

Gamelan Selonding as A Source of Aesthetic Inspiration and Identity for Young Bali Artists

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ABSTRACT

The Selonding gamelan represents one of the oldest gamelan ensembles in Bali, embodying profound historical, religious, and aesthetic values. Its trajectory of development has moved beyond its sacred functions, positioning it as a significant source of artistic inspiration for emerging generations of Balinese artists. This article argues that the Selonding gamelan operates not only as a medium of creative expression but also as a cultural marker that reinforces collective identity among young Balinese practitioners. Employing a descriptive-analytical approach, the study demonstrates that Selonding serves as both a repository of traditional heritage and a site of aesthetic innovation, thereby enriching the dynamics of Balinese performing arts within the context of globalization.

KEYWORDS

Selonding gamelan, aesthetics, cultural identity, young Balinese artists



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Introduction

Bali is recognized as one of the cultural centers of the Indonesian archipelago, renowned for its remarkable cultural resilience. Despite the intense currents of modernization and globalization, Balinese cultural traditions have not only endured but have also demonstrated an adaptive capacity to contemporary transformations. Various forms of traditional arts, categorized as 'classical' and having existed for centuries within Balinese society, continue to persist to this day. Among them is the Selonding gamelan, a classical ensemble that has long been embedded in the cultural life of Bali. The existence of the Selonding is documented in several inscriptions dating back to the reign of King Jayapangus (1103 Caka), such as the Campaga, Bugbug, Landih B. - Nongan, Buwahan, Bulian, and Jagaraga inscriptions, all of which mention the term *selunding wsi*. This evidence indicates that the name Selonding was already known as early as 1181 CE, or the 12th century. Considering this historical data, it can be inferred that the Balinese people have been familiar with the term Selonding for more than

eight centuries. Nevertheless, further scholarly inquiry is required to determine whether the term explicitly referred to the Selonding gamelan as inherited today, or whether it might have denoted another type of gamelan.

As one of the oldest categories of gamelan ensembles, the Selonding gamelan occupies a significant position within the cultural landscape of Bali, particularly in the Bali Aga villages located in Karangasem, Bangli, and several other regencies. Its connection to the religious life of the Bali Aga community is profoundly evident, as it has long served as an integral component of customary and religious ceremonies such as *Ngusaba Dangsil*, *Ngusaba Sumbu*, *Ngusaba Sri*, and various other major rituals. The presence of the Selonding gamelan in Tenganan village, for instance, illustrates its enduring vitality, where the ensemble is considered indispensable and functions as the primary musical accompaniment for every *Ngusaba* ceremony. This demonstrates that the original role of the Selonding gamelan was inherently sacred, underscoring its function as a marker of communal identity and as a medium that bridges the human and the transcendental dimensions.

Alongside processes of social change and cultural interaction, the dissemination of the Selonding gamelan is no longer confined to the Bali Aga communities but has extended to other regions of Bali that historically did not possess this tradition. This expansion can be examined through the lens of cultural adaptation theory, which explains how a tradition adjusts to new social contexts without losing its core meaning. At this juncture, the Selonding gamelan exemplifies cultural resilience—namely, the capacity of a tradition to endure, transform, and remain relevant amidst the dynamics of modern society (Ungar, 2008). Whereas in earlier times Selonding functioned exclusively as an accompaniment for sacred rituals, its role has since broadened to encompass various ceremonial domains, including *pitra yadnya* (death rituals), *manusa yadnya* (rites of passage), and other socio-religious practices. In contemporary contexts, Selonding is even performed at cremation ceremonies (*ngaben*), weddings, and has been employed as a medium for traditional healing practices. Such developments signify not only the expansion of meaning but also the diversification of function, reflecting the adaptive mechanisms through which tradition negotiates the challenges of modernity.

Furthermore, the dynamic development of the Selonding gamelan reflects the emergence of new creative spaces among young Balinese artists. No longer regarded solely as a ritual instrument, Selonding has been reimagined as a source of aesthetic inspiration, giving rise to innovative works in both performance practices and new musical compositions. This phenomenon can be understood through Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity, namely the process of generating new meanings that emerge from the encounter between tradition and modern-contemporary cultural contexts. In this regard, the contemporary vitality of Selonding not only signifies a

revitalization of tradition but also illustrates how the arts are capable of transforming into dynamic mediums of expression. On the one hand, Selonding continues to function as a support for ritual practices and a marker of cultural identity; on the other hand, it serves as a space for creative innovation that reinforces Bali's position within the global cultural landscape. Building upon this phenomenon, the present study focuses on three main issues: the functional transformation of the Selonding gamelan, the emergence of modernist creativity and the reinterpretation of tradition, and their broader implications for Balinese cultural identity.

