

This is not a Kowangan: A case-study in community collaboration as conservation of a world culture musical instrument.

Part One: The Kowangan

In February 2016, after three years of part-time study for my Masters in Cultural Materials Conservation at the Grimwade Centre of the University of Melbourne, I was finally about to launch into what felt like the two most important units of the course: the ultimate in practicals, “Conservation Assessment and Treatment II”, where students are assigned objects or artworks to put their conservation techniques and knowledge into practice, and the far more theoretical “Conservation Minor Thesis”, where students demonstrate their critical thinking and research skills by producing a 13,000 word thesis.

There is always a lot of anticipation in the run up to what we refer to as Treatment 2. Over the course of the previous years, I had enviously watched other students work upon their treatments, and quizzed other objects students on what they had been assigned. For the other streams, paper and paintings, variations depend mostly on size, origin and levels of damage, but for us objects conservators, we could end up with virtually anything -- and our lecturers keep everything very quiet!

The first morning of Treatment 2, we filed into the labs and tried to pay close attention to the introductory lecture, but I found it hard to concentrate in a room full of mysterious forms shrouded in Tyvek wrappings. Whilst most of my fellow students had barely recovered from the intensity of the first year and their experiences of Treatment 1 only a few months earlier, I had been waiting for this since 2012, which is when I decided that I wanted to become a conservator. In 2014, Treatment 1 had been a tantalising glimpse into the delights of solvent-based cleaning, infills and colour-matching, tempered by the demands of my full-time work at the time. This time, I was determined to get the most out of my final year of the course, and I had finished up at my job just days before the subject started, in order to invest myself fully in what I knew more than ever was the only career for me.

These insights will hopefully provide some context to my reaction when first faced with what its label informed me was a “KOWANGAN”. I had been assigned as a huge pile of dusty leaves, wicker-work, and what appeared to be the hair from that scary little girl in *The Ring*.



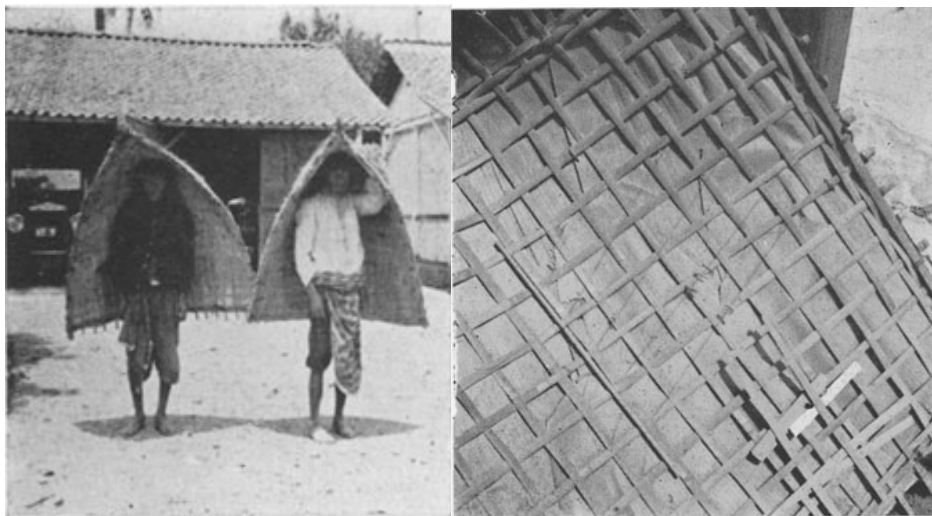
My first impressions of the Kowangan

(Photo left: © Rosie Cook 2016. Photo right © Paramount Pictures 2016, [source](#))

