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Modern Javanese theatre and the politics of culture; A case study of Teater Gapit

In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Performing Arts in Southeast Asia 151 (1995),
no: 4, Leiden, 617-638

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This article attempts to address certain issues of the politics of culture in Indonesia by focusing on a modern theatre group in Solo (also known as Surakarta), Central Java. Since 1981, the group, ‘Teater Gapit,’ has performed plays written by its director, Bambang Widoyo Sp. (whom I will henceforth refer to by his nickname, Kenthut), who chooses to write in Javanese, his mother tongue. Most of Gapit’s members have a background in the traditional performing arts of Central Java, as performers of gamelan music, shadow puppetry (wayang), or dance, and most are, or have been, associated in some way with the Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia (STSI) in Solo, one of Indonesia’s state colleges of performing arts. Kenthut himself is a drop-out from STSI. He and his troupe most frequently present their work at the government arts centre in Solo, Taman Budaya Jawa Tengah (TBGT), where they are a kind of resident company.

Nevertheless, despite the association of the group with government institutions, despite group members’ backgrounds in traditional Javanese arts, and despite its playwright-director’s choice of a regional language over the national language as its medium, Gapit represents, I will argue, a bold challenge to the State’s cultural and political ideology. Its plays are concerned almost exclusively with the plight of the poor and disenfranchised. Its theatrical idiom plays boldly with accepted traditional forms and conventions. Its rough, coarse, and hilarious language is in pointed contrast to the bland, official, national language used by the majority of modern Indonesian artists and writers. Though Gapit is not unique in being defiant and political in its message, or in standing traditional genres on their
heads, or in eschewing the national language, it is unusual in combining all three.

Through a brief examination of some of the group’s recent work, I will try to show how Kenthut and Gapit provide a construction of what it means to be Javanese that is in stark contrast to the prevailing State version, which is based on an elitist, priyayi-centred, neo-colonial view of Javanese culture as adiluhung, or ‘classical’. Since, as Keith Foulcher has written, ‘there is an increasing tendency to align “Indonesia” with a redefined priyayi [aristocratic] Java, [... constructed out of] a kebatinan [mystical] world view and the Dutch colonial mix of public morality and private self-interest, all elaborated against a backdrop of the arts, customs and etiquette of the courts of Central Java’ (1990:303), Gapit’s alternative construction of ‘Javaneseness’ may have important implications nationwide.

Kenthut and Teater Gapit

Kenthut was born in Solo on 27 July 1957, the ninth child of Supono and Srik Nartani, both originally from Mangkuyudan, Solo, and was baptized as Paulus Yohanes Bambang Widoyo S[u]p[ono] (Teguh Pranoto 1991:13-14). He graduated from a Catholic high school, SMA Santo Yosep in 1977. Though Kenthut was avidly interested in theatre from his junior high school years (under the influence of his elder brother, Soelijanto Sri Mulyono, nicknamed ‘Lis’, himself a drama coach working with teenage children\textsuperscript{2}), he first became actively involved as an actor in student productions in high school. He also first tried his hand writing short stories (in Indonesian) while still in high school. He was to study at Universitas Negeri Surakarta Sebelas Maret (UNS) in 1977, and passed the entrance examination, but his family could not afford the tuition fees. He entered the Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia (ASKI; now known as Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia, or STSI) in 1980, where he studied traditional gamelan music, or karawitan. In 1985, he dropped out after seven semesters there.

It was during the years after high school that his short stories began to be accepted for publication in popular youth magazines, such as Hai, Anita, and Gadis (usually under the byline of ‘B. Widoyo’ or ‘Ken’); he also regularly contributed to the ‘Berita Budaya’ column in the Jakarta daily Kompas. Among the stories was an 82-part serialized short novel that ran for three years in Hai. Kenthut describes it as ‘the story of a rebellious teenager – but a Javanese teenager. The story took on more and more Javanese background and flavour, and as it did, it became less popular with readers. Probably it didn’t have enough “glamour” attached to it.’\textsuperscript{3}

The group that later came to be known as Gapit made its debut on 20

\textsuperscript{2} Interview with Kenthut, 12 May 1994.
\textsuperscript{3} Interview with Kenthut, 10 May 1994.
January 1981 performing a play by Sarwoko Sesar called *Gandrung Kecepit* that had won third prize in a Javanese-language drama contest sponsored by Pusat Kesenian Jawa Tengah (PKJT, now the Taman Budaya Jawa Tengah, or TBJT). The performers were all ASKI students directed by Kenthut, himself in his second semester at the school. The group, then known as ‘Gladhi Teater Aski’, performed the play a total of 14 times, at PKJT’s centre at Sasono Mulyo in Solo, in the nearby village towns of Delanggu and Colomadu, and in Blora, on Java’s north coast.

*Gapit’s repertoire*

Kenthut’s first play, *Brug* (‘Bridge’), was commissioned by a society for handicapped children (YPAC) for presentation to a delegation from UNICEF. The wife of S.D. ‘Gendhon’ Humardhani⁴ had asked him to do a play for children focusing on improving attitudes towards the handicapped. The play was performed twice, once at YPAC (at Colomadu, near Solo) and once in Solo.⁵ According to a newspaper account, Kenthut ‘used the opportunity of the commission to focus on the powerless and to make social criticisms’ (Ardus Sawega 1991).

Before its next production, *Suk-suk Pêng*, in 1983, the group took the name Gapit. According to Kenthut, the name can either be derived from the word that refers to the handle of a wayang kulit shadow puppet; from the first and last syllables of their first production *Gandrung Kecepit*; or from the main gate, or lawang gapit, in the palace in Solo, since at the time ASKI’s campus was still located on the palace grounds.

*Suk-suk Pêng* (short for disuk-suk [nganti] gêpêng, roughly, ‘Flattened by the Crowd’) was inspired, Kenthut says, by his reaction to a statement made by President Soeharto at the official opening of a dam near Wonogiri, south of Solo, the building of which forced the resettlement of several villages. According to Kenthut, Soeharto said that ‘pembangunan mesti makan korban’ (‘[national] development requires [sacrificial] victims’). In *Suk-suk Pêng* Kenthut intended to examine the plight of some of those ‘victims of development’⁶.

