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### Games Unplugged! Dolanan Anak, Traditional Javanese Children's Singing Games in the 21st-Century General Music Classroom

#### Jui-Ching Wang<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

Educated in a digital world, millennial children lack social interaction and actual hands-on activities involving tactile and kinesthetic training. To counteract this educational trend, traditional singing games that allow children to explore and make sense of their world physically can be valuable. This article introduces the traditional Javanese children's singing games, *dolanan anak*, and their function in developing children's cognitive and social skills. Children learn to follow rules and commands; acquire general information about themselves, their family, and their natural environment; and internalize sociocultural values, such as collaboration. The article also highlights the culturally specific musical characteristics of the songs, *tembang dolanan anak*, for example, the traditional Indonesian gamelan principles, such as tuning systems and the concept of stratified polyphony. In addition, it presents teaching strategies and ideas modified for music teachers to incorporate dolanan anak into their curriculum to meet the national standards and the goal of globalized education.

#### **Keywords**

culture, world music, singing, children's literature, language development, elementary general music, music education, early childhood

The majority of children in the Millennial Generation grow up in a digital world full of hyperlinks, worldwide webs, multimedia, and mobile devices. In music education research, many studies exist about the pros of advancing classroom instruction through the use of technology (e.g., Dammers, 2010; Reese, McCord, & Walls, 2001; Webster, 2002; Williams, 2008). Such benefits may include a more engaging learning environment enriched by digital devices with multisensory and multimedia capacities. Inevitably, digital and multimedia tools are prevalent in children's learning environments to stimulate more effective learning. However, potential problems resulting from the overuse of such technology in the classroom have not been widely discussed. Among the disadvantages, the lack of social interaction and actual hands-on activities involving tactile and kinesthetic training is the most significant loss in children's development.

To counteract this digital trend in education, traditional singing games, an important part of children's early lives that allows them to explore and make sense of their world physically, can be valuable. Children play everywhere, and music is universally an integral part of their play. Through interacting with their peers, children are open to the cultural elements of their society within which both cognitive and social development takes place.

As music classrooms in the United States become more and more diverse, it is necessary for music teachers to be introduced to singing games played by children around the world. Through such activities, teachers can better understand "the nature of children, including those who may populate their classrooms" (Lew & Campbell, 2005, p. 58) and take advantage of the multiple benefits these games offer. This article introduces the traditional Javanese children's singing games, dolanan anak, and their educational values, such as the development of children's cognitive and social skills when they interact musically with their peers in these games. This article also highlights the musical characteristics of the songs, tembang dolanan anak, that accompany the games. In addition, it presents teaching strategies and ideas modified for music teachers to incorporate dolanan anak into their curriculum.

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Jui-Ching Wang,

Associate Professor of Music Education and World Music, School of Music, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115, USA. Email: jcwang@niu.edu Literally translated as "children's play" or "game," *dolanan anak* is a traditional children's game in Yogyakarta in central Java, Indonesia. It usually involves a group of children who play games and sing *tembang* ("song" in Javanese) dolanan anak together to learn about various social and cognitive skills unique to their culture. Until the early 20th century when public school systems were established in Indonesia, such learning was the only education nonprivileged children received.

Not much has been written about the origin of dolanan anak, but a systematic survey was conducted by Hans Overbeck in the 1930s when he lived in Yogyakarta. His collection of games, "Javaansche Meisjesspelen en Kinderliedjes" (Javanese Children's and Girls' Singing Games) includes 690 games with titles, lyrics, rules of the games, variations of both the games and lyrics, and pictures of various group games played by children (Overbeck, 1939). Although 690 games were collected in this book, Indriasari (2012) noted only 152 games can still be recognized, and because these singing games relied heavily on oral transmission, only 40% of them have survived with recognizable tunes originally sung during the games.

Endraswara (2005) analyzed the lyrics of those existing dolanan anak and categorized them into various types, including word-circle songs, lullabies, prophetic songs about human and divine values, play songs, work songs, and humorous songs with witty and satirical lyrics. He further examined the functions of songs and summarized them into three types: songs to accompany games, songs to accompany ritual ceremonies and dance, and songs sung by themselves. Endraswara stated that regardless of the types of games and songs, the ability to memorize rhymes, melodies, movements, and game rules and to collaborate with each other was extremely essential to Javanese children, because it was through such engagement and interaction that social, cognitive, and kinesthetic skills were developed.