I had watched the students around me receive unusual and unique objects -- a doctor's case, a dance trophy, a delicate cither. When our lecturer Susie Collis announced excitedly

that this *KOWANGAN*, a supposed musical instrument the size of a large child, was to be my responsibility, her tone implied it was an honour to be chosen for this task, and I tried to smile gratefully as I took it in. In fact, I am ashamed to say, I actually had to go outside to take a few deep breaths and blink away my tears of disappointment. I didn't know where to begin, or even what it was, and certainly didn't feel like I had the skills or knowledge to produce a beautiful and satisfying "before and after" set of photos. I didn't even want to touch it. Students at the nearby benches patted me on the shoulder and tried to console me, murmuring "It doesn't look so bad" and "I'm sure if you asked, you could change objects?"; they quickly learned to shake their heads meaningfully when other people came past my station and asked "What is THAT?"

I knew I was over-reacting and being extremely unprofessional, and resigned myself to doing as good a job as I could, but every time I sat down and removed the Tyvek cover, I felt overwhelmed all over again. So I covered it back up, and reverted to the pacifier of the 21st century: the internet. I started by searching the University of Melbourne library, where I found Jaap Kunst's 1939 work "Music of Indonesia" and learnt that this instrument had a variety of spellings and names, was very rare and unique, and originated in the Dieng Plateau of Java. Kunst had included a technical description of the instrument, and four very indistinct black and white photos. I couldn't make out very much, so I began searching the web for more information.



(Photos © Jaap Kunst 1939)

At that time, Google.com.au did not return anything other than Kunst for <kowangan>, but motivated by determination and desperation, I started exploring the Indonesian search options. Using the powers of Google image search and Google translate, over the course of several days, I uncovered snippets of articles and tweets through which I learned that this rare instrument was now played by just one man, and that it was highly endangered. This process of understanding an object's significance is so valuable -- understanding why and what we are treating in a broader context. Suddenly, its meaning changed completely, and my eyes probably lit up as I realised how special this project was, and what an amazing opportunity I was granted when Susie, knowing my interest in community engagement and world cultures, assigned me what I was now affectionately referring to as "my kowangan".



Javanese musician and singer (Photo © Oka Hamid 2008, [source](#))

Susie encouraged me to make contact with the collector and owner of the Kowangan, Professor Margaret Kartomi, who is the Director of [the Music Archive at Monash University \(MAMU\)](#). Margaret, supported by the Head Archivist Bronia Kornhauser, had kindly lent a number of instruments from their collection to the Grimwade Centre for the Treatment 2 subject. I was very fortunate in that Margaret had detailed field notes from when she collected the instrument in 1972, and she passed on to me several pages of information, as well as the wonderful words: "I expect you know some Indonesian language, but perhaps not Javanese? In any case please apply for a grant and go to the Dieng Plateau to do some more research on the instrument." I did not speak any Indonesian, let alone Javanese, but whilst I laughed the first time I read those lines, Margaret had planted the seeds for what was to become an incredible experience -- and a fantastic minor thesis topic.

Once I had become more comfortable with the Kowangan, I began my treatment. I gently cleaned and adjusted its woven bamboo frame, neatly repositioned the dark coconut fibre matting that had once so disturbed me, and used Japanese paper, watercolours and starch paste to create a variety of almost invisible patches to support the layers of cracked and shedding bamboo leaves. But at the same time as I was restoring visual integrity to the 45-year-old instrument, I was continuing to research its significance and background, with hopes of restoring its intangible integrity, as it was missing the strings and small pieces of wood that formed its musical elements. It was clear to me that this would make a great minor thesis topic, and I was fully supported by Susie and my thesis supervisor, Dr Nicole Tse -- as well as by Margaret and Bronia at MAMU.



My much-anticipated “Before and After” money shots (Photo © Rosie Cook 2016)

I made it my mission to track down a Mr Bambang Hengky, the director of a short documentary *Aura Magis Bundengan*, “The magical aura of Bundengan”, who had met with the last maker and player of the instrument in question, and whom I hoped would be able to introduce me -- by this point, I was fully committed to fieldwork in the Dieng Plateau as suggested by Margaret, although I wasn’t yet sure how I would fund it. Fortunately, Pak Bambang was very responsive despite our language barrier, and via emails run through Google Translate, we agreed that in a few months I would visit the musician in his hometown near Wonosobo, to see a performance and purchase a new instrument for MAMU’s collection.

