



Musical Transformation of the *Cowongan* Tradition in Cilacap, Central Java

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Abstract

The Cowongan tradition was originally a sacred ritual of rain invocation practiced by agrarian communities, using a puppet as the medium and collective vocal chants without instrumental accompaniment as the core of the procession. Over time, Cowongan has transformed into a performing art, with the most prominent indicator of change evident in its musical presentation. This study aims to describe and analyze the transformation of Cowongan's musical presentation in Kubang Wungu Hamlet, Pekuncen Village, Kroya Subdistrict, Cilacap Regency. The research employed a qualitative approach with ethnographic and ethnomusicological perspectives. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with elders and practitioners, audio-visual documentation, and local archival sources. Validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, techniques, and time, while analysis was conducted using reduction, thematic presentation, and conclusion drawing within Alan P. Merriam's concept-behavior-sound framework. The findings reveal that Cowongan underwent gradual transformation: from a sacred ritual with collective vocal performance without instruments, to a revitalization phase with broader participation and simple accompaniment, and eventually into an organized performing art featuring formal art groups, traditional instruments, the role of a *sinden* (female vocalist), stage arrangements, costumes, as well as sound technology and documentation support. These changes signify a shift in Cowongan's function from an agrarian ritual to a public performance, expanding its audience and opening economic opportunities, while simultaneously posing challenges in maintaining ritual authenticity and meaning.

Keywords: *Cowongan; Ritual; Musical Transformation; Performing Arts; Ethnomusicology; Cilacap*

Introduction

Indonesia is recognized as an archipelagic nation with a multicultural society that sustains diverse traditions born from the close relationship between humans and nature. In rural agrarian communities, agriculture serves as the primary livelihood, giving rise to various rituals as expressions of gratitude and requests for safety (Nopianti, 2013). These rituals function not only as spiritual practices but also as mechanisms to strengthen social solidarity and affirm cultural identity (Geertz, 1960). Within the Javanese context, one ritual that has endured to the present day is *Cowongan*, a rain-invocation tradition that continues to thrive in Cilacap Regency.

Initially, *Cowongan* was performed using a doll made from a *siwur* (coconut-shell ladle) accompanied by collective vocal chanting without instrumental accompaniment as the core of the ritual (Widiyono, 2016). This tradition is believed to have existed since the pre-Islamic era and has been passed down orally as part of community identity (Supriyanto, 2023). In practice, *Cowongan* was not only understood as a spiritual medium to request rainfall but also as a symbol of communal solidarity among agrarian societies in facing natural challenges (Neswara, 2023). The belief in its effectiveness was reinforced by empirical experiences of villagers who witnessed rainfall following the ritual.

Over time, *Cowongan* has undergone transformations in both function and form. From a sacred ritual, it gradually shifted into a performing art presented in public spaces (Agrestia, 2025). The most evident changes appear in its musical presentation, evolving from simple collective vocals to the inclusion of traditional instruments, the role of a *sinden* (female vocalist), stage arrangements, costumes, and sound technology. This shift reflects broader socio-cultural dynamics, in which local traditions adapt to demands for entertainment, documentation, and cultural commodification.

The continuity of culture is always marked by change (Herskovits in Merriam, 1964). The transformation of *Cowongan*'s musical presentation did not occur abruptly but was influenced by multiple factors. Modernization and increased access to education made communities more receptive to innovation. Shifts in religious values also shaped perspectives on tradition, while local cultural figures played a crucial role in encouraging the addition of instruments and the organization of art groups. Bramantyo (2000) emphasizes that traditional arts inevitably undergo change to remain relevant to their time. In this context, ethnomusicological studies are essential, as they position music as a cultural practice shaped by sound, behavior, and social context.

As Alan P. Merriam (1964: 32-33) asserts, "*studying the music of a society means simultaneously studying the behavior of its people within that culture.*" From this perspective, *Cowongan*'s transformation cannot be understood merely as a shift in sound but as a reflection of the socio-cultural dynamics of its community. The transition from ritual function to performing art raises questions about how society interprets this tradition in contemporary contexts. Changes in social behavior, such as broader community participation and the formal organization of art groups, indicate ongoing negotiations of identity at the community level. Meanwhile, the transformation of sound, from simple collective vocals to traditional instrumental accompaniment and modern sound systems, represents the evolving meanings embedded within the tradition.

