



**MATT MENDER**

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## Introduction

Just over a year ago, my family and I relocated to a new city in Indonesia: Manado, near the northern tip of the island of Sulawesi. Although we have lived in Indonesia for over ten years, and in a different city on Sulawesi for the past nine, moving to a new location requires starting over: building new relationships in our neighborhood, meeting the artistic community, building relationships with new coworkers, learning and understanding the cultural differences here from where we lived previously, and much more. Doing research for a graduate class in learning a new art form, for which I initially wrote this paper, was not only an excellent way to begin learning about all of the above but is also a path to how I might be able to better serve this community.

## Choosing a Focus

As I considered which artistic tradition to pursue for this course, I was torn, primarily due to the history of this area of Indonesia. There has been a colonial presence in North Sulawesi since the 1600s, with influences from the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and English (Ricklefs 2008). There are eight major ethnolinguistic groups in this area, known collectively as the Minahasa peoples, a name given by the Dutch in the 1700s. The languages are distinct but related, and the cultures and arts are similar. The Dutch had the longest and most lasting influence on this area (Indonesia was a Dutch colony until World War II), but the artistic influence of the Spanish and Portuguese should not be underestimated (Rumengan 2009).

Because of these significant outside influences on Minahasa culture, research comes with unique challenges. Somewhat surprisingly, other than historical colonial accounts, little has been written about the Minahasa and their arts, relative to other, more popular, research locations in Indonesia (Batak, Toraja, Bali, and Papua, to name a few).<sup>1</sup> However, this relative dearth of research contrasts with the richness of the arts everywhere I turn. There are thousands of choral ensembles in this region—every church has at least two or three, and offices and clubs have their

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<sup>1</sup> This is a strong assertion, so I want to clarify that one factor in this lack of research may be limitations I experienced because of the COVID-19 pandemic; as will be discussed later in this paper, I was limited almost entirely to resources available online. With that said, it is still striking that few resources in online journals in English have been written about Minahasa music and culture. The Dutch colonized this area for hundreds of years, but I don't speak Dutch. It is possible that more research exists in that language.



own groups (Rumengan 2009). The *kolintang* ensemble (my eventual study subject) can be found in nearly every church and most middle and high schools.

The contrast could not be greater: I was observing a vibrant artistic community in which not only specific skilled musicians perform but nearly everyone sings in some sort of group or plays an instrument. Musical performances are a part of every cultural event I have attended, yet scholarly research is scant. I speculate that most researchers have overlooked this area because of the colonial influence; perhaps the culture and arts are felt to be tainted in a Western fusion of some sort and thus not worth studying, when there are more “authentic” traditions out there waiting to be found (Sutton 2013). Although the European influence cannot be denied, I find the culture here fascinating. What can be learned from a culture with a unique strength that survived five hundred years of colonization? The local minority languages here are still vital and strong, and collectively performed music is still a cornerstone of society.

Perhaps a cultural strength of the Minahasa is their ability to adapt to what comes, and yet thrive. Europeans arrive with their music, and the Minahasa see something interesting; they find what they can learn and adapt into their own traditions to innovate a new fusion. It’s hard to be certain, but although many artistic traditions (including the *kolintang*) have clearly been influenced by the West, it’s also fascinating to see the ways in which they have endured and thrived in the midst of change and a difficult atmosphere (Rumengan 2009). What is it that allows these traditions to remain, and in what ways have they adapted or assimilated? These are ideas for a later time, but these thoughts were swirling in my head as I considered how to learn more about Minahasa arts for this class.

### Ethnographic Research

Like many peoples in Indonesia, the Minahasa are very relational. The logical place for me to begin my artistic search was within my network of new friends and acquaintances: did any of them have connections to artists or arts groups? Teachers? After a few weeks of asking questions, I received an offer from a pastor in Tomohon (about 45 minutes into the mountains from where I live in Manado) to introduce me to an acquaintance he had met a few months prior at a special church service. From Tomohon, Rev. Audi drove me a further twenty minutes into the surrounding mountains to the location of Wale Ma’zani, a Minahasa artistic center. There he introduced me to Bpk. Joudi Auroy, the owner and director.<sup>2</sup> Pak Joudi began his career as a civil servant, usually a lucrative, stable, and highly sought-after job in Indonesia. After a few years, however, he found that he was more passionate about the arts and so chose to leave that career behind to found Wale Ma’zani. The roundabout way in which I was introduced to Pak Joudi through a chain of old and new relationships, friends of friends, and chance encounters resonated strongly with me as typical of how research usually happens. Kay Shelemay comments on this same phenomenon: “Most of us are well aware that we do not study a disembodied concept called ‘culture’ or a place called the

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<sup>2</sup> Indonesians almost always add an honorific such as *bapak* (father, mister) abbreviated Bpk. or Pak, before the name.