This wonderful news spurred me on through the painful processes of ethics applications, literature reviews, methodologies and other delights involved in the early stages of a thesis. In addition to extensive reading on the topics of community engagement and fieldwork, I also was very lucky to take a subject on time-based media and the conservation of performance and installation art through documentation. Readings such as *The Archive and the Repertoire* by Diana Taylor (2003) and *Destination Culture* by Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (1998) reframed my approach to the project as an opportunity for collaboration with artists and creators, rather than falling into the trap of one-way “consultation”. It became clear to me that I needed to propose research that would not just allow me to ‘take the data and run’, Tim Ingold’s trenchant description of participant observation in his 2014 book, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology and Architecture*. Instead, I had to consider what I could

bring to the table, what I could contribute, and how my research would benefit the community who were so generously receiving me. Ingold urges researchers to enter into what he describes as “correspondence” -- and over the course of my fieldwork, I found myself sharing the hopes, goals and dreams of the people I was meeting.

I was also mindful of the needs of the Kowangan’s owners at MAMU. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett particularly emphasises the importance of “living links” between objects in “ethnographic collections” (although in contemporary conservation, we prefer to use the phrase “world cultures” in recognition of outdated, colonial meanings embedded in the word “ethnographic”). Identifying the needs of the stakeholders of the Kowangan -- both the Melbourne-based owners of the physical object-instrument, and the Javanese owners of the cultural tradition that it represented -- showed how a connection between the two would be mutually beneficial. As a conservator, it was my duty, privilege and pleasure to build those living links and to identify what form they might take.

Part Two: Meeting the Bundengan

My first step, encouraged by a meeting with Senior Conservator Holly Jones-Amin, was to join a Gamelan ensemble -- a traditional Indonesian orchestra. I had read Holly's 2006 paper on conserving the spiritual and physical aspects of a museum Gamelan, and was impressed by her approach which included learning to play the instrument. Through friends I met at Gamelan practice, I was introduced to the website Aural Archipelago, and was immediately enchanted by author-ethnomusicologist Palmer Keen's approach, using Facebook and Instagram to simply and sensitively share pictures, recordings and stories about the rare instruments and unique musicians he met as he travelled around Indonesia. I got in touch to ask Palmer for any practical advice on my upcoming meeting with Pak Bambang and the musician in Wonosobo, and was very lucky -- Palmer had heard of the kowangan, and was very enthusiastic about joining me on this expedition. This turned out to be a brilliant idea, and helped me feel much more confident in the lead-up to our visit; I still was not sure who exactly I was meeting, as multiple names had been given to me by Pak Bambang, and I also did not know whether the last instrument-builder and last musician were one and the same person.

Our initial visit to Wonosobo happened in early August, and was a great exercise for me in learning how to manage cross-cultural projects -- even though we had planned things months ahead, when I arrived in Indonesia everyone was very surprised that I was actually "here for real"! Pak Bambang was still able to pull everyone together to meet me at the last minute, and so Palmer, my friends-cum-interpreters Mas Budi and Mas Aji, and I drove the four hours from Yogyakarta for a performance and interviews. I was so nervous and so excited, and was grateful to Palmer for guiding me through the social niceties of Javanese hospitality -- especially as we were so kindly and warmly received.