#### **Educational Benefits**

Examining the content and meaning of the lyrics of dolanan anak, Daru Winarti (2010) considers these singing games an art form of verbal communication through which messages related to children's cognitive development, such as rules and commands, sociocultural values, and general information about themselves, their family, and their natural environment, can be delivered. In addition, the poetic allusiveness of the lyrics often allows room for children to be imaginative.

The coordination of bodily movements and hand gestures, for example, passing a rock to a steady beat, holding hands, singing while moving in a circle, forming a line, or imitating animal movements, is always part of the singing games, helping children develop kinesthetically. In most singing games, children are usually required to engage in all these physical activities through which not only kinetic but also spatial and tactile skills develop simultaneously. In such group learning experiences, children need to pay close attention to each other to interact and collaborate intimately.

#### Collaboration

One important cultural norm highly valued by traditional Javanese is collaboration. Group activities from complex ritual ceremonies to simple agricultural routines are examples of a collaborative life style, or a communal life style, *gotong royong*, that values the group above the individual (Geertz, 1983). In the past, the group participation of children in the singing games reflected this cohesive societal structure that helped the community constitute an essential part of the culture. The structure of the lyrics, especially those in a call-and-response form, illustrates this characteristic.

Through singing and playing games with call-andresponse lines, the children naturally learned to take turns, to play, or to sing back and forth to each other. For example, in *Jamuran ya ge gethok* (a full bag of mushrooms), at the end of the song, all the children ask the question, *Jamur apa*? (What kinds of mushrooms?). A selected child then responds to the question with a command telling the rest of the children to act. In this game, Javanese children were able to increase their vocabularies and develop their problem-solving skills and establish a sense of community through gotong royong, an important part of Javanese cultural identity (see Figure 1).

#### **Musical Characteristics**

Although in the past the songs to accompany the singing games could be sung either with or without *gamelan*, the percussion-dominated ensemble unique to Indonesia, the melodies of these songs were always composed in the two distinctive tuning systems, *slendro* or *pelog* (see Figure 2). *Slendro* is an anhemitonic five-pitch scale with equal-distance intervals, whereas *pelog* is a hemitonic seven-pitch tuning system with two sets of half-step intervals within the scale (Sumarsam; http://sumarsam. web.wesleyan.edu/Intro.gamelan.pdf).

Javanese children's ability to sing in half steps was a result of their immersion in melodies composed in the *pelog* system. Music teachers can use the following two examples in Figure 3 to help students familiarize themselves with pelog tuning.

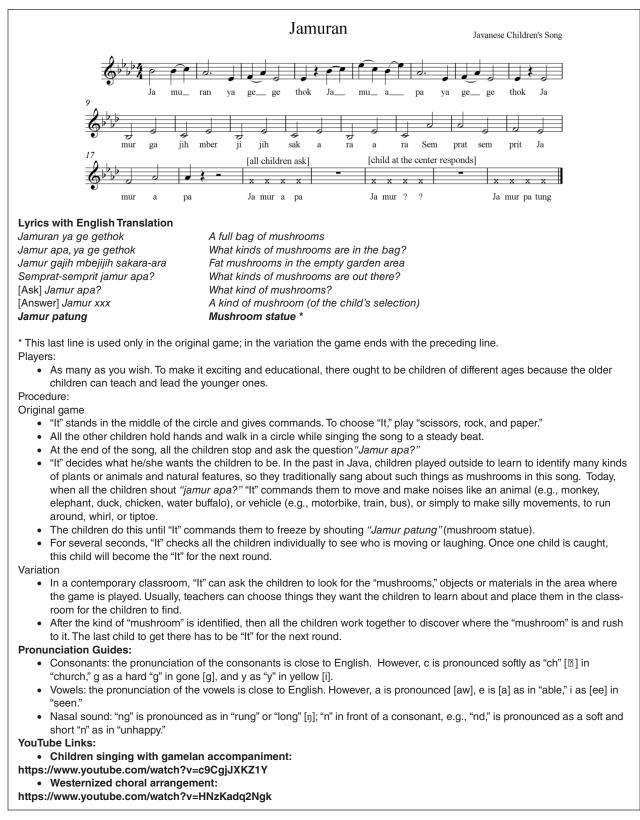
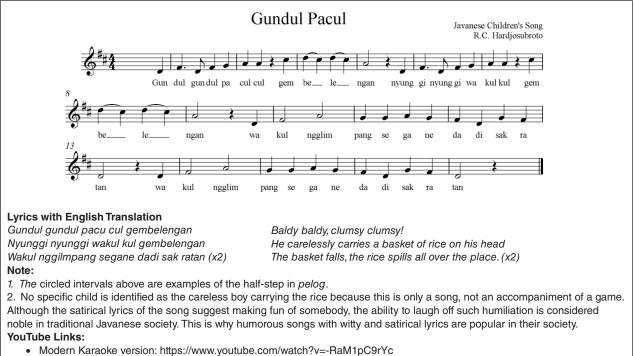






