

# Competition in the Sundanese Performing Arts of West Java, Indonesia<sup>1</sup>

*By Sean Williams*

## **Introduction**

The area of West Java, Indonesia is home to a rich variety of Sundanese performing arts. The Sundanese number approximately 35 million, and are the second most numerous group in Indonesia after the Javanese.<sup>2</sup> In the latter half of the twentieth century many of the Sundanese performing arts have shifted from being widely dispersed through the rural areas to being concentrated in the regional capital city of Bandung. Several factors have contributed to this shift toward Bandung, including the achievement of Indonesian independence from the Dutch in 1945, increased urbanization, the establishment of performing arts academies, and media influences.<sup>3</sup> Many of the musicians and dancers still performing today have taken part in the dramatic changes that have occurred in establishing Bandung as a cultural center, and have altered their lives—and, in some cases, their ideals, through their acceptance of changing standards of performance—to reserve a place for Sundanese arts and artists in the 21st century. This article examines the competitions, sheds light on the relatively new trend of establishing standards through regional competitions, and highlights potential developments in the local performing arts if the trend of competitions continues.

Prior to Indonesian Independence the Sundanese performing arts were either closely tied to village traditions of agriculture or were supported by (and performed for) the members of the hereditary aristocracy. It is the traditions most valued by the former aristocracy (including dance, instrumental music, singing, and recitation), as well as those that developed after Independence (popular Sundanese music as well as staged and choreographed social dance), that form the backbone of modern competitions in the performing arts. With the breakdown of the patronage system following Independence, many musicians had to move to Bandung to find work. During the post-Independence era many musicians had to temporarily abandon their vocation, seeking livelihoods in any field that provided an income. By the early 1960s the Indonesian economy was sufficiently restructured so that musicians once more thrived under a type of reorganized urban patronage, including performing for department store openings, television shows, hotel guests, and weddings with several thousand people in attendance.

Since the 1960s, competitions have increasingly become a major avenue for the promotion and marketing of Sundanese culture, as well as for building support for the arts among young people. Eagerly supported by many urban Sundanese culture enthusiasts, competitions sometimes determine the extent to which a performer may further his or her career. In a typical competition, the results include relative fame (and the possibility of a recording contract or other suitable advantage) for the winners, disgrace for the losers, and enough fuel for years of local gossip. Critics argue that in a climate driven more strongly by stage performance and media exposure than by the slow, steady (and relatively private) advancement of one's art, competitions lead to the continuing development of the "star system" (see Weintraub 1997:238), standardization of the repertoire, and the discouragement of diversity among performers, while a small pool of jurors decides on stylistic appropriateness.

Young Sundanese musicians and dancers are accustomed to competing within the performing arts. Competitions of various kinds (e.g., reciting the Qur'an, singing pop songs, dancing basic steps, or identifying aspects of geography) may begin as young as age five, and the results are printed in newspapers with photographs of at least the female winner.<sup>4</sup> Representatives from various schools compete against one another, with the competitions beginning in a single grade of a particular school, then progressing to the district, city, and sometimes the national level. Winners, even at a young age, receive small prizes, such as school supplies, a cash bonus, a gift certificate, or other incentives. Parents tend to enter wholeheartedly into these events, encouraging their children and helping them to study or practice at home. The young child who wins a competition is honored at home and in the neighborhood, the newspaper photograph is clipped and mailed to relatives or framed on a wall of the home, and a standard of performance is set for others to meet or surpass. That child's reputation for being intelligent, devout, or talented then follows the child through most of his or her school career.

### **Sponsoring a Competition**

The competitive spirit is fostered throughout Sundanese society via government and corporate sponsorship. At the competitions, the names of the sponsors are posted prominently behind the contestants, and photographs of the winners often include the names of the sponsors in the background. Competitions may be sponsored by various branches or local offices of the government, whose members are given the responsibility for locating sites, selecting a jury, establishing prizes, handling publicity, and managing the event from start to finish. In a series of interviews conducted in 1989 and 1996, government officials who discussed the sponsor-

ship of competitions were nearly unanimous in their view that sponsoring a competition led to the development of regional and national pride. As one official put it, "If we sponsor a competition, the participants and the audience members become more aware of the arts, better educated, and better citizens of Indonesia." The argument was that the recognition of local talent was good for celebrating diversity—particularly in emphasizing the large number of Sundanese music and dance genres—and that since *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) is the national motto, celebrating diversity through regional and national competitions is good for the country.

