

Under the Veil of Nationalism: Islam and Indonesian National Theater
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Introduction: Interculturalism, Postcolonialism, Islam

When I first set out, a few years ago, to investigate the role of Islam in contemporary Indonesian theater, I realized that I was venturing far into the margins of American theater scholarship. The resolute parochialism of theater studies in the United States is exceptional, even in comparison with the rest of the American humanities. Euro-American scholars and theater artists have, with good reason, questioned their primitivist and Orientalist engagements with “the other” for several decades now. Unfortunately, this necessary self-scrutiny has abetted an all too reactionary isolationism in American theater studies. The East/West division against which the late Edward Said campaigned for two and a half decades ironically re-entrenches by means of this reflexive turn. American theater departments can now circle their wagons, as they have always done, around a supposedly “Western” civilization. To be sure, this notion of civilization has diversified insofar as it now includes Euro-American women and minorities, but it now considers the “non-West” (that is to say everything that we can know about the world beyond Europe or the United States) primarily as a bi-product of Western neuroses. In a sense, we are in a worse state of affairs than with the old Orientalism, because we have rationalized our global ignorance in the name of progressive critical politics. Have we not succumbed to the same danger that has always plagued subjectivist multiculturalism, i.e. that respect for the difference of others would take the form of indifference to others?

In resistance to this old familiar grand narrative of American global ignorance, there have been two theoretical counter-discourses over the past two decades, which scholars and practitioners have applied in more or less distinct ways to the ridiculously diverse expanse of what these progressive critical agendas have excluded. Interculturalism and postcolonial theory both focus attention on difference across global identity borders (interculturalism with a semiotic emphasis, postcolonialism with an emphasis on anti-colonial politics).¹ I have argued elsewhere that both these frameworks inform local and global discourses regarding the modern Indonesian national theater (*sandiwara*).² However, in doing so, they have both limited that discourse, marginalizing significant strains, and abetting the political and cultural dominance of certain ideologies over others.

Beginning in the 1930s, Indonesian intellectuals debated each other in the pages of literary journals in what came to be known the “cultural polemic” (*polemik*

¹ Given the astonishing breadth of practice that these theories address, the number of theoretical works on intercultural or postcolonial theater is surprisingly small. Patrice Pavis’ dubious “hourglass model” for intercultural exchange, first advanced in *Theatre at the crossroads of culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992) remains the most frequently cited paradigm for that theory. The principal theoretical book on postcolonial theater is Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins’ *Post-colonial drama : theory, practice, politics*. (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), which is largely concerned with British commonwealth theater. Christopher Balme’s Balme, C. B. (1999). *Decolonizing the stage : theatrical syncretism and post-colonial drama*. (Oxford & New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1999) is another interesting text that puts a bit more emphasis on indigenous criticism of Africa and the Caribbean. Nevertheless, the sheer enormity of the presumed “field” of postcolonial or intercultural studies, which has been extensively criticized in the past decade, has no doubt dissuaded many would-be imitators of Pavis, Gilbert & Tompkins and Balme.

² Winet, Evan Darwin. “Shadow and Method: Meditations on Indonesian Theater Historiography” in S.E. Wilmer, ed. *Writing and Rewriting Theater Histories*. (University of Iowa Press, 2004).

kebudayaan).³ In the *polemik kebudayaan*, the “nativists,” led by Sanusi Pane, argued that the path to a distinctly Indonesian modernity lay in a profound engagement with local cultural traditions. The “Westists,” led by Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, argued that Indonesian civilization had become moribund, and required a “fresh wind” from the West. Some of the *polemik kebudayaan* writings simply borrowed the framework of the Orientalist European avant-garde while others attempted to articulate anti-colonialist aesthetics. Many critics and artists attempted to combine these agendas. The core issues are still being debated, and in the past fifteen years, have incorporated the language and literature of Euro-American interculturalism and postcolonial theory. Over eighty years, the majority of these writings have presumed the primacy of ethnic identity (e.g. Javanese, Balinese, Batak, Timorese, etc.) or of national identity. The emphasis on these categories, which are the most legible ones to interculturalism and postcolonial theory, serves the ideological agenda of the Indonesian nation-state, especially vis-à-vis competing pan-ethnic ideologies, of which the most historically significant have been communism and Islam.

This article is a preliminary attempt to relate Islam to the prevailing frameworks and discourses of Indonesian *sandiwara*. I will argue that Islam disrupts the predominant intercultural and postcolonial frameworks in ways that challenge the ideological simplicity of the Indonesian national theater. Islam cuts across all sorts of oppositional dichotomies, figuring both as exogenous and indigenous, traditional and modern,

³ Foremost amongst these literary journals in the 1920s and 1930s was *Poedjangga Baroe* (New Poet), which published from 1933 to 1942. On this crucial first wave of anti-colonial literary discourse, see Foulcher, Keith. *Pujangga Baru: Literature and Nationalism in Indonesia, 1933-1942*. (Flinders University/Asian Studies Monograph No. 2, 1980). *PB* has been followed by such prominent literary and cultural journals as *Basis*, *Budaya*, *Horison*, and, most recently, *Kalam*.

Western and Eastern, rational and mystical, cultural and personal, text-centered and performative, local and global. It challenges notions of identity familiar to performance theory and cultural studies, because only a very small portion of modern expressions to which Islam has some significance are in any overt sense performances *of* Islamic identity.

Islam is an aspect of culture through which local tradition emerges as already global and trans-national. If we view the postcolonial in arts and literature broadly as a preoccupation with the alienating experience of mimicry and the effort to resist the specters of the colonial past through appropriation and other counter-discursive strategies, Indonesian Islam may be seen as a site of postcolonial expression that precedes and extends through European colonization (thereby disrupting the perception of European colonization as committing a stark “epistemic violence” against the colonies). From the beginning, and most especially since the 19th century, Indonesian Islam has struggled with its relation to notions of authentic Middle Eastern Islam, which have themselves always been in flux. Islam complicates the struggle to differentiate modern Indonesian culture from that of the West, and for this reason it is problematic for anyone invested in seeing stark binaries between East and West, native and foreign, colonizer and colonized.

