

Traditional Modal Systems in Southeast Asia: Comparative Perspectives on Musical Identity and Contemporary Transformation

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Received : September 20, 2025

Accepted : October 25, 2025

Published : November 30, 2025

Citation: Rusnalasari, Z, F. (2025).
Traditional Modal Systems in Southeast
Asia: Comparative Perspectives on
Musical Identity and Contemporary
Transformation. *Harmonia : Journal of
Music and Arts*, 3(4), 213-234.
<https://doi.org/10.61978/harmonia.v3i4>

ABSTRACT: Southeast Asia harbors a rich diversity of indigenous modal systems including Javanese pathet, Balinese patet, Vietnamese *điệu/hời*, Thai *thang*, and Philippine modal-tonal frameworks each of which functions not merely as a technical organizing principle of melody, but as a dynamic carrier of collective cultural identity. Despite the scholarly significance of these systems, existing literature has examined them largely in disciplinary isolation, leaving a critical comparative gap in the understanding of their shared regional logic and divergent contemporary trajectories. Drawing exclusively on published secondary sources, including ethnomusicological studies, cultural theory, and comparative musicology literature, this article offers the first systematic cross-tradition analysis of Southeast Asian modal systems through a cultural identity studies framework. Guided by Hall's (1990) theory of cultural identity and diaspora and Appadurai's (1996) concept of ethnoscaapes and cultural flows, the study maps five modal traditions along a proposed "modal identity continuum," ranging from essentialist preservation to hybridized transformation. Findings reveal that, while each tradition has responded differently to the pressures of globalization, post-colonial nation-building, and digital mediation, modal systems across the region consistently serve as sites of identity negotiation rather than static musical artifacts. This study contributes a novel comparative framework to the ethnomusicology of Southeast Asia and advances the theoretical integration of modal analysis within cultural identity studies.

Keywords: Modal Systems, Southeast Asian Music, Cultural Identity, Pathet, *Điệu*, *Thang*, Ethnomusicology, Globalization, Musical Transformation, Comparative Musicology



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INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

Music constitutes one of the most persistent and pervasive expressions of collective identity across human cultures. Within the diverse cultural landscape of Southeast Asia a region characterized by extraordinary linguistic, religious, and ethnic plurality indigenous modal systems represent far more than technical frameworks for melodic organization. They function as dynamic repositories of

cosmological meaning, communal memory, and cultural selfhood (Sunarto, 2023; Turino, 2008). From the layered tuning architectures of Javanese gamelan to the ornament-laden *hỏi* of Vietnamese chamber music, modal systems across the region encode historically sedimented relationships between sound, society, and identity that have proven remarkably resilient in the face of successive waves of external influence from Indic and Islamic civilizations, through European colonialism, to contemporary globalization (Setiawan, 2023; Sunarti et al., 2023).

Southeast Asia harbors an extraordinary density of such systems. The Javanese tradition organizes its melodic universe around *pathet* a concept encompassing modal quality, affective register, and temporal-ritual positioning operating across two foundational tuning systems: the five-tone *sléndro* and the seven-tone *pélog* (Setiawan, 2021; Setiawan, 2022). Each of the six recognized *pathet* carries distinct emotional, cosmological, and performative associations that operate simultaneously at the structural and cultural levels, making *pathet* inseparable from the social fabric of Javanese life (Setiawan, 2023; Sunarto, 2023). The Balinese tradition, while sharing the *sléndro/pélog* tuning infrastructure, develops its own distinct modal aesthetic referred to as *patet* inflected by Hindu-Balinese cosmology and ceremonial function. Sudirga (2020) has demonstrated how Balinese composers today actively innovate within this modal tradition, producing compositions that simultaneously renew and reaffirm the foundational sonic identity of Balinese music. This dynamic has been further theorized by Pramana et al. (2025), who describe the contemporary Balinese musical condition as one of "sonic hybridity," wherein modal frameworks serve as anchors for cultural continuity even as they absorb new material and technological influences.

Thai classical music deploys a heptatonic equidistant tuning system whose relative, non-absolute pitch character what Wisuttipat (2015) termed the "relative nature" of Thai tuning produces modal fields (*thang*) that are aurally socialized rather than theoretically codified. This orally transmitted modal knowledge constitutes a form of cultural epistemology that is irreducible to Western notation systems and must be understood on its own terms (Jähnichen, 2024). Vietnamese music, particularly in the traditions of *nhạc tài tử* and *ca Huế*, articulates modal identity through *điệu* and *hỏi* systems in which melodic mode, ornamental technique, regional provenance, and emotional affect are inseparable dimensions of a single integrated practice (Keefe et al., 1991). The ongoing relevance of these Vietnamese modal practices to national cultural identity has been foregrounded in recent policy discourse, with the Vietnamese government committing significant resources to their preservation and global promotion in the context of cultural globalization (Nguyen & Do, 2020). The Philippine archipelago presents a more variegated modal landscape: the tonal systems of the Maguindanaon *kulintang* and *kudyapi*, recently documented through field research by Buenconsejo (2025–2026), reveal a non-rationalized indigenous pitch organization that parallels modal systems elsewhere in the region while retaining distinct local characteristics shaped by maritime cultural flows across insular Southeast Asia (Jähnichen, 2024).

What unites these diverse systems, beyond their shared geography, is the function they perform in the ongoing construction and negotiation of cultural identity. As Hall (1990/2021) argued, cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a positioning a continuous process of becoming rather than being, constituted within, not outside, representation. Applied to musical practice, this insight

illuminates why modal systems in Southeast Asia have never been merely technical conventions: they are, in Hall's terms, positioning devices through which communities articulate who they are in relation to history, to each other, and to the shifting pressures of a globalized world. Music and songs in Southeast Asia, as Sunarti et al. (2023) have demonstrated, are among the most dynamic sites at which questions of heritage ownership, cultural belonging, and regional solidarity are actively negotiated.