The Transformation of Gamelan Selonding from Socio-Religious to Modern Culture

As one of the oldest categories of gamelan ensembles, the Selonding gamelan was originally characterized by its profound sacred and religious dimensions. Its existence has been closely intertwined with the religious life of the Bali Aga community, where it has traditionally functioned as a consecrated ritual instrument performed exclusively during major ceremonies such as *Ngusaba Dangsil*, *Ngusaba Sumbu*, and *Ngusaba Sri*. In this context, Selonding serves not merely as a musical accompaniment to ritual practices but also as a symbolic medium that reinforces social cohesion while mediating the transcendental relationship between humans and the divine. Thus, its original function can be understood as that of an instrument safeguarding the continuity of spiritual values while simultaneously affirming the cultural identity of the Bali Aga community.

Over time, the function of the Selonding gamelan has undergone significant transformation. Its existence is no longer confined to the Bali Aga community but has expanded to various other regions of Bali. Along with this expansion, the role of Selonding has also shifted from being exclusively associated with sacred rituals to encompassing a broader range of socio-religious ceremonies. For instance, Selonding is now frequently performed in *pitra yadnya* (ancestral rites), including *ngaben* (cremation) and *nyekah* ceremonies, as well as in *manusa yadnya* (life-cycle rituals) marking important stages of individual life. Beyond these functions, Selonding has also been utilized as a therapeutic medium in traditional healing practices, reflecting a diversification of roles that extend into both profane and therapeutic domains. Artana et al. (2020:256) demonstrate that the sound of Selonding possesses the capacity to induce states of psychological calm. This occurs as listeners receive the instrument's soft and distinctive resonances, which can stabilize heartbeat rhythms, refine breathing patterns, and ultimately provide psychological comfort. These findings affirm that the function of Selonding is not confined to religious and ritual dimensions alone but also extends into the psychological and health-related spheres of contemporary society.

In addition, the Selonding gamelan functions as a medium of aesthetic creativity. For young Balinese artists, Selonding is not merely inherited as a ritual instrument but has become a significant source of artistic inspiration for the creation of new works. Musical explorations, cross-genre collaborations, and its incorporation into diverse performing arts contexts illustrate the emergence of innovative spaces that give rise to new forms of expression. This indicates that the Selonding gamelan may be understood not only as a preserved cultural heritage but also as a creative medium that contributes to strengthening Balinese cultural identity while simultaneously fostering dialogue with global cultures. The resilience and adaptive capacity of Selonding further enable it to negotiate processes of social transformation in modern contexts without losing its fundamental meaning. In this regard, its adaptation is evident in the expansion of functions that were once exclusive to sacred rituals but have since extended into social, therapeutic, and creative domains.

Inventory of Creative Compositions and New Gamelan

In the modern context, the role of young Balinese artists is highly significant in revitalizing and simultaneously expanding the functions of the Selonding gamelan. Their efforts are not limited to preservation but also involve the reinterpretation of tradition through the creation of new works that integrate Selonding with other elements of the performing arts, including traditional instruments, vocal music, dance, and various artistic components. A notable example can be found in the 1988 composition *Bali Aga* by I Nyoman Windha, which combines the Selonding gamelan with vocal performance and several other traditional instruments. This work was presented at the prestigious *Pekan Komponis Indonesia VIII* organized by the Jakarta Arts Council at Taman Ismail Marzuki, Jakarta, marking an important milestone in positioning Selonding as a medium for musical innovation.



Figure 1. The process of creating Bali Aga compositions and presenting them at the 8th Composer's Week in 1988

In addition, in 1988, composer I Komang Astita created a work entitled *Ubit Ning Selonding*, inspired by various playing techniques of the Selonding gamelan, including *gegebug ngerejeg*, *nerompong*, *sekati*, and *rereongan*. This composition represents an

in-depth exploration of musicality and performance techniques, resulting in a new musical structure that diverges from previous traditional patterns. Through these works, it may be argued that Windha and Astita were pioneers in employing the Selonding gamelan as a medium of aesthetic creativity. Their contributions underscore that Selonding functions not merely as a ritual instrument but is also capable of transforming into an artistic medium that remains relevant within contemporary cultural development.

