Matthew Cohen

Inventing the Performing Arts: Modernity and Tradition in Colonial Indonesia.

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The dominant attention of scholars for performing arts in Indonesia associated with so-called 'traditional' performing art forms related to the courts of Java, has led to a gap in our knowledge about performing arts and popular entertainment during colonial times. Matthew Cohen, a scholar of theatre studies, has devoted much of his career to filling such gaps in our knowledge. *Inventing the Performing Arts: Modernity and Tradition in Colonial Indonesia* surveys chronologically the development of popular entertainment from the early nineteenth century until Indonesia's independence. The book is set up around three distinct parts, starting with a survey of various forms of entertainment from the nineteenth century in 'Common Ground for Arts and Popular Entertainments'. The second part entitled 'Maelstrom of Modernity' tells the history of the development of performing arts during the heyday of colonialism in relation to the changing world, the rise of modernity and nationalism. The third part of the book, 'Japanese Occupation and 'Greater Asian' Modernity', discusses the impact of the Japanese occupation on the performing arts in colonial Indonesia. Cohen concludes with some reflections on significant developments in contemporary performing arts and their relation to colonial history.

Cohen applies a method of archival research, combined with cultural theory. His thorough browsing of newspapers in Dutch and Indonesian yields detailed information and lays bare a colorful and lively picture of myriad forms of popular entertainment. Many of these forms were looked down upon by the elite and consequently have not received the attention they deserve in academic studies. From Cohen we learn about military music, the circus, Japanese and Chinese influences on performing arts, Parsi theatre, dog and monkey shows, social dance and jazz, to name a few, and the exchange between these forms of entertainment and the influence they had on local forms of music and entertainment. Cohen's eye for the social fabric and networks of performing arts and entertainment is interesting and refreshing. We get a sense of the links between companies, troupes, and artists in colonial Indonesia, Malaya, China, Europe, Japan, and the Middle East. The world seems to have been dynamic and highly interconnected.

We discover that popular entertainment also had a dark and dangerous side. Newspaper reports show that the 'public theaters of Deli, Padang, Palembang, and Bengkulu that hosted *bangsawan*, Chinese opera, and related popular entertainment were rough places, associated with crime, prostitution, and vio-

lence' (p. 54). Music and popular entertainment seem to have been populated by marginalized groups that are not well documented in history. Through the lens of popular entertainment, we learn that 'musicians were often of indigenous origin. Until the nineteenth century, wealthy Europeans kept slaves who played European musical instruments' (p. 12). The picture that Cohen paints of the performing arts in the nineteenth century is one filled with hybrid forms of entertainment, people from all walks of life, and fed by an 'embryonic touring circuit' (p. 16). The world of popular entertainment was full of exchanges of stories, styles, and methods, and open to embrace and incorporate all sorts of elements and people to enliven the various forms of performing arts.

The second part of the book traces how traditional artistic forms and practices transitioned into capitalist modernity and nationalism. Although this part of the book contains less new archival material, it provides a fresh angle on the history of the height of colonialism from the perspective of music and performing arts. The developments of Komedi Stamboel and Indische Toneel reflect the concerns and anxieties of a society in transition and the racist politics of colonialism. An interesting example is Cohen's discussion of the emergence of Indonesia Raya. The Youth Congress of 1928 premiered Indonesia's national anthem 'Indonesia Raya' (Great Indonesia), composed by the journalist and musician Wage Rudolf Soepratman. The song was quickly embraced by Soekarno and other nationalist leaders as it pushed them into a new direction. Newspapers then started to publish the lyrics and melody of 'Indonesia Raya'. The song was soon sung at nationalist gatherings, receptions, and meetings throughout the archipelago. The Dutch government recognized the threat and banned the song in the late 1930s. When the Japanese invaded Indonesia they discovered that their message of liberation and Asian unity was sold more easily when playing 'Indonesia Raya' prior to their propaganda messages on the radio. Tracing the history of this song thus illustrates the cultural history of the development of Indonesia's nationalism.

Commercialism, nationalism, and institutionalization are topics discussed in the second part of the book. Cohen signals the commercialization and rationalization of 'objects and performances once scarce and considered sacred'. In addition to colonial exhibitions, the *pasar malam* (night market) provided a new context of performing arts of competition and commercialism. These platforms were 'hybrid "contact zones" where age-old traditions met scientific modernity' (p. 85). Another result of 'scientific modernity' is the institutionalization of the performing arts along the lines of Western education systems that were accompanied by documentation efforts, conferences, exhibitions, discussions, courses of instruction, and publications in the first half of the twentieth century. Cohen points to the importance of the Java Institute, Taman Siswa,

schools, and churches, among other institutions. They contributed to documentation and institutionalization, and therefore resulted in the standardization and regulation of performing arts. The development of the many art forms Cohen discusses and the heyday of popular theatre is related to the emergence of nationalism. Soekarno is likely the most famous intellectual active in 1930s theater, whose plays Cohen relates to the shift of politics as a new form of theatre informed by the strive for independence. The arts were actively used to achieve a 'modern society, culturally dynamic, oriented to change and innovation' (p. 235).

The last part of the book is devoted to a period in history which continues to be under-researched. Discussions about the transition of the performing arts into modernity had taken place during the 1930s and focused on establishing and defining essential differences between East and West, and how the two orientations should and could merge. The direction of the performing arts shifted under the influence of the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 when they were reformed to build a Greater East Asian Culture. Cohen details how the arts responded to the transition from Dutch to Japanese rule, during which artistic projects were developed as a propaganda tool to educate the masses under the guidance of Japanese directors. Where the Dutch suppressed offensive and politically unwanted cultural expressions, the Japanese actively used arts to further their political aims. Propaganda departments formed, sponsored, or took over a number of the commercially oriented *sandiwara* companies and instructed them to perform plays related to the dominant concerns of the Japanese propaganda office: explaining the purpose of the war and the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, conveying the idea that 'Asia is one' (p. 183). But Cohen also describes the other side of the coin and shows us how the performing arts and other forms of expressive culture in Java became sites of resistance against Japanese oppression.

The declaration of independence ended the Japanese occupation and ushered a new era in which artists were looking to stage performing arts abroad and show the world the richness of Indonesia's performing arts. However, the book illustrates that local artists were linked with China, Japan, Europe, the Middle East, and with the world at large long before independence, and that exchange and hybridity were essential to the performing arts in colonial Indonesia. The paradox that Cohen sees as central to postcolonial praxis, seems to have come already into existence during colonial times: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization. These questions continue to inspire and puzzle contemporary artists working in the field of visual and performing arts, which Cohen illustrates with brief discussions of a few examples.

I hope it's obvious that this review cannot do any justice to the number of performing arts discussed in this book, to the richness of Cohen's sources, or the dynamic and colorful world of the performing arts in colonial Indonesia. This work is by all means a must read for anyone interested in Indonesian history and culture, specifically those interested in colonial history, performing arts, dance, music and theatre. Enjoy.

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