CELEBRATING SALUANG: ADVANCING THE ARTS THROUGH THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES

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Abstrak

Dalam tulisan ini, saya menyarankan metode etnomusikologi baru untuk memajukan vitalitas seni: Humaniora Digital. *Song in the Sumtran Highlands*, proyek digital yang sedang saya bangun, mengacu pada lebih dari dua puluh tahun penelitian etnografi untuk merayakan genre vokal Minangkabau yang dikenal sebagai saluang untuk seruling yang mengiringi para vokalis. Menggunakan platform Scalar, situs interaktif dan ramah pengguna dirancang untuk kaya akan multimedia (gambar, audio, dan video), multimodal (berbagai cara untuk mengalami dan menavigasi materi), kolaboratif dan responsif terhadap kepentingan komunitas saluang. Itu dilakukan dengan mendokumentasikan repertoar — jumlah lagu dalam ratusan — dan memetakan manifestasi sonik tempat melalui penandaan judul lagu, landmark yang dirujuk dalam teks lagu, artis, dan pertunjukan dengan metadata geospasial. Saya berpendapat bahwa proyek ini membantu menata kembali cara para etnomusikolog berbagi penelitian dengan bergerak melampaui teks dan lebih dekat ke epistemologi sonik, visual, dan spasial lokal serta dunia pertunjukan sensoris. Kunci desain proyek ini adalah mewakili pengetahuan etnomusikologis dalam format yang lebih dapat diakses oleh publik.

Kata kunci : saluang, Minangkabau, etnomusikologi, etnografi, Humaniora Digital

Abstract

In this paper, I suggest a new ethnomusicological method for advancing the vitality of the arts: Digital Humanities. *Song in the Sumatran Highlands*, the digital project that I am in the process of building, draws on more than twenty years of ethnographic research to celebrate the Minangkabau vocal genre known as *saluang* for the flute that accompanies the vocalists. Using the platform Scalar, the interactive, user-friendly site is designed to be rich in multimedia (images, audios, and video), multimodal (multiple ways of experiencing and navigating the material), collaborative and responsive to interests of the saluang community. It does so by documenting the repertoire—the songs number in the hundreds—and mapping the sonic manifestations of place through tagging song titles, landmarks referenced in song texts, performers, and performances with geospatial metadata. I argue that this project helps reimagine the ways ethnomusicologists share research by moving beyond texts and closer to local sonic, visual, and spatial epistemologies and the sensorial worlds of performance. Key to the design of the project is representing ethnomusicological knowledge in formats more accessible to the public.

Keywords : saluang, Minangkabau, ethnomusicology, ethnography, Digital Humanities

INTRODUCTION

I am an ethnomusicologist by training and trade. I have done ethnographic research in Indonesia since 1994, when I was an undergraduate student. Although ethnomusicologists come back from the field laden not just with notes and interviews but also with images, audio recordings and videos of the performative practices we study, for years, the dominant scholarly output in ethnomusicology has been written texts, articles and books, with English-language versions privileged. Monographs, including my own [6], sometimes include accompanying audio and audiovisual media, but at best these materials are supplementary to the text. We represent and interpret these performative, sensorial worlds through words. This paper shares a different model of doing and especially disseminating ethnographic research, one that helps with the vitality of the arts in a post-pandemic world. For me, these shifts in doing and disseminating are tightly intertwined, responsive to shifts in the ethics of research. In doing research, I seek more collaborative and mutually-beneficial arrangements, informed by my own recent training in community-engaged learning and research, along with collaborative ethnography and what some call decolonizing methodologies. Part and parcel with those methodological approaches of doing research is reconsidering the ways we disseminate scholarly products, which for me has been strongly informed by the growing field called Digital Humanities [1]. My paper steps you through the ways I see these two strains of doing and disseminating taking shape in my digital project, *Songs in the Sumatran Highlands*, about the Minang genre of saluang.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Introduction to Saluang

In the highlands of West Sumatra, the province populated by the Minangkabau people, the pre-eminent vocal genre is named saluang for the flute that accompanies vocalists. Performances happen late at night, attracting upwards of 100 people, including aficionados who travel considerable distances to hear their favorite singers. A performance typically involves 2-3 padendang (vocalists), who take turns singing; a tukang saluang (flute player) who plays almost continuously throughout the night; and sometimes a janang (master of ceremonies) who brokers audience requests. I have been interested in this genre since 1998 when I was a Darmasiswa student at the institution now called ISI Padang Panjang.