Kenthut’s third play was *Rol* (‘Role’), first performed in 1984. The play boldly dealt with a sensitive issue of the time, the so-called ‘mysterious killings’ the Indonesian army was carrying out against suspected criminals.⁷ Victims were summarily executed without trial and often their bodies were left in public places – ‘for shock therapy’, in President Soeharto’s

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⁴ Humardhani was then head of both ASKI and PKJT and was himself an early supporter of the group that became Teater Gapit.
⁵ See no. 1 in Appendix for a plot summary.
⁶ See no. 2 in Appendix for a plot summary.
⁷ See no. 3 in Appendix for a summary of the plot of *Rol*.
own words. The explicit concern in *Rol* with traditional Javanese performing arts, and their loss of popularity in competition with television, film, and video, recurs in Kenthut’s plays. A recurring technique, too, is the use of a mad character who can tell ‘truths’ in ways that normal people cannot.

Their next production, *Lèng* (‘Ant’s Nest’), has probably received the most critical acclaim, and was the first to be seen outside Central Java. It was performed between 1985 and 1987 in Solo, Jakarta, Salatiga, Surabaya, and Yogyakarta. In a review in the Semarang newspaper, a leading literary critic, Ariel Heryanto, found *Lèng* to be stronger and more focused in its social criticism than the earlier *Rol*:

‘In *Rol* the author’s wish to garner the audience’s sympathy for the fate of the main character (a gali or petty criminal about to be a victim of a “mysterious killing”) was obvious. In *Lèng*, the issues are more broadly drawn and their dimensions more clearly presented. The tendency for the characters to be portrayed in an overly caricatural way, noticed by other critics, was less in evidence. One of the strengths of the playwright-director of *Lèng* is his skill at handling very radical and angry social criticism while managing to be “careful” and still “artistic”. [...] *Lèng* tells of lower-class people in rural Java being displaced by the modernization and industrialization that are the long claws of those in control of political power and capital. It tells of the destruction of the environment, of a system of laws that is a plaything of the powerful, of forced sacrifices made to benefit a small elite in the name of “development”, of ordinary people passively resigned to their fate through a superstitious belief in holy men who sell them lottery numbers, of people living in holes as tiny and crowded as an ants’ nest, of their self-enforced silence and that of the audience, which is complicit in their fate.’ (Ariel Heryanto 1985a.)

*Rèh* (‘Power’), which was performed in Solo and Yogyakarta in 1988, has some similarities with *Rol*. The main character is a former *kethoprak* star. In his autobiography Soeharto discusses the ‘mysterious killings’ with some frankness, indicating that he himself approved of the policy (Soeharto 1989:389-90; 1991:336). See John Pemberton’s trenchant commentary, especially related to the killings in Solo (1994:311-8). The sponsor of the 1984 performance, the Indonesian Journalists Association, apparently did not know beforehand that the play dealt with the issue of the killings. The artists, too, were unaware that some of the very army members carrying out the killings were staying overnight in the same building as the performance venue (Interview with Kenthut, 10 May 1994).

The ‘wise fool’ is a common trope in theatre in the West (compare the fool in *Lear*, for one obvious example) and in Java itself (compare the wayang figure of Semar). It has recently been used as an extended conceit in Riantiarno’s *Rumah Sakit Jiwa*, where modern Indonesian society is seen as a madhouse; that play was performed by Teater Koma in Jakarta in 1992. See no. 4 in Appendix for a plot summary.

See Hatley 1979, 1985a, 1985b, 1993 for discussions of *kethoprak* and its interrelations with other theatre genres. See also Lindsay 1985 on the often
The subplot in *Rèh* about the revival of *kethoprak* gave Kenthut the chance to insert various opinions about the use of the arts for political purposes (used by governmental and nongovernmental organizations alike to get across their own agendas), or about government attempts to 'preserve' art forms.12

*Dom* ("Needle"), which Kenthut wrote and Gapit performed in Solo in 1990, is their latest production and its plot has several features in common with the earlier plays: it takes place in a slum neighbourhood and it has 'low-life' or proletarian characters such as a criminal on the lam and his *dangdut* singer wife, a butcher, a painter of traditional glass paintings, and a formerly powerful aristocrat now down on his luck. According to a review,

'What obsesses all these characters is their fear that what little they have will be taken away from them. The criminal fears for his freedom and that he'll lose his sexy *dangdut*-singing wife. The butcher has lost his job through unfair competition and all are afraid that they'll be evicted from the land on which they're squatting. In the end someone gets the criminal's wife pregnant, he goes out for revenge, and is shot by the police.' (Ardus Sawega 1990.)

According to Ardus, *Dom* is very similar to Gapit's other plays in its overall tone of anger. A setting among the poor, characters pursued by the authorities, sexual profligacy and sexual jealousy, the spectre of eviction, the sacrifice of the poorest for the sake of the rich, and a general helplessness in the face of inevitable repression all run through this, as in Gapit's other plays.

**Tuk: a case study**

I will examine in greater detail another of Kenthut's plays, *Tuk* ('Spring'), which Gapit first performed in 1989 and was revived in 1990, 1992, and twice in 1994, before I draw some general conclusions about the group's total work to date.

**Setting and characters**

The play is set around a well in the compound surrounding a nobleman's large residence. According to a traditional arrangement known as *magersari* or *magersarên*, in return for various services the household staff of a nobleman and, theoretically, their descendants, could maintain modest houses in the compound. In the play, the nobleman, Dên Darso, has died and the compound is now in the charge of his widow and her daughter

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Menik. (Den Darso’s widow, who had been his servant in his dotage and whom he agreed to marry after she became pregnant by another lover, is only referred to as ‘Menik’s mother’ in the script and never appears in the play.) The eldest resident in the magersarèn is mBah (‘grandma’) Kawit, an elderly widow who works as a tukang kerok (a kind of masseuse) and who has refused to move out to join her son, Jupri, since, among other reasons, she is incompatible with Jupri’s wife. Lik (‘uncle’) Bismo used to be the assistant to a famous dhalaṅg (puppeteer); he never married and, now old, he is a peddler in the market. Soléman Lempit makes his living as a middleman; he’ll buy or sell anything to anyone to make a buck. Romli, a tailor, has a tendency to philander and is therefore frequently at odds with his wife, Sum. mBok (‘mama’) Jemprit is a trader at the market and somewhat wealthier than the others in the compound. It is not clear what Bibit’s marital or employment status are; he seems to be young and unmarried, and under some financial obligation to mBok Jemprit. Martokrusuk is a bicycle-tire repairman and is old enough to have a grandson, Genjik. mBak (‘sister’) Jiah is another resident.

