

Introduction

POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY INDONESIA

Blitar, 20 July 1900

Recently, I happened to be outside the post office of Blitar and heard lively sounds [*rame-rame*] and was surprised to see that in the yard next to Babah Tjan Tjin Hianak's store, the store employees were practicing how to perform stambul. *Wah*, my friend Babah Oei Sing Bi made a good impression of a komedi stambul clown named Ahmat Sokrok, and when he put on his costume and took off his shirt and put on glasses and stuck out his stomach, everyone laughed for he made such a good clown as he was an inch away, meaning almost the same as, Si Ahmat Sokrok, and I stayed to watch until after ten. Oh, I don't know what happened after that as I went home, amen.

—*C. Aswotoendo (alias B. Tjitoroso)*, Bintang Soerabaia

AT THE TURN of the century in the small towns and larger cities of the Netherlands Indies, the island group roughly corresponding to the Southeast Asian archipelagic nation known today as Indonesia, the Malay-language musical theater of komedi stambul was omnipresent.¹ Itinerant professional troupes with casts and crews of fifty or more visited regularly, performing four- or five-hour tent shows for paying spectators. Diverse audiences attended—drunken European men, middle-income Muslim families, Chinese store owners, prostitutes, sailors and soldiers, Eurasian clerks, and nearly everyone else. Those who could not afford the price of a ticket might listen outside the tent or try to

sneak in. Men and women fell madly in love with actors and actresses and lavished gifts and attention on them. Songs from this theater, known as *lagu stambul*, were sung on the streets, issued as cylinders for music boxes, and incorporated into diverse musical genres including *kroncong*, *gambang kromong*, and *gamelan*. Stories based on stambul plays or those destined to be performed on the stambul stage were published regularly in the vernacular press, and professional companies advertised and were reviewed in the Dutch- and Malay-language newspapers. Amateur and semiprofessional groups multiplied, performing scaled-down versions of plays such as *Ali Baba*, *Snow White*, and *Faust* for their own amusement and on the streets during communal celebrations such as the Chinese New Year. Ethical aspects of the theater, performers, and spectators were debated, and the theater was appropriated for charitable, social, and political causes. Not everyone was interested in watching komedi stambul, but almost everyone had an opinion about it. Stambul was integrated into the rhythms of everyday life; it was an involving site of lively (*rame*) amusement and distraction realized in counterpoint to the city's stores, post offices, and like sites associated by many with the drudgery of urban life.

Stambul theater was a peripatetic cultural formation and a popular movement in the arts and culture of Indonesia. Its beginnings can be traced to the eastern Javanese port city of Surabaya in 1891 and the founding of the musical theater company known as the Komedi Stamboel, with Eurasian actors and Chinese owners. The adaptations of *Arabian Nights* stories which the Komedi Stamboel performed on a proscenium stage with wing-and-drop scenery and offstage musical accompaniment initially took place exclusively in a theater in the city's Chinatown. Within months of its founding, the Komedi Stamboel transformed into a touring company, and it was not long before many imitators, professional and amateur, emerged. The ethnic affinities of the theater were of critical importance during the Komedi Stamboel's early history, but the process of intercity and interisland touring resulted in the theatrical form no longer being associated with a particular city or region: it was a common cultural possession of the Indies.

As the first performing art to emerge in the Indies with currency throughout the archipelago, stambul had a significant role in shaping what Hildred Geertz long ago described as Indonesia's "metropolitan superculture," an "integrating system" connecting cities and towns into a single network.² A superculture of this sort is not unique to Indonesia, but its articulation in this archipelagic nation, with more distinct ethnic cultures and languages spoken than perhaps any country in the world, is nonetheless striking. We find today, for example, *sanggar tari* (dance studios) located in all Indonesian cities teaching ethnic dances culled from many ethnic groups, and dance artists such as Didik Nini Thowok creating hybrid choreographies drawing on innumerable indigenous and exogenous traditions. Horror films and *sinetron* (television soap operas) might be set against the background of a particular ethnic culture or urban locale, but draw on a shared body of narrative motifs and a repertoire of gesture recognized and comprehended by all Indonesians. A popular music sensation such as the *dangdut* singer-dancer Inul Daratista can ignite the passions of audiences around Indonesia. All speak to the integration of Indonesians in a shared structure of feeling.

