

Marichi Gupta
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**Sampling Far-Away Sounds:
The Use of *Kecak* in Modern Media**

For centuries, composers and musicians have engaged in musical conversations by way of interpolating melodies belonging to other cultures, eras, or artists in their work. In the recorded-era, such conversations continue by way of sampling, or the playback of a record in another work. With increasing globalization of the past century, the use of foreign samples has raised questions of cultural appropriation and respect for the sampled source material. In this essay, I investigate implications of sampling in Western media of the Balinese art form *kecak*, which itself was developed by a Westerner for Western consumption. I primarily discuss Michael Bakan's analysis of *kecak* in the film "Blood Simple" by Joel and Ethan Coen (the Coen Brothers) and argue that the use of *kecak* in modern media to excite the listener is directly tied to its origins in entertainment.

Kecak developed in the 1930s largely under the direction of German artist Walter Spies.¹ The development coincided with the era of exploitative *goona-goona* films coming out of Bali where European filmmakers seized opportunities to include shots of the bare-breasted indigenous women in their movies,² and Spies tailored *kecak* for inclusion in the film "Island of Demons."³ With *kecak*, Spies was in particular enamored by the sound and effect of the performance rather than its meaning, writing that "the sound exist[ed] for itself... and [was] complete in itself" beyond any plot or storyline.⁴ With the budding tourist industry that arose during the 1930s,

¹ Cohen, 132.

² Cohen, 133.

³ Atkins, 82.

⁴ Spies (and his collaborator) qtd. in Atkins, 85.

where Europeans would come to visit the Dutch-occupied territory and indulge in the indigenous traditions,⁵ *kecak* developed a clear tilt towards the entertainment of foreign audiences.

Ironically, “Island of Demons” was a silent film,⁶ but the sonic qualities of the *kecak* chant would go on to entice both tourists to Bali and artists abroad in the future. Musicologist David Lewiston, during his 1966 travels to Bali, was so intrigued by the Bali soundscape that he published field recordings of his to the 1967 compilation album, “Music from the Morning of the World” published by Nonesuch Records.⁷ The album contained a recording of a *kecak* performance, where one hears a large chorus of male voices singing a sweeping melody before launching into the energetic “cek-ke-cek!” chant.⁸ The publication of this record, along with others also capturing the art form, has allowed future artists to include samples of *kecak* in their works for varying purposes.

One such example, detailed by Bakan, is *kecak*’s use in the Coen Brother’s 1984 film, “Blood Simple.” The film, a pulp-fiction-rooted revenge drama, uses Lewiston’s particular recording to underscore a murder scene.⁹ Film composer Carter Burwell, who at the time played in an informal *gamelan* ensemble in New York, included the sound clip to enhance the audience reaction during the scene, writing that *kecak* commanded a “special attention from the listener... with a mysterious element.”¹⁰ In the case of Burwell and the Coen Brothers, the sonic quality itself seemed to be the main motivation, and the use here does not otherwise engage with Balinese culture. Per Bakan, *kecak*’s use in “Blood Simple” constitutes a “schizophrenic transmogrification”, which captures the use of a culture’s “voices and sounds... separated from

⁵ Cohen, 133-135.

⁶ Atkins, 86.

⁷ Cullman.

⁸ “Bali Music from the Morning of the World.”

⁹ Bakan, 95-96. The trailer for the film (“blood simple-1984”) features this scene – see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T58uyzlOcT0&t=38s>.

¹⁰ Burwell’s correspondence with Bakan, qtd. in Bakan, 97.

their original sources of identity... to evoke the strange and... grotesque,”¹¹ and he points to the danger that the use of the sample with a scene of violence may impart new associations to the genre that are inconsistent with Balinese culture.¹²

Bakan bases his article on the premise that *kecak*, despite its role in the entertainment and tourism industries, is representative of something inherent to the Balinese identity.¹³ However, this premise is somewhat weakened by the vast amount of foreign intervention that surrounds the development of the genre. While not to imply that the form is not Balinese, *kecak* was, from the start, separated from Balinese culture and has leaned more towards entertainment. At the same time, Bakan’s analysis raises interesting questions on the larger topic of cultural appropriation and the use of foreign music in Western media, especially since the use of sampling has increased over the past several decades. Indeed, *kecak* has been sampled in several songs by international artists, such as “The Wind Chimes” (1987) by the British singer Mike Oldfield,¹⁴ and “Magical Wave” (1992) by the Japanese artist Kitaro,¹⁵ with the uses of the sample primarily emphasizing the rhythmic quality of the chant – in these cases, just as the Coen Brothers (and Spies decades ago), artists seemed to have been attracted to musical elements of the form without otherwise engaging with its content or history. This emphasis on sound over meaning may have to do with increasing commercialization, where artists may concern themselves less with what is culturally and ethnographically appropriate versus what sounds the most appealing. Even hip-hop has seen the trend where the use of a sample is completely independent of the sample’s origin: A good example is rapper Kendrick Lamar’s 2017 record “DUCKWORTH.”, which

¹¹ Bakan, 84-85.

¹² Bakan, 85-86.

¹³ Bakan, 87.

¹⁴ “Mike Oldfield – Islands – Wind Chimes Part Two.” See 0:40 in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1748DpmgWes> for *kecak* usage.

¹⁵ “Magical Wave.” See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhbnYVmDqro> for *kecak* usage.

samples a European love song in a record about Lamar's experience growing up in inner-city California.¹⁶ In this regard, Bakan's hope for deeper engagement with the cultural history of the genre may be a tall order.

From the above, we see that attraction to the *kecak* genre has largely been driven by the sounds of the performance and effect on the listener rather than its history or cultural position. In an odd way, this type of ignorance towards the Balinese culture is totally consistent with the genre's origins as an entertainment form for foreigners. The fact that modern artists have been intrigued by the soundscape of *kecak* perhaps speaks to Spies' eye as a director for spotting its selling point; however, the purely sonic focus on *kecak* can have unintended consequences for the Balinese by creating new and culturally unmotivated associations with the genre.

¹⁶ "9th Wonder On Sampling For Kendrick Lamar | The Formula | NPR Music," and "Ostavi Trag Lyrics."

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