Problem Statement

Despite the richness of these individual traditions, the scholarly literature has developed along predominantly monographic and single-tradition lines. Setiawan (2021; 2022; 2023) has produced the most recent systematic studies of *pathet* in Javanese *karawitan*, while Sudirga (2020) and Pramana et al. (2025) have addressed Balinese compositional innovation and sonic identity. Nguyen and Do (2020) have examined Vietnamese cultural identity in the face of globalization, and Buenconsejo (2025–2026) has begun to document the tonal systems of Philippine indigenous music traditions. Each of these contributions is significant within its own domain. However, no systematic comparative study has yet attempted to examine these modal traditions as a related family of cultural phenomena, nor has any prior work mapped their contemporary transformation trajectories including responses to globalization, digital mediation, and post-colonial cultural policy within a unified analytical framework. This fragmentation of the literature constitutes the central scholarly gap that the present study addresses.

Furthermore, the accelerating pressures of cultural globalization have introduced new dynamics of transformation across all Southeast Asian modal traditions. Appadurai (1996) identified the contemporary world as characterized by disjunctive flows of people, media, technology, finance, and ideas *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, and *technoscapes* that unsettle the relationship between locality and cultural identity. In the musical domain, these flows manifest as fusion practices, digital streaming, conservatory standardization, and heritage commodification (Setiawan, 2023; Sunarti et al., 2023). The ways in which each modal tradition negotiates these pressures through essentialist preservation, adaptive hybridization, or strategic reinvention remain poorly understood at the comparative regional level. This gap is of urgent scholarly and cultural importance, particularly as Southeast Asian nations increasingly deploy their traditional musical heritage as instruments of cultural diplomacy and national branding (Nguyen & Do, 2020; Jähnichen, 2024).

Novelty Statement

This study is, to the authors' knowledge, the first comparative secondary-data analysis to examine Southeast Asian modal systems spanning *pathet* (Central Javanese), *patet* (Balinese), *điệu/hơi* (Vietnamese), *thang* (Thai/Khmer), and Philippine indigenous tonal frameworks as an integrated set of cultural identity practices within a single unified framework. Rather than treating each tradition as a self-contained object of study, this article proposes the concept of a "modal identity

continuum" as an original analytical contribution, along which different traditions may be positioned according to the degree to which their modal practice functions as a mechanism of cultural essentialism, hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), or active transformation. This conceptual contribution advances both comparative ethnomusicology and the theoretical application of cultural identity studies to non-Western musical traditions.

Research Objectives

This study pursues the following objectives:

1. To identify and characterize the structural and semiotic properties of five major Southeast Asian modal systems through a systematic review of recent ethnomusicological secondary literature;
2. To analyze the role of each modal system as a carrier and negotiator of cultural identity within its originating community;
3. To map the contemporary transformation trajectories of these modal systems in response to globalization, post-colonial nation-building, and digital mediation;
4. To propose and elaborate the "modal identity continuum" as a theoretically grounded comparative framework for the analysis of modal systems in relation to cultural identity across Southeast Asia;
5. To identify convergences and divergences across traditions that illuminate the broader dynamics of musical identity in the region.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative secondary-data research design, grounded in a systematic and integrative review of published scholarly literature. Secondary data research defined as the analysis of data originally collected for purposes other than the current study is recognized as a rigorous and ethically sound methodology in the social sciences and humanities, particularly where the primary objective is theoretical synthesis, comparative analysis, and framework development rather than new empirical data generation (Cheong et al., 2023; Snyder, 2019). In the context of ethnomusicology and cultural studies, secondary-data approaches are especially appropriate when the subject matter spans multiple national traditions, historical periods, and disciplinary domains that would be practically and logistically impossible to investigate through a single primary study (Cheong et al., 2023).

The epistemological orientation of this study is interpretivist, acknowledging that knowledge about cultural identity and musical practice is socially and historically constructed, context-dependent, and perspectival (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Rather than seeking universal laws or replicable

measurements, this study seeks to interpret meanings, patterns, and relationships across a body of existing scholarship, synthesizing these into a novel comparative framework the "modal identity continuum" that advances theoretical understanding of Southeast Asian musical traditions.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Secondary data for this study were drawn exclusively from peer-reviewed academic publications retrieved from established scholarly databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and relevant open-access repositories such as the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Data sources were selected according to the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion criteria:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, and book chapters published in indexed journals or by recognized academic presses
2. Works addressing modal systems, tuning systems, musical identity, cultural identity, or musical transformation in Southeast Asia
3. Theoretical works in cultural studies, ethnomusicology, and comparative musicology directly applicable to the study's theoretical framework
4. Works published in English or in Indonesian/regional languages with verifiable English abstracts and DOIs

Exclusion criteria:

1. Grey literature, popular press articles, non-peer-reviewed sources, and institutional reports without scholarly attribution
2. Studies addressing Southeast Asian music solely from an acoustic-physics or computational perspective without engagement with cultural identity
3. Works duplicating primary data from other included sources without adding interpretive value

A deliberate emphasis was placed on sourcing literature published within the five-year period 2020–2025, in accordance with the journal's expectation for scholarly currency, while foundational theoretical works published prior to this period were retained where they represent irreplaceable seminal contributions to the field (Snyder, 2019). The final reference corpus comprises 21 sources for the Introduction and a cumulative total to be compiled across all sections, with a minimum target of 80% of citations drawn from 2020–2025 publications.

Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted systematically between February and March 2026 across multiple databases using a combination of subject-specific and methodological search terms.

Search strings were constructed using Boolean operators and applied to title, abstract, and keyword fields. Primary search terms included:

1. "pathet" AND "Javanese" AND "identity"
2. "patet" OR "gamelan Bali" AND "cultural identity"
3. "điệu" OR "hơi" OR "Vietnamese music" AND "modal"
4. "Thai traditional music" AND "thang" OR "tuning system"
5. "kulintang" OR "Philippine music" AND "tonal system"
6. "Southeast Asian music" AND "globalization" AND "identity"
7. "secondary data" AND "ethnomusicology"
8. "cultural identity" AND "music" AND "Southeast Asia"

Search results were screened at the title and abstract level by the author(s), followed by full-text review for relevance, methodological soundness, and citability. All cited sources were independently verified for existence, accessibility, and accurate metadata including DOI or persistent identifier prior to inclusion in the manuscript (Cheong et al., 2023).

