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"Killing the Dancer": Asymmetrical Metre and the Transformation of Tradition in a Balinese Dance Composition

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ABSTRACT

Tradition is not a stagnant entity but a dynamic process of transformation. Ethnomusicologist Michael Bakan (2019) describes tradition as a "creative transformation whose most remarkable feature is the continuity it nurtures and sustains." This study investigates the transformation of the traditional Balinese *gilak* structure into the asymmetrical *gegilakan* by analysing I Ketut Gede Asnawa's *Egar Abinawa*. Composed as an accompaniment for Topeng Keras an improvisatory dance, *Egar Abinawa* challenges dancers to navigate irregular metres—a departure from the predictability of *gilak*. This research combines ethnomusicological fieldwork, musical analysis, and Balinese notational systems to dissect the *gilak* and its transformation. This paper will analyse two important issues: firstly, understanding the intersection of tradition and transformation in Balinese musical forms; and secondly, probing Asnawa's provocative concept of *ngematiang pregina* ("killing the dancer"). This metaphor encapsulates the challenge posed to dancers habituated to *gilak*, compelling them to transcend ingrained rhythmic instincts and engage creatively with the unfamiliar *gegilakan* framework. Through *gegilakan Egar Abinawa*, tradition is not merely preserved but transformed, demonstrating how asymmetrical metre can serve as a catalyst for artistic growth. This composition underscores the evolving nature of Balinese music and dance, where innovation breathes new life into heritage.

Keywords: Balinese gamelan, *Egar Abinawa*, gegilakan, gilak, tradition and transformation

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INTRODUCTION

Music in Bali is omnipresent, permeating every aspect of life on the island. Renowned for its rich cultural heritage, Bali places significant importance on music, which plays a crucial role not only in social and religious rites but also in secular activities. In the religious domain, Balinese music, commonly known as gamelan, is indispensable for the thousands of ceremonies conducted throughout the year. "At a plethora of traditionally mandated religious events, the gods descend in numbers to inhabit their designated shrines for the length of the festivities, awaiting the lavish musical entertainments that their village hosts are expected to provide" (Tenzer, 1991, p. 12). The sound of the gamelan ensemble, with its vibrant and intricate compositions, reflects music's centrality in connecting Bali's spiritual and material worlds.

Before the 20th century, Bali had already developed a wide array of gamelan ensembles, including Gong Gede, Gambang, Pagambuhan, Selonding, Angklung, Gong Luang, and Gender Wayang, each serving specific ceremonial and cultural purposes. During this period, individual attribution in music was virtually nonexistent. Creative works were seen as communal offerings shaped by collective tradition rather than personal ownership. Musicians were often patronised by local kingdoms, and claiming individual credit for compositions was considered culturally inappropriate. This paradigm began to shift in the early 20th century when I Wayan Lotring emerged as Bali's first formally recognised composer.[1] His groundbreaking work marked a turning point in Balinese music, introducing a new era where composers were celebrated for their contributions.

Despite this shift, the essence of Balinese composition remains deeply rooted in its musical tradition. As Bruno Nettl observes, composers do not create music from nothing but instead draw from cultural "building blocks" that have been passed down through generations (Nettl, 2015). These foundational elements are reimagined and transformed, imbuing new compositions with both innovation and continuity. Christopher Adler elaborates, stating, "The act of composing is an engagement with hybridity. Every composer must mediate between the diverse influences, intentions, theories, and emotions impinging upon the compositional moment" (Adler, 1998, p. 1). In Bali, gamelan composers exemplify this process by honoring traditional forms while reshaping them into new expressions. Furthermore, ethnomusicologist Michael Bakan states that "tradition here is conceived of as a process, in particular a process of creative transformation whose most remarkable feature is the continuity it nurtures and sustains" (Bakan, 2019, p. 30). Tradition is not stagnant; rather, it moves and transforms into new works of art.

[1] Lotring's acclamation as a composer title is believed to be influenced by his American colleague, Colin McPhee. Discussions on Lotring's history, life, and works have been researched by numerous scholars (see Harnish, 2000; Herbst, 2015; McPhee, 1964; Tenzer, 2000)

The scholarship on Balinese composers and their works has long captivated the field of ethnomusicology. Traditional compositions were extensively examined by figures such as Asnawa (1991), Bandem (2013), McPhee (1964), Rai (1996), Sadguna (2010), and Sudirana (2013b), offering profound insights into the roots of Balinese music. This foundation was later expanded with discussions on neo-traditional compositions by scholars like Bakan (1999), Roeder and Tenzer (2012), Senen (2002), Sukerta (2009), and Tenzer (2000). More recently, contemporary works have been explored by researchers such as McGraw (2005, 2009, 2013, 2014), Smith (2019), Sudirana (2013a, 2020, 2024), Sugiartha (2012), Tenzer (2018), and Yuwell (2021), each contributing invaluable perspectives that highlight the evolving complexity and innovation in Balinese musical composition.

Building on this extensive body of scholarship, this article explores a new musical structure known as *gegilakan*, which emerges as a transformation from one of the most established forms in the Balinese gamelan tradition: *gilak*. Traditionally, *gilak* is defined by its distinct 8-beat colotomic structure. However, our research has uncovered innovative developments that extend and reshape its foundational elements. The term *gegilakan* signifies both continuity and transformation, indicating a compositional structure that maintains a connection to *gilak* while introducing new dimensions. This structural transformation can be observed in new compositions across various Balinese ensembles, including Baleganjur, Gong Kebyar, Gong Gede, and Semar Pagulingan. Rather than proposing an entirely new terminology, we use *gegilakan* as a conceptual bridge to discuss recent trends among Balinese composers experimenting with asymmetrical metres, diverging from the traditional framework of *gilak*.