September 11, 2001 awakened me to my own blindness to the importance of Islamic discourse, and I soon recognized a prevailing secularist prejudice in telling the story of *sandiwara* in which I had been complicit. This prejudice was overwhelmingly evident throughout the discourses on the subject in Indonesia and without. It is a blindness that is particularly acute in theater scholarship, and quite out of proportion to scholarship on

Indonesia in the social sciences, where numerous scholarly works have appeared in the past 20 years recovering the significance of Islam to Indonesian culture.⁴ However, in scholarship of *sandiwara* there has been little mention of the role of Islam outside the quite limited field of *teater dakwah* (theater of Islamic proselytization).⁵ The tendency in Indonesian interculturalism has been to construe the significant discourse as between the modern West a traditional Asia that consists mainly in Hindu and Buddhist sources.⁶

In questioning the role of Islam in Indonesian *sandiwara*, we should not assume that it is any more significant than any other religion is to the modern theater of societies in which that religion predominates. However, if the significance of Islam to modern Indonesian theater is even comparable to the significance of Christianity to modern Euro-American theater (to which it has bequeathed such notions as personal spiritual transcendence, inner confessional truth and diachronic eschatological time), there is a great deal to be recovered. We have grown accustomed to telling histories of our modern theaters in terms of secular politics, identities and aesthetics. We understand our “Western” theater history as shaped discursively in relation to fascism, whiteness, masculinity or Nevada (poles connected at the reader’s discretion). If Christianity is

⁴ For example, Woodward, M. R. and Association for Asian Studies. *Islam in Java : Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta*. Tucson, Published for the Association for Asian Studies by the University of Arizona Press, 1989; Ricklefs, M. C.. *Islam in the Indonesian social context*. Clayton, Victoria, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1991; Riddell, P. G.. *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian world : transmission and responses*. Honolulu, HI, University of Hawaii Press, 2001.

⁵ See note 38.

⁶ For example, Sanusi Pane described the West/East divide as the “Faust/Arjuna” model, opposing the materialism, rationalism and individualism of Faust to a spiritual connection to nature associated with the meditating hero of the *Mahabharata*. Pane, Sanusi. “Persatuan Indonesia,” *Poedjangga Baroe* 111, 89-92. This meditative spirituality might just as easily have been associated with Sufi mysticism, and materialism, rationalism and individualism can all be found in the writings of such Sufis as Ibn Arabi, a point that Alisjahbana occasionally made.

interesting, it is as a mask for more material political agendas. And yet, surely we all recognize that a distinct, relevant, and at this point *alternative* narrative of modern Euro-American theater could be told by tracing the uses of Christian discourse. This is essentially what I propose to do for modern Indonesian theater vis a vis Islam.

Paying attention to Islam as a category of identity, culture, thought, practice in modern Indonesian theatre, or perhaps as a *kampong* (neighborhood/village) within the *kota* (city) of *sandiwara*,⁷ recovers the important contributions of religiously self-identified artists (such as the founders of *Teater Muslim*, described below), but also calls attention to the role of Islam in theater that is not expressly Islamic, and the role of religion in the discourse of Indonesian nationalism itself. It disrupts the local as a coherent category, revealing intercultural and postcolonial concerns across an array of micro-fractures in Indonesian identity, and disrupts the global providing a local, pre-colonial repository for a variety of themes and ideas typically associated with imported Euro-American modernity (e.g. rational causality, genealogy/linear time, emphasis on interiority, etc.)

Goenawan Mohamad has said that *sandiwara* in Indonesia is a “minority among diverse minorities.”⁸ Islamic *sandiwara*, however we end up defining that, might be seen as a minority among that minority which is *sandiwara*. Although I will ultimately argue

⁷ As in the national discourse of many other countries, there is a common rhetorical opposition in Indonesia reinforced by all sorts of public and private discourse between imported metropolitan modernities, and authentic village localities. Urban neighborhoods are often discussed as microcosms of village locality within the metropole, which can be spun positively as the authentic interiors of the cities or negatively as persistent centers of backwardness or counter-modernity.

⁸ Mohamad, Goenawan. “Forgetting” in Foulcher, Keith and Tony Day. *Clearing a space : postcolonial readings of modern Indonesian literature*. Leiden, KITLV Press, 2002.

that we see more by viewing Islam as one among many *poles, centers* of meaning and identity in relation to which *sandiwara* has crafted its place.

Religious values and themes in national theaters

In October, 1999, I attended a play at the Jakarta Arts Institute by a young theatre troupe called Teater Kanvas. Members of W.S. Rendra's Workshop Theater (*Teater Bengkel*), who surely must be viewed as part of a national theatre establishment in Jakarta at this point,⁹ were decidedly unenthusiastic when I expressed interest in attending. Jose Rizal Manua, a veteran Bengkel actor, expressed some grudging respect for Kanvas' artistic director and leading playwright, Zak Sorgas, but this did not overcome the fact that it was an Islamic theatre and thus not of interest to the mainstream theatre community. It turned out to be one of the best new plays I had seen over the previous five months in Indonesia, one that addressed in original ways many of the themes pervading the post-Suharto *Reformasi* discourse. The play portrayed a group of tattered men in a prison, each negotiating his own personal relation to political persecution, some world-weary and cynical, some raving, some living out emancipatory fantasies. It was filled with negative imagery of soldiers and denunciations of military authoritarian states. It was a work of social realism whose depiction of a society of ordinary men living in the urban shadows on the brink of hopelessness called to mind Gorky's *Lower Depths* or O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, but with an abstract poetic meter more suggestive of Ionesco or Genet. In short, it was suffused with the themes and aesthetics of Western

⁹ Rendra's *Teater Bengkel*, founded in Yogyakarta in 1967, has had a greater impact on the development of Indonesian theater in the past forty years than any other troupe. Rendra's approach to acting and playwriting, and above all, his vision of a *pesantren*-like community of actors (discussed below) have inspired several generations of Indonesian theater artists. Nearly every theater artist working in *sandiwara* today can in some way trace a genealogy back to *Bengkel*.

modernism, and yet completely unremarkable in relation to mainstream *Reformasi* theater. Apart from metaphysical speculation and aspiration of the sort that one might identify in *Waiting for Godot*, there was little to mark it as “Islamic theatre.”