Officials use wayang [rod puppet theater] contests as opportunities for recruiting performers who will subsequently lead the masses in their participation in national development. The arts are constructed and valued by the state as a cultural medium for carrying and disseminating messages of development. (Weintraub 1997:189)

Performing artists in Indonesia often lack the steady income that civil service workers enjoy; their income is sporadic and depends entirely on their relationship to the leaders of performance groups. As a result of the difficulty of making a decent living in the arts, many performers seek steady employment in government offices. The government is the largest employer of civilians in Indonesia. The presence of a single performer in a position of power (for example, as the head of an office) leads to other performers gravitating toward that person. Some government offices have a majority of performers among the workers. (The Bandung tax division, for example, is renowned for its performers.) In a competitive event with government sponsorship, the entire office may take the day off to attend (and perform in) the event. Offices may send their best performers to compete against other offices, and everyone turns out to support the candidates. Taking the day off is relatively easy for a performer, because the prestige of winning a competition then reflects well on the performer's office.

Corporate sponsorship is very important in terms of providing large prizes and gifts for the winners. Depending on the nature of the competition, certain corporations tend to sponsor particular events. For example, the cigarette company Remaja (Teenager) is known for sponsoring competitions among up-and-coming rock bands. Department stores also sponsor competitions. Occasionally, representatives from companies (particularly cigarette companies) are on hand to distribute free products, especially at events aimed at young people. Because many competitions require an invitation to be a member of the audience, the mayhem that

might occur at the chance for free products is minimized; showing one's invitation at the entrance may result in receiving a small packet of "sampler" products from the sponsor. Publicity generated by the large number of audience members and hangers-on at these events outweighs any minor financial outlay on the part of the corporate sponsor (see also Coplan 1985:77).

The most prestigious competitions are sponsored by nongovernmental organizations such as the Daya Mahasiswa Sunda (DAMAS), the organization of Sundanese students. In fact, the membership of DAMAS is overwhelmingly constituted by older artists and patrons who are no longer students, but who are deeply committed to the preservation and continuation of the Sundanese performing arts. The members of DAMAS include recognized leaders in the arts, and being a prominent person within the organization means being an important person in the Sundanese performing arts; other organizations convey similar status to their members.<sup>5</sup> Thus, having "DAMAS 1991" printed on one's cassette cover indicates that one has the blessing and sanction of the foremost arts organization in West Java.

### Preparation for a Competition

The dates for a particular competition are announced in the newspapers and on the radio months in advance. Following the initial announcement, high-ranking members of the arts community begin to wield their influence to change the dates, and the dates may end up being shifted half a dozen times (with an official announcement and corresponding rumors to the contrary) before they are finally established. Reasons for the shifting of dates have to do with local holidays, conflicting events (such as the wedding of the son or daughter of a local official), or a major national event (for example, the 1996 death of Ibu Tien Suharto, the former president's wife, which entailed a long period of official mourning and, therefore, a change in the scheduled dates of the DAMAS *tembang Sunda* (classical vocal music) competition for that year). Almost immediately after the announcement of dates, the established performers (in particular, previous winners of competitions sponsored by that event's sponsor) are swamped with eager, potential students of all capabilities.

In the pre-competition era (prior to the 1950s), the accepted approach to studying with a master artist involved the student becoming a member of the artist's entourage. A prospective student might work as a servant, bringing tea, running errands, being helpful in a variety of small ways, and listening quietly for long periods of time before actually learning to dance, sing, or play an instrument. In other words, the teacher (*guru*) would become familiar with the student, speak easily to him or her as

from a superior to an inferior, and learn to trust the student's intentions. After this time, the guru might try the student out on a few easy songs or steps, or request a more advanced student to take on the beginner for free in a trial run. The more advanced student, because of the debt he owes his teacher, would then take the beginner under his wing and bring him up to an appropriate level.

During the months preceding a competition in the late 1990s, however, many such conventions may be abandoned. People who plan to participate in a competition find out when lessons or practices (*latihan*) will occur, and begin showing up. Mothers bring their daughters, boyfriends escort their girlfriends, and young men come alone or with friends to the homes of respected performers. In such preparation sessions—for a variety of competitions, including those in dance, vocal and instrumental music, and martial arts—the teacher usually views such outsiders with courteous distance, and may correct only the most obvious errors.

In 1996 I observed a man at a rehearsal for a DAMAS competition of *tembang Sunda*. He had come to the rehearsal alone, and had no social connections to anyone there. He received correction only on the pitches of the songs, and was offered no sense of phrasing, interpretation, dynamics, or ornamentation. On the other hand, another student who had approached the teacher in the more traditional manner described above was received warmly, and offered more intensively focused guidance than he could assimilate.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in preparation for a martial arts competition, the teacher repeatedly threw the new (competition-oriented) students to the floor, while speaking in a detailed way to his regular students. Nonetheless, in the hope of winning a competition, prospective students flock to nearly anyone who holds regular practice sessions.