The compound is extremely crowded; there is one toilet near the well that all must share, and bathing and washing are done by the one well, too. The compound is dirty, smelly, noisy; old furniture and dishracks, buckets, dirty laundry, dovecotes, and chicken coops are all lying around in disarray. The well is the main meeting place. Some of the individual shacks are better appointed than others.

**Scene-by-scene summary**

**Act 1**

1. The tailor Romli and his wife are arguing loudly over Romli’s affair with another woman. Soléman Lempit refuses mBok Jiah’s offer to sell her radio. Menik announces that the rent will be raised.

2. mBah Kawit, Lik Bismo, and Bibit: mBah Kawit looks for Soleman, since he usually needs a massage around evening time. Bibit tries unsuccessfully to fix a leaky bucket, gets angry at it, shouts at it, threatens to throw it in the well, but is restrained by mBah Kawit.

3. Soléman enters, looking for his fighting cock; mBah Kawit admits having found the bird drowned and having sold it for 500 rupiah. Soléman fulminates against the well for drowning his bird. He gets up onto the edge of the well and urinates into it, to mBah Kawit’s horror.

4. mBok Jemprit enters. Since Romli is using the toilet and Jemprit can’t restrain herself any longer, she urinates next to the well, then unwittingly washes herself with the now polluted well water, laughed at by others. She tells of the corruption of market officials, and of imminent plans to move the market. She and Bibit argue about money and he talks her into giving him some to get the well cleaned. Kawit and Jemprit talk of Kawit’s son, Jupri. Lik Bismo trades sad stories with Kawit; he tells of his years with dhalaṅg Gandagempil and his obsessive hatred of the wayang character.
Sengkuni. Kawit says she is exploited by her son. He pays the rent and hopes that she won’t die soon, so that if there are forced evictions from the magersari, he will get her severance money. They all discuss the rumours of the sale of the compound. Kawit had heard Soléman and Menik discussing it. Jemprit confronts Soléman, demanding to know what he has up his sleeve. He avoids her by going inside, but finally emerges to accuse Jemprit herself of trying to buy her own share of the magersarèn from Menik’s mother.

Act 2
1. Voices of a husband and wife arguing: she wants to move to a better part of the magersarèn.
2. Menik demands mBok Jiah pay up her rent money or face eviction.
3. Bibit, Jemprit, Romli, overhearing, note that four others have already been evicted, while even more families have come in. Jemprit complains about her life. Bibit brings up the story of Menik’s mother, of how, no more than a wandering prostitute, she was taken in by the widower Dên Darso, owner of the magersarèn, and ended up pregnant – though not by the old man himself. He was forced, or agreed, to marry her anyway, though. Darso died of grief around the time of Menik’s birth. Menik’s mother has now taken up with a corporal, the fifth boyfriend in a series, and, wandering around with him, has left Menik alone. Jemprit talks of the magersarèn in the days of Dên Darso – not only did they not have to pay rent then, but they were given money every Idul Fitri. As long as they lived there peacefully, everything was okay. But ever since Menik’s mother took over, things have changed. They talk of overcrowding, of those who can pay more money getting better places, of only one well to serve ever more people. They talk of another well that had to be closed, since it was haunted after the suicide there of Soléman’s grandparent. Jemprit and Romli argue: she faults him for never trying to improve himself, for just waiting for things to happen, for forcing his wife to leave. He faults her for finding fault with everyone else. She vividly compares herself to a chilli pepper, crushed into sambal, served up to be eaten by anyone and everyone. Bibit gives his cynical view: their future (and everything else) is all arranged by big shots in Jakarta, and the decisions are all made far away by others, for example the transformation of a residential compound into a bank, or of a market into a shopping plaza or a hotel. ‘The rich need property to increase their money, those who are stepped on are panting ever more desperately.’

Act 3
1. mBah Kawit sits cross-legged reciting mantras while staring at the well. She is taunted by Martokrusuk, while Lik Bismo plays with his wayang puppets. She is praying that no one will buy the compound. The three trade different views on a possible sale: Marto hopes it will be sold and is
pleased at the prospect since he looks forward to some severance money, which he'll use for his children. Bismo seems indifferent: if it's to be sold, so be it. Kawit is dead set against it. She won't move. She tells of Dên Darso's final wishes, that it never be sold, that the original families in the magersarèn be allowed to stay, that they all live together in peace. She'll refuse to go, they'll have to take her out feet first. She wants to die here, to have her neighbours at her funeral. They talk of heaven and the afterlife. For Marto, it's here now – material things. Bismo rants on about swarga bandhang. According to 'wayang philosophy', everyone must eventually return to the eternal realm. All creatures have been given the wherewithal to live and companions to help them along the path of life. Every person is born with siblings – the amniotic fluid an elder sibling, the placenta the younger sibling. But those siblings are separated from us at birth. God gave us thought, reason, feeling, and emotions in order that we can find our siblings, for only they can help us return to the eternal world from which we came. Marto still insists on riches in the here-and-now. Bismo continues his 'philosophizing' by telling the wayang story of Janaka falling in love with a mountain girl. She agrees to make love to him if he will go with her to Heaven. Thinking she's an angel, he agrees to go. He thinks he's in heaven, he thinks he's in her arms, but, in fact, he's been kidnapped by Nyi Permoni. He thought being in the realm of the gods was the same as Heaven, but he's in a false heaven, a prison heaven (swarga bandhang). Semar goes looking for Janaka and ends up losing his temper. Togog appears and tries to engage Semar in conversation, but Semar refuses. Finally Semar explains and demands that Togog help him find Janaka; Togog agrees. Bismo tells of Togog returning to Java at the end of time as a messianic saviour.