The Teater Kanvas production certainly did thematize a search for God and personal transcendence that might be read as “Islamic.” However, this is hardly a necessary or exclusive interpretation. Isn’t such spiritual content found throughout mainstream secular *sandiwara*, or for that matter, throughout existentialist and otherwise metaphysical modern theatre in the West? What does it mean for a modern theatre to have an *explicit* relationship to religion? How, if in any way, is such a relationship or identity marked in the text or the production themselves?

Let me bring in two more points of reference. My sister-in-law recently finished training at L’Ecole Jacques Lecoq in Paris. In the summer of 2003, I had the opportunity to see them perform the *auto-cours* (self-training exercises) for their clown unit. Readers familiar with the work of Lecoq and other leading instructors of physical and movement-based actor training would not be surprised at what I saw: a young ensemble of actors portraying a variety of comic confrontations, ruptures and interventions in the status quo social relationships between generations, classes, lovers, social cliques, etc. In the summer of 2004, I attended an afternoon presentation of student exercises at the Patravadi Theatre, one of the defining modern theaters of Bangkok. The students had strong physical skills derived from pantomime and other movement training, excellent economy of gesture and sense of narrative structure and timing, all of which they used to portray scenes of youthful conflict and desire of the sort familiar to any improvisation class anywhere in the world. The presentations reminded me quite a bit of the Lecoq

autocours, and my first impulse was to take this as an instance of globalization in acting pedagogy.

However, at the conclusion of the performance, a local Buddhist monk came onstage and, with the facilitation of Patravadi Mejudhon, the theatre's artistic director, led a discussion of how we might, in our everyday lives, manage the destructive emotions portrayed in the scenes. Although this pragmatic, religious discussion emphasized the betterment of life outside the theatre, Patravadi insightfully suggested how that practice might begin within the theater. For instance, she suggested that the actor should discover the praxis of Buddhist philosophical connections between breath and emotion within his own art.

Patravadi promotes her theater, and it is promoted by state and tourist media as a leading institution of the Thai modern theater. This performance of student acting exercises, taken on its own, was a piece a contemporary physical theatre that might well be admired at the Lecoq school or in any modern movement-based acting classroom. However, it was framed and experienced by its practitioners and audience as Buddhist praxis. Religious content and context, even when this explicit, may be obscured by the grand narratives of modernism and nationalism. This is a problem worth keeping in mind while seeking the presence of Islam in *sandiwara*, a genre known first and foremost as the national modern theater of Indonesia and which is certainly legible within that context, but which is, after all produced predominantly by and for Muslims.

Islam and anti-colonial nationalism in Indonesia

Islamic identity bears a complex relationship to ethnic and national identity in

Indonesia and the Malay world. Robert Hefner notes that Islam has historically been so linked to Malay identity that when non-Muslims in neighboring populations converted to Islam, they were said to be “entering Malayness.” (*masuk melayu*). Similarly in pre-nineteenth century Java, to become Javanese was frequently associated with becoming Muslim.¹⁰ Nevertheless, as colonial and post-colonial Indonesian governments looked to forge unity out of vast cultural, ethnic and religious heterogeneity, political Islam was generally viewed with suspicion. In the 19th century, the Dutch promoted a “prophesy” that without the restraining presence of their central administration, Islam would act out of an intolerance of Indonesian heterogeneity, leading to disorder and mass killings in the name of establishing an Islamic state. Islam was thereby set in opposition to order and justice. In the nineteenth century, the Dutch used this prophesy as part of a negative campaign against the Java War.¹¹ In the late 1960s, President Suharto simultaneously demonized the communists for treason to the nation in the failed 1965 coup, and radical Islamists for taking revenge against the communists in the 1965-6 massacres (a dual scapegoating that left his regime free of significant political opposition).

But what is the cultural status of Islamic faith in modern, urban Indonesia, and what does it have to do with postcolonial nationalism? The manifestations of Islam across the Indonesian archipelago are quite heterogeneous and partake of a variety of complex

¹⁰ Hefner, Robert W. “Religion: Evolving Pluralism” in Donald K. Emmerson, ed. *Indonesia beyond Suharto: polity, economy, society, transition*. Armonk & London: M.E. Sharpe, 1999: 205-236.

¹¹ 1825-30. The Java War, though led by Prince Diponegato of Yogyakarta, is generally seen by Indonesians as a popular uprising against the advance of Dutch bureaucratic colonization. The nationalists in the 1920s invoked it as a glorious precursor to their own struggle. At the time, the suppression of the uprising gave the Dutch a pretext to incorporate the Javanese courts into their administration and extend their plantation economy throughout the island.

syncretisms, all of which have proved notoriously difficult to model. Clifford Geertz presented a seductively clear distinction between what he saw as a specialized class of devout (*santri*) Muslims distinct from the larger population of nominal (*abangan*) Muslims in Java.¹² This view of Islam as a “thin veneer” over more ancient belief systems has been critiqued both by syncretists who argue that contemporary Indonesian religion is irreducibly hybrid, and also by scholars who see Indonesian appropriation and adherence to Islam as considerably more orthodox in relation to Middle Eastern Islam than is popularly assumed.¹³

It is generally agreed that there were Muslims in the Eastern Indonesian islands by the 8th century, that widespread Islamization had begun in North Sumatra (particularly in present-day Aceh) by the 13th century, and that prior to the 19th century, Sufism prevailed as the most consistent strain of Islam in Sumatra and Java.¹⁴ Specters of authenticity, to borrow Ben Anderson’s borrowing of Jose Rizal’s phrase,¹⁵ have haunted Indonesian Islam throughout its history. The first Muslims in Indonesia were traders and

¹² See Geertz, Clifford. *The religion of Java*. Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1960.