In addition to the process of finding and working with a guru and practicing constantly, contestants occasionally look for success through spiritual and/or medicinal means. Some contestants fast for a single day of each week leading up to the competition (usually on the day of the week that coincides with their birth), or spend time in prayer or meditation (*betapa*). Others consult with sellers of herbal medicine (*jamu*) to find ways to enhance the voice, tone the body, strengthen the muscles, or improve coordination. David Coplan mentions a local equivalent to the latter practice in the context of *sefela* (migrant song) competition in South Africa (Coplan 1994:231).

### **Anatomy of a Competition**

Sundanese competitions are always focused on a particular genre, such as popular song, gamelan, a type of dance, or recitation. Competitions may be held in the daytime or at night, depending on the sponsor.

Government- and school-sponsored events are usually held during the day, beginning in the early morning, because the candidates are already present at work or at school, and the time is made available. Some corporate- or organization-sponsored events may also be held in the daytime, but many are held on several successive evenings. Another option is to hold the initial rounds during the daytime, followed by the final in the evening. In general, the first rounds do not necessarily generate heavy attendance (except by friends and family of the competitors), but the final is a gala event of great social and political significance. Sections of a competition are usually divided by gender, because most Sundanese performing arts repertoires are gender-specific. For example, certain vocal styles (such as the "Rajah" invocation in *tembang Sunda*) are only appropriate for men to sing, while others may only be sung by women (such as the fixed-meter *panambih* songs of the same genre). Classical and social dances may also divide along gender lines; however, coeducational training in schools has tended to ease (or perhaps temporarily suspend) certain gender boundaries in the performing arts (Williams 1998).

Several weeks prior to the competition the sponsors send out invitations to influential people, detailing the place, date, and time of the event. Because the initial round may be held in a separate location from the final, two separate invitations may be issued. The invitation functions as an entry pass, and considerable networking immediately occurs to obtain extra invitations for friends and family, as well as for people with business or political connections. By this time, the aspiring contestants (*calon*) have either ceased to study (and will not enter the competition), or have intensified the focus of their practices, coming almost daily to their teachers' homes. Contestants preregister with the sponsoring organization.

Women competitors spend considerable time deciding on clothing, hair styles, jewelry, and makeup. Men wear formal performance clothing, but do not otherwise pay extra attention to their appearance (nor are they expected to). Women borrow especially dazzling outfits from relatives, or even rent them from wealthier people. Renting a special outfit (with detailed beadwork, for example) can cost more than \$150. However, a costume is likely to be rented only if the contestant expects to reach the finals, when seeing other people and being seen by others are extremely important.

On the morning of the competition audience members arrive and register their names and addresses in a guest book. Each contestant receives a large numbered badge, which is pinned to the costume. If the event is a dance competition, contestants use recorded music. The use of recorded music tends to minimize problems in interpretation, since Sundanese dance drumming often posits a particular stylistic relationship and under-

standing between the drummer and the dancer. Dance contests vary: In classical dance the repertoire is well-known and relatively limited, so the choices are more limited. In contrast to performers of classical dance, choreographed social dance (*jaipongan*) contestants choose from a much larger variety of pieces. If the contestant makes it through the first round, he or she may then proceed to the final.

Song contestants are usually given a choice of pieces (*lagu pilihan*), such as one song out of four options, and are also assigned one required piece (*lagu wajib*). Contestants use live ensembles paid for by the sponsor. In a pop Sunda contest in 1991, the band included a traditional Sundanese set of three barrel-shaped drums (*kendang*), an electric guitar, an electric bass, a Yamaha DX-7 synthesizer keyboard, and a trap set. All day long for each of two consecutive days the musicians were required to play from a very small selection of pop songs for various contestants. By the end, the audience members had memorized all of the words to all the songs and were singing so loudly that the master of ceremonies had to ask them to lower their voices for the sake of the contestants.

Audience participation at most competitions tends to be quite lively. Friends and family applaud loudly for their favorites, and many audience members converse throughout the entire event. Michael Tenzer describes Balinese gamelan competitions in a way that may offer a slightly more colorful illustration of the setting.

The atmosphere at these events [Balinese gamelan competitions] is much more reminiscent of a sporting event than a concert. . . . The audiences are thoroughly responsive to everything taking place in the music or dance, reacting instantaneously with approving cheers at a particularly well executed passage, or jeering with abandon at the slightest mistake. (Tenzer 1991:110)

Audiences in Sundanese competitions begin to pay close attention when major contenders appear onstage, or when a contestant begins making mistakes. In the former case, the audience listens or observes very closely and quietly, watching for elements of fine skill or for particularly good segments. In the latter, the audience tends to look for mistakes that can be discussed in detail later, either for general amusement or to help future candidates understand the pitfalls of a particular song. Indeed, in 1987 a group of *tembang Sunda* musicians were still discussing—with great hilarity and accuracy of detail—the single error of an unfortunate vocal contestant who briefly slipped into the melody of a different but very similar song in the DAMAS competition of 1976. This same error was brought up at least four times during my research in 1996, twenty years after the original event. If an audience favorite (especially the projected

winner) happens to make a mistake, the sympathy in the room is palpable: people make a sucking sound through their teeth, hum and nod in pity, and look at each other in distress.

