Introduction: A Changing Indonesia

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Dramas of Uncertainty

It was a late afternoon in December 1998, on Kuta Beach, Bali, roughly six months after the abrupt end of an era in Indonesian history, the reign of President Suharto. An Indonesian man clad in black set down his black case, pulled out a loudspeaker and started beckoning passers-by to gather and witness his soon-to-begin display. His amplified voice boomed incessantly as he touted his credentials and expertise. As he spoke, he carefully marked off a six by six metre “stage” in such a way that viewers would not be able to see closely what was to transpire in the centre. He was an army man, he told us, and with his postings all over Indonesia he knew the dangers, particularly in this time of uncertainty. He had discovered in his travels a foolproof way of protecting himself. He then directed the spectators’ attention to his assistant, a long-haired, emaciated individual, whom he introduced as a Dayak, well versed in the ancient Dayak arts of protection and defence. He boasted about his accomplice’s astounding abilities. He could go into trance and swallow live snakes that would slither through his body; he could coax those same snakes through his nose and out his mouth. For the gathering crowd of curious passers-by listening to these amazing claims, it was at first unclear what this pair was selling. Eventually, however, it became apparent they were marketing magic stones, stones that originated from Kalimantan and were guaranteed to protect the owner in these times of uncertainty.

The seller soon unsheathed a machete knife. To demonstrate its sharpness, he waved the knife over his body, cutting hairs from his own head and arms, and then dramatically sliced the knife across his skin to draw blood. "If you carry one of these stones even a machete can not harm you”, the seller proclaimed, and requested a volunteer from the audience. A man, apparently reluctantly, stepped forward. The seller presented him with a small pouch, which we were told held a magic stone. "Hold this.", he ordered and, before the man had a chance to demur, the seller thrust his machete into the crook of the man’s arm, and pulled it out. No blood. "Do you want to buy one of these stones?”
enquired the seller of his volunteer after this demonstration. Without speaking, the man nodded. Several thousand rupiah changed hands and the volunteer pocketed his treasure and quickly left the audience. Were there others who wanted to buy? One or two others hesitatingly showed interest. In the meantime, the Kalimantan Dayak was falling into a trance. Periodically redirecting our attention to the Dayak, the hawker enticed the small crowd with a description of what he was about to do. As he reminded us, this man could control snakes; we would witness a snake penetrate his nostrils and exit his mouth. The Dayak then produced what was declared to be a poisonous snake from his own black bag, which appeared to be writhing with snakes. After placing it on the ground, he slipped another black bag over his head and fell into trance.

Around the beach, night was approaching. Foreign tourists wandered over every now and then. They watched puzzled, uncertain what this show was about. Indeed why had these peddlers come to Kuta Beach, a famous tourist mecca, to sell their wares to an Indonesian audience, instead of finding a more locally-frequented spot? Observing this scene, the riddles that it invoked, it seemed perfectly consonant with what was unfolding on the wider Indonesian stage at that very moment. On both stages the slipperiness between the genuine and the contrived was palpable. In both arenas, confusion and suspicion reigned amongst the spectators. Watching the stone seller at work, it was hard to discern who in the audience was genuine, and who were stage props, planted to convince others to buy. It was difficult to fathom what was actually transpiring below the surface, what was real and what was pretence. Did outside observers necessarily understand less than those who listened and thought they understood? The man with the stone in his hand was cut by the knife, but did not bleed. Had he really been cut or was he part of the act? And there was the Dayak, lying on his back in “trance” with snakes emerging from his nose. Or were they? What was really going on under that black bag? The show seemed to be marketing the “primitive” and the “mystical”. Was that the only power in which people could still believe, the only force that people trusted to protect them in these uncertain times?

The uncertainty of the performance, what was real, what was unreal, paralleled the events in Indonesia then, previously, and subsequently. Had, for example, the New Order really ended, or was Suharto still the puppeteer behind the screen? Who were the conjurers and perpetrators? Who were the genuine, innocent observers? Indeed, was, anyone innocent? Could in fact anyone watching be presumed to be innocent who stayed and supported, colluded with the performance? Could anyone be innocent who had watched and