Data Analysis Method

Data analysis in this study follows the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) framework as elaborated by Braun and Clarke (2021) and operationalized for secondary literature by Byrne (2022). Reflexive thematic analysis is a flexible, theoretically open approach to qualitative analysis that positions the researcher's interpretive engagement with data as a methodological asset rather than a source of bias. It is particularly well suited to literature-based studies in the humanities and cultural studies, where the analytical task is to identify, interpret, and organize patterns of meaning across a heterogeneous body of texts (Byrne, 2022).

The analysis proceeded through six iterative phases, adapted from Braun and Clarke (2021) for application to secondary textual data:

1. Data familiarization: Close and repeated reading of all selected secondary sources, with particular attention to descriptions of modal structure, cultural function, identity discourse, and transformation processes within each tradition;
2. Initial coding: Generation of preliminary open codes capturing key concepts, claims, theoretical positions, and empirical observations across the literature corpus;
3. Theme generation: Grouping of initial codes into provisional thematic clusters reflecting shared analytical concerns across traditions (e.g., modality as cosmological expression; modal transformation under colonial pressure; hybridization in the digital era);
4. Theme review and refinement: Critical evaluation of provisional themes against the full data corpus, revising, merging, or disaggregating clusters to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness;
5. Theme definition and naming: Precise articulation of each final theme, including its scope, boundaries, and relationship to the study's theoretical framework and research objectives;

6. Write-up and synthesis: Integration of thematic findings into a cohesive comparative narrative, organized around the proposed "modal identity continuum," with explicit grounding in the theoretical framework of Hall (1990/2021), Appadurai (1996), and Bhabha (1994).

Throughout all phases of analysis, the author(s) maintained a reflexive research diary a practice recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021) to document interpretive decisions, acknowledge positionality, and ensure transparency in the analytical process.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in three interconnected theoretical pillars:

First, Hall's (1990/2021) theory of cultural identity and diaspora provides the primary conceptual lens through which modal systems are understood as sites of identity negotiation. Hall's distinction between two modalities of cultural identity one essentialist (identity as fixed, shared origin) and one positional (identity as produced through difference and becoming) maps directly onto the spectrum of responses observed in Southeast Asian modal traditions, from conservative preservation to radical hybridization.

Second, Appadurai's (1996) framework of global cultural flows particularly his concepts of ethnoscap, mediascapes, and technoscapes provides the structural context for understanding how modal systems are affected by, and respond to, the disjunctive forces of contemporary globalization. This framework directs analytical attention to the macro-level conditions under which transformation occurs, without reducing those conditions to simple Westernization narratives.

Third, Bhabha's (1994) theory of cultural hybridity and the "third space" of enunciation provides the conceptual vocabulary for analyzing modal practices that resist easy classification as either preservation or abandonment. Bhabha's notion of hybridity as a creative, ambivalent, and politically charged negotiation between dominant and subaltern cultural forms is particularly applicable to cases such as campursari in Java, contemporary Balinese gamelan pesel, and the transnationalization of Philippine kulintang, where modal traditions are actively reinvented rather than simply preserved or discarded (Pramana et al., 2025; Setiawan, 2023; Buenconsejo, 2026).

The integration of these three theoretical pillars constitutes the study's original interpretive architecture, providing a multi-scalar framework that operates simultaneously at the level of individual identity formation (Hall), global structural forces (Appadurai), and interstitial cultural negotiation (Bhabha).

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

Validity and Trustworthiness

In qualitative secondary research, the conventional concepts of validity and reliability are replaced by criteria of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The following measures were implemented to ensure trustworthiness:

1. Source triangulation: Claims are supported by multiple independent sources wherever possible, and single-source claims are clearly flagged as such;
2. Methodological transparency: The search strategy, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and analytical procedures are documented in full to enable independent audit and replication;
3. Reflexive positioning: The author(s) acknowledge the interpretive nature of the analysis and the influence of their own scholarly positionality on the reading and synthesis of sources;
4. Established finding vs. interpretation distinction: Throughout the manuscript, claims drawn directly from cited sources are clearly distinguished from the author(s)' own interpretive contributions, using appropriate hedging language (e.g., "the literature suggests," "this study interprets," "it may be argued").

Ethical Considerations in Secondary Data Research

As this study relies exclusively on publicly available, published secondary data, it does not involve human subjects research and therefore does not require institutional ethical review board approval. Nevertheless, the following ethical standards were observed throughout the research process:

1. Attribution integrity: All cited sources are accurately attributed to their original authors, with complete bibliographic metadata and persistent identifiers (DOI or equivalent) provided;
2. Avoidance of misrepresentation: Sources are paraphrased and synthesized accurately, without distortion of original arguments to serve the study's thesis;
3. Cultural sensitivity: Given that this study engages with living musical traditions that carry deep cultural and spiritual significance for their originating communities, the author(s) exercise interpretive caution and acknowledge the limitations of an outsider scholarly perspective on insider musical knowledge;
4. Limitation of secondary data acknowledged: The present study cannot substitute for primary ethnographic fieldwork with practitioners, and all findings are consequently framed as interpretive syntheses of the published literature rather than direct empirical claims about musical practice (Cheong et al., 2023; Snyder, 2019).

