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4 Traditional Javanese performance? Kethoprak at TVRI Yogyakarta

Television features three kinds of kethoprak performances: kethoprak for television, kethoprak on television and television kethoprak. (Bondan Nusantara 1990:41,55, 1991d:42).⁶⁸

Reflecting on the rapidly increasing impact of foreign cultural influences on traditional arts in Indonesia, the famous Javanese puppeteer Ki Manteb Soedharsono said he was convinced that traditional arts were being forced to enter into a close engagement with these extraneous influences. He acknowledged that this view was not new. From time immemorial, said Ki Manteb, Indonesians had been accustomed to associate (*bergaul*) with cultures from abroad. As an example, he referred to the indisputable presence of influences from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam (Abbas dan Subro 1995:155).⁶⁹

Kethoprak is an example of a Javanese dramatic genre that time and again, ever since its coming into being more than a century ago, has been absorbing and integrating influences from its surroundings. Essentially a Javanese affair, it developed from a modern urban commercial performance genre into one that has been attributed the designation ‘traditional’. TVRI Stasiun Yogyakarta has played an influential role in the broadcasting of this local genre. After sketching the beginnings of the genre, in this chapter I shall concentrate on televised kethoprak. Bondan Nusantara’s three categories of televised kethoprak will serve as a starting point: kethoprak for television, kethoprak on television and television kethoprak. In Chapter 5, two examples will be paid special attention: kethoprak on television (*Pangeran Mangkubumi Wisuda*) – based on an analysis of the 1993 TVRI Yogyakarta broadcast; and television kethoprak (*Kethoprak Sayembara*) – based on an analysis of local newspaper articles.

Kethoprak’s connection to Javanese tradition has been an inexhaustable topic of discussion among practitioners, researchers and government institutions. In order to grasp the most important points in these discussions, I focus on the notions of kethoprak and tradition held by two prominent kethoprak actors, script-writers and directors, Handung Kus Sudyarsana and Bondan Nusantara.

The discussions about kethoprak and tradition reveal that defining tradition as it pertains to kethoprak is a complicated matter. In the section on the effects of television on kethoprak as a so-called traditional art form, I shall reflect on the discourse about these effects on ways to preserve the genre, the loss of tradition and the erosion of its *adiluhung* features. Tradition in this sense is bound up with ideology and a more theoretical approach to kethoprak. Any

⁶⁸ ‘Wonten tigang jenis Kethoprak ingkang dipun-tayangaken televisi. Injih menika Kethoprak kangge Televisi, Kethoprak ing Televisi saha Kethoprak Televisi [...]’ (Bondan Nusantara 1990:43, 54-56; 1991d:42).

⁶⁹ ‘Akulturasi budaya di negeri Nusantara semakin seru. Arus budaya modern datang dengan derasnya membanjiri kebun seni tradisi. Arus deras budaya manca itu membuat seni tradisi mau tak mau harus bergaul akrab. Namun hal ini bukan sesuatu yang baru. Sejak dulu nenek moyang telah terbiasa bergaul dengan budaya-budaya dari luar. Misalnya pengaruh Hindu, Budha, Islam dan lain-lain. Ki Manteb memandang sudah wajar pengaruh-pengaruh itu datang’ (Abbas dan Subro 1995:155).

development and innovation should accordingly remain within the constraints of the genre, whatever these may be. Kethoprak practitioners (when creating, performing, and/or broadcasting the genre) treat tradition as an active process. They accept development and innovation as necessities and part and parcel of the creative character of the genre. But, since kethoprak practitioners are both artists and observers-cum-critics, they adhere to both a normative and a pragmatic stance towards the genre, depending on the context.

1 *Kethoprak*, ‘essentially a Javanese affair’

Kethoprak is a Javanese dramatic performance genre that came into being in the late nineteenth century as a result of and/or a reaction towards the processes of modernization in Indonesia (Vaníčková 1965:402-403; Budi Susanto 2000:31). The precise origin of the genre, the connection between kethoprak as folk art and as urban popular drama, and the history of its development have been the topic of extensive discussions and have produced a diversity of ideas about its periodization.⁷⁰ Wijaya and Sutjipto (1977:11) mention the year 1887 as the beginning of *kethoprak lesung*, kethoprak accompanied by singing and percussion using a wooden rice pounder, and divide the history of kethoprak into three periods. As it is not based on clear concepts and characteristics, this division raises a number questions (Wahyana Giri MC 1992). In the 1920s, when the genre developed under the influence of the Malay-spoken *stambul* theatre (Cohen 2006:3, 371-372) and European theatre and film, it enjoyed huge popularity, as the following two examples show. An article in *Warna-Warta* of 19 May 1927 signals the mushrooming of kethoprak troupes in the area of Wates, close to Yogyakarta.⁷¹ Another article in the same newspaper, entitled ‘Kethoprak causing victims’ (*Lantaran ketoprak* 1927), reports on the large audiences in Tempel (Yogyakarta) flocking to watch rehearsals of the local kethoprak troupe.⁷² The victims (*korban*) in the title refer to members of the audience who climbed a lime tree in such large numbers it seemed as if the tree was bearing human fruit, until suddenly one of the branches broke and the people tumbled down.