Based on these issues, this study focuses on describing the transformation of *Cowongan*'s musical presentation in Kubang Wungu Hamlet, Pekuncen Village, Kroya Subdistrict, Cilacap Regency. The analysis employs Alan P. Merriam's concept-behavior-sound framework, which maps the relationship between cultural concepts, social behavior, and musical sound. Through this approach, each musical change can be traced back to shifts in meaning and social practice, ensuring that the study not only describes musical forms but also explains the cultural contexts underlying them.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach, as its primary focus was to understand the transformation of *Cowongan*'s musical presentation within the socio-cultural context of its supporting community. Ethnography was chosen because it enables researchers to interpret the meaning of traditions based on the experiences, behaviors, and interactions of the people, as emphasized by Spradley (1980), who stated that ethnographic research aims to understand a community's worldview from their own perspective. The research was conducted in Kubang Wungu Hamlet, Pekuncen Village, Kroya Subdistrict, Cilacap Regency, with participants including local cultural figures, members of art groups, and community members involved in both ritual and performance practices.

Data were collected through participant observation of *Cowongan* processions, in-depth interviews with cultural practitioners and community members, and documentation, in line with Moleong's (2017) view that qualitative research emphasizes data collection through direct interaction with information sources. Data analysis was guided by Alan P. Merriam's (1964) concept-behavior-sound framework, which examines changes in the function and meaning of tradition (concept), patterns of participation and social interaction (behavior), and musical transformation from simple collective vocals to traditional instrumental accompaniment and modern sound systems (sound). The analytical process involved data reduction, categorization, and interpretation to produce a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between musical changes and socio-cultural dynamics. Data validity was maintained through source and method triangulation to ensure the credibility of the findings

Results and Discussion

1. The Cowongan Tradition in Kubang Wungu Hamlet, Pekuncen Village, Kroya Subdistrict, Cilacap Regency

Kubang Wungu Hamlet is located in Pekuncen Village, Kroya Subdistrict, Cilacap Regency. This area is predominantly agrarian, with most of its inhabitants working as farmers. The community lives a simple life that is highly dependent on agricultural cycles, making agrarian traditions an integral part of their daily existence. In addition to economic activities, the people of Kubang Wungu continue to preserve various traditions such as *sedekah bumi* (earth thanksgiving), *sadranan* (grave cleaning ritual), and *slametan* (communal feast). These traditions serve to strengthen social solidarity while functioning as spiritual practices to maintain harmony between human life and nature. Within this context, *Cowongan* emerges as a distinctive local tradition, a rain-invocation ritual that employs a puppet made from a coconut-shell ladle (*siwur*) accompanied by collective vocal chants.

Cowongan has been transmitted orally from generation to generation. In the collective memory of the community, *Cowongan* functioned as a sacred ritual to request rainfall during prolonged droughts. Over time, however, the tradition experienced periods of decline. Its continuity was closely tied to the occurrence of drought, while broader social changes, the introduction of new religious values, and declining interest among younger generations contributed to its irregular practice. In 1994, a local cultural figure named Mr. Tamiarja took the initiative to revive *Cowongan*. This revitalization began in response to a severe drought affecting the hamlet and gradually developed into a collective movement to preserve ancestral traditions. Since then, *Cowongan* has been performed regularly, particularly during the month of *Sura* in the Javanese calendar, and has become an important part of Kubang Wungu's cultural calendar.



