

Harmonic Poetics and Vocal Subtlety in Karambangan: Interpreting Pamona Musical Aesthetics

Dedi Setyawan¹, Budi Wibawa²

¹Universitas Dr. Soetomo Surabaya, Indonesia

²Institut Kesenian Jakarta, Indonesia

Correspondent: dedi.setyawan@unitomo.ac.id¹

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ABSTRACT: Karambangan, a traditional vocal genre of the Pamona people in Central Sulawesi, integrates poetic kayori with guitar-based harmony. This study examines the gap in existing research by analyzing how performers employ vocal interpretation strategies, particularly in relation to harmony, diction, and affect, within cultural and pedagogical settings. Using a multidisciplinary approach, the research combines ethnographic fieldwork, harmonic transcription, phonetic analysis, and cultural interpretation. Data were collected through audio recordings, kayori texts, and interviews with performers. Harmonic progressions were mapped, vocal timbre and vibrato were measured, and rhetorical features in lyrics were analyzed. Findings reveal that Karambangan vocalists emphasize emotional nuance through vibrato restraint, nasal resonant timbre, and precise prosodic alignment. Harmonic structures often based on three chord cycles and supported by alternate guitar tunings offer a stable platform for expressive delivery. Kayori lines are vocally interpreted through dynamic shaping, rhetorical timing, and culturally informed diction. The study also discusses the pedagogical value of these techniques and the ethical considerations of transitioning the genre from ritual to stage. Karambangan emerges as a genre of cultural significance, where voice embodies both artistic expression and spiritual practice. This research contributes a model of vocal interpretation in indigenous traditions and emphasizes the importance of culturally embedded music education.

Keywords: Karambangan, Pamona Music, Vocal Interpretation, Kayori, Indigenous Harmony, Ethnomusicology, Cultural Pedagogy.



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INTRODUCTION

Karambangan is a vocal tradition of the Pamona people in Central Sulawesi that interweaves poetry, music, and culture. More than an art form, it functions as a vessel of memory and identity. Through kayori, Karambangan embeds communal narratives into performance, making song both an expressive medium and a cultural archive.

Historically, Karambangan emerges from the socio cultural fabric of the Pamona community, which has long inhabited the mountainous and coastal terrains of Central Sulawesi. The genre's roots can be traced to communal and spiritual musical expressions prevalent prior to external influences. However, the arrival of Dutch colonialism and Christian missionary activities during the early 20th century marked a turning point in the evolution of this genre. According to Scalici (2019), the intersection of indigenous musical frameworks with imported Western hymnody reshaped Karambangan's harmonic and structural language. This resulted in the integration of triadic harmonies and polyphonic textures that echoed Christian choral practices. Yet, rather than displacing local traditions, these elements were localized, giving rise to a distinctive hybrid musical aesthetic.

The influence of Christian hymns on Karambangan's harmonic vocabulary is particularly significant. Traditional unison and heterophonic textures were expanded through exposure to four part harmonies, encouraging the emergence of parallel triadic arrangements and responsive part singing. These adaptations allowed for greater emotional expressiveness, aligning with both sacred and secular themes. As Scalici (2019) suggests, this musical hybridity did not erode cultural specificity; instead, it expanded the expressive possibilities available to performers and enriched the genre's aesthetic language. Consequently, Karambangan became a cultural dialogue between the spiritual heritage of the Pamona and the resonances of a new religious order.

At the heart of Karambangan is the *kayori* a poetic structure that does not merely serve a lyrical function but embodies symbolic and rhetorical dimensions. These poetic lines articulate genealogies, moral teachings, natural metaphors, and existential reflections. Performed with measured diction, the *kayori* demands vocal strategies that align linguistic stress with melodic phrasing. Hyperbolic imagery, repetitions, and symbolisms are commonplace, requiring nuanced delivery, often enhanced through rubato phrasing or crescendo on emotionally potent words. In this way, the poetic architecture of Karambangan fundamentally shapes its vocal interpretation.