This transformation of a traditional structure into innovative forms is not unique to Balinese music; similar phenomena have also occurred in the Western music. For instance, Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1913) was revolutionary for its time, breaking away from traditional, predictable rhythms and metres with its complex, dynamic structures. Another example is Paul Desmond's *Take Five* (1959), famously recorded by the Dave Brubeck Quartet. This iconic jazz composition stood out due to its unconventional 5/4 time signature, a bold departure from the prevailing 4/4 or 3/4 metres of its era (Ramsey, 2005). These examples highlight how composers across cultures innovate by challenging and diverging from traditional norms. Similarly, *gegilakan* represents a Balinese parallel to this creative spirit, where composers reimagine the conventional 8-beat framework of *gilak* to explore new rhythmic and structural possibilities.

Situated within the broader context of the cross-cultural rhythmic innovation, this article analyses a new *gegilakan* composition for Topeng Keras accompaniment, *Egar Abinawa,* which features an asymmetrical 20-beat cycle.

Composed by I Ketut Gede Asnawa in 2018 for the Bali Arts Festival, it reflects Asnawa's longstanding engagement with traditional, neo-traditional, and contemporary styles. Granted complete creative freedom, Asnawa chose to compose within a conventional idiom while simultaneously pushing its boundaries. *Egar Abinawa* stands out as one of the rare instances—if not the only one—where *gegilakan* is used to accompany an improvisational dance form.

This shift toward asymmetrical structures is driven by an emerging artistic imperative to challenge conventional expectations within Balinese performance practice. While *gilak* patterns remain deeply embedded in the cultural fabric, many composers and performers regard them as increasingly predictable and formulaic, restricting the possibilities for creative expression. The drive toward innovation is further propelled by heightened exposure to global music scenes, academic discourse, and intercultural artistic experimentation. Within this evolving landscape, composers such as Asnawa aim not only to honor tradition but also to interrogate and disrupt it, urging performers to reevaluate their embodied musical instincts and engage more deliberately with unfamiliar and evolving musical forms.

Asnawa's approach embodies this dual commitment to innovation and cultural continuity. His intent to *ngematiang pregina* ("killing the dancer")—a metaphorical disruption of the dancer's habitual reliance on familiar rhythms—invites both performers and choreographers to reengage with their practices in new ways. This article explores how such compositional strategies provoke shifts in embodied performance and what it means to navigate the tension between tradition and transformation in the contemporary Balinese dance accompaniment.

Through a close analysis of this piece, the study uncovers the artistic and cultural implications of Asnawa's *gegilakan* composition and how it reshapes the relationship between music and dance in Balinese tradition. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, musical transcription, and close collaboration with performers, the study demonstrates how asymmetrical form unsettles habitual modes of interaction, prompting new forms of musical-dance dialogue. Ultimately, the study argues that *gegilakan* operates not only as a formal innovation but as a culturally situated intervention, revitalising performance practices and reasserting the vitality of tradition through acts of creative disruption.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an ethnomusicological approach, blending ethnographic fieldwork with in-depth musical analysis to understand its subject comprehensively. The fieldwork involves interviews with key figures selected based on their competence, including I Ketut Gede Asnawa, the composer; Putu Adi Sujana, the topeng dancer; and other musicians and dancers specialising in *gilak* and its accompanying dances. The researchers themselves are long-time Balinese music and dance practitioners, with

extensive experience working professionally with *gilak* forms. This positionality informs their methodological choices and interpretive framework, grounding the research in both scholarly inquiry and embodied knowledge. A comprehensive literature review supports the study, highlighting its originality and situating it within the broader context of existing scholarship.

A central component of this methodology is transcribing oral musical traditions into written form, a process essential for thorough analysis. As Arom emphasises, "It [music] would seem extremely difficult to analyse in depth unless first reduced to the form of a written score, i.e., a transcription in the case of music from an oral tradition" (Arom, 1991, p. 94). Notating the music will utilise the Balinese notational system called the *Ding-dong*, which derives from traditional Balinese letters called *aksaras,* which can be seen in Table 1. This system captures relative note positions within a scale rather than fixed pitches, accommodating the unique tuning variations among Balinese gamelan ensembles. Additionally, cipher notation is utilised for clarity, particularly for readers unfamiliar with Balinese *aksaras*.

Table 1
Notation system

Balinese Aksara	Cypher Notations	Read
ᬦ	1	Nding
ᬦᬂ	2	Ndong
ᬦᬾ	3	Ndeng
ᬦᭀ	5	Ndung
ᬦᬃ	6	Ndang

Besides the *Ding-dong* and cipher notations, additional symbols are utilised to represent musical elements: parentheses ( ) to signify gong strokes, dashes (–) for kempli strokes, and plus signs (+) for kempur strokes. Rests are marked with periods (.), while brackets [ ] indicate repeating sequences. Importantly, kajar strokes occur on every beat and are excluded from the notation for simplicity. Sections of the music are labelled with abbreviations to streamline analysis: "M" for the main melody, "KW" for the Kendang Wadon section, "KL" for the Kendang Lanang part, "Da" for the dancer's movements, "CM" referring to the common 16-beat melodic line, and "EA" referring to *Egar Abinawa.*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Breaking Down the *Gilak* Structure

Gilak is thought to have originated in the Gong Gede repertoires, where it can be played as an independent piece or serve as part of a larger composition, such as in the *lelambatan* genre.[2] Besides played for instrumental pieces, *gilak* is used for dance accompaniment, particularly the Baris and Topeng dances. Despite its prominence, the exact meaning of *gilak* remains unclear. It does not appear in ancient *lontar* manuscripts, and for many musicians, the focus lies more on its distinctive colotomic structure than its

[2] I Nyoman Rembang conducted extensive research transcribing various *lelambatan* pieces across Bali, documenting different types of *tabuhs.*(see Rembang, 1985).