The emergence of new works employing the Selonding gamelan since the 1980s has inspired younger generations of artists to continually produce musical compositions using the same medium. These works have been presented across diverse performance platforms, both locally and internationally, including the Bali Arts Festival, final recital examinations at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) Denpasar, the World Culture Forum, and most recently, the Bali Aga Festival in 2024. Through such venues, a wide spectrum of compositions has been produced, ranging from those rooted in traditional aesthetics, to innovative works negotiating between convention and novelty, and even to modern compositions that embrace cross-genre collaborative approaches.

The formation of new discourses has fostered the understanding that traditional arts are not merely cultural relics but enduring sources of inspiration. The continuity of Selonding music in the modern era has been further enriched by the emergence of creative young artists such as Komang Seraya Murtikanti, Agus Andi Pastika, and Wayan Janurangga. Inspired by the profound cultural identity embedded within the Selonding gamelan, these artists have produced works imbued with neo-classical nuances, accompanied by diverse reinterpretations that culminate in modern musical expressions. One notable example is *Kembang Tanding*, a composition by Agus Andi Pastika, which arose from an imaginative response to established playing techniques, tonal elaborations, and *ubit-ubitan* patterns of the Selonding gamelan. Experimental approaches to Selonding instrumentation became the foundation for exploration, interpretation, arrangement, and recomposition through the manipulation of octaves, *ubit-ubitan*, and *nyogcag* patterns, ultimately generating what Pastika refers to as “Neo-Selonding.” According to Pastika, the Neo-Selonding concept represents a newly emergent discourse shaped by the creative visions of young artists who consistently aspire toward innovation and renewal in their artistic output. Neo-Selonding thus reflects a new perspective that integrates modernist sensibilities while remaining firmly rooted in the cultural identity of the Selonding itself.



Figure 2. Presentation of the composition Kembang Tanding by Agus Andi Pastika

The emergence of new Selonding compositions should not be perceived as a threat to traditional conventions but rather as an adaptive strategy to maintain cultural relevance amid the dynamics of contemporary society. This phenomenon demonstrates that cross-generational engagement by artists has endowed Selonding with strong cultural resilience, enabling it to transform in response to social and cultural change. Originally serving a ritual-sacred function within the Bali Aga villages, Selonding has now evolved into a medium of aesthetic expression and artistic creativity, spanning from classical to modern sensibilities.

Beyond the creation of musical compositions, Selonding has also inspired young Balinese artists to pursue innovations in organology, including modifications in the arrangement of keys and the development of new ensembles tailored to contemporary creative needs. For instance, in instruments such as the *kempul* and *gong*, the repositioning of keys—placing identical pitches in closer proximity—has facilitated performance techniques while simultaneously broadening the possibilities for musical elaboration. This phenomenon illustrates how tradition is not merely preserved in its conservative form but also innovatively developed through pitch repositioning, the addition of new instruments, and integration with other ensembles, thereby shaping a more adaptive medium in alignment with the evolving cultural landscape.

The existence of the Selonding gamelan has also inspired the creation of several new ensembles, including the Salukat gamelan, the *pesel* gamelan, and the Diatonic

Selonding gamelan. The Salukat gamelan is a variant of Selonding in which the keys are made of bronze alloy (*kerawang*). Its uniqueness lies not only in the use of *kerawang* keys but also in the specially designed *tungguhan* (frames) that closely resemble the *gangsajongkok* instrument. This gamelan was first created in 1991 by I Dewa Gde Darmayasa, founder of *Sanggar Gringsing Mas*. Although its development has not yet been fully established, the Salukat gamelan was featured by *Sanggar Kang Cing Wie* during the 47th Bali Arts Festival (PKB) in 2025, where several Selonding repertoires were presented.



Figure 3. Gamelan Salukat performance at PKB 2025

In addition to the Salukat gamelan, another ensemble inspired by the Selonding tradition is the Pesel gamelan. Among the three ensembles, the Pesel gamelan, created by I Wayan Arik Wirawan in 2013 has gained considerable popularity within the community. The name *Pesel* itself is an acronym of *Pegulingan* and *Selonding*, signifying the fusion of the Smar Pegulingan gamelan with the Selonding gamelan as the foundation of its creation. According to Arik Wirawan, the Pesel gamelan was conceived as a medium for expressing creative ideas while simultaneously serving as a space for dialogue between tradition and modernity. Through this ensemble, Wirawan released an album entitled *Nada Hidup* (“The Living Tones”), which features several compositions, including *Ayuning*, *Kerulut*, *Muda Langen*, *Lantur*, *Jangkep*, and *Pategak Babarongan Uyang-Uyang*. Collectively, these works are imbued with philosophical values that articulate the cosmological relationships among humans, between humans and nature, and between humanity and the Divine.



