CHAPTER 8

Two Stages for Performance in Aceh
From State Conflict to Syariah Politics

Reza Idria

The overview given in this chapter cannot represent and interpret the entire dynamic of the performing arts in Acehnese history, nor portray the current situation in a detailed way. Rather it aims to set out the main factors explaining how two models of performance exist at the same time in present day Aceh. The chapter is also an attempt to analyse the condition of Acehnese arts, especially the performing arts, after the fall of the New Order regime, to allow readers to compare the situation with other areas of Indonesia. At a time when other provinces have begun to critically evaluate their forms of artistic expression, Acehnese artists are still struggling to claim space. The fall of the New Order and the special autonomy given to Aceh allowing the implementation of syariah Islamic law has given rise to two types of performance stage with very different aims. The following analysis is intended to provide some sense of the human and situational factors likely to determine which model becomes more dominant in Aceh in the future.

Stage 1

A direct broadcast from RRI, Radio Republik Indonesia, the national Indonesian radio station, in Banda Aceh is in progress. However, it comes not from the radio transmitter but rather from the room referred to as the auditorium. A man wearing a ‘tangkulok’ cap who reminds me of Dokarim, a marginal poet during the colonial war period, is holding a microphone and is in continual contact with an ‘on-the-ground’ reporter. His voice fades in and out, possibly due to the poor functioning of the loudspeaker or in order to create the sense of an uneven signal from the scene. The man is encased in a cube-shaped box resembling a large television, complete with an antenna and loudspeaker. A sign ‘live’ is hanging in front of the screen. On top of the large box are printed the words: TV Eng Ong.

Amongst the watching crowd a young woman in a black jilbab (Islamic female head-covering) carrying a microphone packaged in a plastic mineral water bottle acts as the on-the-ground reporter communicating with the tangkulok-wearing broadcaster. A teenage boy carrying a large camera on his
The term used in the original Acehnese, wh, is an abbreviation of Wilayatul Hisbah, frequently referred to by Acehnese people as the syariah police. In order to implement syariah Islamic law the Acehnese regional government regulates activities ranging from moral and religious questions, to regional government practices. See M.B Hooker and Virginia Hooker (2006), shoulder is following the young reporter. But his camera is a fake! As it gets closer to the audience, it is evident that it is only a wooden box to which a red kerosene can funnel has been attached. There is a small light on top of the box representing the camera. As he comes closer and directs the light in the direction of the audience member being interviewed, I see written in small letters on the ‘camera’ the same words: TV Eng Ong.

There is a question and answer exchange between the reporter and the audience in response to prompting from the broadcaster in the television set, which elicits much laughter from the audience. Several audience members are invited to enter the ‘television’. The broadcaster shouts out in Achenese Njoe tv aséli, Eng Ong, jeut teubiet jeut tamöng! “This is true television, Eng Ong, able to be entered and exited!” Then he continues, laughing and grimacing wryly, “Tonight we can see stimulating and entertaining expression, even though this is a story about the wounds of conflict, but another time males and females may not be allowed to appear on the same stage, and the performance may even be banned by the Morality Police.” The audience applauds. Needless to say the live broadcast I have been recounting is in fact a scene from a performance, an artistic performance.

Although stages and performances in other parts of the archipelago and the wider world are unequivocally associated with entertainment, with art, this is not necessarily the case in Aceh. That is why I need to stress that the first stage was an art performance, since now I want to describe another form of performance. Another stage, which does not entertain at all.

**Stage II**

This stage is situated in front of the mosque, to the left-hand side, in front of a yellow-fringed marquee characteristic of events attended by Indonesian officials. There are rows of empty plastic seats that will be occupied as soon as people come out from the mosque. This is Friday; the day Moslem men in Aceh are required, in accordance with the regulations of syariah law (qanun), to attend the mosque. As the congregation comes out from Friday prayers, there is an announcement from inside the mosque that there is to be a caning of sinners.

---

1 The term used in the original Acehnese, wh, is an abbreviation of Wilayatul Hisbah, frequently referred to by Acehnese people as the syariah police.

2 In order to implement syariah Islamic law the Acehnese regional government regulates activities ranging from moral and religious questions, to regional government practices. See M.B Hooker and Virginia Hooker (2006),