**Act 4**

1. mBah Kawit is asleep, dreaming. She dreams that the magersarèn is on fire. Kawit, Bibit, Soléman, and Marto are all visible in her dream (and on stage). Bibit believes the fire was set on purpose. Marto denies it could have been, thinks it the result of a short-circuit in Menik's mother's house, both Menik and her mother being away with the corporal boyfriend. But Bibit saw the corporal hanging around before the fire. Bibit says this is just like the Pasar Wagé fire, where the whole market went up in flames and the sellers lost everything they owned, only to see a shopping plaza go up in the old market's place. Local sellers could in no way compete with foreign businessmen. They were to be given something, but in fact never were. Soléman and Marto argue over their past attitudes towards moving. Marto is faulted for having wished for severance money; Soléman is accused of having tried to act as go-between to sell the magersarèn. Soléman denies it and says that he was just acting a part and, in fact, was putting off prospective buyers with the hope that Menik's mother would change her mind and not sell.
2. Marto delivers a monologue on how his hopes are dashed, on the evil of the army man – 'sent by God knows whom' – who set the fire, and on the indifference of everyone else (addressed to the audience, as well).

3. Kawit's monologue: She cries out to everyone to pay attention to the fire that is raging around them and to put it out. She then addresses Dèn Darso and asks his forgiveness. She yearns for the perfection of return to another realm that Bismo had described earlier. She appeals to Dèn Darso, she asks his forgiveness, and takes leave of him. She dies.

4. The final scene, near the well, is the funeral of mBah Kawit. Lik Bismo gives the eulogy. In it he says that mBah Kawit had wished to die among her neighbours in the magersarèn before it was sold, and in the end she got her wish. There was even a slight smile on her lifeless face, he says. As he goes on and on about her sacrifices and willingness to help in the neighbourhood when she was alive, his voice fades out and the lights go down.

Analysis

In addition to the vivid, vulgar Javanese conversational language and the pervasive humour of the characterizations, Tuk has in common with Kenthut's preceding plays various recurring plot features:

- The characters are all members of the underclass. Unlike most of Gapit's other plays, Tuk does not portray an antagonistic upper class, except indirectly through descriptions of Dèn Darso, Menik's mother, and through the two very brief scenes with Menik.
- Imminent eviction hangs over everyone. Fate is in someone else's hands.
- Traditional values embodied in traditional cultural forms, like wayang, are a potential source of comfort, but those forms are forgotten, devalued, fragmentary, ambiguous.

Though Tuk shows, too, the tendency to deliver what may be a simplistic political message, it also contains a more philosophical one. That is the concept of mulihi ('return'), returning to one's origins. Kenthut himself claims that:

'The issue [of Tuk] is the obligation in Javanese culture to survive. Rol was about the culture of wayang wong; Rèh about kethoprak; Lèng about the ritualistic behaviour of Javanese who are cast aside, evicted. Tuk deals with the concept of mulihi for the Javanese. mBah Kawit wants to achieve the perfection of any human life, to die in peace, to pass on a message to those who succeed her, to carry out the promises that Dèn Darso had enjoined her to make. She wants to die in the magersari complex, to receive the blessings of its deceased owner. The Javanese also talk of the concept of mampir ngombè [literally, 'to stop by for a drink'], that is, that the world is preparation for the afterlife.

'But land and possessions have become a source of conflict. [...] I feel that Ariel Heryanto's and Halim H.D.'s interpretation of the central
problem of *Tuk* as forced resettlement is not on target. What we meant was to emphasise the necessity of fulfilling one’s obligations in this world, not just for selfish reasons, but for the benefit of all around us.’\(^{13}\)

The character of Kawit is indeed intriguing. In many ways, she is a more rounded character than is found in many of Gapit’s plays. (Incidentally, *Tuk* is Kenthut’s only play with a female central character; the play was written with the troupe’s very talented lead actress, Wahyu Inong, in mind.) Does her stubborn attachment to Dên Darso’s memory signal, despite Kenthut’s stated intentions, a nostalgia for a changed social order? Is the play’s message that pre-independent Java was somehow more humane, that seemingly exploitative ‘feudal’ relations allowed for more social equity, not less? And is Kawit not shown as a pathetic character to some degree? Kenthut seems to be ambivalent. On the one hand, Kawit’s is the most consistent rejection of ‘New Order’ change: she will not leave. (Marto looks forward to the money; Bismo is indifferent; Soléman is amoral.) But, on the other hand, she is delusional, she *imagines* the burning of the compound, and the ‘perfection’ of the kind of death she needs to fulfil her life on earth she brings on herself. She dies with a smile on her face, but is this victory or defeat?

*Nation and region in Indonesian performing arts*

Gapit’s work needs to be seen in the context of the performing arts in Indonesia more generally. And, given the strong Javanese orientation of the group and its work, we need to understand how Gapit relates to the context of Javanese performing arts specifically.

The highly refined arts developed at the courts of the princely rulers of Surakarta (Solo) and Yogyakarta in central Java still have considerable prestige in the rapidly changing social and political environment of independent Indonesia, where those rulers no longer wield any real political or economic power. Nevertheless, attempts by the Javanese-dominated government bureaucracy in Jakarta to pass off Javanese ‘high art’ as somehow national in character are resented by non-Javanese, and even in Java those arts are seen by some as throwbacks to an outdated feudal order or as stuffy fare in need of drastic overhaul.\(^{14}\)

Recent scholarship on Javanese arts has re-examined some of the claims made for court culture and found them to be related to a colonial and post-colonial need to maintain a system of control. Lindsay (1985), Florida (1987 and 1990), and Sumarsam (1992a) all examine, for instance, the concept of *adiluhung* (roughly equivalent to ‘classic’, or ‘of the first or highest class’ according to Lindsay, and rendered by Florida as ‘the

\(^{13}\) Interview with Kenthut, 10 May 1994.