The genre has shifted and adapted over the years, from exclusively male padendang to almost predominately female vocalists today, allowing greater interaction between vocalists and their mostly male audience members. The repertoire has also shifted, incorporating material from other Minangkabau genres, including dangdut Minang and regionalized traditions. Saluang retains affective capacity for its reference to place and flexible texts responsive to performance contexts.

Fig. 1. **Saluang Performance, Suayan, July 31, 2015. Performers (L-R): Nor Cingkariang (vocalist), Te E (vocalist), Bujang Rao-Rao (saluang)**.

Performers have also experimented with adopting additional instrumentation, including keyboard. In other words, it retains vitality in part because of its ability to adapt to the times, though some of these adaptations draw criticism from different corners of the saluang scene, including older performers and more traditionalist connoisseurs.

I became fascinated with the gendered dimensions of the practice when saluang was one of the two Minang genres on which I focused my doctoral dissertation research in 2003-4. The other genre was *talempong* (a gong tradition), which became the subject of my first book published in 2015 [6]. When I finished that project, I turned my attention back to saluang, thinking I would publish a book. I returned to West Sumatra for further research in the summers of 2015 and 2016. By the end of August 2016, I had documented more than 40 hours of recordings with over 300 individual instances of songs. I had conducted interviews with singers, flute players, and devotees, including some of the most famed singers of the last 20 years some of whom have since passed. I have worked on transcriptions of texts from 30 different songs, totaling 80 or so pantun (the verse format used in saluang). I drafted a table of contents and had more than enough data to sit down and write a book. I had also been thinking about a parallel website that tracked the songs with reference to place.

But then the way I thought about and taught ethnomusicology changed, partially in response to my students but also in response to shifting dynamics in and ethics of ethnographic research and movement towards decolonial futures. I was inspired by new models of disseminating research that aimed to reach broader audiences than a single-authored monograph in English could ever hope to do. In 2015, I diligently took copies of my book back to communities that gave me so much, but some of my collaborators could not read at all, and certainly not the language in which it was written. For whom was this knowledge constructed? Where was the reciprocity for the community who had shared so much with me? Already in the Summer of 2016, I started asking performers and other people invested in saluang what they would like to see come out of my research. One of the answers was a database of songs so that the repertoire was not lost, so that it was available to a younger generation. My vision for a Digital Humanities project was starting to take shape.

2. Introduction to the Digital Humanities

Inspired by work in sound studies, digital humanities, digital ethnography, and digital visual anthropology, my project, *Song in the Sumatran Highlands*, aims to break with the dominant mold of disseminating research. By adopting a digital platform, my project moves towards representing "content in a medium that is most proximate to the source of knowledge" [7, c.f. 3-4, 14]. Using the capacity of digital, web-based platforms to radically reimagine and diversify the ways we share our research experiences and products, I align myself with scholars interested in interrogating "the medium of writing as a privileged mode of expression of academic ethnographic practices" [7]. Not only can multimedia become integral to the project, but a digital platform offers greater flexibility in modeling local epistemologies of the sonic, visual, and spatial worlds that we investigate. Most importantly, Digital Humanities does not just re-orient how we represent our research but with *whom* knowledge is shared. In this way, Digital Humanities shifts away from largely academic audiences and jargon to make knowledge more accessible to a broader, public audience.

3. The Digital Platform of Scalar

When I started on this project, I had a number of choices of digital platforms, including building my own in consultation with web technologists. In the end, I decided upon using a pre-existing platform that suited many of my needs. I am using a Scalar, a "free, open source authoring and publishing platform" (https://scalar.me/anvc/scalar/ Last accessed October 12, 2020) which was developed by The Alliance for Networking Visual Culture. I chose this platform for the following reasons:

1) It is an interactive, user-friendly platform accessible on computer, phone, and tablet.

2) It is designed to be rich in multimedia. I will incorporate photographs, videos, audio recordings, and maps.

3) It is multimodal, which means presenting multiple modes through which material is experienced, such as through multimedia and text.

4) It can be collaborative: multiple people can contribute content and users may comment on that content.

5) It offers a flexible format, allowing myriad pathways of navigating the content.

6) It allows heavy use of hyperlinks and annotations of texts, connecting different content throughout the site.

7) And, most importantly, I can provide access in multiple languages so there will be an Indonesian language version.