Few memories might remain today of the Komedi Stamboel in Indonesia. Indonesian theater scholars sometimes refer to it in passing as a "transitional" theater, located nebulously between the classical and folk theaters of traditional Indonesia and the modern, Indonesian language theater said to have begun with the nationalist movement in the 1920s. Some actors and aficionados of Indonesian regional theaters, such as *ludruk*, *lenong*, *sandiwara*, or *drama gong*, might be aware of the pivotal role that touring Malay-language theater beginning with the Komedi Stamboel played in forming these localized popular traditions performed in regional dialects and languages. The relation between stambul and *ketoprak*, a Javanese-language popular theater form that emerged in Yogyakarta in the mid-1920s, is particularly close. An alternate early designation for ketoprak, in fact, was *stambul Jawa*, or (Javanese [language] stambul), for stambul costumes, music, and stories were at the core of ketoprak's early dramaturgy. Kroncong singers are certain to know stambul as a form of song, and the more experienced singers are likely to know that these songs were once associated with a

genre of theater, now long gone. In the Netherlands, Indonesia's former colonizer, older Eurasian repatriates will recognize the Komedi Stamboel as a Eurasian cultural product and are likely to have seen some oft-reprinted stambul images collected by Rob Nieuwenhuys.

At the same time, traces of this popular musical theater, the first theater to be performed on a proscenium stage in a language that could be understood by the majority of Indonesia's urban public, are to be found everywhere in Indonesia today—in language, gesture, and intonation; artistic production and reception; the conceptualization of the public. The horizons of imagination, the possibilities for self-transformation, and the potentials of interethnic solidarity did not emerge as programs propounded by intellectuals or politicians. These were theatrical mechanisms and reflexes that came to inform all aspects of Indonesian society. Tracing the genesis and early development of komedi stambul means mapping the formation of Indonesian public culture.

KOMEDI STAMBUL's dramaturgy appears at first glance to be derivative of European models, but in fact the theater is an eminent hybrid that, in Homi Bhabha's terms, enunciates cultural difference and "problematizes the binary division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address."³ Greasepaint, bright lights, wing-and-drop scenery, trapdoors and flies, box seats and stalls, tickets, posters, leaflets, and all the apparatus of theater arrived in colonized Asia and Africa with the growth of European settler populations. Temporary stages and then permanent theaters were constructed; amateur and semiprofessional drama clubs and associations were formed; plays were written and rewritten, performed, and reviewed. Occasionally non-Europeans were recruited as actors in early colonial performances, but it was more likely for Asians or Africans to be present in the audience or work behind the scenes than tread the boards. Starting in the middle of the nineteenth century, however, non-European "colonial mimics" began to put on their own dramas, using European dramaturgical forms and theatrical technology to perform plays in their own languages and idioms. The theater of Europe was appropriated and localized.

Theater, as Raymond Williams has pointed out, is the most social of art forms. The transplantation of this European cultural form into non-European cultural landscapes required not only imitating attitudes and poses and translating dialogue. It also entailed a resituating and redefinition of the “art world” of theater, the organized network of patrons, sponsors, performers, technicians, support personnel, spectators, and critics who produce and consume performances. The remooring of European theater in colonial contexts meant creating, or finding equivalents to, the sites of performance, the networks of patronage and support, the institutions of performer training and methods of personnel recruitment, the mechanisms of publicity and promotion, and the makers and suppliers of theatrical equipment that together allow theater to function. Various local conditions yielded a panoply of theater worlds in Asia and Africa, homologous with the theater worlds of European colonizing countries but not identical. The production of colonial theater was a complex negotiation involving tenacious thespians, erratic local conditions and tools of production, volatile whims and desires of sponsors and audiences, and the restrictions of colonial authorities. The playing out of dramas in the public sphere was simultaneously an enactment of the tensions and conflicts among actors and agents, diverse cultural forms, forces of production, the public, and governance.