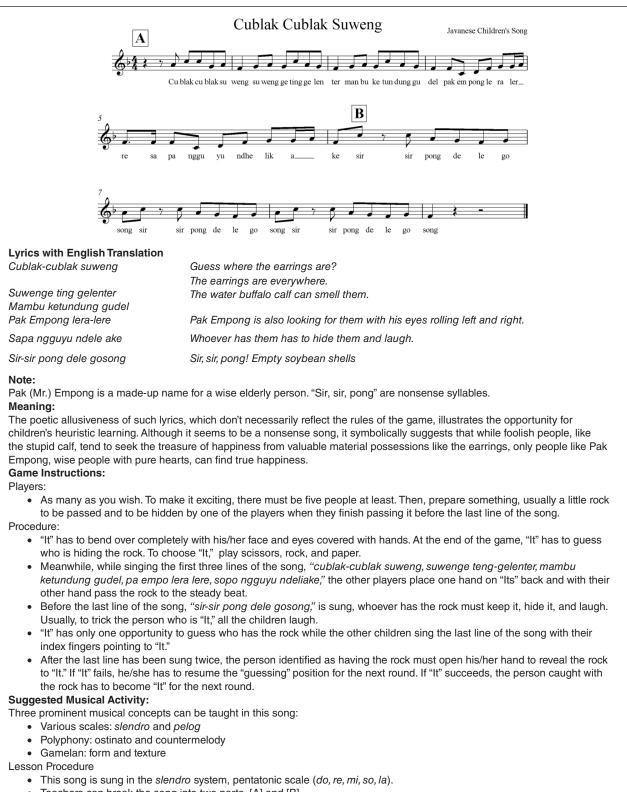
Figure 2. Slendro and pelog tuning systems.



- Westernized choral arrangement with instrumental accompaniment: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLkjzNTwXDU
- Westernized choral arrangement a cappella: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMecQPFxz9Y

Figure 3. Children's song in pelog: Gundul Pacul.

When accompanied by the gamelan, the singing Javanese children are embedded in a rich harmonic texture in which multiple layers of the instrumental melodies and the children's voices are closely intertwined into a stratified polyphony. The many interrelated layers of melodies in the gamelan are derived from *balungan*, a skeleton or main melody. The registers of the gamelan instruments determine the density of the layers. When there's no gamelan, such a concept can still be practiced by adding multiple vocal lines as countermelodies to the main melody (Sumarsam). The musical activity in Figure 4 illustrates this practice. The ability to spontaneously develop countermelodies was unique to Javanese children because they were immersed in such sonority at a very early age by attending social activities such as ritual ceremonies and festivals where gamelan performance was always an important part. Repeatedly singing the songs while playing the games, children learned these musical concepts and educational values, both aurally and orally, as a result of their close interaction and collaboration with their peers and adults. Playgrounds and streets thus became an effective music classroom and the best cultural laboratory where knowledge and skills necessary for children to develop were spontaneously acquired.



- Teachers can break the song into two parts, [A] and [B].
- Once the students master the song in unison, the teacher can teach the concept of polyphony by having a group of students sing [B] as an ostinato melody to accompany the rest of the group while they sing the entire song.