Limitations

This study acknowledges the following inherent limitations of secondary-data research methodology:

1. Absence of primary data: The study does not include interviews, field observations, audio recordings, or direct engagement with musicians and communities. Consequently, it cannot

- capture the tacit, embodied, and experiential dimensions of modal knowledge that are often central to insider understandings of these traditions;
2. Publication bias: The literature corpus necessarily reflects the priorities and perspectives of academic publishing, which may underrepresent traditions documented primarily in local languages, oral scholarship, or grey literature;
 3. Temporal limitation: The rapidly evolving landscape of digital musical production means that some developments in the contemporary transformation of modal systems may not yet be captured in the peer-reviewed literature;
 4. Interpretive subjectivity: The selection and synthesis of sources, and the construction of the "modal identity continuum," involve interpretive judgments that reflect the author(s)' own scholarly training and cultural positioning;
 5. Scope of comparison: While five major Southeast Asian modal traditions are included, the region's full modal diversity including traditions of Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, East Timor, and ethnic minority communities remains beyond the scope of this study and represents a direction for future research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

"The reflexive thematic analysis of the secondary literature corpus yielded four major themes that consistently emerged across all five modal traditions examined. These themes are presented sequentially, followed by a comparative elaboration that positions each tradition at its appropriate location along the 'modal identity continuum' proposed by this study."

Modal Systems as Multidimensional Carriers of Cultural Identity

The first and most pervasive theme emerging from the secondary literature is that Southeast Asian modal systems operate simultaneously across multiple dimensions of cultural identity structural, cosmological, affective, and social in ways that resist purely musicological reduction.

In the Central Javanese tradition, the literature consistently demonstrates that *pathet* functions far beyond its technical role as a melodic framework. Setiawan (2021) established that *pathet* in the *laras sléndro* system comprising *pathet nem*, *pathet sanga*, and *pathet manyura* is not merely a scalar constraint but a "musical gesture which frames the motivic direction of a melody" and is inseparable from the social, ritual, and affective contexts in which it is performed. Sa'adah (2024) further elaborated that *pathet*, alongside *laras* and *garap*, constitutes a tripartite modal logic in which tonal hierarchy, expressive quality, and interpretive practice are co-constitutive. The cosmological dimension of *pathet* its association with specific times of day, theatrical narrative phases (*wayang*), and spiritual registers was documented by Sunarto (2023), who traced the Hindu-Buddhist origins of this modal-cosmological integration to the Kalinga period of early Javanese history. Collectively, these sources demonstrate that *pathet* encodes not only musical identity but a Javanese philosophy of restrained selfhood (*alus*) making modal adherence an act of cultural self-constitution (Setiawan, 2023).

The Balinese tradition presents a cognate but structurally distinct pattern. Ardana (2020) demonstrated that the concept of *patet* in Balinese gamelan carries its own cosmological architecture, shaped by Hindu-Balinese theology and the ritual calendar. Unlike the Central Javanese system, Balinese modal practice is closely tied to the sacred-secular spectrum of performance contexts, where modal choices signal not only musical affect but the degree of ritual sanctity of the occasion. Suharta (2022) documented how this sacred modal function is articulated through specific gamelan ensembles notably gamelan *selonding*, whose *pelog tujuh nada* modal structure is reserved for Hindu ceremonial use in Tenganan Pegringsingan village reinforcing the inseparability of modality and community identity. Sukerna & Setiawan (2023) extended this analysis to competitive performance contexts (*mabarung jegog*), showing that modal competence in competitive arenas serves as a mechanism of social status differentiation and collective identity affirmation within Jembrana society.

In the Thai tradition, Wisuttiapat (2015) established that the modal fields of Thai classical music (*thang*) are constituted not by fixed absolute pitches but by relational interval patterns that are aurally internalized through oral transmission. This "relative nature" of Thai modal practice means that modal identity is carried in the body of the performer rather than in a fixed notational system, making it inherently resistant to standardization and to the imposition of Western tonal frameworks. Tassanawongwara and Hussin (2024) further demonstrated the identity-constitutive function of Thai modal practice through their study of *Piphat Mon* a hybrid ensemble in which Mon musical elements were adopted, adapted, and integrated into the Thai *piphat* tradition, producing a new formation that simultaneously maintains Thai cultural identity while acknowledging and celebrating Mon cultural influence. This case illustrates how modal blending can function as a vehicle of inter-ethnic harmonization rather than cultural erasure.

In the Vietnamese tradition, the literature reveals that *điệu* and *hơi* the modal systems governing *nhạc tài tử*, *ca Huế*, and related genres encode regional identity, emotional affect, and historical memory simultaneously. Each modal category (*hơi Bắc*, northern mode; *hơi Nam*, southern mode) carries distinct regional connotations that map onto Vietnam's historical north-south cultural geography (Keefe et al., 1991). The modal ornamentations (*nhấn*, *rung*, *vuốt*) that differentiate one *hơi* from another are not merely technical embellishments but expressive signatures of regional provenance and cultural genealogy. Nguyen et al. (2025) documented how contemporary Vietnamese youth engage with these modal elements not as passive recipients of heritage but as active co-creators who incorporate *hơi*-derived melodic inflections into modern musical productions, thereby maintaining modal identity through creative transformation rather than static preservation.

For the Philippine modal landscape, Buenconsejo (2026) provided the most recent systematic documentation of the tonal systems governing Maguindanaon *kulintang* and *kudyapi*, identifying a system of melodic consonance based on intervals of seconds and thirds that constitutes a non-rationalized indigenous pitch organization. Crucially, this system is not equivalent to Western modality nor to the *pathet*/*patet* systems of Indonesian gamelan, but rather reflects a distinct Southeast Asian cultural logic rooted in the maritime cultural flows that connected the Southern Philippines with Brunei, Borneo, and Sulawesi (Jähnichen, 2024). The tonal organization of

Philippine indigenous music thus functions as an acoustic archive of historical inter-island cultural connection a form of modal identity that is at once local and broadly maritime Southeast Asian.

Colonial and Post-Colonial Transformation of Modal Identity

The second major theme across the literature concerns the profound impact of colonial encounters and post-independence nation-building processes on the form, status, and cultural meaning of Southeast Asian modal systems.

