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Dance-floor politics in easternmost Java

Gandrung is a beloved entertainment for ritual celebrations in rural Banyuwangi in easternmost Java. In this genre – a variety of one known throughout western Indonesia – a professional female singer-dancer, the *gandrung* (who gives the genre its name) dances with male guests, accompanied by a small ensemble of drums, violins, gongs, and a triangle. It is not always easy for a *gandrung* to entice guests onto the dance floor, since their dancing, like hers, requires artistry and poise while their movements will be watched critically by spectators, who may include their own wives and children.

Bernard Arps

On the other hand, there are those who find dancing with a *gandrung*, with her smile and her fantastic attire that contrasts so strikingly with their own, nothing less than addictive. Her charm also lies behind the adoption of ‘the *gandrung* dancer’ as the official mascot of the Regency of Banyuwangi in late 2002. ‘The dancer says welcome to Banyuwangi, as it were’, the head of the Department of Tourism explained. Statues and other images of *gandrung* dancers adorn public places throughout the region.

Gandrung, as just sketched, may seem a frivolous but basically innocuous entertainment designed to give the guys a good time, while providing the audience with an elegant and occasionally irksome though otherwise inconsequential spectacle. *Gandrung*, however, is permeated with and enmeshed in politics – politics with a much broader reach than the immediate setting and duration of a performance. Apart from being objectionable to many Muslims (something not addressed here), the sensuous allure of *gandrung* is a powerful factor in the management of gender relations, and even in regional patriotism.

The diegesis of *gandrung* performance

A *gandrung* performance is participatory: it is not only intended to please spectators, but to lure some of them to



Gandrung Dwi Yuliatin and a dance partner, Kemiren village, 10–11 March 2001 Ben Arps

dance. The participants move, speak, and interact in ways rarely seen in other contexts; the *gandrung* or *gandrungs* (usually there are two), their successive male and occasionally female dance partners, and the musicians project personas that differ from the personas they project elsewhere. Though the performance is not narrative or dramatic, the participants jointly construct what I would characterize as a diegesis. (This notion, which hails from film theory where it refers to the world depicted in a film, is rarely applied to genres like *gandrung* though it helps to understand what is happening. See Arps 1996:66.)

A performance consists of two types of alternating segments roughly equal in length (20–30 minutes) but very different in diegesis. One is called *maju*, literally ‘coming forward’, which involves four men entering the arena and dancing in turn with a *gandrung*, while the other *gandrung* sits at the side and sings. The other segment is called *repènan*, ‘singing’, during which the *gandrungs* sit and converse among guests, and sing songs by request.

In the *maju* segments the diegesis is sensual and may verge on the erotic. It is highly corporeal, involving choreographed movements and postures. The male dancer projects bravado and the *gandrung* dances responsively, sometimes defensively, but may also tease and even ridicule him if he does not dance well. While the danced interaction

stands central, *maju* also involves singing, which contributes to the diegesis; the dance pieces are usually classical compositions whose lyrics express a woman’s infatuation with a man. They are suggestive rather than explicit:

*My mum doesn't like you
nor does my dad
but I won't give you up*

*You've gone home, leaving me behind
if I knew the way, I'd come after you*

The singing segments are also interactive and the physical presence of the *gandrung* at the table is important, but here the diegesis is primarily a matter of language. Two kinds of song are prominent. In one, the *gandrung* sings lyrics given to her by a guest on a piece of paper, commenting critically and humorously on fellow villagers; the other is drawn from local popular music whose lyrics are about male-female relations or the region of Banyuwangi.

In the diegesis of *gandrung* performance, the type ‘*gandrung*’ merges with the type ‘woman’. There may be other women on the dance floor and at the tables, but they belong to the type ‘man’. Their dance style is not like the *gandrung*’s but like that of her male dance partners. (These women are usually wives or girlfriends of male guests, and sometimes prostitutes.)

Patriotism

The subject matter of the songs is quite broad. When the lyrics invoke themes that are not otherwise perceptible in the performance and its immediate surroundings, those themes are thereby absorbed into the diegesis. This is one reason why the diegesis of *gandrung* performance may bear relevance to affairs outside the performance itself. The other reason is that elements of the diegesis may have parallels in the world at large. An example is the analogy of the relation *gandrung*-guest dancer with that of woman-man.

As the performance draws people into it physically, or at least psychologically, it impresses its diegesis upon its participants and spectators. It thus comes as no surprise that *gandrung* has been embraced by various institutions for the promotion of political ends. This is especially evident in the context of patriotism. Most songs in the *repènan* segments are taken from local pop music, much of which focuses on the beauty of Banyuwangi’s nature, the heroism of its people and history – songs written under the tutelage of the regional government.

Gandrung outside performance

Gandrung is also used for promotional causes outside performance. The music can be heard on audio cassettes, video CDs, and radio. Stage dances based on *gandrung* but performed by school girls are a fixed component of official events



A golden *gandrung* on one of Banyuwangi’s busiest streets, 2003 Ben Arps

in Banyuwangi, especially for the welcoming of visiting dignitaries. Statues and other images of *gandrung* dancers are usually associated with the government as well. This is not just a matter of *gandrung* functioning as an emblem of regional identity; the statues often flank notices of government programmes.

Only certain parts of *gandrung* diegesis are recreated in these mediated forms. The statues and other images always portray the *gandrung* in a dance pose, never as a singer, let alone with the microphone she wields in actual performances. The precarious, sensuously charged danced interaction with men is usually lacking as well. The *gandrung* that accompanies promotional activities is not just a decontextualized but a sanitized *gandrung*.

The politics of attraction

A critical question concerning language in the world is how it is combined with other forms of representation to win people over. The importance of this issue is not matched by the extent of its study. The discipline of rhetoric is important, but focuses on specific kinds of (mostly western) speech and writing – on convincing – and not other kinds of winning over. If we want to understand this use of language and its frequent failing, other approaches are needed and other forms of discourse must be studied within their contexts.

Among them should be genres like *gandrung*. The seductive potential of its music and dance is a source of enjoyment, irritation and indignation: the genre is alluring. As it attracts spectators to the performance space it creates a choreographic and discursive arena for thematizing cultural concerns that affect life beyond the performance. What is being pulled into the diegesis is ‘experiencing persons’. What is subsequently ejected into the world and into other diegeses is persons who have now expe-

rienced that diegesis and may bring their experience to bear on those other diegeses. This possibility of influencing the outside world is why *gandrung* is employed for political causes.

Yet some aspects of the diegesis of performance are barred from the promotional use of *gandrung*. The Banyuwangi government uses *gandrung* as an emblem or mascot based on the realization that it has allure. The *gandrung* that the government has in mind, however, is the sanitized kind. *Gandrung* as entertainment at a ritual celebration may superficially look and sound the same but it is much more complex, and in some respects radically different. It invites people jointly to create a diegesis, but the diegesis is not harmonious. Rather, it is characterized by tension, especially between men and woman. This is also clear in the lyrics, which do not present a single vantage point on love; many lyrics address gender injustice, and some explicitly thematize conflict while the media market helps to produce and spread such signs of antagonism and dissent. In Banyuwangi, then, the sensuous charm of a singer-dancer lies at the heart of an extensive and complex field of political forces. <

Reference

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