\(^{14}\) See, for example, Rendra 1983 and Goenawan Mohamad 1980:129-30.
beautiful sublime' and by Sumarsam as 'exalted beauty') in Javanese arts. Sumarsam and Florida show that the classicization of Javanese arts began as a Dutch colonial notion that the Javanese elite took up to maintain their own politically impotent but socially prestigious positions. During the 1930s, some Indonesian nationalists of elite Javanese background (like Ki Hadjar Dewantara or Soetomo) saw a need for strong indigenous regional traditions (of which the Javanese was seen as the strongest) to counteract the threat of internalizing Western culture. While the radical nationalism of the early post-Revolution and later Guided Democracy periods may have tended to devalue regional traditions as threatening to 'an Indonesian culture [that was to be] unitary, populist, and progressive', under the New Order 'regional traditions are promoted as a counter to excessive foreign influence' (Hatley 1993:49). But, as Hatley and others have shown,15 these regional traditions are often 'shorn of elements considered discouraging to modern development-oriented attitudes' (Hatley 1993:49), or are reshaped or reinvented for the needs of Javanese-influenced bureaucratic ceremony. And while neglecting to see the intrinsic relationship between an art form and its audience, the government has stressed in its rhetoric the need for 'development and preservation of culture'.16

The performing arts academies in Indonesia (read Java and Bali) have played an important, though sometimes ambivalent role in the New Order's 'adiluhung preservation' project. While, for instance, ASKI/STSI/PKJT in Solo in some sense took over as heirs to the palace traditions of gamelan music and dance (especially in the early 1970s when the last generation of palace experts were still alive in sufficient numbers to train a new generation), director Gendhon Humardhani's real interest was less in preservation than in encouraging often radical experiments to make those traditions 'relevant' (shortening performance times, eliminating repetition, or mixing regional styles being the mildest examples). And, the arts academies in Solo and elsewhere became important sources for what Hough, in describing the situation at STSI Denpasar, calls 'spectacles as rituals of state, commissioned by the State, for the State' — for example, dances to welcome dignitaries, or extravagant historical pageants for broadcast on national television (Hough 1992:10).17

15 See also Acciaioli 1985; Zurbuchen 1990; and Florida 1987.
16 Goenawan Mohamad (1980:129-30) has described the disjuncture between gamelan or wayang traditions from the courts of Solo and Yogya and the tastes of pesisir Java. Florida (1987:3) writes: 'Highlighting what [are] imagined as the super-refined and spiritualized ways of traditional priyayi and then contrasting them with those of the so-called coarse and material West, the New Order Javanese elite have invented a vision of their very own adiluhung heritage as the somewhat endangered pinnacle of cultural development, the preservation (and reservation) of which they see as a "sacred duty".'
17 See also Hatley 1994:252 on these academies as 'brokers' promoting certain kinds of performances and particular standards by which to judge them.
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Gapit's stance with respect to *adiluhung* Javanese culture, to the New Order's ideology of 'development and preservation' of traditional cultural forms, to the general privileging of Javanese culture over that of other ethnic groups, is provocative and ironic. Traditional forms that are more or less related to Javanese court culture – like *wayang kulit*, *wayang orang*, *gamelan*, *kethoprak* – are constantly referred to and problematized in Kenthut's plays. The issue of the vitality of *wayang orang*, for example, is one of the central themes of *Rol*. The main character in *Rèh* is a former *kethoprak* star, and the relationships between him and the women fans who idolize him are crucial. In *Tuk*, Lik Bismo sees the world exclusively through *wayang* metaphors, and it is his understanding of Javanese philosophy derived from *wayang* – the concepts of *mulih*, of fulfilling a task in this life in order to enter peacefully into the next – that is shared by the central character, Kawit. But these characters are always treated ironically by Kenthut: they are half-mad like Salamun in *Rol*, or washed up like Kanjeng in *Rol* or Pinilih in *Rèh*, or their philosophizing is considered so much useless rubbish, as with Lik Bismo in *Tuk*. Likewise, gamelan music and *tembang* (sung poetry) are always present in each of the plays, but almost always used in unconventional or ironic ways.

**The politics of Javaneseness**

Kenthut's decision to write in Javanese is a rejection of the conflation of Java-as-Indonesia. He has chosen to communicate with a local audience, to give voice to local issues. Gapit has chosen not to be translatable, has chosen to use a vulgar, popular idiom that makes impossible exposure on mass media like television or radio. And in focusing in all of his plays on the urban poor of central Java and giving them voice, Gapit seems to imply that the majority group can be marginalized, too, that hegemony is exercised along class lines and not exclusively along ethnic or regional lines.

Perhaps Gapit’s stance is implicitly consistent with Goenawan Mohamad’s perceptive statement that 'all cultures in Indonesia are minority cultures’. Goenawan sees the tendency to universalize (and to nationalize) to be ultimately futile. Indonesia consists, in his view, of a plurality of cultures, a plurality of artistic expressions each with its own audience:

'[Genres like] *wayang*, *ludruk*, *lenong*, *kethoprak*, and “modern” Indonesian theatre, are all basically “minority” genres. As long as each genre is to be presented as something authentic, it [pre-]selects an audience that is familiar with it. When a genre decides to speak to everyone, when it decides it must become something universal, at that moment it becomes something abstract. But a theatre of the abstract to my mind is something impossible.’ (Goenawan Mohamad 1980:131.)
Theatre and politics

Kenthut and the members of Gapit have recognized and exploited the potential of traditional theatre in Java to carry a political or social message and to convey it in entertaining and humorous ways. Many observers of Javanese wayang kulit, ludruk, and kethoprak have noted their political aspects. And, as Hatley (1981:22) writes, quoting Geertz, ‘in aspects of life played out on the Javanese stage, ordinary people, villagers and servants, behave in an earthy, humorous, no-nonsense fashion which is frequently held to represent the “realistic view of life as opposed to the idealistic”’. But we are not dealing in Kenthut’s work with the same “vocabulary” of character types’ as in traditional Javanese theatre (Hatley 1981:19), nor with the same expectations that stereotypical conventions or dramatic coherence structures call up in performances of wayang or kethoprak.

We see in Gapit’s work what Hatley aptly calls ‘quoting from the tradition’.