Many competitions include a category for "contestant most favored by the audience" (*juara favorit*). No criteria are offered; instead, a box may be passed among the audience members, who deposit slips of paper marked with the number of a personal favorite. On two occasions (in 1987 and 1989) I witnessed the friends and family members of several contestants stuffing fistfuls of numbered slips into the proffered box. Each group had brought pens of various colors and styles in an attempt to avoid the appearance of cheating.

As the jury begins its deliberation, amateurs and previous contest winners are brought in to entertain the audience. Participation (*karul*) by nonprofessionals or noncontestants at any event is usually welcomed, and these performers are received with generosity, wild laughter, and applause by the audience. At a government competition, for example, a division head might agree to sing one song, to the wild applause of his underlings. At a school competition, a teacher or parent might perform. At an organization-sponsored competition, a previous winner is expected to perform, and is usually asked politely in advance. Foreigners are sometimes brought onstage, usually with memorable results. Distraction is the aim of this kind of programming, because competitions are fraught with tension. The music or dance teachers of contestants always attend these competitions, and their presence (if they are not already on the jury) adds to the tension and the excitement because of their own histories of professional competition with each other.

Once the winners of the initial selection are announced, the slate is generally wiped clean and all of the finalists have a fair chance at winning the final. Many, if not all, of the original contestants try to at least attend the finals, to participate in the scene as well as to receive pointers for their future work. By listening to audience commentary and observing which contestants' performances are favored by the jury, a future competitor may enhance his or her grasp of currently important criteria for success. Contestants and audience members dress up in their best clothes to attend the final, and many people try to arrive early to socialize and to be seen and photographed.<sup>7</sup> During the meeting of the jury for the finals, guest performers are again brought onstage, but they are generally of good quality and can be trusted to entertain the audience at a professional level. Audience members at the finals tend to have stronger ties to that particular art form than those who come to the lower-level competitions; for example, they may have studied the art form themselves. The announcement of the winners is greeted by approving applause if the re-



sults are obvious, and by gasps, scattered applause, and loud talking if the choice is a surprise. Runners-up are announced first, followed by winners (*juara*) #3, #2, and #1. The winners go home and celebrate, and the losers are usually publicly devastated and morose. A significant amount of gossip can be generated by losers and their friends who mistrust the jury.

### Jury Selection and Criteria

In general, juries for Sundanese competitions comprise panels of widely acknowledged experts in the field, and often include at least one or more previous winners of the same competition. Conflicts of interest abound, however, because the best performers tend to have some of the very best students, each of whom is interested in winning a competition and furthering his or her own career. In addition, the parents and patrons of contestants seek out influential members of the juries and offer favors of various kinds, including money, political influence, and increased social standing if their child is selected.<sup>8</sup> Erlmann points out a similar situation in South African choral *isicathamiya* competitions: “[T]here are many ways in which choirs seek to increase their prestige and share of the cake, one of the most prevalent methods being the use of magic and the bribing of judges” (Erlmann 1996:273). Some musicians simply shrug after competitions, saying, for example, that there was really no point in having the competition because the daughter of an officer was competing, and that the jury therefore had no choice but to award the child first prize.

In the most ideal situation (and the one that most jury members strive for), the jury remains neutral. “Our talent is a gift from God,” mentioned one male juror. “It is our duty and our honor to bring the next generation forward through fair judging.” Euis Komariah, a respected vocalist and frequent juror, openly discussed the possibility of recusing herself from the jury of a particular competition, because her top student was competing. She recognized the possibility of conflict of interest and wanted to offer her student the fairest chance she could. (The student later won the competition twice in a row.)

Contestants are judged by a mutually agreed-upon set of criteria (determined by the jury), which may include accuracy of pitch, skill in vocal or instrumental performance, grace as a dancer, physical appearance or comportment, and the extent to which the contestant has internalized the meaning (*pangjiwaan*) of the piece being performed. For example, at a *jaipongan* competition in 1989, dancers were judged, first and foremost, on being light on their feet. Even though the dance form requires equal dexterity of arms and legs, performers for that competition needed to be *lincah*, described as “prancing like a deer.” The balance between technical and aesthetic criteria is negotiated by the jury prior to each competition.