My embarrassing spin on the dancefloor (Photo © Palmer Keen 2016)

After watching the dance and musical performance in Ngabean village square (and being somewhat embarrassingly drawn in to join them on the tarp dancefloor), we sat down with performers Pak Munir, the musician I recognised from photos and from *Aura Magis Bundengan*, and Pak Buchori, the singer who performed with him. I had prepared some interview questions, but in reality this was more of a warm-up session as we got to know each other -- if I asked a question in English, it first had to be translated into Indonesian, and then into the local Javanese dialect. The answer would then come back to me in the reverse order, and was not always related to the initial questions -- but would always be interesting and lead to further conversations. The aim for me as a conservator wasn't so much to conduct in-depth ethnomusicological research about the musical instrument, but to create living links to the community of musicians who understood its significance in a very tangible way. The most important discovery for us from this interview was that the instrument we had been referring to as "kowangan" was actually called "bundengan". I had previously understood it to be a different name for the same thing, but in fact a kowangan is a rigid woven bamboo cape, from which a bundengan is made -- and I was promised a visit to the kowangan-maker would be arranged on the following day. As for making kowangan into bundengan -- well that was up to the individual musician and Pak Munir always converted his own instruments. Palmer has captured the organological details of the instrument fabrication in his account of our trip, [here](#).

After the initial interview, everyone was able to relax and we were very kindly invited to stay the night in the home of Pak Buchori, where the interview had in fact taken place. Curious neighbours and wide-eyed children began to accumulate around the doorway, eventually spilling into the room and surrounding us -- and soon requesting selfies and handshakes! As the afternoon progressed, Pak Buchori's daughters, along with friends and schoolmates, started preparing for a dance performance, and the large open living-room was filled with music, giggles and clapping, as the older girls and women looked on, calling out advice to the dancers in between taking selfies and chatting away. One of the dances was performed whilst singing a very pretty song about Wonosobo regency, accompanied by Pak Munir on the bundengan, and Khori, the eldest daughter, taught me the words so I could join in with everyone else. Probably one of my favourite memories of my visit, captured in the video below, is that of sitting with Mbak Khori as I stumbled through the Javanese lyrics, feeling a very tangible joy of sharing music as everyone smiled and nodded encouragingly as we all sang along together. This was precisely the type of living heritage that it was my privilege to pursue on behalf of the MAMU Kowangan back in Melbourne.

<https://youtu.be/oXte2NKKC88>

"At Home with Bundengan" (Video © Rosie Cook 2016)

The next morning, our visit to Pak Mahrumi, one of the last makers of high quality kowangans suitable for conversion into bundengan, was yet another type of materials conservation knowledge gathering. Over the course of nearly two hours, we interviewed Pak Mahrumi, discussing his 70 years of experience, and handling the different bamboo products used. We filmed the weaving process that goes into building a kowangan, and discussed the properties of the bamboo "*slompring*" or culm sheaths that are layered over the frame and secured with a cord made from palm coir. To understand the materials and techniques that go into making objects, instruments and traditional wares such as a kowangan, watching the process as opposed to reading a book about them is truly ideal, and it gave me such a

deeper understanding of the Kowangan I had worked on in Melbourne. Details that I had interpreted as damage and degradation turned out to be quite normal features on a freshly built kowangan; elements that I had assumed were integral to its structure revealed themselves as irreversible strain on the woven bamboo and Pak Mahrumi assured me that our Kowangan could never be converted into a bundengan, because over the past 40 years, the inherent tension had deformed the bamboo making it unsuitable as a sounding board. It's so much easier to explain this type of information in person -- it was clear that my visit to Wonosobo had paid off immensely in terms of understanding both the materials and the meaning of the Kowangan, and how best to care for it moving forward.

<https://youtu.be/Ncl3CmXDj0>

“Making Bundengan” (Video © Rosie Cook 2016)

When visiting Ngabean village, Pak Buchori's daughters asked me to add them on Instagram, and this simple gesture of social connection triggered a rapidly expanding network, which continues to grow to this day. One of the pictures from our visit was hashtagged [#bundengan](#), which led me to check out all posts tagged [#bundengan](#). In August 2016, there were only a handful of posts -- but we were delighted to see people interacting with bundengan on social media. Most were photos or videos of Pak Munir and Pak Buchori performing, but one intriguing post showed schoolchildren playing instruments in formation alongside dancers. Over the course of the next few days, back in Jogjakarta, excited Instagram comments led to a flurry of Whatsapp activity, and the second, unplanned leg of my field trip was under way -- a visit to a school in Selomerto, Wonosobo Regency, which was rumoured to teach bundengan.

