Traditional Music of Sulawesi

By Reza Roovers
Indonesia is an archipelago that has around 17,508 islands. The country has 33 provinces and the province I will talk about soon is Sulawesi, but let’s put that aside and first talk about the country. Indonesia has a tropical weather and it is humid but for outsiders they enjoy the heat.
Before European powers began colonizing South East Asia, there were different empires and small kingdoms. Such as the Majapahit Empire (located in Java) and Pajajaran (now known as Bogor). Many traders came to the islands of Indonesia to trade spices, and that was very important for the locals. Traders not only trade spices but also influenced the locals of their cultures. They brought language, religion and foreign artifacts. Indonesia became a major trading point that the Europeans wanted to seize power over the archipelago, and that was how this country changed.
In 1511, the Portuguese took over Malacca, the first Indonesian island to be colonized. In 1512, the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) arrived at Banten for trading and communicating with the natives. The Dutch Government seized control of the trading in Nusantara because the VOC went bankrupt. From this point on the Indonesia is under the rule of the Dutch until independence was gained in 1945.
In 1942, the Japanese occupied the Dutch East Indies. When the Axis surrendered to the Allies in 1945, Indonesia became independent on the 17th of August, 1945 from the Netherlands and freed from Japan. Although the Dutch acknowledged the independence in 1945, The Proclamation (Proklamasi) was held in 1945 by Ir. Sukarno and Dr. H. Muhammad Hatta. After years of stabilizing the country, ending civil conflicts and trying to put an end to corruption, Indonesia is a fast developing country and becoming economically growing nation.
Despite the weird shape of the island, Sulawesi is an island paradise. Because of the cultures, paradise and cleanliness (in some parts of the island) Sulawesi has attracted so many visitors. There are six provinces: West Sulawesi, North Sulawesi, Central Sulawesi, South East Sulawesi, South Sulawesi and Gorontalo. In all of the provinces there are different tribes and all tribes have their own language. This is also what makes Sulawesi special.
Sulawesi is rich in cultures. Tribes such as the Makassarese and Bugis in the south and the Minahasas in the north. They each speak their own language. Sulawesi’s first superpower, the kingdom of Gowa, has risen in the 16th century. It became powerful because they have allied and traded a lot with the Bajo tribe. Not only the Bajos, but also international traders and Gowa became rich. Around 1660 in Gowa’s capital, Makassar, was under control of the Dutch and controlled its trading. In 1667, the Dutch stopped trading in Makassar and shut down the port.
In 17 August 1945, Indonesia has won independence. Even after independence, there were still conflicts and instability in parts of the country. As for Sulawesi, the island is still undergoing development. However, developing Makassar was interrupted by civil conflicts in the city and it ended by the 1960s. Unfortunately in Central Sulawesi there are still conflicts up until today.
Not many people know what the name Celebes means. According to a local myth, when a Portuguese ship first arrived on the island, the captain of a ship wanted to ask the name of the island. So he asked a local blacksmith in Portuguese the name of the island. The blacksmith didn’t understand so he said “sele besi” which means working with iron. The captain then wrote it down in his book. After Indonesia gained independence, Celebes changed into a modern name Sulawesi which means “island of iron” because iron is one of Sulawesi’s natural resources.
Over the years people of Sulawesi have played music for generations. The locals have enjoyed music and a lot of their cultures can be found today. Because there are so many different cultures in Indonesia, the motto “Bhineka Tunngal Ika” means Unity in Diversity and that symbolizes the diverse cultures in the country. The heritage is still kept.
Kolintang is known as the Indonesian Xylophone from North Sulawesi. According to a local folklore, the name Kolintang means Ting (high pitch note), Tang (moderate pitch note) and Tong (low pitch note). By saying “let’s ting tang tong” it means that you want to play the instrument. This is where the name Kolintang comes from.
Originally, the Kolintang is just a series of bars in a row with no legs. The players would sit crossed legged and play. Later, banana trunks were used for the legs of the Kolintang. The bars are made of wood along with the plank that holds the bars. Each of the bars sounded differently, the biggest bar low pitched and the smallest bar high pitched. The Kolintang you see today has an extra row on top so more music can be played.
Kolintang has been a very close heritage for the Minahasans. It was used for playing in rituals and funerals. When the Portuguese and the Dutch brought Christianity to North Sulawesi, it has disappeared. It has been lost for about a hundred years. Then, in WWII, the Kolintang has reappeared! It was played by a blind musician named Nelwan Katuuk, who made it again and modernized it. Now the Kolintang is played with other instruments like a guitar or a string bass to make it more musical.
The kolintang is just like the modern xylophone. The only difference is that the Kolintang has a deeper sound than other xylophones around the world. When you hit a bar with the stick, it produces long sound, deep sound when struck. The pitches are different depending on what bar you played. When you hit the bar, you can hear a deep TONG or a high TING. The kolintang is very popular and in many Indonesian orchestras you can find people playing that instrument.
Bibliography

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