

Re:Sound “Restituting, Reconnecting, Reimagining” Internal Kick-Off Meeting Report

Sound Heritage Date: 14 April 2025

Location: Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), Yogyakarta and online

Organizers: Department of History, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, UGM

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Introduction

The Internal Kick-Off Meeting for the *Re:Sound* project, titled “*Restituting, Reconnecting, Reimagining Sound Heritage*,” marked the official launch of a multi-year, multi-institutional research initiative focused on critically engaging with colonial-era sound archives. Held in hybrid format—both in person at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) in Yogyakarta and online via Zoom—the meeting brought together scholars, archivists, curators, students, and community-based practitioners from Indonesia, the Netherlands, and across Southeast Asia. Spanning from 2025 to 2028, *Re:Sound* aims to rethink how sonic heritage is collected, curated, interpreted, and made accessible in the postcolonial present.

The opening remark was delivered by Dr. Abdul Wahid, Head of the Department of History, who highlighted the department’s long-standing research excellence. Dr. Wahid expressed his hope that *Re:Sound* would reinvigorate UGM’s historical research traditions and deepen the university’s collaborative ties with international partners—particularly institutions in the Netherlands.

Project Genesis and Institutional Framework

Dr. Sri Margana, Principal Investigator and project leader from UGM, recounted the genesis of *Re:Sound*. The idea emerged during the DeCoSEAS project, where discussions led by Dr. meLê yamomo and Dr. Barbara Titus seeded the vision for a project that would push the boundaries of conventional archival practices and scholarship. These conversations culminated in a successful proposal to the Dutch NWO/NWA funding program “Research into Collections with a Colonial Context.”

Re:Sound is a collaborative venture among:

- **Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM)** – Lead institution and host of the PhD program
- **University of Amsterdam (UvA)** – Home of the Jaap Kunst Collection and key academic partner
- **Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (NISV)** – Archival and technical partner in Hilversum

Additional collaborators include Museum Sonobudoyo, Lokananta Records, Queer Indonesia Archive, MyArchives (Malaysia), UP Center for Ethnomusicology (Philippines), and leading European sound archives in Berlin, Vienna, and Paris.

Dr. Margana highlighted that the project is not only a research program but also a cultural bridge between Indonesia and the Netherlands. He underlined the importance of strengthening institutional ties and creating new collaborative platforms where academic researchers, museums, and archives can work together. Drawing on his own research in the Jaap Kunst archive, he spoke about the importance of context: the sounds preserved in colonial archives are only truly meaningful when interpreted alongside letters, correspondence, and photographs that reveal how and why they were made.

He emphasized that restitution is not merely about physical repatriation but also about reactivating the meanings of sonic material in contemporary contexts. By combining archival inquiry with fieldwork and oral history, *Re:Sound* seeks to make that reactivation possible.

Reframing Heritage through Sound

Dr. Barbara Titus presented the theoretical framework of the project, emphasizing that dominant notions of heritage are deeply Eurocentric. The very concept of heritage, she argued, is rooted in colonial epistemologies that classify, objectify, and hierarchize cultural expressions. In contrast, sound is ephemeral and non-material; it resists easy categorization and lends itself to alternative ways of knowing.

The project employs sonic methods to question what constitutes heritage, who defines it, and how it should be accessed and preserved. Dr. Barbara Titus, musicologist and curator of the Jaap Kunst Collection, explained that

Re:Sound operates at the intersection of sound studies, historiography, and musicology, proposing a shift from text-based history—often shaped by colonial elites—to a more inclusive, sound-informed, polyvocal narrative.

Building on her colleague's, Dr. meLê yamomo's, concept of "sound-source-based historiography," Titus emphasized the value of listening as a method to surface voices marginalized in written archives, particularly in colonial contexts where literacy was limited. Sound, she argued, offers access to alternative epistemologies and worldviews long excluded from dominant narratives.

The approach of *Re:Sound* builds on Dr. meLê yamomo's earlier work and ongoing collaborations with Dr. Barbara Titus, rooted in his project *Sonic Entanglements* (2016–). This initiative has been instrumental in theorizing how colonial sound archives encode power, mobility, and memory across Asia and Europe, while fostering interdisciplinary engagement aimed at challenging hierarchical institutions and advancing a decolonial, collaborative model of sonic scholarship.

Objectives and Methodology

The Re:Sound project seeks to:

- Complicate the notion of heritage by decentering European epistemic authority
- Use sound recordings as historical sources and methodological tools
- Facilitate digital and physical access to sound archives housed in Europe
- Transfer curatorial agency to Southeast Asian scholars and communities
- Support emerging researchers and artists through funding, training, and international mobility

Through a blend of archival research, community engagement, and institutional collaboration, Re:Sound aims to reimagine what sonic heritage can be and how it should function in the postcolonial present.

Research Structure: Work Packages

1. PhD Program

UGM will host a fully funded doctoral program, open to candidates from Southeast Asia with backgrounds in history, anthropology, musicology, and related fields. PhD research will be conducted in Indonesia and Europe, engaging with collections such as the Jaap Kunst archive, the collections of the NISV, the Lautarchiv in Berlin, and the Phonogramm-Archives in Berlin and Vienna. The program will run for three years with the possibility of a one-semester extension. Living costs and research expenses are covered.

2. Visiting Fellows Program

Two fellowships will be awarded to scholars, artists, or curators for three-month research residencies in the Netherlands. Fellows will work with collections at UvA, NISV, and other European institutions. The goal is to produce publishable research outputs while building international networks.

