Concluding Comments

*Identity, Community and the Marketplace in Contemporary Indonesian Performance*

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One point I would like to comment on is the use of the phrase ‘post New Order’ in the title of the conference workshop, and as a reference point in individual contributions. I was hoping that people would problematize the term rather than simply taking it for granted as a description of a particular era. It suggests that there is something quite specific about this period, that it is significantly different from the New Order period. It prompts the question: what is this difference? I feel that not enough has been said in past two days about what is specific about ‘post-New Order’.

Perhaps we can consider an alternative, broader term ‘post-Cold War’. This term would allow for comparisons among Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, and to allow us to engage with the region that we know so little about. Discussing a post-Cold War era would also open the space for a reexamination of 1950s politics as related to culture and art, particularly of the work of the Community Party-affiliated cultural organization LEKRA. I cannot think of any other institution in entire history of Indonesia that has done what LEKRA did, namely the most ambitious attempt to theorize and to put into practice what they believed to be the progressive links between politics, art, and culture. Unfortunately, major political violence brought this project to an abrupt end. One wonders how they might have fared if they had been allowed to continue to pursue their project.

When discussing Indonesia’s politics and arts, you risk missing a lot if you do not refer back to the 1950s. One can speculate that from LEKRA’s point of view nothing significant has changed since the 1950s, except its own destruction. There are changes here and there since 1965 in the links between arts and politics in Indonesia, but how significant are they? The fact that we are still talking about a post-New Order era, perhaps paradoxically indicates that we are still stuck under the shadow of the New Order. Why must the New Order

* These comments, transcribed from presentations at the workshop on which this volume is based, refer to workshop versions of the chapters in addressing the key themes of the book.
still be there in our frame of analysis? Why cannot we do something better than simply add a prefix ‘post-’ to speak of the present? I look forward very much to the time when we decide that the New Order is just over and it was one stage in a broader and messy history. It was not necessarily the most important one.

I have the impression that many of us are still operating under the shadow of the New Order, taking revenge against the New Order, in celebrating qualities that we were not allowed to express then. It’s a kind of recapturing of the self in the past. Under the New Order when I was born, when I grew up, we were not allowed to have a divergent self. We were defined by the powerful in Jakarta; they declared who we were, and how we should behave. With the fall of the New Order, for the first time in thirty years many of us declare we know who we are. It doesn’t mean that we do know. But we think that we do.

The expression of old repressed identities is not without problems. Some of the papers indicate problems with decentralization, with pluralities in this period in that the new diversity can also be reduced and simplified for a number of reasons, and an essentialized identity repeatedly reproduced, as if we are already in post-New Order Indonesia. The prefix ‘post’ there can be problematic.

Even in the case of modified forms of ‘New Self’ which are not necessarily essentialized, in this ‘little New Order’, localities or identities are not equal. Some are more powerful, more empowered than others. For example, a ‘local’ Jakarta remains a dominant one. Likewise, Javanese culture is still much more dominant than others. I suspect this inequality is partly attributable to the working of the mass media. The mass media have been responsible for celebrating this new sense of self and identity as well as distributing identities, and promoting them, in uneven ways. For example, the Jakarta-derived youth language bahasa gaul differs from New Order-styled Indonesian, but bahasa gaul still dominant over the many varied youth languages across the island of Java and beyond. This imbalance is an inevitable result of the Jakarta-centric media production and dissemination.

I’d also like to discuss the issue of participation and promise. The idea of community is fascinating. For me community is a utopia. It is not a description of reality anywhere. It’s alluring because it promises the idea of egalitarianism unlike the family, keluarga. What we call keluarga still presupposes an unequal relationship between father and mother as commonly depicted in the ideal image of an Indonesian family. In contrast, community is non-hierarchical, and also organically-linked. We need to borrow the European term for this utopia, because we do not know or remember if something similar exists or existed in pre-Indonesia history.