In tembang Sunda competitions, the repertoire is so firmly established and the range of variation so limited that the jury knows every ornament of every song well, which is in marked contrast to some other competitive traditions, in which presenting something new is absolutely crucial (cf. Turino 1993:67). Variation from established norms is so risky that most tembang contestants will listen closely to one of the famous singers and emulate that singer's style as well as they can. The students of jury members have virtually no choice but to follow the precise direction offered by their teachers. In some cases, a cassette recording of the accepted version of performance is created by an acknowledged master of the genre and made available to contestants in the months prior to the competition (as in the 1996 and 1999 recordings for the DAMAS tembang Sunda competition), so that all contestants have the chance to learn the standardized version.

### **Becoming a Star**

In addition to receiving a very large trophy (up to one meter in height), an adult contestant may receive a significant cash prize (such as one million rupiah awarded to the winning musical ensemble<sup>9</sup> of a 1991 contest, worth about \$430 at the time). Other awards might include a motorcycle, a computer, a "lifetime supply" (or at least a year's worth) of a particular food, or bags of rice. Intangibles, which are what most contestants really hope for, include being invited to record at a prestigious recording studio, being invited to become part of one of the more prestigious performing arts groups (*lingkung seni*) if they do not already belong to one, being asked to join an international tour, or being asked to teach in one of the local colleges, schools, or informal teaching settings. Becoming even a local celebrity in one's school or office is a benefit because of the respect and admiration that it engenders.

Winning a competition may also lead to long-term benefits that winners may not even anticipate, such as reaching the upper echelons of society, or being invited to perform at the most important political and social events (such as receptions for foreign heads of state). The most desired result, however, is the launching of one's career as a musician or dancer, with all the risk (particularly financial instability) that being a performer may entail. Ironically, the social mobility that might occur with the winning of a competition seems to be more readily available to a woman than to a man, because a female winner is in a better position to marry upward once she has won a competition.

On certain cassette covers (in small letters on the lower right side) appear an acronym and a date (e.g., DAMAS 1988). This acronym and date signify that the main performer was the top winner (*juara*) of a competition

in a certain year, and is therefore certifiably good enough to merit the purchase of the cassette. No matter how many years it may have been since the competition, one victory can help to set up a performer for life, in terms of establishing a reputation, winning recording contracts, getting good gigs, and earning the respect of fellow musicians.

The winners [of *wayang golek purwa* competitions] receive recognition among their peers as well as promotion through reports in the popular press. In addition, the top three *dalang* [puppeteers] are invited to broadcast a *wayang golek purwa* performance on the national radio station network. In this sense, the contest acts as a kind of official sanctioning of certain kinds of performance over others. (Weintraub 1997:193)

Most first-place winners do not enter a repeating competition more than once or twice. The primary reason for being happy with a single win has to do with the sense that one has already established one's credentials. Another reason, which tends to be discussed in whispers rather than openly, is that most winners are afraid of losing ("takut kalah!") on the second try. The musicians or dancers who win a competition two times in a row, however, need never fear that the public mistrusts their abilities, or sees the initial win as a fluke or simple stroke of luck. A double win is lasting proof of both competence and talent, and is attempted by only the very brave.

### Gossip and Scandal

Some musicians maintain that what goes on behind the scenes is the best part of the competitions, because it gives people something to talk about for months or years afterward.<sup>10</sup> Some competitions are followed by months of newspaper and magazine articles detailing the rumors of intrigue and secret deals behind closed doors, offering multiple viewpoints and printing interviews with, and letters to the editor from, eyewitnesses. Suspicion of a rigged jury generates the most gossip and the most bitter feelings.

Because the Sundanese performing arts community is rather small and divided in terms of alignment with particular patrons or performing group leaders, the possibilities are seemingly endless for suspicion, accusations of conflict of interest, rumor-spreading, and backstabbing. Musical "accidents" may also occur unless contestants are particularly kind to their musical accompanists; some unscrupulous musicians have been rumored to play incorrectly in order to throw particular contestants off pitch (Williams 1990:160). Journalists sent to cover these competitions rely on

precisely this kind of feuding to get good copy, and some even create quotes from audience members to start the gossip mill turning. In an interview with a journalist from one of Bandung's main newspapers, I was told that part of a journalist's job is to sometimes create commentary "as if it had been mentioned by an audience member or contestant."

Because the audience consists at least partly of performers who know the styles in competition, a significant amount of gossip comes from exploring in excruciating detail the mistakes of previous contestants. In addition to the aforementioned small slip in the 1976 *tembang Sunda* competition, in 1991 a Sundanese zither (*kacapi*) competition was thrown into chaos when the 20-year-old grandson of a jury member was awarded first place over a famous and very experienced *kacapi* player (Rukruk Rukmana), whose borrowed *kacapi* went slightly out of tune as he played. The community immediately fell into two camps: those who felt that the jurist's grandson (Gan-Gan Garmana)—who was indeed both highly skilled and very musical—had every right to expect the first prize for his fine playing, and those who felt that a string slipping out of tune should not have disqualified the more experienced player. To this day, both sides have questions about the event, and the fact that the primary jurist (Uking Sukri, the most well-respected of all twentieth-century *kacapi* players) is now deceased means that the issue may never be resolved.