‘field,’ but rather encounter a stream of individuals to whom we are subsequently linked in new ways” (Shelemay 2008, 153).

Pak Joudi collects old instruments from the community in order to preserve them, and he told me his plan to one day have lessons and ensembles for each one. Some are almost lost to history now, but he dreams of revitalizing them. Although he is proficient in most of the Minahasa musical instruments, the primary focus of his center is on the teaching and performance of the kolintang.

I was initially thinking about asking to learn a bamboo flute or a drum or one of the other rarer instruments. As I sat and heard Pak Joudi’s story and reflected on Nicole Beaudry’s advice from our class readings, however, I decided to pursue this research differently (Beaudry 2008).<sup>3</sup> It was clear that he was well-acquainted with many of the Minahasa musical traditions, and my ambitions for learning about the arts here go much deeper than just learning an artistic tradition for the duration of the class. I plan to live in this area for the next eight to ten years, so my time frame is longer than just the few months of this semester. With that in mind, I gave Pak Joudi some background on who I am and what I do, explaining that I was taking this course and wanted to learn an artistic tradition. Instead of asking about a specific instrument, I asked him what he would recommend as a good starting point, a gateway into learning more about Minahasa music, arts, and culture in general.

Pak Joudi immediately recommended the kolintang. In his mind, it is the foundational instrument and so pervasive in society that my ability to understand the music and even play the instrument would be invaluable for my future in the Minahasa area. I had initially dismissed the kolintang, for perhaps the same reasons that many ethnomusicologists have also bypassed the Minahasa arts: the instrument uses the diatonic scale, and the keyboard layout looks suspiciously similar to the piano. He was quite adamant, however, and I realized that if I truly want to apprentice under Pak Joudi in learning about Minahasa arts long-term, I needed to allow him to choose my path in what I should learn and when.<sup>4</sup>

With the decision to learn kolintang settled, we chose to meet each Tuesday at 10:30 a.m. for about an hour (this would turn out to be closer to two hours each time). Every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon there are kolintang ensemble rehearsals at Wale Ma’zani, so our hope was that he would give me private lessons for a few weeks, and once I knew the basics I would continue private lessons but also begin attending rehearsals on occasion to play alongside other musicians and get to know the community.

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<sup>3</sup> Since reading Beaudry’s contribution to *Shadows in the Field*, I have not forgotten her quote from John Steinbeck at the beginning of the chapter: “We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us.” This idea led me to allow relationships and others to guide and direct many of my research choices.

<sup>4</sup> Beaudry comments, “I came to understand that no expressive behavior exists in isolation from its cultural context and therefore that the shortest route toward real understanding is still the long way around—that I still needed to see the forest as well as the trees” (Beaudry 2008, 229). This stuck in my mind as I struggled with Pak Joudi’s choice for me: I realized that in some ways those rare and fascinating instruments I was initially attracted to are very unique and rare trees in a much bigger forest.

Before beginning the lessons, I wanted to learn what I could about the kolintang from other sources, so as not to begin my lessons completely naive. The term kolintang (sometimes spelled kulintang) is actually a regional term used across Southeast Asia, and it primarily refers to gong ensembles, usually made up of small gongs laid in horizontal rows. The ensembles are present all across this region, including on the island of Sulawesi in areas further south, as well as up north into the southern Philippines (Kalanduyan 1996). This gong ensemble concept even extends to Java and Sumatra, and it takes a slightly different form when put in the well-known gamelan ensembles of that area. There is a long tradition in Asia of also making these types of ensembles out of bamboo or other woods, such as the bamboo *calung* or *angklung* ensembles on Java and the North Sulawesi wooden keyboard kolintang. I was surprised to find that most scholarly resources focus on the gong-based ensembles in the southern Philippines rather than the wooden Minahasa version. I found kolintang mentioned in some articles and books discussing colonial history in the Minahasa region, but otherwise the majority of information was found on Indonesian cultural websites or social media documentation, such as YouTube videos.