To study such interpretive strategies requires a methodological synthesis of ethnography, music analysis, and linguistic inquiry. Ethnographic techniques such as oral history interviews and participant observation are instrumental in capturing the lived experiences and tacit knowledge of performers (Scalici, 2019). These approaches enable researchers to trace the shifts in performance practice and contextualize them within broader socio cultural narratives. Simultaneously, analytical tools from musicology such as chord progression mapping and timbral analysis allow for the examination of stylistic changes across historical timelines.

The cultural function of Karambangan as a form of identity assertion is equally central to its understanding. Among the Pamona, vocal traditions like Karambangan not only preserve language and poetry but also express resilience in the face of socio political and religious transformation. As Scalici (2019) articulates, such musical practices continue to serve as anchors for communal belonging and historical consciousness. In their performative mode, Karambangan songs enact the ongoing negotiation between tradition and innovation, situating Pamona identity within a dynamic musical ecology.

Additionally, the interplay between voice and instrumentation particularly with indigenous instruments like the *geso geso* and alternate tuned guitars further informs the stylistic contours of Karambangan. This interaction is not merely accompaniment but a dialogic exchange in which instrumental voicings shape the timbral and rhythmic context for vocal delivery. Research has shown that the instrumental setting modulates phrasing, diction, and vocal register, illustrating how vocal technique is inherently relational (Scalici, 2019).

Despite growing scholarship, research rarely explores how Karambangan singers integrate harmony, diction, and emotional delivery. This study addresses that gap by examining interpretive strategies as cultural and historical expressions. Its novelty lies in combining harmonic analysis, poetic interpretation, and phonetic observation to build a comprehensive framework for understanding Karambangan as a dynamic cultural practice.

METHOD

The methodological framework for this study combines ethnographic inquiry, harmonic analysis, and phonetic profiling to examine the interpretive strategies of Karambangan vocalists in Central Sulawesi. This multidimensional approach is designed to capture the nuanced interplay between harmony, poetic diction, and vocal affect as expressed in Karambangan performance.

Ethnographic Methods

Ethnographic engagement forms the cornerstone of this research. Drawing on the principles outlined by Curran & Radhakrishnan (2021), participant observation was employed during community performances and rehearsals to record contextualized performance behavior. This method enabled a deeper understanding of audience interaction, performance structure, and ritual or informal settings that shape Karambangan practice. In addition, semi structured interviews with six experienced Karambangan singers provided insight into their interpretive choices, aesthetic priorities, and reflections on vocal style and cultural continuity.

Through this immersion, the study accessed tacit knowledge not readily visible in recordings alone, including phrasing intentions, emotional considerations, and strategies for synchronizing with harmonic instruments. Fieldnotes were used to triangulate performance behavior and interview content, ensuring coherence between observed practice and performer testimony.

Harmonic Analysis

The harmonic layer of Karambangan was analyzed using a formal musicological approach tailored to indigenous vocal genres, as suggested by Pogalin & Lestari (2023). Audio recordings from Aural Archipelago, Pamona Record, and Karambangan 2 were transcribed to identify prevailing harmonic progressions, chordal voicings, and textural relationships between lead and harmony parts.

Each song was charted for harmonic sequence, indicating cadence points, modal tendencies, and voice leading. The analytical focus centered on triadic progression patterns (e.g., I–IV–V–I, I–V–vi–IV), the influence of alternate guitar tunings (notably F#–D–A–D–A–G), and the effect of these structures on vocal phrasing. Comparative analysis was also conducted to identify hybridization between local harmonic idioms and hymn derived structures, as elaborated by Irawati (2021).

Phonetic Profiling and Vibrato Analysis

To evaluate the vocal nuances in Karambangan singing, the study applied phonetic analysis using acoustic software tools such as Praat (Hinkley, 2023). Vocal segments from selected recordings were isolated and subjected to spectrographic analysis to measure vibrato frequency (Hz), extent (semitones), and stability (variance). These quantitative metrics were then correlated with interpretive contexts for example, vibrato narrowing during emotionally intimate kayori lines.

Timbre profiling included analysis of nasal resonance and vowel openness, informed by Baker et al. (2024) and Loni & Subbaraman (2019). The software's formant tracking capabilities were employed to observe how singers adapt vocal tract shaping to ensure harmonic blend or textual clarity. These acoustic findings were interpreted in conjunction with qualitative observations and performer feedback, as recommended by Prieske (2019), to ground the data in cultural relevance.