¹³ See Hefner for an orthodox view. For a more syncretist view, see Sears, Laurie J. *Shadows of empire : colonial discourse and Javanese tales*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1996.

¹⁴ Robert Hefner points out that despite its centrality in Indonesian Islamic discourse, Sufism has never been the *only* strain of Islam present in the archipelago. Indeed, there are records from first millennium Sumatra of scholars who were clearly familiar with more orthodox Islamic doctrine and literature, who objected to the Indonesian Sufis on the grounds that they confused divine with human, and distracted Muslims from their rituals and disciplines.

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson organizes his collection of essays, *The spectre of comparisons : nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the world*. (London & New York, Verso, 1998) around this phrase coined by Jose Rizal in his novel, *Noli me Tangere*. The protagonist describes the disorienting experience of returning to Manila from Europe in the 1880s to see newly constructed botanical gardens as a scene haunted by “el demonio de las comparaciones.” Anderson uses this image to describe the many ways in which elements of contemporary Southeast Asia society are haunted by their exogenous sources.

mystics, mythologized by oral tradition into the nine founding fathers (*wali*) who some Muslims imagine as having brought an authentic faith directly from Arabia. In the 1960s, Slametmuljana caused a stir with a book arguing that three of these *wali* had most likely come from China and were ethnically Chinese.¹⁶ In any case, the first Muslims were followed by migrations from coastal Gujarat. It was these South Asian Sufi mystics and Muslim traders from the Coromandel coast who did most of the converting. As Laurie Sears puts it,

“When Islam entered the archipelago, it had already been filtered through the fabric of Indian religious philosophy, which emphasized meditative practices in the effort to contact the divine. Traders, who were often connected with sufi *tarekat* (paths or schools of esoteric teachings), brought their interpretations of Islam to the north coast cities of Java, where merchants, who perhaps had not been participants in the elite mystical Shivaite-Buddhist faith of the inland kingdoms, were quick to adopt the new religion, which required no priests or rituals other than the observance of the five pillars of the faith.”¹⁷

If Sufi philosophy has remained one of the most important strains in Indonesian Islam, it is not a matter of greater authenticity so much as enduring pragmatism within complex tribal, feudal, colonial and ultimately national cultures. “Sufi philosophy explains Allah’s permanent presence in nature; this makes Sufism relatively compatible with animistic beliefs. [an important observation to the syncretic camp]. Collective worship is not necessary. Each believer can find Allah in his/her own way. [a concept of

¹⁶ See Slametmuljana, *A story of Majapahit*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1976.

¹⁷ Sears, 58.

profound significance to the individualistic strain in modern theatre, one which is not stressed in the animistic or Hindu traditions, though it is an insight typical of all mysticisms including Buddhist mysticism] Ibn Arabi (1165-1246), one of the great mystical philosophers of Islam, developed a doctrine of Unity of Being—the creator is visible in different aspects of nature and the human spirit—a perfect man in whom all attributes of divine being are present.” This found ecstatic expression, such as Hamzah Fansuri promoting alcoholism in 16th century West Sumatra: “His radiance is a blazing glow/ In all of us/ It is He who is the cup and the arak/ Do not look for him far away, child.” Indonesian Sufism also put an emphasis on the teacher-disciple relationship, which built well on Hindu/Buddhist practice.¹⁸

Indonesian Islam developed in the 19th century in ways that did carry anti-colonial implications. Young men of means from Java and Sumatra would sometimes seek relief from Dutch colonialism by disappearing to the Hijaz to perform the hajj in Mecca. The hajj brought back different orientations of Islam depending on the times: Wahhabism in the 1820s, new forms of Sufi mysticism in the 1850s, Islamic modernism in the 1890s. Some did not return. Those who did, often embraced the anti-colonial cause. They had been radicalized by Arab Muslim modernists such as al-Abduh and al-Afghani, who Soekarno acknowledges as ideological brothers in his NASAKOM formulations.¹⁹

Some critics have concluded that the Islam of these returning radicals was simply a

¹⁸ See Ali, Tariq. *The clash of fundamentalisms : crusades, jihads and modernity*. London, Verso, 2002.

¹⁹ See, for example, Soekarno’s seminal 1926 lecture, *Nationalism, Islam, and Marxism*. Ithaca, N.Y., Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Dept. of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1970.

mask for nationalism, but surely it is equally plausible that they were sincere in their religion, and, like many of the sincere communists, viewed nationalism as an expedient means to their own goals. Might not nationalism have been a mask for Islam as it clearly is for many politically active Indonesian Muslims today?

By the time the nationalist movement took shape in the 1920s, Islam had become part of a complex anti-colonial ideological landscape in Indonesia. In those early years, political Islamists formed unstable alliances with communists, and many local and foreign leaders looked forward to a highly effective revolutionary synthesis between the two. Sarekat Islam (the Islamic Union), established in 1908, is considered by many to be the first Indonesian anti-colonial organization capable of transcending local ethnic appeal. In 1912, SI chairman, Tjokroaminoto greatly expanded the organization by calling for a struggle against Christian missionary activities. At the time, Lenin praised this as the birth of a mass nationalist politics linked to Islam and the emergence of a native capitalist intelligentsia. A communist faction grew within SI under the leadership of Tan Malaka, which split from them in 1921 creating the first major communist organization in Indonesia. This faction attended the Conference of the Toilers of the East in Baku in 1920. Here, with hundreds of delegates from the Muslim world, Grigorii Zinoziew, then president of the Communist International, called on the Muslim world to launch a jihad against all empires.²⁰

It is worth noting that one of the first major Indonesian insurrections against the Dutch before the war, in which Roestam Effendi (author of the first Indonesian play) participated and for which he was exiled, was the premature rebellion of the communist

²⁰ Ali.

party in 1927, which took place in West Sumatra, amongst some of Indonesia's most pervasively Muslim societies.²¹

Sufi mysticism in *sandiwara*

Beliefs associated with Sufism suggest a variety of significant links to the form and content of *sandiwara*. For example, Indonesian Sufis advocated total independence from sectarian religious groups and all orthodox interpretations of the Koran. They abhorred ritual. Many mystics argued that orthodox believers had to be hypocrites because they sealed off their faith from their own daily practices in the material world. A Sufi, by contrast, insisted that the creator only dwelt in the inner realm of spirit and thus sought to break with and shame the outer world of matter. He refused to accept an Allah who was only on the outside. As with other mystical approaches to religion, this tended to promote the relationship between disciples and independent teachers. Sufi *kyai*, or religious experts, formed *pesantren* (boarding schools), which became and remain the most pervasive institutions for religious education in Indonesia.