Figure 1. Mr. Tamiarja with the *Cowong* puppet since 1994
(Source: author's documentation, 2024)



Figure 2. Presentation of the *Cowongan* tradition in Kubang Wungu Hamlet
(Source: author's documentation, 2024)

2. Periodization of *Cowongan* Practice in Kubang Wungu Hamlet, Pekuncen Village, Kroya Subdistrict, Cilacap Regency

Periodisasi praktik *Cowongan* di Dusun Kubang Wungu memperlihatkan dinamika tradisi yang terus beradaptasi dengan kondisi alam, sosial, dan budaya masyarakat. Secara garis besar, perjalanan *Cowongan* terbagi ke dalam tiga fase utama:

a) Before 1994 (Collective Memory)

Before 1994, the practice of *Cowongan* in Kubang Wungu Hamlet lived within the collective memory of the community as a sacred agrarian ritual. Its primary function was to invoke rainfall and safeguard agricultural land during prolonged droughts. This concept was rooted in ancestral experiences transmitted orally, so *Cowongan* was understood not as a spectacle but as a medium of spiritual communication with nature and the ancestors.

The ritual began with preparatory stages, including the creation of a *Cowong* puppet from a coconut-shell ladle (*siwur*). The puppet was then presented beneath a banana tree (*pisang raja*) or another site considered sacred, as a means of calling upon ancestral spirits. At that time, *Cowongan* was performed in sacred places. The main performers were elderly women (mothers and grandmothers) who sang while simultaneously dancing with the *Cowong* puppet, while men were responsible for guarding the ritual site. The duration of the ritual typically followed odd-numbered days and could last up to fifteen nights until rainfall occurred. The closing stage involved placing the *Cowong* puppet in a high location, such as the roof of a house, symbolizing its return to the ancestors.

From a musical perspective, *Cowongan* before 1994 was characterized by simple vocal chants sung in unison by women (mothers and grandmothers) without instrumental accompaniment. If additional sounds were present, they consisted only of wood or stones being struck, reflecting the community's limited resources at the time. The musical structure was not standardized but relied on the oral memory of the performers. Since no written documentation existed, the continuity of *Cowongan* depended heavily on collective memory. This condition made the tradition vulnerable to disappearance, although it continued to survive through stories and practices passed down across generations.



Figure 3. Reconstructive transcript of *Cowongan* music “*Kembang Putat*” before 1994 (collective memory) based on informants’ descriptions (Transcribed by the author, 2025)



Figure 4. Reconstruction of *Cowongan* performance in the past
(Source: author’s documentation, 2024)

b) 1994–2005 (Revitalization)

Beginning in 1994, the *Cowongan* tradition in Kubang Wungu Hamlet entered a phase of revival after a period of dormancy. While *Cowongan* continued to be understood as a sacred ritual for rain invocation, in practice it also came to be interpreted as an effort to preserve local cultural heritage. This revitalization was initiated by a community leader, Mr. Tamiarja, who revived *Cowongan* following a prolonged drought in the hamlet. The initial impetus arose from his youngest child’s request to perform the *Cowongan* ritual, which later developed into a collective movement among villagers to safeguard ancestral traditions from extinction.

During the revitalization period, *Cowongan* was performed in the hamlet’s yards rather than in sacred sites as in earlier times. According to ancestral accounts, the *Cowong* puppet crafted from a coconut-shell ladle (*siwur*), remained the central symbol of the ritual, accompanied by collective vocal chants sung by villagers, now enriched with simple musical instruments. A significant change occurred in the composition of ritual participants: community involvement expanded beyond elderly women to include men, who began to participate as instrumentalists and supporters of the procession.

From a musical perspective, unison vocals remained the dominant element, consistent with earlier traditions. However, this phase introduced simple instruments such as *kendang* (drum) and *saron* (metallophone), which added depth to the accompaniment. The inclusion of instruments did not alter the core ritual but provided new nuances that reflected adaptation to evolving social and musical contexts.

Knowledge transmission of *Cowongan* occurred informally through collective practice. Older villagers taught the chants and ritual procedures to younger generations, ensuring the continuity of the tradition. This revitalization strengthened social solidarity, reestablished *Cowongan* as a regular event held annually during the month of *Sura*, and reaffirmed its position as an integral part of Kubang Wungu’s cultural calendar.