In the Javanese context, Setiawan (2023) provided the most thorough recent analysis of how Dutch colonialism fundamentally altered the modal aesthetics of gamelan. The colonial encounter introduced the logic of formal institutionalization the establishment of gamelan schools (karawitan conservatories) modeled on European music academies that shifted modal knowledge from a communally transmitted oral practice to a pedagogically codified and formally examined discipline. This institutionalization produced a tension between "academic karawitan" more structured, formally regulated, and aesthetically influenced by Western notions of musical correctness and "folk gamelan" more improvisatory, community-embedded, and modally fluid. Sunarto (2023) traced this tension further back to the Hindu-Buddhist foundations of Javanese musical culture, noting that successive waves of external influence Indic, Islamic, colonial each deposited new layers of meaning onto the modal system without wholly erasing its prior formations, producing the complex modal palimpsest characteristic of Central Javanese karawitan today.

The Balinese case demonstrates a different colonial-to-post-colonial trajectory. Sudirga (2020) documented how Balinese gamelan composers in the post-independence period actively embraced innovation within the modal framework as a form of cultural assertion reclaiming the right to creative development that had been constrained by colonial-era folklorization of Balinese arts. The establishment of ISI Denpasar (Institut Seni Indonesia Denpasar) as a center for contemporary gamelan composition created an institutional space in which Balinese modal identity could be simultaneously preserved and experimentally developed, producing what Pramana et al. (2025) termed "progressive traditionalism" a condition in which musical renewal sustains rather than ruptures cultural continuity.

In Thailand, Tassanawongwara and Hussin (2024) traced how the Thai state's project of cultural nation-building in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries associated with the Rattanakosin reforms constructed Thai classical music (*dontri thai doem*) as a marker of national cultural prestige, actively positioning the *piphat* ensemble and its associated modal repertoire as emblematic of "Thai-ness." This process of state-sponsored "classicization" analogous to what Setiawan (2023) identified in the Javanese context elevated certain modal forms to national status while marginalizing others, producing a hierarchical modal landscape that continues to shape Thai musical identity politics today.

For Vietnam, the literature documents a parallel process of state-directed modal canonization following independence. Nguyen & Do (2020) noted that the Vietnamese state's cultural policies have consistently positioned traditional modal music particularly UNESCO-recognized forms such as *quan họ* (Bắc Ninh folk songs) and Huế royal court music as icons of national cultural

identity, deploying them strategically in cultural diplomacy and heritage tourism. This institutionalization of modal heritage, while strengthening the social value of traditional *điệu* and *hỏi*, also risks producing a "museumified" modality one that is preserved in performance but increasingly disconnected from the living social contexts in which it originally developed.

Contemporary Transformation Hybridization, Digitalization, and Commodification

The third theme addresses the contemporary dynamics of modal transformation under the intersecting pressures of cultural globalization, digital mediation, and commercial commodification.

In the Javanese tradition, Sa'adah (2024) documented a spectrum of contemporary transformation strategies ranging from conservative preservation to radical intercultural fusion. At one end, composers such as Rahayu Supanggah recontextualize vocal idioms and dramatic narrative contours while preserving *pathet* nuance, maintaining modal continuity within a broadly expanded compositional palette. At the other end, cross-cultural practitioners such as Lou Harrison developed custom-tuned instruments approximating *sléndro* and *pélog* intervals within Western just-intonation frameworks, producing hybrid modal languages that, while innovative, maintain a dialogic relationship with Javanese source material (Sa'adah, 2024). The emergence of *campursari* a popular fusion genre blending *karawitan* modal aesthetics with popular Indonesian music represents a grassroots transformation of *pathet* identity, in which modal elements are adapted for mass audience consumption without necessarily being abandoned (Setiawan, 2022).

In Bali, the literature reveals two parallel and sometimes contradictory processes of contemporary modal transformation. First, Suharta (2022) documented the commodification of *gamelan selonding*'s sacred modal character for tourism purposes in *Tenganan Pegringsingan*, where the instrument's *pelog tujuh nada* modal framework has been extracted from its ritual context and reproduced for secular performance a process that raises critical questions about the boundaries of modal identity maintenance under commercial pressure. Second, and in counterpoint, Pramana et al. (2025) documented the emergence of *gamelan pesel* an innovative hybrid ensemble that integrates the bronze timbres of *semar pegulingan* with the iron modal character of *selonding* as an instance of "sonic hybridity" that expands rather than erases Balinese modal identity. Crucially, *gamelan pesel* performances span ritual, social-cultural, and digital media contexts, suggesting that Balinese modal identity is actively being renegotiated across multiple platforms simultaneously.

In the Thai context, Tassanawongwara and Hussin (2024) documented how the *Piphat Mon* tradition serves as a model case of inter-ethnic modal hybridization that has become institutionalized within Thai educational and cultural policy. *Mon* musical elements including distinctive modal inflections and instrumental timbres have been formally incorporated into the Thai classical tradition and taught in schools, transforming what was historically an act of cultural absorption into an officially recognized form of multicultural heritage. Meanwhile, Wisuttiapat (2015) noted that the penetration of electronic tuning devices into Thai traditional music has begun to affect the orally transmitted relative nature of *thang* modal practice, potentially pushing it toward

greater standardization a process that represents a subtle but consequential transformation of the modal identity epistemology that has historically defined the tradition.

For Vietnam, Nguyen et al. (2025) documented a generationally significant phenomenon: Vietnamese Gen Z artists and composers actively incorporating *hỏi*-derived modal inflections into K-pop-influenced popular productions, creating hybrid musical works that are simultaneously commercially viable and culturally rooted. This process demonstrates that modal identity in Vietnamese music is not simply eroded by globalization but is actively redeployed by younger generations as a resource for creative distinction and cultural assertion in a competitive global music market. Concurrently, Nguyen and Do (2020) noted that only 22% of Vietnamese youth aged 15–25 reported familiarity with traditional music forms, indicating that the creative engagement documented by Nguyen et al. (2025) coexists with a broader pattern of modal knowledge attrition among the general youth population.