Such an “ensemble structure” provided an inspirational model for modern *sandiwara* practitioners such as W.S. Rendra, who returned to Java from New York City in 1967 to revolutionize *sandiwara* not only through the new communal politics and

²¹ In November, 1926, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) was already well established, and the nationalist party (PNI) had not yet formed. However, these poorly coordinated rebellions of party elements, which began in the relatively affluent and sparsely populated towns of Bantam in Java and Minangkabau in Sumatra were ruinous for the party. By mid-1927, the rebellion had been fully suppressed, and much of the party leadership in the Indies had been incarcerated or deported. However, this sudden destruction of the PKI clearly provided the fledgeling nationalist movement a space to fill. See Benda, H. J. and R. T. McVey. *The communist uprisings of 1926-1927 in Indonesia: key documents*. Ithaca, N.Y., Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Dept. of Far Eastern Studies, Cornell University, 1960.

improvisational pedagogy he had learned in America, but also through a new indigenization of modern theater in relation to the *pesantren*. His famous Workshop Theater may have brought the techniques of Beck and Malina or Grotowsky to Indonesia, but it was perceived as “Indonesianizing” (*meng-Indonesia-kan*) modern theater largely insofar as it brought *sandiwara* into the *pesantren*. This Muslim aspect of Rendra’s dramaturgy has received surprisingly little attention. Despite the fact that he converted from Christianity to Islam in 1971, critics have tended to see his workshop more as a pseudo-Hindu hippie “*ashram*” than as a *pesantren*, and to view his advocacy of *kampong* (village) over *kota* (city) in terms of democracy and class discourses without making the connection to his radical mysticism.²² This is a significant omission not only in understanding the context not only of Rendra, but of *sandiwara* as a whole. The notion of a theater troupe as a community committed to a kind of spiritual quest in the style of a Sufi *pesantren* is one of the most recurrent ideas in *sandiwara* over the past 50 years.

The *pesantren* institutional structure relates closely to how Indonesian acting might be viewed in the light of Indonesian Sufism. Elsewhere, I have traced the development of Indonesian acting theory in the 1950s as a postcolonial appropriation of

²² See, for example, Hatley, Barbara. “Theatre as Cultural Resistance in Contemporary Indonesia.” *State and Civil Society in Indonesia*. A. Budiman. Clayton, Australia, Monash Papers on Southeast Asia - No. 22, 1990: 321-348; Kartomi-Thomas, K. S. *Tradition and Modern Indonesian Theatre*. Doctoral Dissertaton for the Department of Southeast Asian Studies. Berkeley, University of California, 1994; Kayam, U. *Seni, Tradisi, Masyarakat*. Jakarta, Sinar Harapan, 1981; Morgan, A.-M. “Three approaches to modern theatre in Jakarta in the 1990s: Rendra, Putu Wijaya and Ratna Sarumpaet.” *Australasian Drama Studies* 27 (October, 1995): 70-85; Toda, D. N. “Willy yang Mencari, Terluca dan yang Berang.” *Hamba Hamba Kebudayaan*. Jakarta, PT Sinar Agape Press: 110-119, 1984.

the American Method.²³ However, this revolutionary spiritualization of psychological characterization may also be connected to the individualistic strains in Sufism. It is comparable, perhaps, to the admonitions of Asrul Sani (founder of the first National Theater Academy in Jakarta in 1955) that Indonesian actors should discover themselves and a new Indonesian national subjectivity through struggle with the wild emotions of their characters. Furthermore, such an anti-material attitude serves the same anti-theatrical prejudice that has ironically been so productive to avant-garde theatre in the West, and indeed it may be discerned in Indonesian *sandiwara*'s obsessions with probing individual inner spirituality and finding truth within the actor.

The role of Islam in the first Indonesian play

Roestam Effendi wrote *Bebasari* (Essential Freedom) in 1926, as the nationalist student movement began to organize in Bandung, Java. The play is generally acknowledged as the first modern Indonesian drama, not only because it is the first to be written in the Indonesian language, but also because it is the first to take the idea of a sovereign Indonesia as its theme and context. The anti-colonial credentials of *Bebasari* are unmistakable: it is an agitational plea for revolution through positive images of Indonesian identity and negative images of the colonizers. The protagonist is a noble poet/prince who fights not for his own sake as in the old folklore, but rather to free the *bangsa*, the Indonesian people (or nation). However, the imagery through which *Bebasari* promotes anti-colonial struggle are not simply nationalistic, but also tap into communist and Islamic discourse. This is hardly surprising, given that Indonesian anti-colonialism had been born of these discourses decades before the articulation of a

²³ Winet, Evan. "Interpolating American Method Acting in 1950s Indonesia," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 18:1 (Fall, 2003), 89-106.

commitment to ‘Indonesia.’ Nevertheless, the dominance of nationalism in the ideological spectrum of Indonesia since the 1920s has all but erased these strains, and canonized Effendi’s play solely as a work of nationalism.