Table 2
Gilak colotomic structure

8	[1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8]
(G) -	[.	-	.	(g) -	+	-	+	(G) -]

etymology. Balinese music scholar I Gede Yudarta speculates that the term *gilak* might stem from *galak*, suggesting qualities like 'fierce,' 'enthusiastic,' or 'vibrant.'[3] This interpretation aptly reflects the spirited, energetic character of *gilak*, defined by its short *gongan* cycles and brisk, driving tempo.

Traditional Balinese musical structures are mainly cyclic, called *gongan*. To identify the idiosyncrasies of a Balinese gamelan form, we refer to its colotomic structure. "This technique of using gongs to define the form has been dubbed colotomy by Western musicologists; the arrangement of gongs within a melody is referred to as the colotomic structure" (Tenzer, 1991, p. 42). It is determined by the cycle length (number of beats) and how the colotomic instrument markers such as the gong, kempur, kajar, and kempli are distributed (see also Dunbar-Hall, 2006, p. 85; Rai, 2022, p. 38). The colotomic structure of *gilak* can be seen in Table 2.

In the instance of *gilak* as shown in Table 2, the starting and ending point is on the eighth beat, marked by the sound of the large gong with a lower sound called the gong wadon (G). There is also a higher pitch gong, slightly smaller in size, called gong lanang (g), which is played on the fourth beat. To complete this structure, the medium-sized gong called kempur will be sounded on beats five and seven (indicated by the plus sign +). The kempli played on every even beat (marked as –), while the kajar is played on every beat. This flexibility extends to the melodic aspect, where composers can craft melodies that align with the eight-beat cycle or its multiples. According to Balinese gamelan lecturer I Wayan Suweca, *gilak* melodies often evoke a sense of "returning home," resolving on the tonic while maintaining dynamic progression.[4]

Drumming further enriches the *gilak* structure, employing two drums: kendang wadon (lower-pitched) and kendang lanang (higher-pitched), which creates an interlocking rhythm known as *geguletan*. The term, derived from *gulet* ("to hug"), symbolizes how the drum patterns tightly interweave (Rai, 2022, p. 38). The patterns of the two drums are shown in the following transcription.

Table 3 demonstrates the rhythmic interlocking between the Kendang Wadon (KW) and Kendang Lanang (KL) in the *gilak* form. "D" and "T" represent the KW's open and closed right-hand strokes, while

[3] Personal communication with I Gede Yudarta on September 19, 2024.

[4] Personal communication with I Wayan Suweca on August 7, 2024.

Table 3
Geguletan kendang in gilak

	(G) -				[.				-				.			
KW	D	.	T	.	D	.	T	.	D	.	T	.	D	.	T	.
KL	.	d	.	t	.	d	.	t	.	d	.	t	.	d	.	t
	(g) -				+				-				+			
KW	D	.	T	.	D	.	T	.	D	.	T	.	D	.	T	.
KL	.	d	.	t	.	d	.	t	.	d	.	t	.	d	.	t

"d" and "t" denote the KL's corresponding strokes. Each drum strike aligns with a sixteenth note, with no simultaneous strikes between KW and KL, creating a distinct interlocking pattern. The blue blocks indicate one KW cycle, while the yellow blocks show the KL's, both spanning four beats. Completing a *gilak* cycle requires two of these drum cycles.

The drummer is regarded as the leader of the musical ensemble, responsible for controlling the music's dynamics, rhythm, and tempo. In performances that include dance, such as the Topeng Keras, drummers play a pivotal role as the 'translators' of the dancer's movements, transforming them into musical accents. This intricate relationship between dancer, drummer, and musician will be explored in greater depth in the following sections.

Topeng Keras: The Regal Minister

One of the most iconic classical performances in Bali is the topeng dance, where topeng means "mask." In Balinese, the word for mask is *tapel*. According to Dibia, "*tapel* originates from *tup,* which means to conceal or transform the identity of the person who wears it" (Dibia, 2013, p. 111).[5] This transformative quality is at the heart of topeng, where the mask allows the dancer to embody characters and narratives within the performance. Traditionally, topeng is an essential component of Hindu ceremonies in Bali. Without it, a ceremony is considered incomplete.

The common topeng performance consists of two parts: the *panglembar* and the *lampahan*. Dibia (2013, p. 124) describes these sections, noting that "the emphasis of the first part is on dance, unlike the second part, which focuses on drama or telling the story". The most common *panglembar* dances are Topeng Keras and Topeng Tua, each showcasing a unique style and musical structure. Among the two, Topeng Keras uses *gilak* as its musical accompaniment. Topeng Keras represents a noble character and a person of significant political power in a kingdom. The character is sometimes also referred to as a "prime minister,"

[5] Numerous scholars have conducted research on topeng performances, but mainly from a performative and dancer perspective (see de Zoete & Spies, 1939; Young, 1980; Bandem & deBoer, 1995; Dibia & Ballinger, 2004; Catra, 2005). If the music is mentioned in these works, it does not go beyond the mentioning of the musical form or the notation of the basic melody.