With that limited knowledge, I headed to Wale Ma'zani for my first lesson. Pak Joudi had a specific method to his teaching and was clearly used to guiding beginners such as me; although he moved quickly, he was very careful to focus on a few foundational techniques first. He showed me how to hold the mallets (one in each hand, and loosely, so they could easily and quickly rebound off the keys). I first practiced on just one key, attempting to achieve a fast and relatively steady tremolo effect. The mallet strikes didn't need to be perfectly even or line up precisely with the rhythm of the music; the most important thing appeared to be uninterrupted speed and continuity of the sound.

Once I could (sometimes) maintain a tremolo on one note, Pak Joudi gave me scale exercises to separate my hands and begin practicing maintaining a tremolo on different keys. We began with one hand staying on a central note and the other moving note by note up or down the keyboard (depending on the hand). A further technique was to play scales with both hands in intervals of octaves, fifths, and thirds, to get used to my hands moving together. These exercises appear simple but were (and still are) surprisingly difficult for me. My Western classical music background aided me in some aspects: I know what a diatonic scale is, and the arrangement of the keys is the same as a piano keyboard, so I knew where to find each note. Rhythmically, however, I was challenged in new ways. My strongly held Western assumption was that the tremolo should be divisible by a beat such as eighth, sixteenth or thirty-second notes, yet it became clear that this is not as highly valued in playing the kolintang. While some players may frequently line up with the beat, just as often players don't concern themselves with it, or they move freely in and out of alignment. Based on my limited experience (and this is something I want to learn more about once I have the opportunity), this simply isn't of concern to most performers.

It is unexpectedly difficult for me to let go of this assumption about music, since it is rooted in physical habits that have been trained into my muscles since I was a child learning music for the first time. While I'm trying to focus on striking the correct notes, my mind is constantly distracted either by subconsciously attempting to line my tremolo up with the beat or by focusing on how it doesn't align. This was an unforeseen challenge.

Because I approached the kolintang with a musical background, most of my challenges have been in the technique, not in finding the correct notes. Once Pak Joudi had demonstrated the practice techniques above, he quickly moved on to teaching songs, with the assumption that I would practice at home to improve. The first song he taught me seems based on the Spanish traditional song “La Paloma” and probably arrived with the Spanish (could this trace all the way back to colonial times? Further research is needed!). For that lesson, he taught me the melodic line through repetition and demonstration: he played a phrase a few times and then asked me to repeat it back to him. We did this until I could imitate his performance relatively well. Before the lesson ended, I asked him to perform the entire song from beginning to end so that I could take a video to watch at home and remind myself of each phrase. Pak Joudi’s teaching method follows closely what Mantle Hood recommended years ago: rather than focusing on notation, imitation and rote learning are far more beneficial in the early stages (Hood 1960, 56).

In subsequent lessons, we not only learned more songs (melodically) but Pak Joudi also introduced me to the other instruments in the ensemble. From his perspective, kolintang is the entire ensemble, not just one instrument. To learn to play kolintang, I needed to be able to play all the instruments in the ensemble, not just the melody. Generally, there are specific rhythmic patterns and harmonization structures for the accompanying instruments. Each has a role to play in filling out the sound of the ensemble, and I also realized that learning the general rules and style for each instrument makes it easier to jump into an ensemble to play along with a group or arrange a new song. Once the musicians have a grasp of the melody, song structure, and underlying chords, they can improvise the song very quickly based on preset formulaic patterns.

Table 1 describes the names of each instrument. There is considerable variation in names, depending on the source, so I have compared and contrasted two of the systems I encountered, along with some explanatory notes (“Ini 5 Fakta Keren Musik Kolintang Dari Sulawesi Utara” 2020). Once I am able to continue lessons with Pak Joudi, I would like to ask more about the discrepancies.

Once I had a basic understanding of each instrument, how it fits into the ensemble, and how to play it, Pak Joudi assigned me the homework of choosing a song to arrange for kolintang for our next lesson. This was an exciting challenge, and I was enthusiastically thinking of different options that would sound great as well as be good learning opportunities. Unfortunately, that next lesson never happened, as the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread around the world and social distancing became necessary.