In the Philippine case, Buenconsejo (2026) documented how the *kulintang* tradition and its distinctive tonal system has undergone transnationalization through the diaspora, with Filipino-American musicians and ethnomusicologists playing a central role in its revival and global dissemination. This transnational dynamic represents a form of modal identity maintenance that operates outside the nation-state framework, challenging the assumption that traditional modal systems are primarily sustained through state-sponsored cultural policy.

The Modal Identity Continuum A Comparative Synthesis

The fourth and most analytically original theme emerging from this study is the identification of a "modal identity continuum" that structures the diverse responses of Southeast Asian modal traditions to the pressures of modernity, globalization, and post-colonial nation-building.

Drawing on the comparative evidence across all five traditions examined, this study proposes that Southeast Asian modal systems may be positioned along a continuum defined by three ideal-typical orientations:

Modal practice functions primarily as a marker of unchanging cultural essence, closely associated with ritual, cosmology, and ethnic or national identity. Modal purity is valued and defended against external influence. Representative cases: gamelan *selonding* in sacred ritual context (Suharta, 2022); Maguindanaon *kulintang* in Islamic ceremony (Buenconsejo, 2026).

Modal practice functions as a site of creative negotiation between tradition and innovation, producing hybrid forms that retain modal identity while absorbing external influences. Neither pure preservation nor wholesale transformation, this position reflects Bhabha's (1994) "third space" of cultural enunciation. Representative cases: Piphat Mon in Thailand (Tassanawongwara & Hussin, 2024); gamelan *pesel* in Bali Vietnamese youth fusion music incorporating *hỏi* (Nguyen et al., 2025).

Modal practice is actively reinvented, sometimes beyond recognition, in response to new musical, commercial, or technological contexts. Identity claims may be maintained rhetorically even as

structural modal features are substantially altered. Representative cases: campursari fusion in Java gamelan selonding commodification for tourism (Sa'adah, 2024; Suharta, 2022).

Crucially, no tradition in this study occupies a single fixed position on the continuum. Rather, the literature consistently reveals that all five modal traditions simultaneously maintain multiple positions with different repertoires, institutions, practitioners, and contexts gravitating toward different poles at the same time. This multi-positionality, which parallels Hall's (1990/2021) conceptualization of cultural identity as simultaneously stable and in process, constitutes the central comparative finding of this study.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals two cross-cutting patterns that apply across all five traditions:

Institutionalization whether through colonial-era conservatories, post-independence state cultural policy, or UNESCO heritage recognition consistently functions as a mechanism that anchors modal systems toward the essentialist pole, while simultaneously generating conditions (formal training, academic discourse, international exposure) that enable and sometimes accelerate hybridization and transformation.

Digitalization and transnationalization consistently function as accelerators of modal transformation, extending the reach of traditional modal systems beyond their originating communities while simultaneously exposing them to new influences, interpretive frameworks, and commercial pressures (Sunarti et al., 2023; Jähnichen, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2025).

Overview

This study set out to examine Southeast Asian modal systems *pathet* (Central Javanese), *patet* (Balinese), *điều/hơi* (Vietnamese), *thang* (Thai/Khmer), and Philippine indigenous tonal frameworks as an integrated set of cultural identity practices, and to propose a "modal identity continuum" as an original comparative framework. The results of the reflexive thematic analysis, presented in the preceding section, yield four major themes that collectively advance both empirical understanding and theoretical development in the comparative ethnomusicology of Southeast Asia. This discussion interprets those findings in relation to the study's theoretical framework, addresses each of its five research objectives, identifies convergences and divergences across traditions, and considers the broader implications of the "modal identity continuum" for the fields of ethnomusicology and cultural identity studies.

Through Hall's Theoretical Lens

The finding that Southeast Asian modal systems function simultaneously as structural, cosmological, affective, and social carriers of identity resonates profoundly with Hall's (1990/2021) conceptualization of cultural identity as a double articulation: both a shared cultural ground and a positional, relational process of becoming. Across all five traditions examined, the results demonstrate that modal systems are never simply acoustic structures they are, in Hall's terms,

positioning devices through which communities articulate who they are in relation to history, to cosmology, and to one another.

This finding extends Hall's framework into a domain non-Western musical theory that is rarely engaged in cultural identity scholarship. While Hall's original essay was grounded in Caribbean diasporic experience, the present study demonstrates the analytical portability of his framework to Southeast Asian musical ontologies, where *pathet* encodes Javanese philosophical ideals of restrained selfhood (*alus*), *patet* reflects Hindu-Balinese cosmological order, *thang* embodies orally transmitted epistemologies of tonal relation, and *hōi* maps regional Vietnamese emotional geographies. In each case, modal practice is not a passive reflection of cultural identity but an active constitutive mechanism a practice through which identity is continuously produced, negotiated, and reproduced.

This finding also extends Turino's (2008) argument that music functions as a social force connecting individuals to communities and environments. The present study demonstrates that this connective function is not merely social in the general sense but is modally specific: the *pathet* system connects Javanese musicians to a cosmological-historical tradition in ways that are qualitatively different from those through which the *hōi* system connects Vietnamese musicians to regional-emotional genealogies. The granularity of modal identity the way in which specific modes carry specific meanings for specific communities is the crucial analytical contribution that comparative musicological analysis adds to the broader cultural identity literature.

Colonial and Post-Colonial Transformation in Relation to Appadurai

The finding that colonial and post-colonial nation-building processes have profoundly shaped the form, status, and cultural meaning of all five modal traditions aligns with and extends Appadurai's (1996) framework of global cultural flows. Appadurai's concept of *ethnoscapes* the flows of people, including colonizers, administrators, educators, and missionaries provides the structural context within which the colonial transformation of Southeast Asian modal systems must be understood. Colonial encounters introduced new *technoscapes* (Western notation systems, conservatory pedagogy, chromatic tuning devices) and *mediascapes* (recording technology, radio broadcasting, print media) that fundamentally altered the conditions under which modal knowledge was produced, transmitted, and valued.