Figure 1. Topeng Keras character

which represents strength, authority, and governance, shown through the strong yet regal movements. The mask is typically painted red or brown, symbolizing strength and power as seen in Figure 1.

This dance has two widely recognised melodies: one following an eight-beat cycle and the other a sixteen-beat pattern. Both melodies retain the distinctive *gilak* structure, which can be seen in Table 4.

Topeng Keras is an improvisational dance in which the dancer leads[6], by signaling musical changes through specific cues known as *angsels*[7]. Although drawing from a repertoire of characteristic stock movements, their timing is not predetermined but shaped by the dancer's movement vocabulary, experience, and the performance context. Training begins with exposure to *gilak*, during which dancers develop an intuitive sensitivity to musical rhythm and flow (*ngerasang gending*). Over time, the music becomes second nature, enabling dancers to execute *angsels* instinctively, with fluidity and precision.

From the drummer's perspective, recognising and responding to various *angsels* is critical. As the ensemble leader and mediator between the dancer and the other musicians, the drummer bears significant responsibility. Tenzer (1991, p. 12) describes this relationship as a "mutually reflective duet." Ensemble members rely on the drummer for guidance, listening for key cues, and often relying on eye contact to maintain cohesion. Given the dance's improvisational nature, drummers must master the nuances of *angsels*, such as *angsel bawak*, *angsel lantang*, *angsel numpuk*, and *angsel tugak*. This dynamic is illustrated in Table 5, which analyses the *angsel bawak* cycle using the 16-beat melody presented in Table 4.

In Table 5, the dancer (Da) initiates subtle movements called *metuwek* before commencing the *angsel*, as indicated by the white boxes. *Metuwek* is the conduct of *ngidupang tapel* or bringing the mask to life (Sadguna, 2022, p. 98). The *angsel* sequence starts with the dancer giving a

[6] According to Sadguna (2022, p. 85) there are three categories of dancer-musician relationship; first is where the composition is fixed and the dancer(s) follows the music. Secondly, is when musicians accompany the dancers by following their improvisatory movements. Lastly, it involves a back-and-forth leading position between the dancer and the musician.

[7] *Angsel* is a cadential point marked by a simultaneous pause in the dance motion and corresponding music.

beginning cue called *wangsit* on the half beat of pitch *ndung* to initiate the *angsel bawak.* This will be followed through for nine beats until it reaches the pitch *ndung* again before the gong, as highlighted in the green boxes. Drummers must be vigilant and responsive, having only one beat (indicated by the yellow boxes) to pick up the *wangsit,* they play louder (marked bold) to signal to the other musicians that an *angsel* is occurring. Understanding this dynamic change, other musicians will increase the volume (*nguncab)* starting on pitch *ndong*, as marked in the orange boxes. Towards the end of the sequence, the dancer, drummer, and musician synchronise their actions to stop simultaneously as they approach the gong. This table exemplifies how the dancer leads the music, specifically through the *angsel bawak* movement.When the dancer and musicians achieve perfect harmony, it is called *adung.* Sadguna describes *adung* as "a reciprocal harmonic relationship between dancer-musician, the critical element of a successful performance. If it is not connected accordingly, it will be *balu* or *palas* (divorced)" (Sadguna, 2022, p. 94). It demands a profound understanding and connection between dancer and musicians, an unspoken dialogue that aligns movement and music into a seamless whole.

Adding another layer of complexity to this relationship is the fact that, in Topeng Keras performances, it is very common for the dancer and musicians not to rehearse together beforehand. As shown in Figure 2, the Karawitan students of ISI Bali accompany a *Topeng Keras* dance for a recording session. Despite being a recording, no rehearsal was conducted beforehand.

Figure 2. Karawitan students of ISI Bali accompanying a Topeng Keras performance

Table 4
Common melodies for Topeng Keras accompaniment

8-Beat Melody

( ) – 5	[1	– 6	2	( ) – 1	+2	– 6	+1	( ) – 5]

16-Beat Melody

( ) – 1	[2	– 1	6	( ) – 1	+ 5	– 6	+ 1
( ) – 2	3	– 5	2	( ) – 3	+ 1	– 5	+ 6

Table 5
Dancer, drummer, musician relationship in the angsel bawak *cycle*[8]

M	( ) – 1			2			– 1			6						
Da	metuwek															
KW	D	.	T	.	D	.	.	D	.	T	.	D	.	D	D	.
KL	.	d	.	t	.	d	d	.	d	.	t	.	d	.	.	d
M	( ) – 1			+ 5			– 6			+ 1						
Da	*metuwek*					***wangsit***			***Angsel bawak***							
KW	D	.	T	.	D	.	.	D	.	**T**	**.**	**D**	**.**	**D**	**D**	**.**
KL	.	d	.	t	.	d	d	.	d	**.**	**t**	**.**	**d**	**.**	**.**	**d**

Drummers responds

M	( ) – 2			3			– 5			2						
Da	Angsel bawak															
KW	**D**	**.**	**T**		**D**	**.**	**.**	**D**	**.**	**T**	**.**	**D**	**.**	**D**	**D**	**.**
KL	**.**	**d**	**.**	**t**	**.**	**d**	**d**	**.**	**d**	**.**	**t**	**.**	**d**	**.**	**.**	**d**

Nguncab

M	( ) – 3			+ 1			– 5			+ 6						
Da	Angsel bawak															
KW	**D**	**K**	**.**	**D**	**.**	**D**	**.**	**.**	**.**	**K**	**.**	.	.	.	.	.
KL	**.**	**.**	**p**	**.**	**d**	**.**	**d**	**.**	**.**	**.**	**p**	.	.	.	.	.