Integrative Approach

By synthesizing ethnographic observation, harmonic analysis, and phonetic profiling, the methodology constructs a robust framework for interpreting Karambangan vocal practice. This combination of qualitative and quantitative data supports a holistic account of how harmony, poetics, and vocal style intersect within a specific cultural and musical tradition.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Harmonic Frameworks

Karambangan's harmonic language synthesizes Southeast Asian idioms with Christian polyphony. The use of parallel intervals and pentatonic-based progressions provides both stability and space for expressive improvisation, shaping the emotional tone of performance.

Open guitar tunings such as F#–D–A–D–A–G enhance harmonic texture and accessibility, allowing performers to access chords that align more closely with traditional melodic contours (Zhou et al., 2019). These tunings serve both functional and expressive roles, simplifying transitions between harmonic centers and providing sonorous support for legato vocal lines. The triadic harmony, although not indigenous, has been assimilated as a structuring device, organizing musical phrases and generating emotional climaxes (Milne et al., 2023; Shin & Fujioka, 2018). Instrumental interaction, particularly with geso geso and seruling, contributes to the formation of a dialogic musical environment, accentuating vocal phrasing and expanding tonal variety (Sun et al., 2017).

Poetic Diction and Kayori Phrasing

Karambangan's kayori a repository of Pamona poetic tradition relies heavily on figurative devices such as metaphor, repetition, and symbolism. These rhetorical elements directly influence vocal phrasing and delivery. Performers utilize musical techniques like rubato, caesura, and dynamic modulation to interpret these poetic structures vocally (Goldman et al., 2018; Thorpe et al., 2019).

Linguistic stress patterns in Pamona language align with musical emphasis, resulting in a phonologically informed phrasing system (Lahdelma & Eerola, 2019). For instance, stressed syllables often coincide with melodic peaks or rhythmically strong beats, reinforcing semantic content. Singers also draw on personal emotional associations with poetic symbols, expressing them through timbre shifts and pitch inflection (Zhu et al., 2023). These expressive strategies are neither formulaic nor entirely improvised they reflect an embodied familiarity with both the language and musical form. Comparative studies show that such prosodic melodic alignment is common in Southeast Asian vocal traditions, reinforcing shared regional aesthetics (Sun et al., 2020).

Timbre and Vibrato Control

The role of vibrato in Karambangan is characterized by restraint and precision. Acoustic analysis reveals narrow vibrato width (typically 1–2 Hz) that supports harmonic blending and textual clarity (Recek et al., 2021). This vibrato strategy emphasizes the cultural preference for emotional subtlety and vocal cohesion. Nasal resonance is a salient acoustic feature, producing a warm, forward placed timbre that enhances projection and blends naturally with traditional instruments (Crespo-Bojorque et al., 2024).

Singers adapt timbre dynamically according to their role. In ensemble contexts, voices are modulated to prioritize blend suppressing individual timbral idiosyncrasies in favor of group coherence (Kleinsmith et al., 2016). In solo passages, however, timbral individuality is foregrounded, often marked by increased color variation and breath nuance. These stylistic adjustments are pedagogically informed, with vibrato and timbre control forming core components of local vocal training (Buse & Roessner, 2016).

Karambangan vocal practice is deeply embedded within a wider cultural framework that prioritizes emotional subtlety, communal cohesion, and spiritual depth. Rather than being merely a musical style, Karambangan is a performative embodiment of Pamona social values and cosmology. This discussion explores four interrelated dimensions emerging from the analysis and supporting literature: vocal restraint, pedagogical potential, ethical challenges in modern staging, and the integrative role of voice–instrument interplay.

Vocal restraint in Karambangan represents both stylistic and moral choice, aligned with humility and respect. This contrasts with Western traditions that prize projection and virtuosity, emphasizing instead intimacy and ethical engagement with the audience. This approach to vocal delivery not only underscores the lyrical meaning but also reinforces a collective musical identity grounded in moderation and harmony (Bremmer & Nijs, 2020). As Tang and Choatchamrat (2024) highlight, such restraint transcends technique, representing an ethical practice of respecting sacred space and fostering genuine listener engagement. It creates an atmosphere where the poetic kayori is received as a sacred narrative, and the singer acts as a mediator between communal memory and

spiritual presence. Millican and Forrester (2019) further note that gentle vocal timbres are essential in spiritual ceremonies, enabling singers to align with ancestral spirits and natural elements.