Figure 4. Gamelan Pesel at the Bali Arts Festival 2017

Beyond the Salukat and Pesel ensembles, another innovative development inspired by the Selonding tradition is the Diatonic Selonding gamelan. This ensemble represents an organological adaptation in which the traditional pentatonic tuning system of Selonding is transformed into a diatonic scale, thereby expanding its tonal possibilities and facilitating cross-genre collaboration with Western musical systems. The creation of the Diatonic Selonding reflects the efforts of contemporary Balinese musicians to recontextualize traditional instruments within broader musical discourses while retaining their cultural essence. By employing diatonic tuning, the Selonding instrument is no longer confined to its ritual functions but is reimagined as a versatile medium of artistic expression that bridges classical heritage with global modernity. Such innovation not only demonstrates the adaptive resilience of Balinese gamelan traditions but also affirms Selonding's position as a fertile source of aesthetic inspiration for contemporary composers.



Figure 5. Diatonic Selonding Gamelan

The diverse phenomena of organological innovation and the emergence of new ensembles demonstrate that the fusion of two or more traditions gives rise to novel forms of expression imbued with multiple layers of meaning. The creation of the Salukat, Pesel, and Diatonic Selonding gamelans should not be understood merely as acts of musical experimentation, but rather as cultural strategies that affirm the vitality of Selonding as both a source of aesthetic inspiration and a dynamic marker of cultural identity.

Reinterpretation of Tradition

Cultural reinterpretation refers to a process in which elements of tradition or cultural heritage are reinterpreted to align with contemporary needs, contexts, and challenges. Within this theoretical framework, culture is not perceived as static but as dynamic, continuously open to re-reading and transformation in response to social, political, and technological developments (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Stuart Hall (1997) conceptualizes this as *cultural representation*, namely the process through which symbols, practices, and cultural artifacts acquire new meanings via social interaction. In this sense, reinterpretation functions as a mechanism that enables traditions to remain relevant in contemporary contexts while simultaneously preserving their historical roots.

The functional transformation and creative reinterpretation of the Selonding gamelan epitomize the dynamic nature of Balinese culture, which continuously evolves in response to the needs of changing times. Originally serving a ritual-sacred function within the Bali Aga communities, Selonding has since developed into a medium of aesthetic expression and artistic creation that diverges from its initial perspective. This phenomenon demonstrates that tradition is not merely inherited but actively reconstructed to acquire renewed relevance. In this context, the reinterpretation of Selonding does not diminish its original meaning; rather, it adds new dimensions that broaden its social and artistic functions.

The development of both musical and organological aspects of Selonding reflects an effort to revitalize traditional values within the broader framework of Balinese karawitan. Such revitalization cannot be understood merely as a conservative act of preservation; instead, it represents an active and adaptive cultural strategy. Within the context of globalization, revitalization carries strategic significance, as a transforming tradition can serve as a bridge between locality and modernity. Accordingly, the revitalization of Selonding is not simply an attempt to maintain something old, but also a creative strategy to bring cultural values into wider discursive and performative spaces. This strategy ensures that Selonding remains an integral part of Balinese social life while simultaneously functioning as a symbol of cultural identity that is both adaptive and relevant within the global artistic and cultural arena.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that the Selonding gamelan holds a highly significant role in the dynamics of contemporary Balinese society. While it continues to preserve its sacred character and essential function as a ritual instrument within the Bali Aga communities, Selonding has also undergone a functional transformation that extends its relevance across wider regions of Bali. This transformation positions Selonding not merely as an accompaniment to ceremonial practices, but also as an aesthetic medium that provides a space of expression for Bali's younger generation of artists. For these artists, Selonding serves as a distinctive and fertile source of inspiration, capable of generating diverse forms of creativity, whether through new musical compositions or innovations in gamelan-making. Consequently, the vast potential embedded within Selonding opens pathways for its continual development—not only as a vital representation of Balinese cultural identity but also as a creative medium that remains relevant for future artistic endeavors.

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