Figure 5. Reconstructive transcript of *Cowongan* music “*Kembang Putat*” during the 1994–2005 revitalization period based on informants’ descriptions
(Transcribed by the author, 2025)

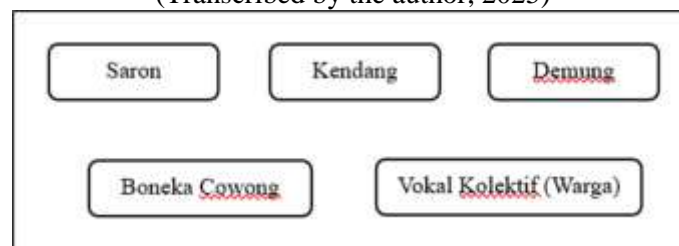


Figure 6. Reconstructive presentation of *Cowongan* music during the 1994–2005 revitalization period based on informants’ descriptions
(Source: author, 2025)

c) Post-2005 (Transformation)

After 2005, the *Cowongan* tradition in Kubang Wungu Hamlet entered a phase of transformation, marking a significant shift from sacred ritual to cultural performance. While *Cowongan* continued to be understood as a rain-invocation ritual, it simultaneously emerged as a representation of Cilacap’s cultural identity. A pivotal moment occurred when the residents of Kubang Wungu, together with local cultural figures, were invited by the Department of Culture to perform *Cowongan* at the *Pendopo* of Cilacap Regency. This invitation provided public legitimacy, and from that point onward, *Cowongan* was no longer viewed merely as a village ritual but as a cultural performance worthy of presentation in formal spaces.

Following this recognition, the community of Kubang Wungu, in collaboration with cultural leaders, established the *Wulan Sari Wungu* art group. This group adopted a formal organizational structure, consisting of elders, a chairperson, a *sinden* (female vocalist), instrumentalists, dancers, and technical coordinators. With this structure in place, *Cowongan* performances became more organized and professional. The performance sequence was systematically arranged, beginning with an opening segment, followed by the core ritual, an audience participation session, and a closing segment.

Musically, the previously collective vocal element was now led by a *sinden*, while the instrumental ensemble expanded to include *saron*, *calung*, *kendang*, and *gong*. Sound technology, such as the use of a sound system, was introduced to enhance the quality of the performance. The visual aspects of the presentation also underwent significant development: stage design became more structured, costumes and makeup were carefully curated to enhance aesthetic value, and formal documentation of performances began. These changes made *Cowongan* more communicative and accessible to a broader audience.

With the presence of documentation, *Cowongan* no longer relied solely on oral transmission but became formally recorded as part of the region's recognized cultural heritage. The character of *Cowongan* in this phase reflects its transformation from ritual tradition to public cultural performance. Nevertheless, the core ritual remains preserved as a vital expression of Kubang Wungu's cultural identity.



Figure 7. Musical transcript of *Cowongan* “*Kembang Putat*” from the post-2005 period to the present (Transcribed by the author, 2025)



Figure 8. Musical presentation of the *Cowongan* tradition in its current form (Source: author's documentation, 2024)

Conclusion

The transformation of musical presentation within the *Cowongan* tradition in Kubang Wungu Hamlet can be understood as a dynamic interaction between concept, behavior, and sound. In the period prior to 1994, *Cowongan* primarily functioned as a sacred ritual practice, characterized by collective vocal chants. The years 1994–2005 marked a phase of revitalization, when awareness of cultural preservation emerged without eliminating its ritual function. Music during this phase remained dominated by unison collective vocals, though simple instruments began to be incorporated. After 2005, transformation occurred through institutional legitimization, which encouraged the establishment of formal art groups. As a result, *Cowongan* performances became more structured, with the inclusion of instruments, stage arrangements, amplification, standardized sequences, and official documentation.

These changes were causal and mutually reinforcing. Public legitimacy (concept) stimulated organizational formalization and improved performance quality (behavior), which in turn produced

musical and technical adaptations (sound). Conversely, the more communicative sound and visual elements strengthened the interpretation of *Cowongan* as a cultural performance, expanding its meaning from a sacred ritual to a cultural representation accessible to wider audiences.

The main conclusion of this analysis is that *Cowongan* is a dynamic and adaptive tradition, capable of surviving as a sacred ritual, revitalized through collective awareness, and transformed into a structured public performance. The changes in musical presentation not only reflect the internal dynamics of the community but also affirm *Cowongan's* position as a cultural identity symbol of the Cilacap people, maintaining its relevance to the present day.

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