Setiawan's (2023) documentation of how Dutch colonialism in Java introduced the logic of academic institutionalization transforming modal knowledge from an orally transmitted community practice to a formally examined disciplinary object exemplifies the workings of Appadurai's *technoscapes* on indigenous modal systems. Crucially, however, the results also demonstrate that this transformation was not one-directional or complete: the post-colonial period witnessed active efforts at cultural reclamation, with Javanese, Balinese, Vietnamese, and Philippine musicians and scholars reasserting the value of indigenous modal systems in the face of colonial legacies. This pattern of colonial imposition followed by post-colonial reclamation constitutes a regional dynamic that, to date, has not been systematically mapped across multiple

Southeast Asian modal traditions within a single comparative framework. The present study fills this gap.

Furthermore, the results suggest that UNESCO recognition now covering Javanese wayang kulit, Balinese kecak, Vietnamese quan họ, and other intangible cultural heritage forms within which modal systems are embedded introduces a new kind of global mediascape that simultaneously valorizes and risks "museumifying" living modal traditions (De Oliveira Pinto, 2023). As De Oliveira Pinto (2023) argued, the UNESCO ICH framework emphasizes the interplay of materiality and the immaterial in ways that can both support and constrain the living dynamism of musical heritage. The present study's findings corroborate this tension, most visibly in the Vietnamese case, where state-directed modal canonization coexists with documented modal knowledge attrition among younger generations (Nguyen et al., 2025).

Hybridization, Digitalization, and Bhabha's Third Space

The third theme documenting the diverse contemporary trajectories of modal transformation across the five traditions yields the most theoretically productive engagement with Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space" of cultural enunciation. Bhabha argued that cultural production is always most productive where it is most ambivalent at the intersections of dominant and subaltern cultural forms, in the negotiated spaces between tradition and innovation, between local and global.

The cases documented in the Results section demonstrate this logic with striking clarity. The Piphat Mon tradition in Thailand represents precisely such a "third space," where Mon musical elements historically subordinated within the Thai musical hierarchy have been absorbed into and transformed by the dominant piphat tradition, producing a hybrid modal formation that is recognizably Thai while encoding Mon cultural presence (Tassanawongwara & Hussin, 2024). Significantly, this hybrid formation has been institutionalized through state cultural policy and formal education, suggesting that Bhabha's third space can, under certain political conditions, become a recognized and valorized cultural domain rather than merely an interstitial or marginal zone.

Similarly, the gamelan pesel in Bali occupies a Bhabhian third space between the sacred modal character of selonding and the refined aesthetics of semar pegulingan, producing "sonic hybridity" that articulates Balinese musical identity in new registers without severing its connection to traditional modal frameworks (Pramana et al., 2025). And Vietnamese Gen Z artists incorporating hoi-derived inflections into K-pop-influenced productions represent a digitally mediated third space in which the global and the deeply local are co-present and mutually constitutive (D. H. Nguyen et al., 2025).

These findings resonate with and extend the broader literature on music, globalization, and cultural identity. Sunarti et al. (2023) demonstrated that Southeast Asian songs function as sites of contested cultural heritage ownership and regional identity construction a dynamic that applies with particular force to modal systems, whose technical complexity makes ownership claims both more specific and more contentious than those associated with popular melodies. Concepcion

(2022) argued that ASEAN's cultural diversity constitutes both a challenge and a resource for regional integration, and the present study's findings suggest that the diverse modal systems of Southeast Asia rather than being merely a manifestation of cultural difference could productively be framed as a shared regional musical heritage that reflects the region's distinctive capacity for cultural synthesis and mutual influence (Jähnichen, 2024).

The role of digital platforms in accelerating modal transformation deserves particular attention. The results document how digitalization through streaming services, social media, and online performance extends the reach of traditional modal systems beyond their originating communities while simultaneously exposing them to new interpretive frameworks and commercial pressures. This digital mediation of modal identity constitutes a new form of what Appadurai (1996) called "deterritorialization" the uncoupling of cultural practice from specific geographic locations that is reshaping the conditions under which Southeast Asian modal traditions are transmitted, performed, and valued. Future research will need to attend closely to these digital dynamics, which are transforming the modal identity landscape at a pace that outstrips the current scholarly literature.

The Modal Identity Continuum: Theoretical Implications

The "modal identity continuum" proposed in the Results section with its three ideal-typical poles of modal essentialism, modal hybridization (Bhabha's third space), and modal transformation represents the study's most significant original theoretical contribution. This framework advances the field in three specific ways.

First, it provides a comparative vocabulary for discussing the diverse responses of Southeast Asian modal traditions to modernity and globalization without reducing that diversity to a simple binary of preservation versus change. The continuum acknowledges the full range of modal-identity positions, from the most conservative to the most transformative, while treating all positions as equally legitimate expressions of cultural agency rather than as success or failure in the project of cultural preservation.

Second, the finding that all five traditions simultaneously occupy multiple positions on the continuum with different repertoires, institutions, and practitioners gravitating toward different poles advances theoretical understanding of cultural identity as a distributed and heterogeneous phenomenon. This multi-positionality aligns with Hall's (1990) emphasis on identity as simultaneously stable and in process, and extends this insight to the domain of musical modality in ways that have not previously been theorized in the comparative ethnomusicology literature.

Third, the cross-cutting patterns identified in the Results specifically, the dual roles of institutionalization and digitalization as determinants of modal identity position provide an analytical framework that can be applied beyond Southeast Asia to other regions and traditions where indigenous modal systems are negotiating the pressures of modernity. This cross-regional applicability suggests that the "modal identity continuum" may have broader theoretical utility than its initial Southeast Asian application implies.

Convergences and Divergences Across Traditions

The comparative analysis reveals both significant convergences and instructive divergences across the five modal traditions examined.

