

Kerasukan:

A musical journey in Sulawesi



written by

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INTRODUCTION

„*Kerasukan*“ (literally „being possessed“), is a Makassar term for the energy a musician needs to perform. This term also sums up my experience while traveling in Sulawesi, researching the traditional music and buying instruments for my collection:

You need a lot of energy to establish contacts and find the musicians, and if you find people willing to help you, they will do so with sometimes unexpected energy and commitment, and even the musicians often take huge efforts in order to make a recording or just a meeting possible, and they perform with high energy and joy.

This is no academic article. It tries to reflect my „adventures“ while hunting for the remaining musical traditions in Sulawesi, tries to portrait the wonderful people I met, as well as presenting the traditions I found during my research and during my journey.

Why Sulawesi?

After researching mainland Southeast Asia, Indonesia was on my wish list for a long time.

If you search for traditional music from Indonesia, the *Gamelan* will show up first, as this ensemble is in the center of many musical traditions on the main islands (Java, Sumatra, Bali). It seems to be well researched. For sure, there are many places worth a visit, but Sulawesi was somehow touching me, as it seemed to be special:

There is no *Gamelan* on Sulawesi. In Sulawesi Selatan (South) a wonderful instrument is in the center of musical traditions: The boatlute „*kecap*“ or „*kacaping*“, appearing in a special shape, which can't be found anywhere else in Indonesia, compared to the boatlutes of Sumatra or even the Philippines. Furthermore, the bamboo flutes „*suling*“ are widespread and also know many shapes, sizes, names and traditions. And if this is not enough, Sulawesi knows a rich diversity of ethnic groups living side by side, each with their own language, costumes, musical traditions and dances - a researchers dream!

The last German researcher in Sulawesi was **Walter Kaudern**, who was simply listing some instruments in 1927. He drew sketches, sorted the instruments in a kind of catalog manner but somehow forgot to give the instruments proper names or where he found them. He is following the tradition of colonial researchers and compares a lot, but sometimes gets lost in speculations about the instruments origin. **(1)**

The most actual research might be the book „Recalling the spirit“ by **R. Anderson-Sutton**, already presenting some artists and musical traditions in detail in 2002. **(2)**

In between those 70 years, English publications dealing especially with the music in Sulawesi are rare. Actually, mainly **Rappoport** remains **(3)**, concentrating on the Toraja music, but to my humble knowledge that is almost all. Lucky readers sometimes find quotes or statements in sociological or even historical articles, but those are not of satisfying detail.

So, the only way to find out what kind of musical traditions in Sulawesi survived until the year 2018 was by going there and trying to find out by myself.

This is what happened:

1.0 MAKASSAR

Every „*bule*“ („pale“=foreigner) either starts in Manado or Makassar. Here are the two basic airports, Manado for diving enthusiasts in the north, Makassar for the southern and central regions. Makassar also functions as a portal to the center or the southeast peninsula and simply offers

more flight connections than Manado, so most foreigners will start here.

Makassar or „Ujung Pandang“ will confront the visitor with two major facts:

On Sulawesi you deal with boat people, fishermen, even pirates! The harbor is one of the most important industrial oversea harbors in Indonesia, but right next to it you find a fish market where it is possible to see the traditional way of fishing, without big trawlers or long automatic dragnets. There is no industrial fishing around Sulawesi, and this might be the reason why the fishing grounds around the island are claimed to be the most „healthy“ regions of the world. The Scuba or Padi divers in the north will agree, the tourism there is increasing, as the underwater world is known to be one of the most beautiful diving spots of the world.

The *Bajo* people are famous for their diving skills, they are able to hold the breath for as long as 15 minutes, and fishermen sometimes stay on their swimming little bamboo houses for weeks, out on the wide ocean, catching the big yellow Tuna, just with a fishing rod.

On „Pantai Losari“, a central place at the coast in Makassar, statues of four ethnic groups in South Sulawesi show the importance of these groups: *Mandar*, *Bugis*, *Makassar* and *Toraja*. The latter build houses, which remind of a boat which is turned upside down, the *Mandar* are highly respected farmers and fishermen, the former *Bugis* pirates are responsible for the saying „Who is afraid of the Boogie (Bugi!) Man?“, the *Makassar* sailors established the Gowa kingdom and ruled the island for many generations. So yes, this is a pirate island, this is the island of sea folks, people dealing with the ocean for thousands of years. No wonder the „*kecapi*“ lute appears with a resonating box that looks like one of their „*Pinisi*“ boats!