PERFORMING ARTS, at least until the twentieth century, did not flourish in the Netherlands. This was largely due to Dutch Calvinism, with its virulent antitheatricalism and suspicion of ostentatious display. The Dutch in the Netherlands Indies embodied a different cultural ethos than the Dutch in Holland, however. “In contrast to bourgeois Holland,” writes W. F. Wertheim in a classic study of cultural creolization, “where the tendency was towards a thrifty frugality and simplicity which concealed a certain prosperity, the mode of living in the ‘Indian’ towns [towns in the Netherlands Indies] aimed at maintaining colonial prestige in a society predominantly feudal. There was no attempt to create the intimate atmosphere of the cozy Dutch parlor. Instead, Indian social life was a life of balls and receptions. Luxury was not to be found in the confines of interior rooms but in open galleries.”⁴ Some

have viewed this as a European accommodation to the performance economy of the Indies.

The Netherlands Indies had a large variety of indigenous ethnic groups speaking different languages and dialects, as well as substantial populations of Chinese, Arabs, Indians, Europeans and Eurasians, as-sorted “foreign Asian” and other ethnic groups.⁵ Migration and urban growth were stimulated by the passing of the Agrarian Law of 1870, which brought free enterprise to the archipelago. Only about 5 percent of indigenous Indonesians were living in urban areas of Java and other islands in Indonesia at the end of the nineteenth century, but exogenous populations were located predominately in towns and cities. The concomitance of wealth and ethnic diversity in urban centers yielded a cosmopolitan character, or at least aspirations to cosmopolitanism. As an English traveler who visited Batavia (present-day Jakarta) in 1890 snidely declared, “Boston is not the only place in the world which has decided upon insufficient evidence that it is the centre of the universe.”⁶

The Netherlands Indies, particularly in the densely populated island of Java, where about three quarters of the populace lived, might be characterized as an open-gallery society, in which social and cultural worth were judged on the basis of display, performance, and public presentation. Open galleries were spaces of coarticulation with porous barriers and minimal restrictions. A musical concert might take place in an ostensibly private space such as a European club, but that open gallery space was permeable to crowds of eavesdropping onlookers. There was even a Dutch colonial word coined to describe the incidental audience members who enjoyed a “passive kind of happiness.”⁷ They were known as *nontonners*, from the Batavia Malay word *nonton*, “to go to see a sight.”⁸ Nontonners were omnipresent at cultural performances. They also congregated to witness fistfights; eruptions of amok, mentally ill, and drunken behavior; military drills; and executions and corporal punishment. The hustle and bustle of ambulatory street vendors, marketplace exchanges, the arrival and departure of ships, and the passage of elegantly appointed carriages were entertaining diversions for the lower socioeconomic classes, for whom “the city’s streets were both living room and public theater.”⁹

Life in late nineteenth-century urban Indonesia was lived at an accelerated pace due to advances in communication and transportation technology. Indonesia was fully a part of what naturalist (and Indonesianist) Alfred Wallace termed “the wonderful century,” with its attendant “marvelous character” and sense of “vast possibilities of further development of many of our recent discoveries.”¹⁰ Roads with hardened surfaces for the use of wagons were first constructed in 1852. The first telegraph line for public use was laid in 1856. A modern postal service began operation in 1862. The first kilometers of railway were laid down in 1867, and by 1888 there were eight railway lines in operation, connecting the fifteen largest cities of Java. The Suez Canal opened in 1869, shortening the distance between Europe and the Indies by many kilometers. The first automobile was imported to Java in 1890, and a cycling craze swept through cities and towns in Java and other islands around 1895. Lithographs, photographs, phonographs, music boxes, and printing presses delivered sounds, texts, and images to the elite and the masses alike.

Along with this increasing interconnectivity came the inevitable “metropolitan blasé attitude” identified by Georg Simmel as a primary characteristic of urban mental life. But at the same time Indonesians craved all that was novel.¹¹ The port cities of Indonesia had long been places in which “a multitude of impressions, contrast, institutions, buildings, and types of conduct provided an environment which cultivated awareness” of the particularities and generalities of life in process.¹² This awareness only intensified in the course of the nineteenth century.