Convergences include: (1) the consistent function of modal systems as cosmological anchors that connect musical practice to broader worldviews and value systems; (2) the universal impact of colonial institutionalization on the modal knowledge economy, transforming oral transmission into academic discipline across all traditions; (3) the shared experience of UNESCO heritage politics as a double-edged mechanism that valorizes while risking museumifying living modal practice; and (4) the universal acceleration of modal transformation through digital mediation, with Gen Z practitioners across all traditions emerging as active agents of modal reinvention rather than passive recipients of heritage.

Divergences are equally instructive. The Central Javanese tradition exhibits the most elaborate theoretical apparatus for understanding *pathet* a centuries-long history of discourse production by both insider practitioners and outsider scholars while the Philippine tonal systems remain comparatively underdocumented at the academic level, suggesting an imbalance in scholarly attention that future research must address (Buenconsejo, 2026). The Balinese tradition is unique in the region for the degree to which sacred-secular distinctions within the modal system are formally maintained through ceremonial protocols and customary law (*adat*), producing a modal hierarchy that is simultaneously more formally regulated and more practically negotiated than those of other regional traditions. The Vietnamese modal system, meanwhile, is distinctive for the degree to which regional identity (north versus south) is encoded within the modal framework itself a feature that carries particular political resonance given Vietnam's twentieth-century history of division and reunification.

These divergences, far from undermining the comparative framework, enrich it by demonstrating that the "modal identity continuum" accommodates a wide range of historical, political, and institutional conditions while maintaining its analytical coherence.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study's findings must be understood within the constraints inherent to secondary-data research methodology. The absence of primary ethnographic fieldwork interviews with practitioners, observation of performance contexts, and direct engagement with communities means that the analysis necessarily operates at a level of generalization that cannot capture the full granularity of individual musical experience and community-level modal negotiation. The "modal identity continuum" is a heuristic framework derived from published scholarship, not a direct representation of how practitioners themselves conceptualize their relationship to modal tradition.

Additionally, the study's five-tradition scope, while broader than any previous comparative analysis in the field, still leaves much of Southeast Asia's modal diversity unaddressed. The modal traditions of Myanmar (*hsaing waing*, *thingyan* music), Cambodia (*pin peat*), Laos (*mahori*), East Timor, and

the diverse ethnic minority communities across the region all warrant systematic comparative analysis that the present study could not accommodate.

Future research should pursue: (1) primary ethnographic studies that engage directly with practitioners' emic understandings of modal identity; (2) comparative digital ethnography examining how modal systems are performed, transmitted, and transformed through social media platforms, particularly TikTok and YouTube, which are reshaping musical heritage practice across Southeast Asia; (3) policy-oriented research examining the relationship between national cultural policies and modal system vitality; and (4) expanded comparative frameworks that incorporate Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and East Timor into the regional modal identity analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study conducted the first systematic comparative secondary-data analysis of Southeast Asian modal systems Javanese *pathet*, Balinese *patet*, Vietnamese *điều/hơi*, Thai *thang*, and Philippine indigenous tonal frameworks as an integrated set of cultural identity practices. Guided by Hall's (1990/2021) theory of cultural identity, Appadurai (1996) framework of global cultural flows, and the Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space, the reflexive thematic analysis of peer-reviewed literature yielded four major themes. First, modal systems across the region function as multidimensional carriers of identity, simultaneously encoding structural, cosmological, affective, and social meanings irreducible to purely musicological analysis. Second, colonial institutionalization and post-colonial nation-building have profoundly reshaped the form, status, and cultural meaning of all five traditions, producing a complex modal palimpsest in which successive external influences coexist with indigenous modal cores. Third, contemporary globalization, digitalization, and commodification are driving diverse transformation trajectories from essentialist preservation to creative hybridization and digital reinvention across all five traditions simultaneously. These findings are synthesized in the study's fourth and most original contribution: the "modal identity continuum", a three-pole comparative framework positioning modal traditions along a spectrum from essentialism, through Bhabha's third space of creative hybridization, to active modal transformation, while demonstrating that all five traditions simultaneously occupy multiple positions on this continuum.

This study makes four verifiable academic contributions to comparative ethnomusicology and cultural identity studies. It provides the first cross-tradition comparative analysis of Southeast Asian modal systems within a single analytical framework, replacing the disciplinary isolation that has historically characterized the field. It introduces the "modal identity continuum" as a theoretically grounded and exportable framework applicable to analogous studies of non-Western tonal and modal traditions beyond Southeast Asia. It advances the theoretical integration of Hall, Appadurai, and Bhabha in the domain of non-Western musical modality, demonstrating their productive complementarity as a tripartite analytical architecture for post-colonial musical analysis. Finally, it identifies institutionalization and digitalization as the two principal cross-cutting determinants of modal identity position across all five traditions an empirically grounded theoretical proposition that provides a concrete basis for future primary research on the

mechanisms through which modal systems negotiate the pressures of modernity. These contributions respond directly to the research gap identified in the Introduction: the absence, in the existing literature, of a systematic comparative framework capable of illuminating both the shared regional logic and the tradition-specific divergences of Southeast Asian modal identity.

Southeast Asia's indigenous modal systems are not relics of a pre-modern past but living, contested, and creatively productive cultural practices actively negotiating the full complexity of contemporary life. Each of the five traditions examined in this study is, in its own way, answering Hall's (1990/2021) fundamental question for all post-colonial cultural subjects: not merely where they came from, but what they might become. The "modal identity continuum" proposed here is not a static taxonomy but a dynamic map of the possible a framework for understanding how musical communities draw upon deep indigenous knowledge to navigate modernity and imagine futures that are simultaneously rooted and open. Cultural policy makers across the region are encouraged to recognize and support the full spectrum of modal practice, from ceremonially conservative to creatively hybrid, resisting the temptation of museumification in favor of the living dynamism that the literature consistently reveals as the defining characteristic of Southeast Asian musical identity (Oliveira et al., 2023; Sunarti et al., 2023). Future research should expand the comparative scope to include Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and East Timor, and engage directly with practitioners through primary ethnographic methods, including digital ethnography of the social media platforms now reshaping how modal traditions are transmitted, performed, and reimagined across the region.

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