Nguncab

[8] Several scholars have conducted research on the dancer-musician relationship (see Sanger, 1989; Sudirana, 2009; Desiari, 2017; Stepputat, 2017; Sadguna & Suratni, 2019; Schatz, 2020; Sadguna, 2022). Nonethless, it is a topic that can be investigated in more depth and explored in a variety of dance practices.

Topeng dancers, having an innate connection to the *gilak* structure, are prepared to adapt instinctively to any melody "thrown" at them.[9] Their choreography aligns effortlessly with the music. However, what happens when that rhythmic familiarity is disrupted? What if the foundational 8-beat *gilak* structure is replaced with an asymmetrical cycle?

Although existing scholarship has explored dancer-musician interaction and rhythm perception in Balinese performing arts, a critical lacuna remains concerning how improvisational dance practices engage with asymmetrical metric structures. Prior studies have predominantly focussed on choreographed movement in relation to fixed, symmetrical rhythmic frameworks (see Tenzer, 1991; Sadguna, 2010; Schatz, 2020), thereby overlooking the complex negotiations that arise when dancers encounter irregular cycles in extemporaneous performance settings. To our knowledge, no ethnographic or analytical studies have specifically explored the challenges posed to dancers by irregular cycles in improvisational contexts, such as those found in *gegilakan* forms. The only known example of an asymmetrical metre used for Topeng Keras is Asnawa's *gegilakan* composition, *Egar Abinawa.* This study therefore, offers a novel contribution by analysing the embodied responses of dancers navigating an asymmetrical 20-beat cycle in a performance that retains improvisatory agency, as exemplified in *Egar Abinawa*.

Gegilakan Egar Abinawa: A New Composition for Topeng Keras

In the last decade, there has been an increased use of *gegilakan* in Balinese gamelan, where compositions are inspired by *gilak* but do not follow the strict 8-beat convention, exploring cycles in 5, 7, 9, 12, up to 20 beats. These instances are prominent in Baleganjur compositions, highlighting rhythmic complexity and intricate ornamentations. Besides Baleganjur, asymmetrical metres are used in *sendratari.*[10] In *sendratari*, for example, the *gegilakan* is meticulously composed to match the prearranged choreography, leaving no room for improvisation. In contrast, *gegilakan Egar Abinawa* is one of the pieces– if not the only –to be composed for an improvisatory dance such as the Topeng Keras.

This piece was composed by I Ketut Gede Asnawa (see Figure 3) in 2018 for the Bali Arts Festival.[11] That year, Asnawa

[9] Two newly composed 32-beat Topeng Keras melodies have been identified: one performed in Mas Village, Ubud, and another by I Wayan Sudirana with Gamelan Yuganada. While both feature novel melodies, they remain structurally faithful to the *gilak* form. Links to these examples are provided as follows.: https://www.facebook.com/reel/803017895142591 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlwXau_7hHs.

[10] *Sendratari* is an acronym of *seni drama dan tari,* a term akin to ballet, representing a fusion of dramatic arts and dance. Further discussions on *sendratari* can be seen in (Suartaya, 2011, 2016).

[11] I Ketut Gede Asnawa (b. 1955) is recognised as one of Bali's leading musician and composer. Renowned for his expertise in traditional music, he has also made significant contributions to neo-traditional and

was commissioned to create the music for a *topeng kreasi* performance, played by the Wahana Ghurnita of Denpasar. In an interview, he characterized his instructions for the work as "*bebas"* (free), revealing that there were no predetermined guidelines governing the creation of this work, granting him both freedom and responsibility to innovate.[12]

Figure 3. I Ketut Gede Asnawa

Drawing from his musical expertise, Asnawa embraced the concept of *kreasi* as the foundation of his creative process. As Tenzer explains, "*kreasi* literally means 'creation' and *baru* means 'new.' The use of this term is not exclusive to instrumental works, but can also be used to describe new works for dance and other new artistic creation" (Tenzer, 2000, p. 158). Asnawa sought to craft a composition that was both unique and unconventional—an approach Sudirana describes as "finding the unusual" (Sudirana, 2024). For composers, creating new works often involves a deliberate search for distinctive elements that set their creations apart from others. Furthermore, Sudirana states that

> Creative composers are always seeking new ideas through listening or direct in-depth learning of their own classical music or musics from other cultures. Of course, these composers are also creative musicians who are "fans" of the music they study. In the act of composing, composers will consciously or unconsciously—depending upon their skills and talent—apply new musical elements or concepts that they have learned or come to favor. (Sudirana, 2013a, pp. 165–166)

Asnawa reflected on his compositional challenge: *"Kenken carane pang len? Yen baang gending gilak, kal amunika manten. Pang taen ngematiang pregina*" (How can I create something truly different? If I compose a piece based on *gilak*, it will feel the same. I want to "kill" the dancer), he explained.

In this context, the phrase "killing the dancer" is not meant to convey violence but to disrupt the familiar and push creative boundaries. Traditionally, dancers often perform with minimal rehearsal, relying on choreography they already know by heart. Asnawa sought to challenge this norm, compelling dancers to engage dynamically and creatively with his music.

contemporary musical forms. Asnawa's works have been discussed in-depth by scholars such as Andrew McGraw and I Wayan Sudirana (see A. McGraw, 2005, 2009; Sudirana, 2020, 2024).