Cities brought different sets of performance cultures into contact with each other. Cities were “arenas of conflict.”¹³ They were also arenas of observation. People from different ethnic groups became aware of how other ethnic groups behaved in daily life. They could also inspect diverse forms of extradaily behavior. Cultural performances that were significant reflexive occasions, in which a group told stories about themselves to themselves, became occasions for intercultural communication. The accomplishment demonstrated in producing and performing art and spectacle acted as a source of group pride and cultural valuation in a multiethnic society.

Indonesia is justly famous for the diversity and vitality of its traditional performing arts. Many of the elaborate art forms practiced by Javanese, Balinese, Madurese, and other ethnic groups of the western archipelago, such as the shadow puppet theater known as *wayang kulit*, have roots in Indonesia that go back a millennium or more. There are numerous forms of trance dance, sometimes associated with shamanism and healing; mask dance and mask theater; communal folk dancing; and storytelling with musical accompaniment. Processions with palanquins, giant effigies, music, and dancing accompany rites of passage in many Indonesian societies. Folk troupes of musicians, dancers, actors, and animals busk in markets and street corners. The royal courts of the western archipelago have been patrons of the performing arts for more than a millennium, packaging their own productions and hiring local and extralocal troupes for royal festivities and bestowing noble titles on performers. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the courts of central Java produced *wayang wong* dance drama, in which actors took the roles of puppets in wayang kulit plays. These could involve months of rehearsals and casts of hundreds. Gamelan, or gong-chime music, has famously influenced Western composers since Debussy, and is played and heard in numerous social and ritual contexts in Indonesia. Communally sponsored festivals, featuring scores of performing ensembles, commemorate ancestors and propitiate spirits.

Other Asian populations in the Indies were active in the arts as well. Indonesian Chinese were historically important sponsors of both indigenous as well as Chinese performance. Seventeenth-century European travelers describe Chinese opera performed in the trading entrepôts of Java's northern littoral to mark the arrival and departure of junks. Chinese opera was translated into the Malay language, the Indonesian lingua franca spoken as a first language by indigenized (*peranakan*) Chinese, by the eighteenth century.¹⁴ In nineteenth-century Java the majority of Chinese opera troupes were all-female. Performers were often not of Chinese descent. They were usually Southeast Asian women drilled and trained to high degrees of proficiency by teachers imported from China.

The European and other elites who demanded the latest novelties from Paris to furnish their luxurious villas, were keen to consume public performances. A minority of Europeans patronized non-European arts and artists, but most preferred arts of European provenance. In contrast to French and British colonies, the Dutch colonial government was not committed to building and maintaining institutions for the cultural good of the public.¹⁵ In Java, there were schouwburgen, European-style theaters with proscenium stages, in the cities of Batavia, Semarang, and Surabaya. These institutions were often strapped for cash, in the absence of fixed-sum awards from the municipal or colonial state governments, and made regular public appeals for support. Dramatic fare at these theaters and other public spaces of performance was an eclectic mixture of professional touring theater and local amateur efforts.

British troupes “played the empire,” performing the latest hits from Covent Garden in a transoceanic circuit encompassing Johannesburg, Bombay, Calcutta, Shanghai, Singapore, Sydney, and other parts of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific with many European settlers.¹⁶ French colonies not only benefited from touring theatrical companies from the Parisian metropole, there were also state-subsidized opera companies in residence in major French colonial cities. The Netherlands, as a rule, did not field international performing troupes in the nineteenth century, and there was little in the way of state subsidy for the performing arts. The public culture of nineteenth-century Indonesia cannot be said to have been genuinely colonized by the Netherlands. Urban Indonesia was a transit zone for itinerant performers, a stopover between mainland Asia and Australia (à la the board game Risk). It had its own independent cultural dynamics and momentum, only indirectly indebted to the culture of the colonizing country.

COMMERCIAL ENTERTAINMENT outfits originating in the Indies and those that arrived there from outside shared a circuit of towns and cities connected by steamship and rail. On this circuit, there were large-scale mass entertainments like the circus and Japanese acrobatic troupes. There was operetta, burlesque, and variety companies of various sorts. There