When I arrived at Selomerto SMP 2, a secondary school located somewhat off the beaten track, my Instagram contact and soon-to-be great friend and collaborator, ethnomusicology student Mas Sa'id, appeared on a scooter, and introduced me to the school principal before I finally met one of my favourite people in the world: Ibu Mulyani. “Bu Mul”, as everyone calls her with equal affection and respect, is a very talented dance and music teacher, and she is also one of the most driven and passionate women I have ever met. It has been my honour to work with Bu Mul over the past months, and I am so grateful to her for the immediate warmth, affection, and pride with which she welcomed me to her classroom. Bu Mul had spotted the unique nature and branding potential of bundengan as a unique local cultural practice, and after convincing the local government to pay for 20 bundengan to be made, and getting Pak Munir to teach her the basics, she began teaching her students how to play -- keeping things quite simple at first, dividing responsibilities between the “drums” and the “strings” to avoid anyone getting too confused.



Meeting Bu Mul and her class of bundengan musicians (Photo © Rosie Cook 2016)

The children were delighted to show off for me, and I enjoyed their performance immensely, before meeting Mas Agus and Mas Andi, two university students and Instagrammers who also used #bundengan, and who had been dedicating themselves to learning bundengan and integrating it into their own music. Because Mas Sa'id, Mas Agus and Mas Andi all spoke English, it was really wonderful to have direct conversations and get more insights into the revival movement, particularly from the perspective of the new generation of players and potential instrument builders.

<https://youtu.be/U2DG9SHqeM0>

“Learning Bundengan” (Video © Rosie Cook 2016)

Developing the #bundengan channel became something of a passion over the coming months, as from my perspective this was not just social media, but participation in the conservation of our MAMU Kowangan. From a time-based media conservation approach, it documents the social meaning and context of bundengan and its performance, from many perspectives, and with the added benefit that the Instagram format welcomes dialogue and interaction from the source community as well as curious outsiders. In addition to these social media activities, following my trip I focussed on writing my minor thesis, framing how this type of project could improve cultural materials practices for world culture objects. I'm glad to say my work was well-received, and to be the recipient of the Alexander Copland Prize for best minor thesis was such a fantastic outcome. I was delighted, not least because the generous prize of \$1000 was immediately earmarked to fund my return to Wonosobo! I announced our success to my bundengan Whatsapp crew -- and we immediately began planning for a bundengan workshop in Wonosobo. The very resourceful Bu Mul leaned on

every connection she had, and I was blown away, when I arrived in March 2017, to see the 2-day event she had put together.



Poster of our March 2017 Bundengan Workshop (Credit: Ibu Mulyani 2016)

Our event was a huge success, and has been a great PR move in terms of gaining further support. We are currently raising funds to establish “Making Connections”, a series of instrument-building and -playing workshops in coordination with the Indonesian Institute of the Arts in Surakarta, the [Music Archive at Monash University](#) and the Grimwade Centre at the University of Melbourne, to continue promoting a sustainable and long-term connection between this unusual instrument and the context within which it has the most meaning and value. We have also seen a huge pick-up in people interested in bundengan, thanks to the huge media coverage we have enjoyed since beginning our workshop project, including engineers at Universitas Gadjah Mada [who are planning a research project to better understand the acoustic properties of the bundengan](#). For more information on our Making Connections project, please feel free to get in touch with me through [my website](#) [rosiehcook.com](#) -- or of course, on [Instagram @rosiehcook!](#)

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