
A fellow anthropologist named David Gowey, who studies central Philippine epics, recently tweeted, “Every so often someone tells me my project proposal is closer to ‘traditional ethnography’ than other projects and I wonder how they mean that to come across” (https://twitter.com/ DGoweyAuthor/status/146377601749596794). “Where have all the cultures gone?” Marshall Sahlins similarly asked not too long ago. “Why is a century of the first hand ethnography of cultural diversity now ignored …? Why are graduate students in the discipline ignorant of African segmentary lineages, New Guinea Highlands pig feasts ... the hau of the Maori gift, the religion of the Ifugao, etc.? Is it that they are not worthy of scholarly contemplation, and should just be confined to the dustbin of intellectual history?”, he continued with his “emeritus rant” on the *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/haujournal/posts/1525246060874162).

It seems to me that these off-the-cuff comments speak of a broader observation that anthropology in the twenty-first century has moved away from small villages towards global networks, and away from classical questions towards contemporary (some might call them “trendy”) topics. Any academic discipline must certainly be ready to change and be responsive to the times. But perhaps an unintended consequence of this shift is that it leaves ambiguous whether the label “traditional ethnography” is a good thing or a bad thing.

This is why it is notable that just this year, Brill published Wim van Zanten’s *Music of the Baduy People of Western Java: Singing is a Medicine*. “Traditional ethnography,” I believe, would be an apt characterization of the book. In the candid sense of Sahlins above, this book is about a “culture,” that is, the Baduy people and their music. Van Zanten states it directly: this book is ‘mainly descriptive’ (p. 18) of ‘the role of music and dance in Baduy society’ (p. 17). The book does profess a theoretical concern that revolves largely around the ‘sustainability of the Baduy society and their music’ (p. 102) vis-à-vis the Indonesian nation-state, but for the most part, it seeks only to ‘pose questions and not try to fully answer them’ (p. 72). Lastly, the introduction says that ‘little has been published on Baduy music,’ (p. 8), and that the book seeks to fill this gap. This is an interesting reassertion of a more conventional (some might say old-fashioned) statement of a study’s significance.

Van Zanten accomplishes this through the nine chapters that comprise the book. The first chapter introduces us to the Baduy and gives an overview of their music. Chapters Two and Four introduce us to the social organization,
main economic activities, religion, and ritual cycle of the Baduy people. In these three chapters we get a good sense of how music and ritual are intimately related, and how adherence to ritual and spiritual principles shape being Baduy through time. Chapter Three discusses previous studies on the Baduy and the author’s own fieldwork and approaches. Baduy music, singing, and their suite of instruments are examined in chapters Five to Eight. Some portions of these chapters are very technical in terms of music analysis, and may pose some challenges for unknowledgeable readers. The ninth and final chapter summarizes the book and touches upon contemporary challenges to Baduy musical culture, such as the possible implications of, or opportunities presented by, Indonesia’s ratification of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This is followed by four appendices that expand on the mapping of the central Baduy village of Kanékés, the Baduy calendar, and the completed texts of some songs discussed in the main text and the manner of their collection; I think these appendices are just as essential reading as the main chapters because they are full of details that further enrich the descriptions of Baduy life, music, and historical experiences in the rest of the book.

It is this descriptive bent that is both the book’s weakness and potential. Regarding its limits, description is not always the straightforward task that it may seem. In ethnographic writing, in particular, description often slides into classification when the author’s implicit assumptions are often revealed. For example, Van Zanten proposes a simple, two-fold classification of Baduy music as music that is ‘connected to their religion,’ and music that is ‘meant for entertainment’ (p. 273). But a unique feature of Baduy ritual music is that some forms of it also serve to ‘entertain the children of the rice goddess Déwi Asri’ (pp. 15, 273). Elsewhere, he surmises that the music of the angklung ensemble (shaken bamboo idiophones and drums) and the keromong ensemble (gamelan, or bronze idiophones) can be classified into whether they are played for deities during harvest rituals, or played for humans during weddings and circumcisions (discussed in Chapter Four), which are also ritualized social events. These observations raise the possibility that perhaps the lines of classification may be drawn differently, because it seems that both humans and gods need music for their rituals, and also appreciate musical entertainment.

Van Zanten acknowledges this shortcoming. Towards the end of the book, summarizing what possible directions future research might take, he states that ‘we should first get a better idea of the Baduy concepts concerning music’ (p. 281), whether for technical or sociological analysis. Be that as it may, the book is already a good step in that direction. The descriptions of Baduy social organization, rituals, catalogue of instruments, and the book’s effort to synthesize previous studies on Baduy and wider Sundanese music and history
is already a worthwhile read and suitable starting point for further studies and comparison. Taking the example in the previous paragraph, the observations about ritual and entertainment contexts of musical performance immediately opens up further possibilities of inquiry. Most importantly, the book is open access (through https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/48323) and music recordings (both audio-visual and audio only) are available on Figshare.com (DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.c.5170520). Both data and interpretation are hence easily on-hand for further engagement, scrutiny, and perhaps even correction or revision. Not bad indeed, I believe, for a “traditional ethnography.”

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