4. Structure of *Song in the Sumatran Highlands*

This site is a work in progress, but I will share some of the design features and work to date. The material is organized in four primary content areas, which map ways of experiencing saluang: (1) Places, (2) Songs, (3) Performances, and (4) People. I will explain each below, sharing examples where I can.
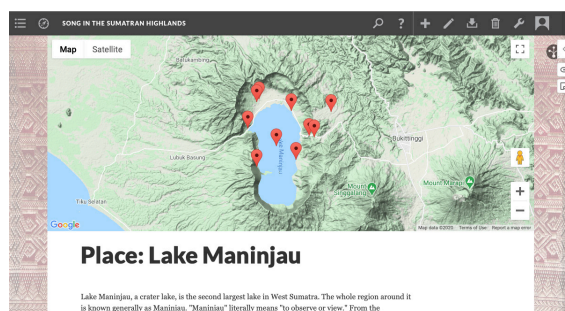

Fig. 2. **Example of a "Place" Page in** *Song in the Sumatran Highlands.*

4.1 Places

Place is an important category of experience for saluang: many songs are linked with specific places, people come from places, and performances happen in places. These place affiliations structure the exper`ience of saluang. For example, some performers, such as Gadih Suayan or Nor Cingkariang are named for their kampung (home villages): Suayan and Cingkariang respectively. Audience members at a performance request a specific song because it is from their kampung. When a performance happens in a specific place with affiliated repertoire those songs are more likely to be requested and performed. The website maps these experiences, building on the work of scholars interested in the sonic manifestations of place [3, 5, 9, 15]. Scalar enables me to literally map the connections between songs, people, and places by tagging song titles, landmarks referenced in song texts, performers, and performances with geospatial metadata (latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates) that link to specific locations on a series of embedded digital maps. Each place has its own page and map, listing all the tagged material, such as songs or people connected with it. Where possible these places are illustrated with photographs so that users get a better sense of place.

4.2 Songs

Songs (or dendang), identified by title and tune, not lyrics, are another important category of

experience in saluang. They are the basic musical unit around which performances are structured, with about 30-40 songs performed in a given night. Performer estimates of the repertoire number in the hundreds, with some vocalists, such as Te E, keeping a list. Our website tracks all song titles encountered in the process of research, currently numbering around 470 songs. At a performance, attendees may request any song part of the extant repertoire.

On the website, these songs are organized into lists following several local categories, such as place affiliations from the broadest levels of darek (heartland) vs. rantau (outlying regions) to luak/kabupaten and down to the level of nagari (village federation) and neighborhoods within nigari. Another important category is type of songs, with 3 broad types: ratok (sad songs), satangah tiang (in between), and gembira (happy). Each song has its own page, which provides information about alternative titles, the translation of the title, whether there is a known composer (a practice only emergent in the last 50 years), any place affiliations, song type, whether it was adapted from another local Minang genre, and other pertinent information. More importantly, because the lyrics can change from one performance to the next, the website will provide links to different iterations of the same song, allowing comparison of textual and structural differences between versions of the same song. Audio and/or audiovisual material will be included. For select songs, there will also be translations of the metaphorical Minangkabau song texts into Indonesian and English. This is a place where users can help generate content. Finally, the platform allows annotation of text, enabling me to provide contextual information about translations and, especially, to provide multiple interpretations of the same text, where relevant.
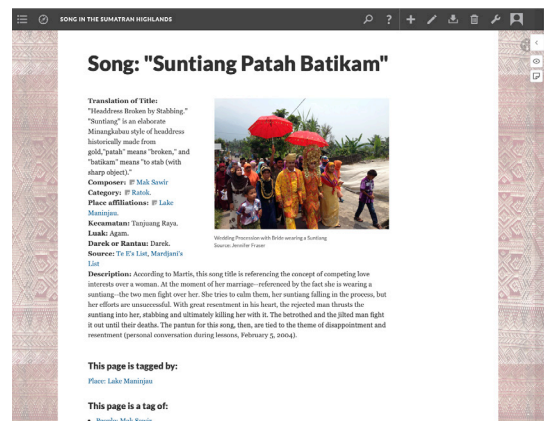

Fig. 3. **Example of a "Song" Page in** *Song in the Sumatran Highlands*.

By documenting the repertoire, the website is responsive to an articulated community need: an inventory of songs in the repertoire. My collaborators in Sumatra—performers and devotees alike—have referenced the precarious nature of the genre with changing aesthetic preferences and social habits.