In its new shape, since the 1920s kethoprak has embodied threefold features: from the wayang tradition, the folk tradition and the modern theatre (Vaníčková 1965:414). Most of these features have persisted up to the present. It is performed on a stage by actors and is accompanied by a gamelan orchestra and male and female singers. Traditionally beating on a *keprak* or *kenthongan*, small wooden slit drums (Kunst 173: 192-193), was used to mark either the beginning or the end of the scenes, to stress an action or strong emotion and to

⁷⁰ On the history of kethoprak, see also Kunst 1973:287-288; Vaníčková 1965 and 1967; Kus Sudyarsana 1984/1985:60-64 and 1989:15-22; Hatley 2008; Cohen 2016.

⁷¹ ‘Katoprak satoe komedie jang boeat orang di Vorstenlanden soedah tidah asing lagi. Begitoe djoega ini waktoe di Wates moentjoelnja ketoprak ada seperti toemboehnja djamoer di waktoe oedjan’ (*Oedjan ketoprak* 1927). I would like to thank Peter Keppy for sharing this information (and the following references to *Sin Po* and *Warna-Warta*) with me.

⁷² ‘Itoe ketoprak kaloe waktoe gladi (training) banjak orang jang dateng menonton, tapi tida seperti pada hari Minggoe jang laloe loear biasa banjaknja orang jang menonton, sahingga tempat itoe mendjadi penoeh orang banjak, saking banjaknja penonton laloe pada liat naek di atas poehoen djeroek. Itoe poehoen djeroek sakoetika keliatan berboeah manoesia, tida disangka sangka mendadak itoe tjabang poehoen laloe pada patah dan menimpah orang jang dibawahnja itoe poehoen.’

accompany particular dance movements. It also sent the *gamelan* players a signal to commence or stop playing or switch to another melody or rhythm. It was the cue for the actors to enter and leave the stage. Present-day performances tend to omit the use of the *keprak*. The themes can be drawn from Javanese legends and history, or from Javanese interpretations of non-Javanese stories. The dialogues are spoken in contemporary Javanese, and are couched in a typical vocabulary and prosody; the singing is also in Javanese.

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, one of its most notable features, no doubt affected by the dynamics introduced by the many and varied troupes in Southeast Asia, was a mutual dissemination of ideas and influences between urban popular theatre forms. Consequently kethoprak shares common characteristics with other forms of urban popular drama in Southeast Asia, that were ‘entertainment-oriented and highly commercial’ (Tan Sooi Beng 1997:18). Among these theatrical genres are the Malayan *bangsawan*, the *zarzuela* of the Philippines, the *likay* of Thailand, the *lakon bassac* of Cambodia, the *cai luong* of Vietnam, the *komedi stambul* of the Netherlands East Indies, the *ludruk* of East Java, the *sandiwara* or *tonil* of West Java (Tan Sooi Beng 1997:18) and the Balinese drama gong.

However, although kethoprak was indubitably influenced by different cultures (and can be considered a hybrid form) and has inevitably incorporated elements of these other theatrical genres, its essential character is still perceived to be Javanese. Vaníčková calls kethoprak ‘essentially a Javanese affair’. The author, who conducted her research on kethoprak in 1961-62, stated that, ‘[i]t has its roots in the Javanese milieu and is performed in Javanese, by Javanese, for Javanese’ (Vaníčková 1965:398). Geographically, it is one part of the cultural heritage of Central Java, whereas ludruk, another Javanese theatrical genre, is of East Javanese origin and is prominent in Surabaya and Sidoarjo (Vaníčková 1965:418-419). More specifically, Yogyakarta has become ‘the’ centre of kethoprak. To such an extent that, as Hatley states, since the early twentieth century this popular theatre form has become explicitly identified with the city (Hatley 2004:66), and kethoprak activities in the area of Yogyakarta have influenced the standards and stylistic models of the genre in other areas (Hatley 1985:7). In 1957, the first national kethoprak festival and congress were held in Yogyakarta (Yuliantri and Dahlan 2008:339-340). Despite the presence of famous touring kethoprak troupes from East Java (Siswo Budoyo and Wahyu Budoyo) and Surakarta (Kethoprak Cokrojo), the image of kethoprak is that of a quintessential part of the cultural landscape of Yogyakarta.