(continued)

#### Figure 4. (continued)

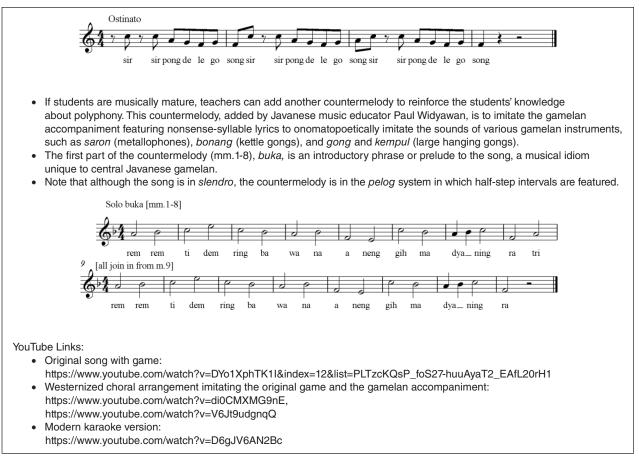


Figure 4. Cublak Cublak Suweng.

#### **Beyond Music!**

The cultural correlates of child development become an important content of children's spontaneous play as exemplified by their singing games. In his fieldwork examining how Venda children developed musically, John Blacking (1973) pointed out that by interacting with their peers and adults, children absorbed what they heard and saw in their daily lives, made sense of it, and created something new. Despite some "genuine" ideas in children's spontaneous musical practices, one cannot ignore that these practices, including singing games, are always shaped by children's cultural sources. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural learning theory also emphasizes this culturally oriented system, in which I believe music and language function as catalysts to efficiently help children acquire cultural values, beliefs, and skills in order to acculturate into their society. The examples of the Javanese singing games explain how traditional cultural values were transmitted via dolanan anak in Java.

Consisting of a great variety of games and music, dolanan anak covers an extensive body of knowledge,

skills, and values essential to children's acculturation in Javanese society. These games not only enhance the development of children's "language and reasoning skills" but also help "foster [children's] social competence and peer-group interaction" (Lew & Campbell, 2005, p. 58). Especially through interacting with older or mature peers in countless game sessions, Javanese children were able to help each other first break the games into manageable units. The musical structure of call and response, for example, allowed children to repeatedly recite the lines (lyrics and melody) until they had memorized them all. By modeling and imitating, children were able to engage in an unconscious learning process while playing with each other. Furthermore, with the collective efforts of all individuals involved in the games, children as a group acquired mental strategies to increase their social and cultural competence. The ability of Javanese children to privilege the group above the individual (gotong royong) or to laugh off personal teasing shows the efficiency of the singing games in delivering messages valued by the society and reinforcing them in children's development at a young age.

Although some musical and educational values of the dolanan anak examples provided in this article are culturally specific, American teachers can wisely adapt this singing game tradition and incorporate it into their curriculum to counteract the disadvantages of the overuse of technology and expand their students' musical horizon and make their classroom more globalized.

Benefits of such incorporation might include the following:

- Through concentrated oral and aural learning, students memorize the lyrics, the music, and the rules of the games.
- Through physical interaction, students develop tactile and kinesthetic skills.
- Through group collaboration, students develop social skills.
- Through polyphonic singing, students learn to be aware of what they sing individually and in relation to others to blend into the total texture.
- Through singing on pelog and/or slendro tuning systems, students develop their ability to appreciate non-European scales and therefore increase their musical vocabularies.

In this article, I introduced dolanan anak and examined its educational benefits to demonstrate the value of music not only in catalyzing children's psychomotor, cognitive, and affective development but also in helping them cultivate their strong cultural identity in the society. By incorporating dolanan anak into classrooms, teachers can take advantage of children's playful nature by using games and music as media to help create an all-encompassing learning environment. Working with students on these Javanese singing games, music teachers can also fulfill the three national standards advocating the inclusion of non-European music: "Singing alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music"; "Listening to, analyzing, and describing music"; and "Understanding music in relation to history and culture" (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994). Moreover, learning various singing games such as dolanan anak allows American children, at an early age, to observe the commonalities and differences between them and their counterparts, to make connections with other cultures, and to appreciate and respect them, the ultimate goal of global education. By returning to "unplugged games," teachers can creatively plan their lessons to help the 21st-century children jump out of the "digital box," for example, iPad or similar devices, and to become singing, moving, playing, listening, and thinking children (Campbell, 2010).

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#### **Author Biography**

Jui-Ching Wang, an associate professor at Northern Illinois University, teaches music education and world music courses and coordinates the Chinese music ensemble, the Indonesian gamelan ensemble, and the Middle Eastern music ensemble. Her research interests include the study of musicking in cultural contexts, musical preferences, children's singing games, and world music pedagogy.