[12] Personal communication with I Ketut Gede Asnawa on December 27, 2024.

Asnawa's exposure to international influences shaped his approach to composition. Having travelled extensively and lived in the United States, where he taught and engaged with world music, he developed a broader and more nuanced perspective. Inspired by this global experience, Asnawa wanted to retain the roots of *gilak* in his work while breaking free from its traditional eight-beat structure. His solution was to create a composition in an asymmetrical metre—one that would feel unique and transformative. The resulting piece, *Egar Abinawa*, embodies this innovative vision. The term *Egar* signifies behavior, while *Abinawa* denotes honor. Together, they evoke the qualities of a prime minister—wise, authoritative, and regal.

Gegilakan Egar Abinawa features an asymmetrical 20-beat gongan, chosen to expand melodic possibilities and challenge dancers with unexpected rhythmic patterns. In addition to the unconventional metre, Asnawa selected the Gamelan Semar Pagulingan Saih Pitu as the accompanying ensemble. According to the ancient Prakempa manuscript, this ensemble was said to be used by kings for their rest (Bandem, 1986). This ensemble employs a seven-tone *pelog* scale within a modal system (*patet*) formed by five primary pitches (*nada pokok*) and two auxiliary tones (*nada pemero*) (see Rai S, 1996). This modal flexibility enabled Asnawa to tailor the music to different characters. For *Egar Abinawa*, he chose *patet tembung*, a mode linked to prime ministerial roles in classical Gambuh, reinforcing the character's noble presence. Table 6 compares the traditional 16-beat *Topeng Keras* melody with the 20-beat structure of *Egar Abinawa*, highlighting its expansion of the gilak form.

For the purpose of analysis, the melody is divided into two parts: the common 16-beat melody (CM), comprising lines 1 and 2, and the *Egar Abinawa* (EA), which also consists of lines 1 and 2. It is evident that this piece is an extension of the common Topeng Keras melody. Departing from the two symmetrical lines of the original

Table 6
Juxtaposition between the common 16-beat melody (CM) and Egar Abinawa's *(EA) 20-beat melody*

CM (1)	(∩) – 1	[⊃ 2	∩ – 1	↾ 6	(∩) – 1	⇃ + 5	↾ – 6	∩ + 1												
EA (1)	(∩) – 1	[⊃ 2	∩ – 1	↾ 6	(∩) – 1	⇃ + 5	↾ – 6	∩ + 1	(↾) – 6	⇃ 5	↾ – 6	∩ 1								
CM (2)	(⊃) – 2	ʔ 3	⇃ – 5	⊃ 2	(ʔ) – 3	∩ + 1	⇃ – 5	↾ + 6	(∩) 1]											
EA (2)	(⊃) – 2	ʔ 3	⇃ – 5	⊃ 2	(ʔ) – 3	∩ + 1	⇃ – 5	↾ + 6	(∩) 1]											

form, Asnawa restructured the melody into an asymmetrical metre comprising a 12-beat line followed by an 8-beat line. This divergence is most striking in the addition of four extra beats in the first line (marked EA (1), highlighted in purple), a deliberate move that reshapes the melodic flow. These additional beats introduce a distinctive ascending melodic contour called *ngelik*. In this technique, the tonic pitch *nding* ascends to a higher pitch *ndong* before gracefully descending back to the tonic. The gong sounded on the eighth beat in a 16-beat cycle, traditionally perceived as the midpoint of the melody, but Asnawa reconceptualises it as a "passing tone" leading toward the *ngelik*.

At the same time, Asnawa preserves the recognizable *gilak* essence through strategic rhythmic placements. The kempli plays on every even beat, while the two kempur strokes—essential to the *gilak* structure—are carefully positioned to precede the gongs. In the first melodic segment, they fall on beats 5 and 7; in the latter, on beats 17 and 19. This meticulous placement anchors the composition in a familiar and reassuring framework for the audience. Similarly, the *geguletan kendang* pattern, with its steady 4-beat length, remains unaltered, providing a rhythmic thread that ties the innovation to the traditional.

Asnawa's intent was not to break away from the established *gilak* form but to transform it, extending its possibilities while maintaining its core identity. Transforming is "making a thorough change in the form, appearance, or character" (Sudirana, 2013a, p. 167). The term *gegilakan* itself encapsulates this idea, signifying a longer and more intricate structure while retaining recognisable elements of the original. This delicate balance between familiarity and novelty ensures that his composition resonates with both tradition and transformation.

Should I Wait? In Search of *Angsels*

Since a cycle involves the repetition of specific content, the listener may easily anticipate what will follow a given event, which gives the present a sense of medium-range certainty. In particular, Gong becomes a predictable goal, so group endings are apparent with or without formulaic closure patterns, such as those in much noncyclic music (Roeder & Tenzer, 2012, p. 27).

This sense of predictability within cyclic structures is one of the primary reasons why topeng dancers rarely need to rehearse with musicians. Their deep familiarity with the *gilak* cycle, honed through years of listening and performing, has cultivated an innate musical instinct. The *gilak* is not just a pattern they follow; it has become an integral part of their being, woven into their muscle memory. They have mastered the art of *ngerasang gending*—to deeply sense and embody the music.

For these dancers, there is no need to pause or hesitate. They do not wait for cues or instructions because the music flows through them. The rhythmic certainty of *gilak* allows them to anticipate every shift instinctively. They know precisely when to signal an *angsel*, when to punctuate their

movements, and how to finish the dance. These actions are not deliberated—they happen as naturally as breathing. In their mastery, waiting becomes obsolete, replaced by an intuitive synchrony with the cyclical nature of the music.

