Honoured guests
Indonesian-American cultural traffic, 1953-1957

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In March 1956, the head of the United States Information Agency (USIA, known outside the United States as USIS, United States Information Service) reported to the US Congressional Committee on Foreign Affairs that the dancer Martha Graham and her company, recently returned from their 1955-1956 tour of Asia, had taken Jakarta by storm. According to the Jakarta press, Theodore Streibert1 boasted, ‘Miss Graham has dispelled the prevalent notion that Americans live in a cultural wasteland peopled only with gadgets and frankfurters and atom bombs’ (quoted in Prevots 1998:50). An American Embassy summary of Indonesian press reports sent to Washington conveyed the conviction that ‘Graham touched the viewers’ hearts and minds by subtly interpreting facets of American life: problems of materialistic society, love between persons of different ethnic origin, and the individual’s opportunities in a democratic society’ (Frey 2003:543).

In this essay I want to examine the nature and formation of prevalent notions about Indonesia in America and of America in Indonesia between 1953 and 1957, the years of the first Eisenhower administration (or the two Ali and the Burhanuddin cabinets). This was an important liminal period in the history of relations between the two countries. I say ‘liminal’ because until the intensification of efforts by the Indonesian government to defeat the regional rebellions that were receiving overt American support by early 1958, neither country had become a ‘dirty word’ for the other (Budiawan 2006:652; Baskara T. Wardaya 2007:213-89). Eisenhower initially pursued the policy of non-interference in Indonesian affairs he inherited from his predecessor Truman, shifting toward one involving active attempts to woo Indonesia into the American bloc, before attempting to overthrow Soekarno altogether (Baskara T. Wardaya 2007:151-209). Relations

1 Theodore Streibert headed USIA from 1953 to 1956. For a detailed discussion of his background, policies, and ideas, see Gull 2008:96-133.
and perceptions between the Third World and the First, as well as those between, and even within, the competing blocs of the Cold War, were also still very much in flux during these years.

1956 in particular was a year of uncertain direction in the evolving relationship between Indonesia and the United States. It was the year in which Khrushchev denounced Stalin; Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal; anti-Soviet uprisings occurred in Poland and Hungary; and Fidel Castro and his followers started their revolution in Cuba. Coming after the Bandung Afro-Asian Conference and the holding of Indonesia’s first democratic elections in 1955 and before the political events of 1957 that led to regional rebellions backed by the CIA in an attempt to destroy Soekarno and the Communist Party, the year 1956 also witnessed a major effort by the United States to ‘bring President Sukarno over to our side […] [or] at least neutralize his tremendous influence’, as US Vice-President Richard Nixon put it in May 1955 (Baskara T. Wardaya 2007:179). The middle years of the 1950s in Indonesia (see Foulcher in this volume) and the United States (as we shall see) were also ones of curiosity and cultural traffic, of openness to other cultures, the pressures of the ever-sharpening differences generated by the Cold War notwithstanding.

‘SOEKARNO’ AND ‘AMERICA’ IN THE EYES OF THE OTHER

It had been the job of the USIA, a government agency established in 1953 and reporting through the National Security Council to President Eisenhower, to publicize and coordinate Graham’s four performances and a lecture-demonstration in Indonesia in early December 1955. With the fall of Dien Bien Phu to Vietnamese communist forces in May 1954 and heightened American fears that yet more Southeast Asian ‘dominos’ would fall, Graham’s tour of Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia, Burma, Ceylon, India, and Pakistan enacted an increasingly urgent American attempt to ‘contain’ the spread of communism in Asia through cultural means (Prevots 1998:44-50). Graham’s trip was funded from the ‘Emergency Fund for International Affairs’, which Eisenhower had requested on 27 July 1954 in order, as he put it, to ‘demonstrate the dedication of the United States to peace and human well-being [and] to offset worldwide Communist propaganda

2 According to the notice appearing in the ‘Berita Kebudayaan’ section of the cultural magazine Budaya (5-1 (January), 1956:40), Graham’s troupe performed the dances Ardent song, Cave of the heart, and Appalachian spring on the nights of 8, 9, and 10 December in the Gedung Kesenian, Jakarta. Graham also gave a lecture-demonstration on 6 December. She left Indonesia with her 15 dancers on 12 December.