Two more examples: In 1987 the room in which a dance competition was held became filled with shouting people when the finest student of one of the most feared and respected jurists (Gugum Gumbira) stumbled and nearly fell; the jurist threw down his glasses and could barely watch the next contestant because he was so angry. In 1996 a *tembang Sunda* competition generated a newspaper article hinting at possible mistakes (or worse) on the part of the jury when the male winner did not appear to be the audience favorite. Each one of these incidents reveals the tense climate in which some of these competitions take place.

### Firing Up Enthusiasm

Almost invariably, the initial response from older Sundanese artists to the question of advantages and disadvantages of competitions focuses on the issue of stewardship: Who will carry on our art once we have gone? Several highly respected elderly artists (including Apung Wiratmadja, Uking Sukri, and Bakang Abubakar) repeatedly expressed serious concerns about what appeared to be a looming twilight for some of the most significant traditional art forms. According to both older and younger artists, competitions have several attractions for young people: most importantly, they "fire up enthusiasm" (*membakar semangat*) for the arts. At a time when Bandung—as the Sundanese cultural center—has become

intensely cosmopolitan, classical dance and music face a crowded field of contenders for the attention of Sundanese youth. Some teenagers are embarrassed by the arts of their parents' and grandparents' generations, and dismiss them as "feudal" (*feodal*) and "ancient" (*kuno*).

Many of the older artists hope that recontextualizing these arts in a lively, modern setting will lift the onus of the pre-Independence past. In his discussion of Peruvian panpipe competitions and the ways in which they serve to legitimize rural music for young urbanites, Thomas Turino observes that "the emcee, the trophies, and a stagelike performance setting (sometimes for a sit-down audience) are framing devices that may be valued by the residents precisely because they link their performances to other established urban venues" (Turino 1993:225).

Sometimes "firing up enthusiasm" conflicts with the logistics of planning an event. In a 1988 competition of sung poetry (*pupuh*), the intent of the competition was to inspire elementary and middle school students to become interested in Sundanese poetic meters. All of the seats at the competition were taken up by teachers and visiting dignitaries (who gave lengthy speeches on the importance of *pupuh* and how all the students should study it). Meanwhile, the students themselves had to stand outside the building in the harsh sunlight and listen to the competition through inadequate loudspeakers. Some competitions are announced but never actually take place (especially if they involve relatively new or unusual genres), at least partly because they may be announced in the hope of luring a financial sponsor.

The lure of cash and other prizes, coupled with the promise of fame and the possibility of recording or touring, indeed has the desired result of drawing teenagers toward the Sundanese arts. As Apung Wiratmadja (who functions essentially as a statesman in the *tembang Sunda* community) told me, "They're drawn by the money and the fame, but they stay for love." Other advantages mentioned by the same vocalist are that competitions encourage bravery (performing in front of a large group of people), they allow people to learn from their own mistakes, and they build repertoire among contestants, who are forced to learn a large number of songs very rapidly (Williams 1990:161). The building of repertoire is a strong advantage for would-be professionals. Competitions have even been described by performers, government officials, and young performing arts students as effective in building a sense of community (cf. Erlmann 1996:225 and Turino 1993:66). It was the hope of many—repeatedly echoed in newspaper articles and letters to editors—that the drama and excitement of competitions would help the traditional arts to maintain a strong footing in an arena increasingly challenged by Western and Asian popular culture.

### Competitions: Threat or Inspiration?

Although many of the artists with whom I spoke were able to accept the competitions as part of the framework of the modern performing arts, most of these same artists were bitterly vocal about potential side effects. The strongest criticism, brought up again and again, was concern about the chilling effect of competitions upon individual innovation. Sundanese musicians, dancers, and government officials pride themselves on the rich diversity of their arts, citing the official record of over 200 distinct performing art forms within the province. Multiple styles have blossomed within each of these art forms, to the extent that individual teachers claim ownership of certain types of vocal ornamentation or dance movements, and all succeeding students are expected to maintain the distinctiveness of their teachers' variants. Andrew Weintraub, in his discussion of wooden puppet (*wayang golek*) competitions, notes that "The first point is to 'cultivate and correct' principles of performance and, thus, to homogenize regional and other differences in performance practice" (Weintraub 1997:190). The authority of one's own teacher can be undermined, and the songs and dances may take on an increasingly generic character by creating standardized versions acceptable for competition (by fixing the choreography, for example, or releasing a private recording for contestants to study). This critique was offered, ironically, not only by several sponsors of competitions, but also by some people directly involved in the standardizing of the music and dance repertoire.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the issue of standardization, many performing artists worry about problems of jury selection. Professional performers and academics maintain an uneasy balance of power. Some of the older (and most proficient) artists lack an appropriate academic degree to work as teachers or paid consultants in the schools and colleges. On the other hand, the faculty in Sundanese performing arts institutions have the necessary academic degrees, but a few may lack the skill or musicality to be effective teachers of the traditional arts. This dichotomy is neither universal nor insurmountable; however, stylistic, social, and political divisions sometimes come between the academics and the professional performers. In most cases, current juries consist of both.