18 See McVey 1986 and Hatley 1993 on wayang; Peacock 1968 and Hatley 1971 on ludruk; and Hatley 1979, 1981, 1985a, 1985b, 1993, 1994 and Kunst 1973 on kethoprak. Kunst, writing from a colonial-era Dutch government viewpoint, explicitly condemns the political aspects of kethoprak: ‘With this the germ was laid of a typically popular form of art containing rich possibilities of development. Unfortunately this development has taken the wrong turning. Politics took possession of it; more and more the players started weaving in critical sneers and allusions to the police and the authorities, thus unmistakably forcing the performances into a communistic direction.’ His New Order counterparts would no doubt find these sentiments quite amenable.

19 Compare Hatley 1985b: 100: ‘All forms of Javanese theater [...] share in a common system of dramatic imagery, grounded in key ideological concerns of Javanese life. Concepts of social order, political power, ideal and disvalued models of personal behavior find expression in aspects of theatrical convention – spatial placements of dramatic figures on stage, movement of plot, codes of physiognomy, dress, gesture and speech through which standard character stereotypes are portrayed. Such conventions are not a conscious focus of attention for performers and audience members. Instead they form a familiar framework within which individual stories are played out, just as the values and attitudes in which they are grounded provide a basis for behavior in daily life.’

20 She notes that, unlike a wayang performance, ‘a modern play dramatizing a regional legend is not seen to contribute to a continuing cultural tradition. Instead, it “quotes” from that tradition in producing an individual, modern work’ (Hatley 1991:2). Admittedly, Hatley is referring here more to examples of modern regional theatre, like Wisran Hadi’s in West Sumatra or Teater Tera’s in Yogyakarta, that indeed claim to be dramatizing in new ways an old, local story like Malin Kundang or Ki Ageng Mangir, whereas Kenthut never makes such direct connections in his work. Gapit is not interested in inventing new ‘traditions’. But Kenthut is often playing off against and ‘quoting from’ the rich store of Javanese tradition for ironic and startling, but often genuinely moving, effects.
Mahabharata cycle\(^{21}\) – which he considers to be appropriate since he is still unmarried and the wayang Bhisma had taken a vow of celibacy. But the correspondence is ironic: Lik Bismo is not an epic hero, but a vendor in the market. Lik Bismo is, as another character puts it, ‘wayang-crazed’. He sees the whole issue of fighting over land in the kampung as analogous to the struggle of the Pandhawa and Kurawa.\(^{22}\)

Gapit, of course, is not the only theatre group in Indonesia attempting to make a statement about the social effects of development plans or going against the grain of the State’s ideology. Just as popular folk theatre genres such as kethoprak and ludruk ‘bear significant reference [...] to social relationships in the world beyond the stage, in the class group from which performers and audience members are drawn’, modern theatre in Indonesia\(^{23}\) is also ‘performed in a context influenced by longstanding expectations of connection between performance and society’ (Hatley 1991:2).

Space does not permit an adequate account of the history of the politics of modern theatre in Indonesia, and ‘since theatre in Indonesia has more often than not been intensely political’ (Hatley n.d.), the topic is very broad indeed. A recent schematic statement by Arief Budiman for a seminar on theatre held in Jakarta to celebrate the anniversary of Teguh Karya’s Teater Populer bears quoting, though. He stated, first of all, that ‘the issue of conflict between a government and politically motivated artists only arises with certain types of government, that is, those that strictly avoid any possibility of political instability’. He then went on to list three categories of attitude toward State control: The first is to avoid plays with political themes, that is, a kind of pre-emptive self-censorship. The second is to take up political issues, but in a creative, stylized manner (Arief’s

\(^{21}\) See Anderson 1965:35 on the character Resi Bhisma.

\(^{22}\) ‘Lik Bismo: Wow, this is just like the play Wiratha Parwa, where Astina fights with Wirata over land, just like mBok Jemprit’s story [about the eviction of vendors from the market in the midst of a dispute over deeds to the property]. And it’s Puntadewa [eldest of the five Pandhawa brothers] who finds a way out, even though at the time Puntadewa was just an ordinary guy [in disguise]. You know, Puntadewa’s got white blood, and if this guy’s white blood drips on the ground, even a single drop, whoa ... the whole world goes into a tailspin ...

mBok Jemprit: Bismo, Bismo, who’s talking about wayang stories? (To others:) This guy goes mad on wayang and thinks he’s a goddam knight in armour...

Lik Bismo: Hey, wait a minute! This is Gondogempil’s version. It’s not that I’m mad on wayang, but you, me, Bibit, Kawit, we could all be like Puntadewa, you know.

mBok Jemprit: Oh, hell. Why do I bother talking to you about anything? All I know is I’ve gotta get some more cash if I’m gonna keep my stall at the market (She goes on counting her day’s receipts) … ’ (Bambang Widoyo 1989:11-2.)

\(^{23}\) The characteristics of ‘modern’ as opposed to popular folk theatre in Indonesia are, in Hatley’s schema: European-derived models, use of playscripts, performances in public theatres, non-traditional contextual references, works of individual creativity, and the use of the ‘standard language of the schoolroom instead of regional dialects’ (Hatley 1991:3).
example being Putu Wijaya’s work). And the third is to express one’s opinions as they are (with W.S. Rendra or Wiji Thukul as his examples) (Arief Budiman 1993). Kenthut and Teater Gapit would probably fall into Arief’s third category, given their consistent choice of controversial themes, like forced eviction or State-executed ‘disappearances’ of ‘criminal elements’, and their unflinchingly direct language.

Some sympathetic critics have complained that Gapit has a propensity to preach a political message in too bald a manner. In comments recorded on a video recording of Gapit’s performance of Tuk in 1993, filmmaker (and former editor of the now banned Jakarta weekly De’Tik) Eros Djarot said, for instance,

‘The question in my mind is: do you really need to explain things to us over and over again – for instance, how angry the masses are? At the end, it’s as if the audience is being lectured to, like this is a warning, “if you don’t do this, dire consequences will happen”, as if Pak Harto himself should be frightened. Also, sometimes if you try to explain things too clearly, it ends up somehow not being clear at all, the mystery [ambiguity?] disappears, the beauty disappears.’