What happens when a dancer's innate sense of predictability, rooted in the familiar rhythm of an 8-beat cycle, is disrupted by the irregularity of a 20-beat cycle? Does their thought process remain the same, or does it force a recalibration of instinct and creativity? Can they still find their *angsels* intuitively?

In composing *Egar Abinawa*, Asnawa sought to "kill the dancer" by challenging them to venture beyond their comfort zones. "They have to be creative," he explained. The composition was completed before inviting the performer, Putu Adi Sujana (Tu Yik), a renowned topeng dancer. During the initial rehearsal, Sujana encountered music that felt both familiar and disorienting, its irregular cycles disrupting the rhythmic instincts shaped by his training. Asnawa recalled that Sujana struggled to adapt. "*Mara baang ningehang cepok, sing be kena ben ngigelang, ngandang gen terus angselne"* (when he listened for the first time, he couldn't dance to it. All of the *angsels* were *ngandang,* out of place). Sujana himself confirmed this assessment, stating: "*tiyang mekesyab ningehang pertama gendingne. Kenken carane ngigelang? Dija tongos angselne?"* (I was surprised when I first heard the piece. How could I dance to this music? Where should the *angsel* be placed*?*).[13] These remarks highlight the intentional rupture introduced by the composition—a departure from conventional rhythmic structures designed to provoke interpretive reconsideration and creative response.

For Sujana, the irregularity of the 20-beat cycle challenged the essence of his topeng training, which had instilled a natural alignment with 8-beat structures. The unexpected patterns disrupted his flow, leaving him feeling momentarily unmoored, questioning his understanding of the art form. It was not a matter of talent but of familiarity and adaptation. Sujana recorded the piece to regain familiarity, taking it home to immerse himself in its intricacies. He listened repeatedly, letting the unfamiliar rhythm seep into his consciousness until it no longer felt foreign. According to Sujana, performing this piece would be impossible for amateur dancers; only those with extensive experience and heightened musical sensitivity can navigate the nuances of such an asymmetrical *gegilakan* form.

The collaboration ultimately exposed tensions between Asnawa's experimental vision and traditional topeng performance practices. While Sujana worked to internalize the composition's unfamiliar rhythms, Asnawa sought to uphold the principle that the dancer should lead the music. In practice, however, this ideal proved challenging to uphold. During early rehearsals, Asnawa found himself stepping in, "giving" cues to Sujana, guiding him to

[13] Personal communication with I Putu Adi Sujana on May 5, 2025.

the "correct" moments to initiate the *wangsit* (beginning cue) of the *angsel* sequences. At one point, Asnawa encouraged Sujana by stating "*benehang mirengang gending niki"* (listen to this piece carefully, then you will understand). These moments temporarily inverted the usual dynamic between dancer and composer, suggesting that the work demanded not only technical fluency but also a redefined model of collaboration. Over time, however, Sujana came to understand and fully embody the composition, ultimately restoring the dancer's central role in shaping the performance.

The choreography incorporated several original *angsel* types from Topeng Keras, including the *angsel bawak*, requiring precise coordination among dancer, drummer, and ensemble. Table 7 illustrates their relationship within the irregular metre of *Egar Abinawa*.

Based on the analysis on Table 7, when performing the *angsel bawak*, the dancer cannot simply count and wait for the timing of an *angsel* to arrive. Relying on internal counting risks exposing a sense of *nguda* (amateurism), a flaw that becomes visible in the fluidity of the performance. To achieve *wayah* (meaning ripe or professional), the dancer must seamlessly weave subtle *metuwek* movements with the melody, animating the mask and infusing it with life (*ngidupang tapel*).