Bebasari adapts the familiar *Ramayana* narrative in which Lord Rama must rescue his wife, Sita from the demon, Rawana, into a contemporary context.²⁴ It invokes the meditation and battle narratives common in *wayang* performances scenarios, in which a noble knight meditates in order to accumulate power before going into battle against the ogres from across the seas (construed in the Hindu tradition as the denizens of Lanka or Ceylon). The young hero, Bujangga, is both *pemuda* (radicalized youth) and *pujangga* (noble poet), the champion of the new age bearing timeless wisdom and faith. He spends the first half of the play struggling against the fears of his elders (the comprador elite of the previous generation), to which end he is encouraged by a succession of prophetic ascetics. These *kyai* raise his consciousness and bolster his confidence to assail the ogres who imprison the Princess Bebasari, Bujangga’s promised bride. It is a rather transparent parable of the aspiring Indonesian youth destined to be free (i.e. to wed Bebasari, whose name might be translated “Essential Freedom”), who must gather their strength under the guidance of *kyai*, and expel the ogres of the Batavian state. The princess Bebasari feminizes the imagined Indonesian nation as the land that has been raped, and as the recovered object of romantic patriotism.

²⁴ The *Ramayana* along with the other major Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*, came to Indonesia along with Hindu and Buddhist migrations and empires in the first millennium. Although most of the Indonesian peoples who adopted these religions subsequently converted to Islam (the Balinese are a significant exception), the narrative traditions survived in a variety of theatrical genres, including *wayang* shadow theater. The fact that these stories still form a significant portion of the *wayang* repertoire would seem to be compelling evidence that Islam did not bring with it the draconian suppression of theater that is so commonly ascribed to it.

Effendi's anti-colonial *pujangga* must fulfill a cosmological mandate articulated by *kyai* to evict the colonizers from the people/nation, through violent struggle if necessary. To achieve this, he symbolically amalgamates the three “emerging forces” that a young Bandung nationalist by the name of Soekarno first identified in his seminal 1926 lecture entitled “Nationalism, Islam and Communism.”²⁵ Of these three forces, it is Islam, not nationalism that is most explicit in *Bebasari*. Bujangga and his *kyai* advisers openly acknowledge throughout the play that effective anti-colonial resistance is rooted in mystical piety. When Bujangga worries that he stands no chance against the superior technology of his foes, he is advised that he will wield the superior knowledge (*ilmu*) of his faith. Even Rawana acknowledges upon his own defeat that “this is the will of almighty God.”

Bebasari invokes an Islamic framework in a variety of more subtle ways. Bujangga often identifies himself as an orphan raised by foster parents, recalling the prophet Muhammed himself, who was raised by his uncle. In contrast to this coding of Bujangga himself as an Islamic religious hero, the Dutch ogres are more strongly associated with the politically ambivalent context of the *Ramayana* narrative. The demon, Rawana, is the only character in the play whose name is adopted directly from the *Ramayana*, he is depicted as dwelling in the Hindu “land beyond the seas,” and when he is defeated, he is not killed. Rather, he is evicted to the abode of the Hindu gods.

²⁵ See Soekarno, 1970. Throughout his presidency (1950-1966), Soekarno often invoked the idea that these three forces synthesized productively in the Indonesian national spirit. He was, to be sure, a masterful manipulator of dissonant political currents, and as paternalistic a leader as his successor, Soeharto. However, by encouraging these three forces, he did provide a greater space for political complexity, and hence by many assessments a more authentic civil society than Soeharto, who took a dim view of non-governmental political ideologies.

Through such coding, the anti-colonial struggle appears not only as the spiritual path of a *santri* under the tutelage of *kyai*, but also as an expulsion of exogenous Hindu elements from the *bangsa* (articulated, ironically, via a Hindu narrative tradition!) The struggle is nationalistic, to be sure, but the post-colonial nation is legitimate insofar as it is Allah's will. The agent of change is a revolutionary nationalist, but his revolutionary consciousness is achieved through a mystical (Sufi) reckoning with orthodox (anti-syncretic) overtones.

Anti-theatricalism and *teater dakwah*.

Recognition of the role of Islam in modern Indonesian theater is doubly marginalized. As I have just described, widespread secularist prejudices in the study of modern theaters subsume religious and spiritual content within over-determining nationalist frameworks. The second source of marginalization is the enduring specter of a rumor: it is the widespread, oft repeated presumption that Islamic iconoclasm and moralism have impeded the development of theatrical performance and dramatic literature throughout the Islamic world.

The record of Muslim anti-theatricalism in Indonesia (not to mention the Middle East) is far from consistent. Indeed, "hard-liner" Islamic authorities in Indonesia have never suppressed theater to the extent achieved in medieval Europe or in Puritan England. The early Sufis by and large did not seek to eradicate *wayang*, preferring to infiltrate and negotiate with the popular medium. More orthodox Indonesian Muslims have spoken out against *wayang* since the first millennium, and their voices became more pointed with the advance of Wahhabism in the 19th century. Nevertheless, at least until recent times, *wayang* shadow theater has remained popular throughout Muslim Java. The form faces a

far greater existential threat from the profusion of Western television and film than it ever did from Islamic censorship.²⁶

Similarly, there have been only scattered attempts by Islamic leaders in the past eighty years to object to *sandiwara*. For example, in 1974 a Muslim leader in Jakarta complained about a poster for Arifin C. Noer's *Orkes Madiun I*, which featured Semar in the shape of Koranic calligraphy. Noer, who, it should be noted, had been a founding member of Indonesia's leading self-identified Muslim theater troupe in the 1960s, took down his posters. Some Indonesian theater critics, particularly in the Soekarno years, invoked Islamic morality in denouncing the new drama, which consisted at the time mainly in adaptations of the European realists and existentialists. Indeed, conservative Indonesian moralists of the 1950s objected to the frank depiction of sexuality, violence and unrestrained emotions in the works of such playwrights as Ibsen and Sartre, but so had many European critics in the first place. In any case, these are hardly cases of religious censorship. Rather, they are indications of ideological complexity in Indonesian national culture, and indications that Islam informed some of the voices in that discourse. Rendra was partly responding to this sort of concern with his *pesantren*-based dramaturgy in 1967. Indeed, there is little evidence for any pervasive antagonism between *sandiwara* and Indonesian Islam. In contrast, *sandiwara* has frequently

²⁶ It has been apparent over the past two decades that as television sets appear in all sorts of public and private spaces and cinemas are built throughout the country, that these genres have taken over a portion of the entertainment niches once dominated by *wayang*. At the same time, *wayang*, like other forms of live theater throughout the world, have adapted by appropriating techniques and aesthetics from these other media, and moving into these media themselves. For a fascinating survey of recent transformations in *wayang*, see Mrazek, Jan. "Javanese Wayang Kulit in the Times of Comedy: Clown Scenes, Innovation, and the Performance's Being in the Present World" *Indonesia* 68 (October 1999): 38-128 and *Indonesia* 69 (April 2000): 107-172.

challenged the institutions of the Indonesian nation-state, and the national government has, in numerous significant instances, censored, suppressed, banned and persecuted *sandiwara* and its practitioners.