Given the repressive attitude of the government to anything it deems to be ‘in opposition’ (note the tribulations that artists such as Rendra, Emha Ainun Nadjib, and even the relatively less forthright N. Riantiarno have had to suffer at the censors’ hands), how is it that Gapit has never really encountered any problems?24 Part of the reason is what Barbara Hatley calls the ‘happy coincidence [...] that [Kenthut’s] older brother [Lis] has a managerial position at the cultural centre [TBJT] where they normally perform’ (Hatley 1993). But the reason that Kenthut gives and that I find plausible, too, is that the plays are written in Javanese. For that reason they are ‘invisible’ to the authorities. And it is one of Gapit’s strongest challenges to the State’s hegemonic image of ‘national culture’ that they have chosen to work in Javanese.

The invisibility of Javanese literature

The notion of the ‘invisibility’ of Javanese literature has been explored tellingly by George Quinn in his studies of modern Javanese literature (1983, 1992) and taken up by Nancy Florida in her work on the putative

24 Kenthut mentioned that Gendhon Humardhani had once urged them not to take one of their plays to village areas for fear it would embarrass him, a local Golkar figure and prominent civil servant, in an election year. But other than that, and a vague rumour about someone from the State security agency, BAKIN, being concerned about the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology acquiring copies of Gapit’s playscripts for its library in the Netherlands, they have never had to deal with any government suspicion of their work (Interview with Kenthut, 12 May 1994).
‘classical’ Javanese literature of the nineteenth century. The prejudice against Javanese as incapable of being ‘modern’, or of being ‘political’, for that matter, has a history in Dutch colonial attitudes. Uhlenbeck, for instance, is cited by Quinn (1992:257) as saying that

‘[Javanese] was considered not to be a suitable medium for discussing modern political and cultural issues and ideals. Only Indonesian could function as such. This was reflected in Javanese literature. Except for some short stories, there was very little in what was written in Javanese which found inspiration in problems of modern Indonesian society.’

Quinn discusses at length the reasons that a minority of ethnic Javanese writers choose to write in their mother tongue; among them is that Javanese is ‘felt to be basically much more intelligible than Indonesian for many people, especially those in rural areas’ (1992:72). Another is that it is used as a vehicle for expressing ‘Javaneseness’, out of a desire to preserve a distinct Javanese identity. A third reason Quinn cites seems likeliest to account for Kenthut’s choice:

‘[B]ecause Javanese is the [...] language of everyday life, unlike Indonesian, which is still encountered mainly in written form or in the formal context of school, government office and news broadcast, it has an immediacy and aesthetic impact that Indonesian cannot duplicate. [...] The perceived blandness of Indonesian springs not only from the fact that it occupies a relatively marginal, somewhat distant place in the lives of most Javanese, but also from the fact that in literature it seems to retain much of the stiff, bookish character of its formal written (as opposed to its lively spoken) origins.’ (Quinn 1992:73.)

Quinn shows that if Javanese is used in a context that has come to be reserved for Indonesian – like novels or theatre – it may not be noticed at all by those ‘who reside unthinkingly within the structures of the national culture’. He also argues that, given the disproportionate concentration of resources on national-language culture, those who write in Javanese suffer from the general government neglect of rural and regional society.

Goenawan Mohamad has poignantly described the process by which Indonesian has been emptied of meaning, through sloganization and appropriation by the State for ‘national’ messages: As the language used in ‘closed classrooms, between office walls’, it retains no ‘element of sensuousness’. Indonesian ‘has been ripped from the world, stripped of shape, smell, colour and form, cleansed of the grit and graffiti, the rumpus and commotion, that make up real life. [...] It has been made the lowest common denominator, the common language for the public as well as for the bureaucrats who force its use on everyone, insisting on its ready acceptance by all. [...] Because poetry can not continually and forever celebrate both “meaningfulness” and “consensus” there has come to be a great disappointment in words.’ (Goenawan Mohamad 1993:125-6.)
Kenthut and Lis have both stated in interviews that Kenthut's plays are not stageable in Indonesian, 'since the symbols, the nuances we depend on communicating would not come across in Indonesian'. Furthermore, Kenthut says, 'I am using a language that is not the language of the government; for me it would be impossible to say critical things or to swear in the government's language. In Indonesian what matters is being “baik dan benar” [literally, ‘good and correct’, a government slogan enlisting proper language use]. Finally, although some people assume that Javanese literature must have its roots in traditional literature, modern theatre in Javanese is actually freer of the constraints of precedents and models than theatre in Indonesian, and it is therefore a liberating medium to work in.

Kenthut's choice of Javanese, which might strike one at first glance as 'nostalgic' or rearguard in its Java-centredness, is actually radical. He has chosen to reject the 'national' project, to eschew the language of the government, to limit his audience in order to enhance the sensuousness and tangibility of his message. He has 'dared to join those who are condemned to wander and fail, dared to be considered not a nationalist', as Ariel Heryanto wrote in a review of Lèng. '[Kenthut’s] courage in choosing to write Lèng in Javanese is inseparable from his courage in dealing with the topics of the grassroots people whom he describes in his play' (Ariel Heryanto 1985a).

Conclusion

The playwright Kenthut and his troupe, Teater Gapit, are not free of certain weaknesses in their style and approach. They tend, as in so much Indonesian and Javanese literature, to be didactic, and can be heavy-handed and repetitive in getting their message across. Their acting and declamatory styles often tend towards monotony and sometimes descend to strident shouting. In a certain sense Kenthut continues to write the same play over and over again. Nevertheless, Gapit’s work is important and worthy of further attention, support, and study.

