, and with its sophisticated and insightful interpretations, it is a truly worthy scholarly contribution to the understanding of the dynamics of local culture in contemporary Indonesia. It will be a valuable resource for ethnomusicological and ethnographic studies of Indonesian regional pop music.

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Surya Suryadi
Leiden University