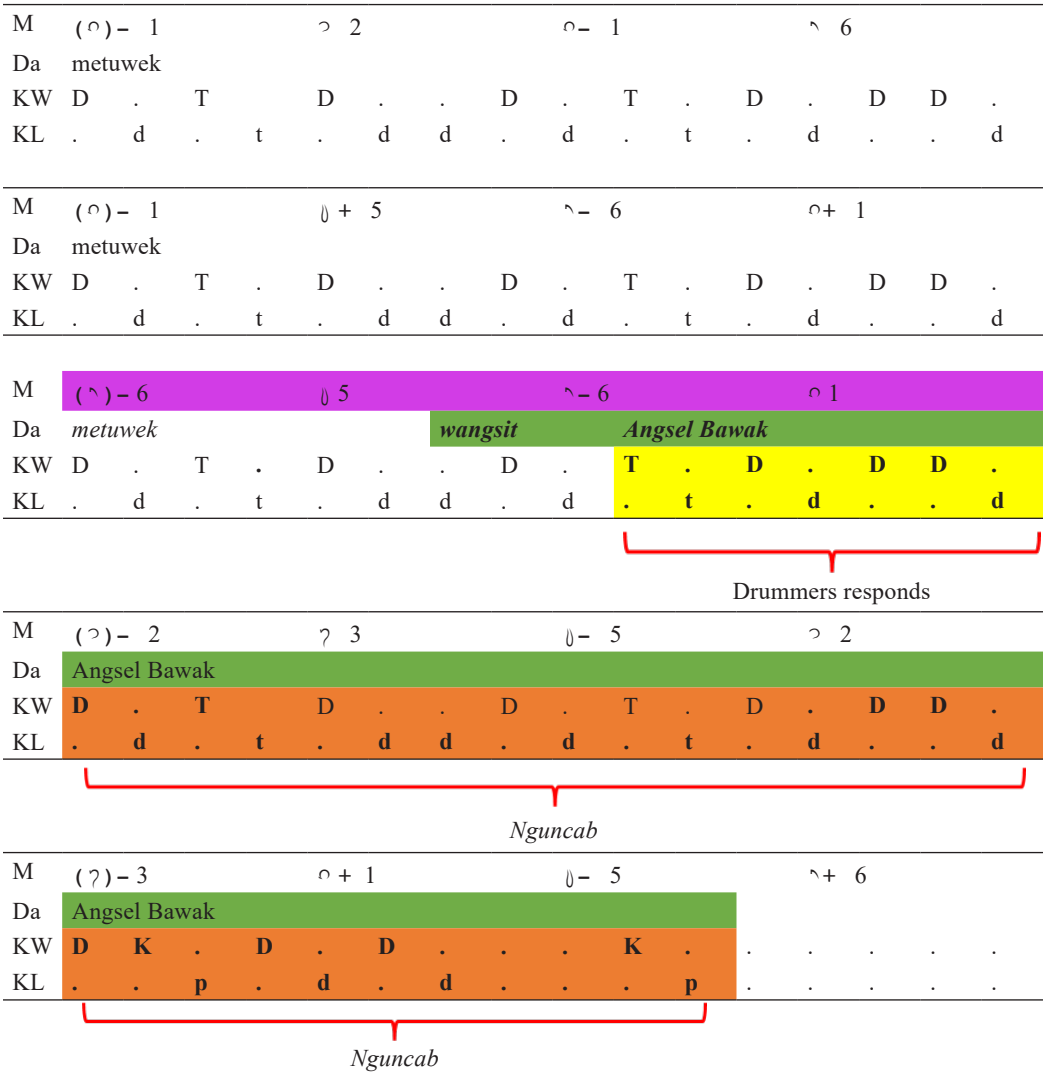
As illustrated in the table, while the *angsel bawak* retains its traditional duration, the expanded melody introduces a new layer of complexity. The dancer gives the *wangsit,* beginning (highlighted in green) on pitch *ndung*, prompting the drummer's response one beat later (highlighted in yellow). Following this, the musicians intensify their volume (*nguncab*) on pitch *ndong* (orange), culminating in a unified gesture, all leaning toward the final *gong*.

For dancers accustomed to the predictable rhythm of traditional *gilak*, the expanded melody of this piece requires considerable adjustments. Dance lecturer I Wayan Sutirtha noted that *"perlu waktu"* (it takes time) to internalise its nuances.[14] Furthermore, I Made Dwi Andika Putra, one of the musicians performing *Egar Abinawa*, recalled introducing the piece to his gamelan group in 2019. The group later performed it during a temple ceremony in Pagutan village, Batubulan. Interestingly, the organisers arranged dancers without prior rehearsal, resulting in a performer unfamiliar with the composition. When the performance began, it quickly became evident that the dancer was unfamiliar with the nuances of the composition. As Andika explained, "*mati pregina'e, sing nyidang ngangselin*" (the dancer is "dead," unable to execute the *angsels*).[15] In response, the musicians had to step in and provide the *angsels* to maintain the flow of the performance—an improvisation that disrupted the expected dynamic, particularly in Topeng Keras, where the dancer traditionally leads and drives the performance.

[14] Personal communication with I Wayan Sutirtha on September 19, 2024.

[15] Personal communication with I Made Dwi Andika Putra on January 1, 2025.

Table 7
Dancer, drummer, musician relationship in the angsel bawak *cycle of gegilakan* Egar Abinawa



Unlike familiar Topeng Keras melodies, this composition requires thoughtful adjustments, as the choreography cannot be immediately applied. Dancers must move beyond instinct, recalibrating their internal rhythm to align with the music's intricate phrasing. This shift compels dancers to adopt a more analytical and deliberate approach, transforming each movement into an intentional response to the melody. This process fosters both artistic and technical growth, deepening their understanding of the symbiotic relationship between music and dance.

Ultimately, this is not just a technical adjustment but an artistic evolution. The dancer and drummer must collaborate with heightened precision to achieve *adung*–the ultimate successful performance.

CONCLUSION

"Tradition is a process of creative transformation," as Bakan states (2019). In the context of Balinese arts, this transformation is not a departure from tradition but a dynamic evolution that balances respect for the past while exploringthe exploration of new possibilities. This balance is vividly illustrated in Asnawa's *gegilakan Egar Abinawa*, where the introduction of an asymmetrical metre redefines both musical and dance conventions.

By expanding the 8-beat *gilak* cycle into the 20-beat *gegilakan*, Asnawa challenges the dancer's reliance on ingrained habits and traditional formulas—a process he described as *ngematiang pregina* ("killing the dancer"). This disruption forces dancers to reevaluate their movements, interpretations, and understanding of rhythm, pushing them beyond their comfort zones. What initially feels like a challenge becomes an opportunity to engage more deeply with the art form, reconnecting with its essence while exploring new creative boundaries.

Through *gegilakan Egar Abinawa*, tradition is not merely preserved but transformed, demonstrating how asymmetrical metre can serve as a catalyst for artistic growth. This composition underscores the evolving nature of Balinese music and dance, where innovation breathes new life into heritage. By challenging performers and audiences to think differently, it reaffirms that tradition thrives when it is questioned, reshaped, and reimagined. In this way, "killing the dancer" becomes a metaphor for revitalising tradition, ensuring its continued relevance and vitality.

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