I have attempted to describe how Kenthut and Gapit have presented a


26 Note, too, that if Anderson is correct that official Indonesian has functioned as a kind of krama inggil, or High Javanese, to the earthier Jakartanese dialect of Indonesian (bahasa Betawi) for many urban Indonesian speakers since the Sukarno period (Anderson 1990:142), then Kenthut's choice of 'ordinary' Low Javanese represents a multiple rejection – of proper, literary Javanese, of High Javanese, of official Indonesian (the national krama inggil), of proper, literary Indonesian, of bahasa Betawi. See also Siegel 1986, especially chapters one and four (on theatre), for a trenchant and iconoclastic analysis of the linguistic situation in contemporary Solo in the early 1980s.
daring alternative construction of what it means to be Javanese and therefore what it means to be Indonesian. By choosing to ‘marginalize’ themselves with respect to modern Indonesian culture; by rejecting the ‘national’ language and using a language and style that render their productions ‘untranslatable’ and unsuitable for mass commodification; by opting for an immediate rapport with a specific, localized audience – in sum, by continuing to be who they are, Kenthut and his troupe have put themselves squarely at odds with the prevailing definition of Javanesseness. They have exposed the class divisions within Javanese culture that are glossed over by a national government construction of adiluhung or the so-called ‘peaks of regional culture’ that are supposed to make up official national culture. They have rescued the traditional Javanese arts, including wayang kulit, wayang orang, kethoprak, and gamelan, from exclusively elitist, kraton-centred, stultifying associations and realigned them with the lives of ordinary Javanese people. And they have done so in creative, entertaining, and accessible ways, while at the same time managing not to contravene the government’s own principles. One can only hope that they will be allowed to continue their brave experiment.

Appendix: Plot summaries

1. Brug
An account by the UNICEF delegation summarized the play as follows:

‘It tells the story of a group of seven travellers, one of them handicapped, who find themselves stranded on the road at night when their bus breaks down. Though the next village is not far away, a sign tells them that the bridge is broken and thus not usable. The play depicts the conflict among members of the group on the action to be taken, with some suggesting they wait till morning and others recommending immediate action to reach the next village. Eventually by accident, a member of the group discovers a nearby cave, and the handicapped person, on hearing the description of the cave, offers to take them through the cave to the other side of the river. After much discussion, all except one member of the group decide to follow him.’ (Soler-Sala and Rajan, n.d.)

2. Suk-suk Pèng
The play’s main characters are a masseuse and a market seller who are displaced when the market where they work is scheduled for demolition. Other characters include a newspaper vendor, a petty criminal, a prostitute, a rich man who gets his household maid (also beloved of the newspaper vendor) pregnant, and the rich man’s son, who is causing his father distress by having decided to devote his life to kethoprak, a traditional, lower-class Javanese theatrical genre.
3. Rol

Rol tells of a police search for a gangster named Bandrèk. The police try various ruses to nab him: they lead him to believe he’s come into an inheritance; they tell him his father, Pak Kanjeng, former head of a wayang orang troupe, is ill. Finally, knowing of Bandrèk’s tendencies to philander, the policeman, Gembok, uses a woman to entrap him. Bandrèk takes the woman, whom he thinks is a prostitute, to the wayang orang troupe’s now disused playhouse to have sex. There he is shot by the police, but manages to escape. His hiding place is surrounded and when the police shoot Kanjeng, Bandrèk himself is forced outside, where he, too, is shot (Teguh Pranoto 1991:37-8). In addition to the seemingly melodramatic main plot, there is a subplot about the culturally bankrupt state of traditional performing arts: Salamun, a former wayang performer ‘who tries to keep to the old values in the end is only capable of nostalgia and envy for the popularity of new forms and values he sees replacing the old’ (Bambang Supranoto, n.d.); the wayang orang playhouse is now used for prostitution; and in the opening scene, Bandrèk’s son Gamblèh is playing with cardboard wayang kulit puppets but drops them in an instant when a truck advertising a Ninja movie passes by.

4. Lèng

Lèng is set at the grave site of a holy man named Kyai Bakal that is visited by people seeking blessings, good fortune, or just wealth. The main characters are people who make their living from something connected with the graveyard, like Pak Rebo, guardian (juru kunci) of the site; mBok Senik, a masseuse; or Kecik, a prostitute. Others – like Janaka, an old bachelor and lower-level civil servant, whose official letter of appointment still hasn’t come through, and Bongkrèk, formerly a factory foreman, now hiding out from his former boss, the owner of a nearby factory – are pilgrims to the grave. All are disturbed by the presence of the factory and the incessant and unbearable noise of its machines, which threaten to destroy the graveyard’s hitherto peaceful atmosphere.

Bongkrèk, who had been fired for taking the side of unfairly treated workers in a dispute with the factory owner, is being pursued by the latter’s agents since he had refused to sell land he had inherited to the factory owner. The agents are still after him to sell the land. He has run away and is fasting in the graveyard in order to find some calm in his life and in the hopes of changing his fortunes.

The factory owner wants to expand his factory by any means and wants to increase his production by bringing in ever larger machines and by decreasing the number of workers. In his obsession with his wealth, he suffers from hallucinations, on several occasions seeing masses of people demonstrating and workers on strike. Because of his paranoia, he will only allow his one servant, Bedor, to wait on him.

Bongkrèk, who had succeeded in calming himself in the company of
Pak Rebo, Senik, and Kecik, becomes annoyed when he learns that his wife has sold his land to the factory owner to raise money for medicine for their child, who had fallen sick from poisoning. Eventually he learns that the son has died. Overcome with grief and frustration, Bongkrek decides to burn down the factory in revenge.

But the factory owner is in fact pleased by the arson, since the machines are insured and he can get newer machines with the insurance payment. (Bongkrèk’s fate is ultimately not clear – maybe he is shot by Bedor, or maybe he is put in jail.) In the end, the whole graveyard site becomes the factory owner’s property. It is kept as a graveyard, but is now managed directly by the factory owner as one of his properties (Joko Santosa 1993:37-40).

5. Rèh

The kethoprak star, Pinilih, is idolized by mBak Sepi, an itinerant pottery seller and girlfriend of Sayid, a becak driver and former prisoner. mBak Sepi would pay any price for a ticket to see her idol on stage again. Each day she gives him a tribute of a package of cigarettes. But, in fact, she herself doesn’t even have enough money to pay her own rent. Pinilih is also the sexual object of Bu Menggung, widow of a rich aristocrat and simultaneously the mistress of the Major, an important military figure. Pinilih gets in trouble with the police, and finds refuge with Bu Menggung. Pinilih’s tragedy is that he has no power over his own life, he is the pawn of his patrons; and his dreams of returning to the stage (like those of Kanjeng and Salamun in Rol) are pure fantasy, since kethoprak is no longer popular and his fees can’t cover his rent. In the end, Sayid tries to kill Pinilih out of jealousy; Pinilih, also sought by the Major, but always the smooth operator, manages to escape.

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