In fact, I will go further to suggest that this situation in Indonesia is in keeping with much of the rest of the Islamic world. Al-Haggagi finds little evidence for theatrical censorship on the basis of iconoclasm in the pre-modern Islamic Middle East. In fact, when Arab leaders did censor theater on iconoclastic grounds, it appears that they borrowed their rhetoric from Christian Byzantium. What anti-theatrical censorship did recur in Muslim Arabia was on moral grounds, against representation of immorality.²⁷

Moralistic anti-theatrical prejudice has shaped theater in Muslim societies as much as it has in every other theater culture in the world. When new theater cultures emerged in Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon in the early twentieth century, Arab Muslims sought to bar women from the profession of acting on moral grounds, associating it with prostitution. The Sheikh al-Islam declared this ban as an official doctrine in 1918. Of course, this is an extremely ubiquitous sort of prejudice, and hardly one that requires the peculiar imprint of Islam. On the other hand, Islamic moralism might explain the extension of this prejudice into the early Indonesian nationalist theater, where nationalism itself does not. Female actors were prominent, headlining attractions in the Chinese-Indonesian professional music hall theatre of the early twentieth century. In stark contrast, the nationalist theatre, which otherwise borrowed much of its form and technique from the Chinese-Indonesian theater, was carried out almost exclusively by young men.

²⁷ See Al-Haggagi, A. S. "The Attitude of Muslims toward the Art of Theater." *Ba Shiru: Journal of African Language and Literature* 11:1 (1980): 72-81.

However, it is also fecund to the creation of metaphysically inflected theatre as with the high-minded neo-mythological theater of Yeats. We see this moralism producing modern theater in the Arab world in 1915 when the Egyptian nationalists sought to create a national theatre in large part in reaction against the perceived immorality and corruption of the existing theatre.²⁸ We can see a similar moralism pervading the early Indonesian nationalist theatre.

What then does an *explicitly* Islamic Indonesian modern theater look like? The relatively sparse catalog of such projects suggests (as in my experience with Teater Kanvas) that it doesn't look radically different than the rest of *sandiwara*, perhaps reinforcing my thesis that mainstream nationalist *sandiwara* is already in line with Indonesian Islam in various ways.

Teater Dakwah (theatre with the explicit aim of promoting Islam) enjoyed a brief moment of prominence in the history of *sandiwara* in the early 1960s when many of the leading theatre practitioners associated themselves with Muslim or Christian theatres. Indeed, Arifin C. Noer, who would remain one of the leading figures in *sandiwara*, at this point was at the center of *teater dakwah*. He, Nasution, Ajip Rosidi, Muhamad Diponegoro and Kuntowijoyo formed *Teater Muslim* in Yogyakarta in 1960. *Teater Muslim* did produce plays explicitly portraying religious stories, such as Diponegoro's *Iblis* (Devil), but Arifin's own work of this period, such as his celebrated *Sumur Tanpa Dasar* (The Bottomless Well), which has enjoyed critical international success and several domestic revivals, are Islamic in moral tone and metaphysical and spiritual

²⁸ See Al-Haggagi, and also, And, Metin. *A history of theatre and popular entertainment in Turkey*. Ankara, Forum Yaynlar, 1963; .Badawi, Mohammed. *Early Arabic drama*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988; Martinovitch, N. N. *The Turkish theatre*. New York, Theatre Arts, 1933.

preoccupation. This religious content is, however, difficult to distinguish from the supposedly “secular” existentialist individualism that pervades much modern drama. Many canonical works of Indonesian drama, of which *Sumur Tanpa Dasar* is certainly one, productively invoke an ambiguity between modern existentialist alienation and a more Islamic spiritual struggle. It is a sort of symbiotic ambiguity whereby Islam can pass as modernism (and thereby as national culture), and modernism can pass as Islam (and thereby as popular indigenous spirituality)

Some of the aesthetics discernible in *teater dakwah* and other works of *sandiwara* might be associated with Islamic thought and culture. A tendency towards poetry and abstraction over colloquial, quotidian language and imagery; recurrent concerns with familial and interpersonal morality; concern with genealogical connections in linear, eschatological (as opposed to synchronic or cyclical) time; concern with interiority and the distinction between outward behavior and inner conviction. In other words, the potentially ‘Islamic’ concerns recurrent in *sandiwara* are many of the same concerns that have driven Realism and modernist drama in the West.²⁹

²⁹ If one expands the category of *teater dakwah* to include not only explicitly proselytizing works but works that deal with spiritual themes of interest to Islam, a large percentage of modern Indonesian drama is potentially legible as “Islamic.” Indonesian theater historian, Jakob Sumardjo, looking at 55 plays staged between 1950 and 1969, identifies only 2 of them as *dakwah* plays, but sees 18 of them as dealing with themes of *kejiwaan* in one form or another. Sumardjo, Jakob. *Perkembangan Teater Modern dan Sastra Drama Indonesia*. Bandung, Citra Aditya Bakti, 1992. Many Indonesian plays addressing *kijawaan* channel Western psychology and modern philosophy through religious mysticism of which Islamic (particularly Sufi) mysticism is a significant component. Sumardjo sees the emphasis in Indonesian drama shifting in the 1970s from *kejiwaan* to more abstractly metaphysical themes (which may engage with Islam in different ways).