3. Network Building

Re:Sound will organize a series of events, including a workshop, a summer school at UGM as well as consortium and public meetings. These gatherings will foster methodological exchange, inter-Asian dialogue, and collaborative project development among academic and non-academic stakeholders.

Dr. Sri Margana on Jaap Kunst Collection Correspondence

Dr. Sri Margana presented his research on the Jaap Kunst archives housed in the Special Collections of the University of Amsterdam (UvA), focusing on Kunst's extensive correspondence. Kunst's fieldwork spanned West Java to Nias and Papua, documenting traditional music through recordings, photographs, and personal letters—many still preserved on location-coded wax cylinders.

Kunst corresponded with over 200 individuals and institutions, including:

- Raden Mas Jayadipuro – musician, dancer, and gamelan broker
- Mangkunegaran VII – Javanese aristocrat and court facilitator
- Husein Djajadiningrat – expert on Sundanese music
- Brandt Buys and Walter Spies – European ethnomusicologists
- Linda Bandara – Indo-European performer and gamelan notator

These letters not only contextualize the recordings but also illuminate the networks of exchange, mediation, and co-authorship that shaped Kunst's ethnomusicological practice.

Stevie Noltén: Introduction to NISV / Beeld & Geluid

Stevie Noltén from the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (NISV) provided an overview of the archive's extensive collections and decolonial initiatives. The holdings span colonial-era propaganda films, amateur recordings from the Dutch East Indies, and contemporary media, including YouTube videos and broadcast content.

She highlighted and showcased beautiful material from the archive:

- A rare 1938 color film of Yogyakarta, produced by a Dutch steamship company, whose silent yet vivid imagery evoked strong responses from Indonesian viewers.
- A 1948 wedding in Sumatra featuring traditional dance, raising questions about the framing of sound and image in colonial recordings.
- A gamelan performance embedded in a colonial newsreel, narrated from a Dutch perspective, illustrating the need to critically reinterpret archival context.

Noltén emphasized the need to revise metadata, challenge Eurocentric narratives, and support community-led archival practices. Initiatives like *SOUNDS FAMILIAR* and acquisitions by diaspora communities offer promising models for more inclusive, participatory approaches to curation.

She also underscored the layered nature of colonial audiovisual materials—as historical records, affective memories, and tools of ideology—and encouraged interdisciplinary methods that move beyond traditional archival frameworks.

Dr. Barbara Titus: Presentation on Pratinada!

Titus and Yamomo introduced **Pratinada!**, a digital aggregation platform and inter-Asian network of curators and scholars. Built on the foundations of the DeCoSEAS project, Pratinada provides access to three previously underexplored collections:

- BBC Empire Service broadcasts
- The Jaap Kunst Collection
- The CNRS-Musée de l'Homme sound archives

The site features annotations in nine languages—including seven Southeast Asian ones—and uses a shared description model that supports polyvocal interpretation of sonic materials. *Pratinada* facilitates the exchange of curatorial practices between Southeast Asian and European institutions, while offering open, intuitively navigable access to rare and historically significant sound collections.

Titus emphasized the project's commitment to source community stakeholders and the importance of addressing infrastructural limitations—such as unreliable internet access or low bandwidth—that often restrict access to digitized materials. A notable example came from Kupang, where the Institute for Resource Governance and Social Change (IRGSC) collaborated with the University of Amsterdam to digitally return recordings from the Jaap Kunst Collection. Acknowledging local connectivity challenges, the materials were distributed on USB drives and integrated into a public library's community learning space—ensuring they could be meaningfully accessed and engaged with at the local level.

Reflecting on this process, Titus observed that, in returning these recordings to their communities of origin, “the archive came to life again.” What had long remained static—“entombed objects” in institutional repositories—was reanimated, gaining renewed cultural significance and a plurality of meanings.

Critical Reflections and Open Discussion

The Q&A session brought forward a range of critical reflections and new directions for research. Dr. Abdul Wahid raised the question of whether colonial sound archives might also be mobilized for inquiries beyond heritage—such as economic history.

Participants from partner institutions—including Chris Miller (Cornell University), Museum Sonobudoyo, and the Queer Indonesia Archive—voiced strong interest in ongoing collaboration, particularly in the areas of digitization, public engagement, and efforts to recover and revitalize lost sonic traditions.

Dr. Titus also emphasized the overlooked contributions of Katy Kunst (Jaap’s wife and collaborator), calling for a more gender-sensitive historiography of sonic research.

In the closing segment, Dr. meLê yamomo reflected on the need to move beyond the disciplinary confines of ethnomusicology and to decenter its methodologies, which have long dominated the study of sound. He connected this shift to a broader rethinking of curating and heritage, tracing the word *curating* to the Latin *curare*—to care for or attend to. For yamomo, this understanding of curation is deeply entangled with the act of listening. Both, he suggested, are practices of attentiveness—responding to what is present, necessary, and often overlooked.

Drawing on the layered meanings of listening in various Southeast Asian languages, he emphasized its emotional, ethical, and political-historical dimensions, as well as its decolonial potential to unsettle dominant epistemologies embedded in the archive.

These ways of listening and attending are precisely the kinds of perspectives that the *Re:Sound* project seeks to cultivate and invite into its research.

Conclusion

The Re:Sound Internal Kick-Off Meeting was a dynamic and inspiring gathering that set the tone for the years ahead. With a strong foundation in decolonial scholarship and community-based engagement, the project aims to reshape both scholarly and curatorial approaches to Southeast Asian sonic heritage.