

Indonesia: Gamelan Music and Instruments

Çudamani

The members of Çudamani live on the beautiful island of Bali, the largest tourist destination in the country of Indonesia. Bali is also home to most of Indonesia's small minority of Hindus, or people who follow the Hindu religion, which is the third largest religion in the world.

Music and dance have long been an important part of Hindu religious ceremonies on Bali. However, as the number of tourists increased in recent years, musicians and dancers on Bali began performing more for tourists and moving away from the religious and community life in their villages.

Çudamani works to restore the connection between performance and the religious and social life of their village. Although modern Bali is filled with the sounds of motorbikes, cell phones, TVs, and computer games, Çudamani's music and dance draws on the sounds of nature and the culture of ancient Bali. The group performs traditional songs and dance and also composes new work that reflects modern Bali. Many people consider Çudamani one of the greatest gamelan ensembles performing today.

Dance

Along with music, dance is considered necessary for a successful religious ceremony. While dancers study for many years before performing, traditional dances within a temple may also include untrained dancers who are moved to join in the ancient steps. Balinese dance may depict stories, abstract movement, or movements drawn from the natural world of trees and animals.

Musical Instruments

A "gamelan" is a traditional musical ensemble from Indonesia that typically includes metallophones, xylophones, drums, and gongs. A gamelan usually refers to a distinct set of instruments, and instruments from different gamelan sets cannot be mixed. In part, this is because there is no standard tuning for a gamelan—each gamelan set has its own tuning, so each village in Bali has its own unique gamelan.

References

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Globe with highlight of Indonesia and map with highlight of Bali (inset)



Çudamani dancer



Çudamani musicians



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Photo by Judy Mitoma.

Gangsa

Many of the instruments in Çudamani’s gamelan are called gangsa. These have many metal bars that are struck with a mallet. This type of instrument, called a metallophone, is similar to the Western vibraphone.

Gamelan musicians play their gangsa in pairs: one person plays an on-beat pattern, while his partner plays an off-beat pattern. These two parts fit together to make a whole that is much faster than one person could manage alone.



Photo by Judy Mitoma.

Kendang

Drums called kendang are important lead instruments in Çudamani’s gamelan ensemble. Kendang guide how fast the ensemble plays as well as how loud and strong the group plays. The drummers use a special technique of interlocking rhythms, and the drums are closely connected to the movement of the dancers.



Photo by Judy Mitoma.

Gong

One type of gong is hung from ropes vertically. It can come in many different sizes and typically marks the beat pattern of a song. The gongs in a full gamelan set come in pairs—one that is considered male (called “lanang”) and another that is considered female (called “wadon”).



Photo by Judy Mitoma.

Reong

The reong is a type of gong that is suspended by ropes horizontally within a frame. Reong can be many different sizes and play both melodic and rhythmic parts of a song.



Suling

The suling is a bamboo flute that comes in a variety of sizes, from very small to very large. Musicians blow into the end of the suling to create a sound and cover finger holes in the flute to change the pitch. The player also creates a sustained, constant tone without interruption by using circular breathing—this is accomplished by breathing in through the nose while simultaneously pushing air out through the mouth using air stored in the cheeks.