And what of Indonesian communism? The antagonism one might assume between the aesthetic ideologies of Islam and communism are really not so clear. As discussed above, the first expressions of anti-colonial sentiment in Indonesia were articulated under the aegis of a coalition between Muslims and communists, however volatile that alliance proved to be. As evident in Effendi's play, pre-war anti-colonial expression drew liberally from all three of Sukarno's "emerging forces." Following Indonesia's independence in 1949, these forces became considerably more factionalized, and the division between communist and Muslim arts became more stark. The brief heyday of Islamic *sandiwara* in the 1960s coincided with an era of communist theatre and censorship that would prove to be even more fleeting. In all, we might view the early 1960s as a kind of culmination of identity theatre in Indonesia (at least in terms of religious and ideological identity) in comparison with which, the 1970s and 1980s (lauded by Indonesian theater historians as "the second golden age" of *sandiwara*) was relatively uni-polar, ideologically speaking. With the end of the Cold War, Soeharto began to accede to greater calls for "openness" (*keterbukaan*).³⁰ Through the 1990s, and especially since Soeharto's resignation in 1998, the fervent civil society of the 1950s and early 1960s has re-appeared in a variety of ways. Political theater groups have once again

³⁰ In August 1990, the word came down from the Soeharto regime that a new policy of "*keterbukaan*," clearly modeled on Gorbachev's "*glasnost*" would be adopted in all sectors of society. Individual initiative would be encouraged in the workplace, strikes would be permitted, freedom of the press and of speech would be encouraged. However, in October of that same year, *Teater Koma*'s play, *Sukses*, which dealt with the controversial topic of presidential succession, was banned in the midst of a successful run, a tabloid newspaper was shut down and one of Rendra's poetry readings was forbidden. This precipitated fervent discussions on the policies of censorship, and might, in retrospect be seen as part of a new swelling of the democracy movement, which would become bolder and gather force throughout the 1990s. On the *keterbukaan* incidents, see Wijoyo, Karto. "Letter from Jakarta" *Inside Indonesia*. (December 1990): 2-5.

challenged official visions of what it means to be Indonesian. Some of these groups affiliate themselves with workers and cautiously recover aspects of communist ideology long discredited by Soeharto.³¹ Some, such as Teater Kanvas, affiliate themselves with religion, asserting, as Effendi did eighty years ago, that the ongoing revolution against colonialism will only succeed insofar as it is carried out by radical mystics. The *pemuda* (revolutionary youth) must be *santri* (religious students).

Conclusion

The evidence for Islamic relevance to the Indonesian national theater is slippery. Indeed, many of the practices and aesthetic I have identified in relation to Islam might be read in relation to Hindu/Buddhist thought; much of it might be read as Western influence, or even as the influence of Christianity (which is disproportionately widespread amongst the Indonesian intelligentsia). However, this very slipperiness feeds my point, which is to critique the narrow referential frameworks of secular materialist analyses of modern national theaters. Although it is undeniably true that much of what can be seen in *sandiwara* was appropriated directly from the Euro-American West, much of it is *legible* in relation to Islam. This semiotic slipperiness serves a crucial role when the question is asked, as it has been *constantly* in anti- and post-colonial Indonesia, how to imagine an Indonesian identity that is not simply a mimesis of Western modernity. Islam provides a code whereby a nationalism that is so often grating in its exogenous cadences can pass as an indigenous ideology.

³¹ On the resurgence of leftist theater in the 1990s, see Bodden, Michael. "Workers' Theatre and Theatre about Workers in 1990s Indonesia." *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 31:1 (1997): 37-78.

How do we go about assessing the Islamic content in Indonesian *sandiwara* and performance theory? Framing the question is not simply a matter, to use the most simplistic formulations of performativity, of representations performing Muslim identity. Rather, I think we find many cases in which signs of Islamic identity and narrative are woven into representations in ways that are legible but often understated or unmarked — available to the seeking eye, inconsequential to the uninterested.

Much of what I hope to achieve in this investigation is to counter the tendency of postcolonial criticism to totalize anti-colonial expression into simplified (generally secular and class and race oriented) agendas and of intercultural criticism (which closely parallels the terms of the Indonesian *polemik kebudayaan*) to read all representation as negotiation between separate cultures. It is to attend to the internal complexity of postcolonial expression. And a counter to the opposition that has gained too much credence since 9/11 of an irremediable opposition between Islam and the West and between Islam and modernity. Attending to the complex synergy between Islam and nationalism in Indonesia may have serious consequences. Will the new global war on terrorism feed into the hands of those who would marginalize the political expression of Islamic voices in Indonesia? What would such a diminishing of the nation's civil society do to the national discourse? Where would it do to discourses of postcolonial modernism?

Keith Foulcher has argued that Indonesia did not experience the quintessential postcolonial sense of difference between inside and outside culture because their postcolonial culture was so wholly modern, so wholly invented.³² Looking at the role of

³² See Foulcher, Keith and Tony Day, eds. *Clearing a space : postcolonial readings of*

Islam in cultural discourse, we might counter that Indonesia has simply experienced a more complexly poly-centric postcolonial consciousness than nations with stronger senses of a shared socio-cultural past. Indonesian Islam might be seen as “the prior exterior” whose cultural influence has prompted postcolonial tensions for the past millennium. It may be seen, as I have tended to portray it, as an interior that informs contemporary postcolonial expressions in often subtle ways. It may be seen, as Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana suggested back in the *Polemik Kebudayaan*, as Indonesia’s pre-colonial link to the Greeks and to the coveted rationalism associated with the so-called Western tradition. This last formulation suggests that the East/West binarism that has forever plagued discussions of Indonesian modernity might be deconstructed via an Islam that introduced the foundations of “the Western tradition” to the archipelago long before European colonixation, suggesting that Muslim Indonesia was in significant ways already Western when the West arrived.

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