The other major fact is the impact of foreign influences. In the 15th century, Islam became the major religion on Sulawesi, thus introducing Arabian music and instruments. In 1525 the first Portuguese settlers came from the Moluccas in search for gold, followed 1605 by the Dutch, who cooperated with the Bugis to defeat the Gowa empire in 1669. They ruled mainly the South until the second world war, and after a short occupation by Japanese forces, Sulawesi was finally integrated in the republic of Indonesia in 1950. Besides the various ethnic tribes, instruments and musical traditions also mixed with „imported“ songs and instruments, as we will see in the next chapters.

In Makassar, visitors can't avoid to find the old „Fort Rotterdam“ built by the Dutch during their reign in Sulawesi. This old fortress was never taken down and actually not only houses a charming little museum, it is also a favored place for concerts, shows and festivals. Here is the place, where visitors will have a good chance to see a traditional dance performance, which seems to be a must for everyone.

People in Makassar say: If you have not seen „*Pakarena*“, you have not seen Makassar.
So on the next day, I had an appointment for this.

1.1 PAKARENA

The term „*Pakarena*“ is believed to come from the *Makassarese* word „*ak' karena*“, which means „to play“. This should not be misunderstood as the way children „play“, it defines the method of acting: Gentle, calm and

elegant. „Playing“ is used in a sense of performing, acting, and, most of all: Dancing.

The „*Pakarena*“ dance belongs to the court traditions, starting from the 17th. Century. It strictly belongs to South Sulawesi, and may have spread from there, influencing other dance traditions, as the village dances in Selayar („*Pakarena Gantarang*“) or similar *Bugis* dances. Especially the *Bugis* would deny this, but keeping in mind that these two always competing and neighboring kingdoms nowadays only separate by a slightly different dialect of the Bahasa Indonesia, while *Mandar* and *Toraja* still use completely different languages, one is not really surprised to find similar traditions.

But *Pakarena* is much more than a traditional dance. Legends claim it to be „magic“, thus evocating ghosts or other divine beings, who give their knowledge about settling, planting, harvest or even marriage and child raise to the ones who called them. We will often face this combination of traditional performance and magic ritual in the next chapters.

This dance tradition is already rare to find, because there are many arrangers and composers trying to create something new out of the tradition. The term „*kreasi*“ stands for the creative process, in which only parts of the traditional dance and music will be taken and combined with something new. Famous renewers of the dance were **Andi Nurhani Sapada** („**Bu Nani**“, who passed away some years ago), and Prof. **Halilintar Lathief**, who I met on the second day. His wife is not only a famous dancer, she also tries to modernize the dance with her choreographies. **Lathief** himself is a profound expert not only for *Pakarena*, but also for all kinds of traditions all over Sulawesi.

So, if I face *Pakarena* for the first time, how do I know if it is „*kreasi*“ or traditional?

It turned out to be easier than expected:

On my first day, I had an appointment with a *Pakarena* group in Gowa district, not far away from Makassar. The group „**Sanggar Seni Je'netallasa**“ is based in Je'netallasa Village. I contacted them twice over their website (4) and Facebook. Fortunately, the manager seemed to speak English fluently, so there I was, got picked up from my hotel, and together with a friend (who I will introduce later) we drove through the outbounds of Gowa.

If I had known what was waiting for me, I would have prepared myself. But how could I expect that a complete village was involved in this? From young to old, everybody gathered around a big hall and waited for the foreigner who made this possible. Immediately, I was in the center of the attention of more than a hundred people. This should happen quite often on my journey in Sulawesi, but for this first time, it was a very stressful experience, making it not easy to concentrate on my recording. Every step I made was eagerly watched, building up my equipment was commented, cakes and coffee were offered, and all around me: Villagers with curious eyes and questions, lots of questions. At least my friend and interpreter stayed calm and laughed all stress away, so within some minutes, I was adapting to the new situation and making myself feel at home.

Anyway, the ensemble was also there, and it was bigger than expected. Following the articles I read, the core ensemble should have 4 female dancers and the ensemble up to 4 musicians. But here I faced several dancers in different costumes, all together absolutely beautiful eye

catchers, and 6 musicians (off which only 3 performed in the end).