### **The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

As the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread around the world in December 2019 and into January 2020, Indonesia remained calm and relatively unconcerned. By the end of February the news was gaining traction and local concern was building, but it was still seen as something far away. By mid-March, however, it became clear that the virus was present in Indonesia (and

Table 1. The Instruments of the Kolintang Ensemble

<i>Instrument Names</i> <sup>5</sup>	<i>Pak Joudi's Instrument Names</i> <sup>6</sup>	<i>Notes and Comments</i>
<i>Ina Esa</i> (Melodi 1)	<i>Ina</i>	According to Pak Joudi this is the main melodic instrument of the ensemble, with the other two <i>Ina</i> playing harmonies. The keyboard is arranged piano-style with two rows of keys. All other instruments are a single chromatic row of keys.
<i>Ina Rua</i> (Melodi 2)		This instrument was not mentioned by Pak Joudi.
<i>Ina Taweng</i> (Melodi 3)	<i>Taweng</i>	This is the highest and smallest instrument. It tends to play <i>keroncong</i> -style accompaniments, which are mainly important for the “crispy” (my term) rhythmic patterns in the background, similar to strumming a ukulele on off-beats.
<i>Uner</i> (Alto 1)	<i>Wangko</i>	Between these four instruments are what Pak Joudi called the <i>Wangko</i> , <i>Benyo</i> , and <i>Gitar</i> .
<i>Uner Rua</i> (Alto 2)	<i>Benyo</i>	
<i>Karua</i> (Tenor 1)	<i>Gitar</i>	
<i>Karua Rua</i> (Tenor 2)		
<i>Cella</i> (Cello)	<i>Selo</i>	There is some difference in the spelling of the name, but otherwise they describe the same instrument.
<i>Loway</i> (Bass)	<i>Bas</i>	The lowest instrument in the ensemble.
<i>Katelu</i> (Ukulele)	<i>Juk</i>	I'm not sure how this instrument fits in. It appears to me to describe something similar to the <i>Ina Taweng</i> , so this is an area where I would like to ask more questions.

<sup>5</sup> (“Ini 5 Fakta Keren Musik Kolintang dari Sulawesi Utara” 2020)

<sup>6</sup> (Auroy 2020)

probably had been for quite some time, but we will need to wait months or even years for all the details), and local governments began taking action to limit the spread. At the beginning of March, the North Sulawesi government asked its citizens to refrain from large gatherings such as church services, sporting events, and shopping at malls, and this soon expanded to include the cultural center where Pak Joudi and I met for lessons, so effectively my in-person ethnographic research ended in mid-March 2020. I am thankful that I live in Manado and intend to continue living and serving in this area for many years to come, so that although for the purposes of this course my research was cut short, I will still have the opportunity to continue learning from Pak Joudi in the future.

The implications of a pandemic on research of all kinds, especially among vulnerable minority groups around the world, are yet to be determined, but certainly the methods of ethnographic research will be affected and forced to change. For ethnomusicological research projects specifically, oftentimes the most interesting and least-documented artistic traditions are in remote areas. This implies several important things: difficulty in traveling to the location, limited communication with the outside world, and (most importantly in these circumstances) limited access to good healthcare. The ethical implications of potentially exposing an isolated people group to a deadly virus for which they have no hope of medical care weigh heavily on many minds.

Video conferencing options and fast internet access have improved dramatically in recent years, and this helps in a pandemic, as families can more easily stay in touch and some work can continue from home and virtually. Even limited internet access can enable access to chat apps such as WhatsApp or Telegram, which allow for voice messages, videos, photos, and files to be sent back and forth in addition to text messages. However, this is an additional challenge to most ethnographic research in a pandemic for the reasons given above: most often, the least-researched and most in need also live in areas with limited communication and no internet access.

In Indonesia, the province of North Sulawesi is relatively wealthy and well-developed. The roads are well-paved, I have a fast fiber-optic internet connection in my home in Manado, and 4G internet is widespread. However, even just fifteen to twenty kilometers outside of Manado those conditions can change very quickly, and Pak Joudi at the Wale Ma'zani happens to be in an area with poor phone reception. Even in a comparatively well-developed region such as this one, the ability to continue research remotely through video calls and interviews is not a given.

Access to academic libraries and research is also an important factor. Initially I was unconcerned about the library research I needed to do for this paper: I have access to JSTOR, the internet, and a university library online through DIU. I soon realized, however, that the kolintang is not well-documented—for a number of reasons listed earlier, some of which could make for a very interesting paper on why the arts in colonized areas are relatively ignored by much of academia. I became aware that the limited existing research on kolintang is primarily offline, in the form of books and articles in the Bahasa Indonesia language in local university libraries here. In this pandemic, all local university campuses were closed, so I didn't have access to those libraries in person.