This aesthetic philosophy presents valuable lessons for regional music education. Karambangan provides a robust pedagogical model rooted in oral transmission, collaborative expression, and embodied learning. As Bedoya et al. (2021) affirm, forms such as call and response and participatory singing enhance inclusivity and build a sense of cultural ownership among students. By incorporating these practices into curricula, educators can cultivate musical proficiency alongside sociocultural literacy. The genre's focus on breath control, vibrato moderation, and precise diction offers technical grounding, while its thematic depth supports emotional and narrative engagement (Zorzal & Quiles, 2017). Moreover, integrating kayori into classroom activities enables students to appreciate linguistic richness and poetic structure, strengthening local identity. Hu (2022) emphasizes that such culturally rooted education empowers students to reconcile tradition with innovation, producing versatile musicians with strong ties to their heritage.

Despite its pedagogical promise, the transition of Karambangan from ritual to staged performance settings introduces complex ethical dilemmas. As sacred or intimate genres are adapted for concerts, festivals, or commercial settings, they risk being stripped of their original symbolic and spiritual meanings. Ma (2024) and Zhang (2024) warn that such transitions can amount to cultural appropriation if they occur without proper consultation with community custodians. When performance contexts shift without ethical sensitivity, the genre's function as a spiritual conduit may be undermined. Liu & Guo (2025) note that commercialization can distort both form and function, altering audience expectations and potentially marginalizing original performers. Performers themselves may face emotional dissonance when asked to present spiritually charged music in contexts that are secular or commodified. Jiang (2023) stresses the importance of emotional and psychological support for artists who navigate these conflicting spaces. To ensure integrity and authenticity, all adaptations should involve community dialogue, respect traditional knowledge, and promote sustainable practices that honor the music's cultural roots.

A key insight from this study concerns the voice–instrument dynamic in Karambangan, which reflects a holistic approach to musical storytelling. Instruments like the *geso geso* are not ancillary; they act as co narrators, providing harmonic and rhythmic frameworks that guide vocal phrasing and timbral shaping. The interaction between vocal and instrumental parts exemplifies a Pamona worldview that sees music as a shared endeavor, mirroring social harmony and environmental symbiosis (Baughman, 2019; Li, 2024). The mutual shaping of voice and instrument underscores a performative philosophy where all elements musician, instrument, audience, and environment are interdependent. Hackworth (2021) and Ritchie & Sharpe (2021) argue that this sonic interconnection is fundamental to ritual efficacy, making music a site of both aesthetic beauty and spiritual encounter.

Overall, Karambangan's interpretive strategies cannot be separated from its cultural, ethical, and pedagogical dimensions. Vocal restraint, pedagogical potential, ethical challenges, and voice–instrument interplay together affirm its role as a living cultural philosophy. Finally, the genre's voice–instrument interactivity reinforces the integrative aesthetics of Pamona tradition, highlighting music as a form of living philosophy. Understanding Karambangan thus requires a

multidisciplinary lens one that honors not just sound but the cultural systems that give that sound its meaning.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights how Karambangan, as a Pamona vocal tradition, integrates harmony, poetic diction, and controlled vocal nuance into a distinctive interpretive practice. Rather than functioning only as a musical form, Karambangan embodies cultural values of humility, cohesion, and spirituality. Its interpretive strategies demonstrate that voice serves simultaneously as an artistic tool and a moral-spiritual expression.

Beyond documentation, the research contributes a model for understanding indigenous vocal traditions within ethnomusicology and cultural pedagogy. By emphasizing the pedagogical potential and addressing ethical considerations in the transition from ritual to stage, the study underscores the importance of preserving cultural integrity while fostering innovation. Karambangan thus emerges as a living philosophy, offering insights for music education, cultural sustainability, and future scholarship.

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