The music for the *Pakarena* is known to be wild and excessive drum music, consisting of two drummers on the „*Ganrang*“ drums. The drummer sitting in front is leading the ensemble and is called „*anrong guru*“, („guru“=teacher), so in fact he is also the teacher of the ensemble. Being the drum leader „*appalari*“, he also leads the tempo for the second drummer, called „*attanang*“. The wild intensive drumming is even dominated by another shrill sound, coming from the „*Puik-puik*“ shawm, a small but effective little oboe, which is played with a circular breathing technique called „*sombung nafas*“, so that the sound never stops. This core ensemble might be topped with a „*Suling*“ flute, a *Keso'-Keso'* fiddle, some metal clappers, a gong, or actually even the *Kecapi* lute, but most of the time the drums and the shawm are building the basic ensemble:



The „Je'netallasa“ Pakarena core ensemble with a *Puik-puik* (left) and the *Gambang* drums (right)

The *Puik-puik* is playing free, improvising on central notes and repeated core melodies, while the second attanang drummer presents basic patterns („*lerassang*“), which try to keep up with the increasing tempo of the *appalari* drummer. This results in a huge crescendo, the *appalari* presents intersections which confuse the *attanang* (his student). One basic amusement for the teacher is to try to destroy the concentration of his student by wild movements, sometimes striking both drums at the same time, and with comedy movements („*amik kik*“) of the head and shoulders, making the audience laugh and giving some attractions.

This seems to be needed, as, in a big contrast to the wild music, the female dancers move as slowly as possible and sometimes don't seem to move at all. I was later explained, that this contrast is a symbol for male and female aspects in

life: The penetrating wilderness of the men in contrast to the shy and subtle elegance of the women.

But the dancers still keep most of the attention. Not only the beautiful costumes, also the concentrated movements let the viewers hold their breath. There are long moments where simply no movement is seen, and suddenly all four dancers move at once, waving their colorful fans, a glimpse on the beautiful faces is possible for a moment, before the fans go up and the movement stops immediately again: **(5)**



Pakarena dancers in their colourful costumes and the traditional fans, mostly covering their faces

The longer you watch the dancers, the more obvious it becomes, how much energy is used for concentration and keeping the muscle tension in order to hold the position. The synchronicity of the slight movements, sometimes just guessable in centimeters, requires not only muscle strength, but also a lot of group practice. Eyes are often closed, and if open, staring straight ahead, avoiding the eye contact with neither the players or the audience. I wondered how they know when to move and when to stop, as there are no signs or symbols in the music, and even the *appalari* leader is giving no notifiable signs to the dancers. They told me afterwards that it is all about practice and counting.

The first *Pakarena* performance was started by an instrumental opening. Here, the drummers provide a steady sequence, on which the *Puik-puik* improvises. Although the melody seems to be free, the *Puik-puik* still follows the meter of the drummers. After a while, the meter will be doubled, the tempo increases and ends together with the *Puik-puik* on a sudden stop.

As the *Puik-puik* dominates the sound of the ensemble, it is worth to take a closer look on this special instrument. This shawm is clearly of Arabain origin and quite similar to the Turkish *Zurna*, the Arabian *Mizmar* or even the Chinese *Suona* or the Cambodian *Sralai*. It can be found in various ensembles all over Sulawesi, along with intense drumming, one can find it in the music for fighting shows or even the *Bissu* tradition (see chapter 1.4).

A few weeks later, I was happy to buy my own *Puik-puik* from the famous *Pakarena* artist **Serang Dakko**, who is living and teaching in Makassar. He showed me the basic playing styles, including the typical scales and the virtuos finger techniques used for pitch bending, rapid tremoli or sliding. **(6)**



Serang Dakko playing the *Puik-puik*

My *Puik-puik* is 33.6 cm long, it has 6 finger holes on the front, equidistant in 1.9 cm and each with a diameter of 4 mm, as well as one thumb hole on the back, same diameter and in a distance of 7 mm from the last top hole on the front. The cylindrical tube is made of hard wood, it has a metal ring on top with a diameter of 1.7 cm, while the lower end has a diameter of 5 cm. The mouthpiece holder is made of metal, 7 cm long, ending in a little platform where two mouthpieces are attached with a piece of yarn.



My *Puik-Puik*

The most important part of the instrument is the smallest one, it is the mouthpiece. These tiny little double reeds,