4.3 People

Songs and their attachment to places don't happen without human actors. The genre and its meanings are activated by people: both those who perform and those who listen to them. The section about people spells out the different kinds of roles in saluang, who performs and who listens, along with gendered changes over the last 50 years. It also tracks all the performers encountered in the process of research, including those known from the past. Each performer will have their own page, with basic information, where accessible, about them, including stage name, other names, sex, date of birth and/or death, kampung, and roles in saluang. An individual's page will link to performances I've witnessed or songs they've composed and include photographs, ethnographic notes of our interactions, and excerpts of interviews, so that users can hear the performers speak

for themselves rather than rely exclusively on my translations and interpretations of their words. It is one way to bring the users closer to that "proximate source of knowledge." Finally, the website also provides a place to celebrate legendary singers of the past, such as Syamsimar, Ajis St. Sati, and Sawir St. Mudo. This aspect provides another important way of documenting the richness of the saluang genre.

4.4 Performances

The final category is performance, where places, songs, and people come together. Each performance is a unique event, structured by the location, the occasion (for example, a wedding, circumcision or community event), particular performers, and audience members in attendance. The program is never determined in advance, but unfolds over the course of an evening, shaped by the locale and the requests of the audience. Moreover, the texts for a song change from one performance to the next, vocalists drawing on stock verses or creating them anew in response to the performance context and interactions with the audience members. This section of the website, then, maps out the richness of the saluang scene. Each performance will have its own pathway, with a page about basic details (when, where, who, why) illustrated with related photographs, a page tracking the individual songs performed, and pages of ethnographic notes about the event with my interpretation and analysis. Tracking the repertoire at individual performances helps reveal the contours of performance practice and illustrate the relative frequency and duration of individual songs: have there been changes over time? What songs were more popular or favored when? What time of night do certain songs get performed? Song length is flexible, vocalists adapting to the context and

request, so that on one occasion a song might have just two pantun while another it might have five. Providing individual renditions of particular songs reveals how the songs are shaped in response to the performance context.

4.5 Bringing it all together

Saluang is a rich and complex musical genre with many variables structuring the performance practice. This multimedia, multimodal website allows a user to get closer to the sensorial experience of saluang than a book does. The platform allows the creator to annotate media with interpretive notes so that users can more fully understand what they are hearing and seeing. For example, I can easily point out which performers are in images. For audiovisual media, I can insert time stamps that helps the user navigate the song structure and follow the lyrics. The structure of the website, moreover, offers flexible pathways where users can navigate their own explorations. A user might, for example, move through the website by tracking a particular person, a particular performance, song or place.

By adopting a digital platform, my project moves towards decolonial methodologies aiming to counter colonialist representational strategies. Digital platforms, which allow for non-linear structures and polyvocality, offer the scope for decentralizing authority or what Ramella calls the "de-hierarchization" of knowledge [13]. While my scholarly voice is imprinted on the project through my selection and curation of the media and textual materials, insights into my ethnographic process and experiences, and textual elements that aim to explain and interpret the rich connections, the structure of the site is designed to decenter my authorial voice. In this digital project, text becomes *one* of the modes for engagement,

but not the dominant one. Unlike a book that is structured linearly from beginning to end, users will engage individualized pathways to navigate the site, choosing how they approach, engage and understand the material.

CONCLUSION

My project presents and celebrates saluang; an important genre to the Minang community, but little known beyond it. It does so in a creative, cutting-edge format. To date, few Digital Humanities projects have been released by ethnomusicologists. W.F. Umi Hsu has contributed important methodological pieces and one of the first articulations of using geospatial mapping to reveal the distribution of digital musical lives [7-8]. *Sekuru's Stories* [10] is a "born-digital monograph" by Jennifer Kyker. My vision departs from their groundbreaking work and combines it with the work of visual anthropologists who offer interactive media sites [2, 11, 12].

Song in the Sumatran Highlands aims to diversify the way we represent, produce, and share knowledge in ethnomusicology. When it is finished, I hope that my website offers several things:

1) An accessible, user-friendly site that it useful to the saluang community and academics alike.

2) A cutting-edge approach to ethnographic modes of representation and dissemination useful to other researchers and ethnographers.

3) An approach that is more collaborative and responsive to the ethics of research in an era with increasing calls for decolonial approaches where researchers don't just take knowledge, but find productive ways to share with the communities with whom they work. In other words, to do research *with* a community, not just *on* or *in* a community. My greatest hope is that the product will be used by the local arts organization I collaborate with to reinvigorate this art amongst young people.

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