Further concerns that were voiced quietly, but frequently, had to do with whether future juries would be selected exclusively from the ranks of unskilled academics or government officials, once the older masters had passed away. In my two years of continuous study, statements such as "Who will guard our treasures?" and "Who will help us remember?" were frequently uttered by elderly performers. In witnessing conversations about competitions—whether in person or through loudspeakers—I often heard a stern warning: "Don't let it happen that the Sundanese have to

go to America to study their own traditions!" [Indonesian: *Jangan sampai orang Sunda harus pergi ke Amerika untuk belajar kesenian diri sendiri!*] While this statement obviously referred in part to a particular foreign researcher,<sup>12</sup> it was also a serious indictment of the problems that could result from preserving an art form in government-controlled "formaldehyde," killing any hope of development.

Some Sundanese performers positively thrive on competition. One teacher lamented the fact that she had only one serious student, because the lack of competition from a rival meant that the student would never rise above her current state of complacency.<sup>13</sup> In several other areas of the world, competitions have significantly contributed to interest in local culture. Goertzen, for instance, discusses the ways in which modernization has boosted the Norwegian folk revival: "The progressive encroachment of international pop culture facilitated by advances in communication and transportation made anything specifically Norwegian ever more precious" (1998:104). Tenzer points out that without competition, some women's gamelan groups in Bali simply dissolve (1991:109). Turino mentions a similar situation with the following pithy comment: "For [a particular musical ensemble], rehearsing music repeatedly outside the context of a festival would be like practicing cooking and then throwing away the food" (1993:156). Finally, Coplan's discussion of *sefela* competitions highlights the importance—also seen in certain aspects of Sundanese performance practice—of achieving maximum validation of one's musicianship, identity, and community through competition.

The competitive dimension of *sefela* performance expresses the social tension inherent in the notion of games as a friendly fight, a conflict that unites people in a common excitation over the display of individual prowess in social accomplishment. Indeed, competition is regarded by many performers as the central dynamic, the point of performance. Some singers, encountered by chance, declined to perform without a partner and rival, someone to resound for and against, while others consented to imagine an interlocutor [in the sense of American minstrelsy] for the occasion, as long as some prize money was provided as a stimulation. Still others I met at home in rural Lesotho explained that, while they enjoyed performing for a local audience, they seldom did so since their village lacked suitable competitors." (Coplan 1994:204)

In the case of Sundanese performers, it is not really enough to get performances, recording contracts, and international tours through skill and connections alone. Having a public affirmation of that skill is an

important way for many young people in particular to guard their reputation as performers and open up access to new musical, social, and financial opportunities.

### Conclusion

The chance to participate in a competition is one of the forces that drives new interest in the Sundanese performing arts. It leads to enthusiastic participation and intensive study on the part of young musicians and dancers, and its rewards are tangible and satisfying. The chance to launch a decent career as a performer is an important incentive in a region where unemployment is high and associating oneself with a performing arts group can lead to continuing social and financial rewards. The current excitement surrounding competitions is an important means of ensuring stewardship of the traditional arts. At the same time, the problems of standardization and of covert battles over artistic authority within each genre lead to concerns that the arts of the future may be attractive but empty imitations of their twentieth-century counterparts. Sundanese music and dance forms—in spite of the diversity of genres and the frequent development of new and sometimes short-lived creations both inside and outside the academies—do not necessarily hold the attraction or relevance to modern Sundanese life that other forms of entertainment do. For a young performer who stands at the crossroads of traditional and popular culture, however, a competition can make all the difference.

### Notes

1. The fieldwork for this article was conducted in West Java, Indonesia (largely in the city of Bandung) between 1987 and 1989, and again on separate occasions in 1991 and 1996. I am very grateful for receiving a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Award to carry out the main body of my fieldwork, and for receiving permission to do research in Indonesia from the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia. I would also like to express my thanks to the many musicians and dancers with whom I worked, especially the *lingkung seni* (performing arts group) Jugala. In addition, various government officials, contestants, and jury members kindly helped me to understand their ideas and ideals surrounding the nature of contemporary competitions. Lastly, I wish to thank the many people who reviewed this article prior to its publication; their comments and suggestions were essential in helping me to refine it.