I was fortunate to own two books by a respected Minahasa scholar, Perry Rumengan, which he wrote on the vocal music of the Minahasa (*Musik Vokal Etnik Minahasa*) and on contextual church music among the Minahasa (*Musik Gerejawi Kontekstual Etnik*). I met him at a workshop in 2011 and he gave me a copy of each of his books. Through doing research in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was humbly reminded of the importance of relationships, primary sources, physical books, and interviews. Had I not possessed these two books, I would have been extremely limited in the background knowledge I could find on the kolintang. My only choice would have been internet sources and websites of dubious academic quality with little documentation of the original source of the information. Through reading these two books, I was able to correlate and cross-examine online sources for accuracy and reliability.

The COVID-19 pandemic could have a major effect on ethnographic research methods. Much remains to be seen, and history may regard this pandemic differently from how we do now, but I can at least speak from my current perspective. This crisis lays bare the internet as a resource, both the good and the bad. There is extremely easy access to information in some languages on some topics; unfortunately, the opposite is true for more languages and topics than academia may have previously realized. In a world where so much can be learned through a simple search or voice query to a device, a new digital divide is exposed. The “digital divide” is usually framed in terms of those who have internet access and those who do not, but there is also a divide in what knowledge is available online versus what is either undocumented or only available as physical, offline media (“3 Ways the Coronavirus Pandemic Could Reshape Education” n.d.). Google Scholar and the Internet Archive, among other endeavors, have been digitally scanning old public domain texts as well as copyrighted works (while only providing excerpts to the public, alongside links to purchase the resource). But these efforts have focused primarily on English-language resources. Is there interest in documenting the thousands of books, dissertations, articles, and theses residing in university libraries all across the Indonesian archipelago? At this point a new “digital divide” between what is and is not available online is more clearly visible.

A frequent source of quick-and-dirty initial research into an artistic tradition is an online video platform such as YouTube. The researcher can find what others have shared, see professional as well as amateur videos of the tradition, and access an audiovisual record of a wide variety of performances in diverse contexts (Laurier 2013). In the case of this research, I was required to rely on this resource more heavily than normal. I finished my master’s degree in 2006, and at that time online resources were not always acceptable in research papers—much less casual videos (when they even existed online) and barely existent social media posts. Today, however, much can be gleaned from what is (and is not) posted online, as well as what is (and is not) discussed on social media. Research is even being done on the online presence of particular artistic traditions. In some cases, such as memes, the art form owes its existence to social media.

The current pandemic may force researchers to more heavily investigate the online representations of artistic traditions than might have been the case historically, and this could lead to new and exciting research trends. Dougan writes, “Ethnomusicologists and those studying world music value the currency, convenience, and content of YouTube, finding it offers access to performances that may not be available commercially (or possibly due to legal or political reasons),



and may be difficult for libraries to acquire” (Dougan 2016). In my case, as I prepared my annotated bibliography of kolintang examples, I realized how true this statement is, as I was forced to use YouTube as a primary source of information.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia has seen a curious return to the past. One example: for previous generations, flying homemade kites extremely high into the sky and competing with friends was a favorite pastime. In certain parts of Indonesia, such as on the island of Bali, this tradition has persisted. In my time living in Manado prior to the pandemic, I don't recall seeing kites flying. A month into social distancing, while on a recent drive to get some fresh air, my family and I drove through villages where ten or more kites could be seen flying high. As we drove slowly down the narrow roads, I observed middle-aged fathers flying kites alongside their children, showing them how to wind the string and gently coax their kite higher and higher into the air. I wondered how long it had been since those fathers had made and flown a kite. With more free time at home and so many restrictions on travel and social life, was I observing a return to older ways of having fun? Perhaps this means the opportunity for revitalization of some local traditions. It is conceivable that the Minahasa peoples will see newly revived interest in their culture; with more time at home, grandfathers and grandmothers might pass on their knowledge and share their values, teach new generations how to play an old instrument, and tell great stories.

Inevitably, society will change through this pandemic. I am simultaneously optimistic and cautious about the effects of this on local artistic traditions. Many people are deeply touched by the arts as their favorite artists share performances, both live and recorded, over the internet. My fervent hope is that renewed interest will be generated that will last well beyond any social distancing measures imposed by the government, yet I am discouraged as I witness so many people moving in the opposite direction and becoming fully absorbed in their mobile phones. Only time will tell, but it will be fascinating to observe the long-term effects of this pandemic on local arts and the research of those traditions.

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