2. All foreign terms, unless otherwise indicated, are in the Sundanese language. Most direct quotes from performers and government officials are provided in English only. Indonesian and Sundanese were my only languages of communication with Indonesians, so the English-language quotes provided here are my translations of the original statements. In most cases—due to the sensitive nature



of conversations dealing with the issues of competitions—the people making the statements wished to remain anonymous. “You should write all of this down, but don’t tell people that I said it” was a common response to my requests for information about behind-the-scenes workings of competitions. Out of respect for the performers and government officials who wished not to be identified, I have offered more generic identification of their positions in society or in performing groups.

3. Bandung is a city of approximately two-and-a-half million inhabitants. It is home to over two dozen institutions of higher education, and is also the center of Indonesia’s aerospace technology industry. It supports several influential recording studios and record companies, which market Sundanese music throughout the region and in Jakarta and Bali, where a strong demand for Sundanese music has developed among the tourists. Competitions held in other regional cities outside Bandung—such as Sumedang, Tasikmalaya, and Garut—are often viewed as preparatory for Bandung competitions. When a province-wide competition is hosted by a regional city other than Bandung, it is a matter of great local pride.

4. Women performers are much more frequently featured in the newspapers and on cassette covers than are men. See Williams (1990:188) and Van Zanten (1989:49) for more information about the use of photographic images of men and women in Sundanese music.

5. One of the main reasons that the DAMAS competitions are so meaningful to Sundanese performers is that DAMAS continues to function as the standard-bearer for quality in the traditional performing arts. Some of the most influential members of the organization were alive in the pre-Independence era, and although the arts have changed considerably since the Revolution, the belief prevails that the DAMAS elders are keeping the arts on the “true path.”

6. *Tembang Sunda* was the subject of my dissertation (1990) and that of Dutch scholar Wim Van Zanten (1989). It is considered the most elite of the Sundanese arts and is characterized by melismatic vocal ornamentation, complex phrasing of poetic meters, and themes (in the sung lyrics) of nature, the ancestors, and love. Because *tembang Sunda* enthusiasts as well as performers of other music and dance genres consider *tembang Sunda* to be strongly representative of pre-Independence aristocratic culture (Williams 1990:265), appropriate behavior in *tembang Sunda* rehearsals and performance sessions is sometimes viewed as appropriate Sundanese behavior altogether.

7. Polaroid photographs of the arrivals of competitors and audience members are nearly always available for a small fee during intermissions and after the events. Photographers may be either freelance workers or the employees of a local photography studio.

8. At a beauty contest in 1988 I observed the wife of an important military officer approach a juror, lean over the table toward him, and say that a certain number belonged to her child. He looked at her, cleared his throat, shifted in his seat, wrote something down, and nodded. She went back to her place in the front row, and the daughter later won a place in the top three. Just after a 1988 competition in *tembang Sunda* a relative of one of the jurors jokingly bemoaned the end of all

the favors from the contestants. "We all get to enjoy these gifts," she said. "Jurors and musical accompanists are treated like royalty for at least a month before each competition."

9. The ensemble was led by Yayah Rochaei Dachlan, an excellent performer who runs her own performing arts group (*lingkung seni*).

10. On three separate occasions I listened as musicians decided to attend a competition solely for the gossip. "Who cares who wins?" said one. "I just want to see [a certain performer]."

11. Standardization is particularly a late-twentieth-century concern in Sundanese music. The Sundanese population was widely dispersed in remote rural areas even after the Dutch established Bandung as an administrative center in 1864. Although most of the upper-class Sundanese arts were imported from central Java (including batik, some gamelan, and some of the classical dances), they developed into relatively independent local forms.

12. My ability to quickly learn the basics of two Sundanese genres—*tembang Sunda* and *jaipongan* (social dance)—was a matter of concern for some elderly Sundanese performers. As far as I was able to ascertain, the concern was based on my use of a very accurate (and idiosyncratic) system of notation that gave the illusion of being able to precisely (though awkwardly) reproduce the pitches and ornamentation of any song after a single hearing. The fact that a foreigner could learn so quickly, and that most young Sundanese showed not the slightest interest in learning the music, deeply pained these elderly performers.

13. I was unnerved and amused to discover that some of my own teachers hoped that some other white foreigner would come to Bandung and challenge me, so that they could all watch us compete against each other and speculate about who was the best musician. In almost every case, the "best musician" implies the best teacher; any accolades accorded the student usually reflect on the teacher. According to Euis Komariah: *Kalau muridnya bagus, gurunya terbawa bagus* [If the student is good, the teacher is carried along as well].

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