Although essentially perceived as Javanese, kethoprak has a long history of political involvement in a national context. In particular, it has been used to advocate revolutionary and nationalist ideas.⁷³ Over time, in different settings, various agents prompted by various interests pushed it either to politicize or depoliticize. During the colonial period, it was used as a medium to stir the national consciousness of the people in the struggle for an independent Indonesia (Vaníčková 1967:131; Kus Sudyarsana, 1984/1985:59).⁷⁴ The colonial government frequently banned such performances. In February 1929, for instance, the police in Batavia

⁷³ See Brandon (1974), Vaníčková (1965 and 1967) and Aiko Kurasawa (1987).

⁷⁴ Jan Mrázek paraphrased parts of Vaníčková’s 1967 text in English.

intervened as the pregnant female protagonist in the play *Bermana-Bermani* represented the Indonesian people, the mango fruit for which she longed independence, and the sultan from whose garden the mango had to be fetched, the government.⁷⁵ In the independence period, kethoprak actors in specific troupes used their performances as a vehicle for political satire. In this environment of change, the old repertoire was adapted to the purposes of nationalist propaganda and the ongoing saga of political struggle (Vaníčková 1965:414). Pertinently, for ideological purposes at the end of the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s organizations like the communist-oriented Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, the Institute of the People's Culture) and the All-Indonesian Kethoprak Organization (Badan Kontak Organisasi Kethoprak Seluruh Indonesia, Bakoksi) were seriously interested in kethoprak as a means to propagate their ideology (Vaníčková 1965; Yuliantri and Dahlan 2008:342-344).⁷⁶ Brandon calls Bakoksi the 'largest politically oriented theatre grouping in Indonesia' (1974:215). The nationalist Lembaga Kethoprak Nasional (the Institute under the PNI-affiliated Lembaga Kebudayaan Nasional, LKN, the Institute for National Culture) offered a counterweight to Bakoksi (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:30).

During the Japanese occupation, kethoprak artists were involved in the dissemination of Japanese propaganda; Kurosawa gives two names (Kurosawa 1987:64).⁷⁷ Radio entertainment, deployed for propaganda objectives, 'was confined to music and traditional performing arts', while programmes like radio drama, storytelling and variety shows were rare (Kurosawa 1987:88).⁷⁸ Later, the New Order government never hesitated to disseminate information and propaganda by means of kethoprak and other traditional performing arts genres. Actually this compulsory depoliticization meant a (new) politicization by the New Order regime, because kethoprak was depoliticized in the sense that no open criticism of the government was tolerated, a process already begun in 1965. Despite the censorship, kethoprak practitioners became adroit at insinuating critical comments.⁷⁹

Although in its form, contents, language use, repertoire and performance structure it 'remained entirely Javanese' (Vaníčková 1965:440) and preserved artistic features of the Javanese performance tradition, recalling its political involvement (in the 1920-1930s and again in the 1950s-1960s) Vaníčková concluded that kethoprak was transformed into a qualitatively different type of art and transcended the local. She argues that, as it had freed itself from the wayang tradition and in view of the political satire of the clowns, it had

⁷⁵ 'Kethoprak Dilarang. Katanja sebab mengandoeng politiek ... Seperti ternjata dari pembrian tahoenja Thalia Bioscope di Mangga Besar moelai semalem di itoe gedong tontongan aken dipertoendjoeken permaenan Katoprak. Tapi waktoe itoe pertoeendjoekan maoe dimaenkan mendadak politie soeda larang sebab anggep lelakon jang diambil, jalah Bermana-Bermani ada mengandoeng politiek: jaitoe katanja itoe poetri dalem itoe lelakon jang boenting dioempamakan bangsa Indonesia, sedeng boeah yang di-idamin ianja ada kamerdikahan....dan itoe boeah mangga jang di-idamin moesti diambil dari kebonnja satoe soeltan, jang dioempamakan ada pamerintah. Begitoelah itoe permaenan Katoprak djadi tida dipertoendjoeken dan Thalia Bioscope tidak banjak sedikit dapet karoegian' (*Sin Po* 8 February 1929 L.2 P.3). Another example is given in *De Indische Courant* of 26 April 1927 (see 'Binnenland. Djocja: Een verbod').

⁷⁶ In *Lekra tak membakar buku*, Rhoma Dwi Aria Yuliantri and Muhidin M. Dahlan show how Lekra appropriated the dramatic genre for ideological purposes, as reported in *Harian Rakjat* (Yuliantri and Dahlan 2008:339-353).

⁷⁷ Bandem and Murgiyanto mention two lakons: *Amat Heiho* and *Pendaratan di Maguwo* (1996:145).

⁷⁸ On traditional arts under the Japanese occupation see also Cohen 2016:187-193.

⁷⁹ Hatley has written extensively on social references in kethoprak performances in the New Order period.

assumed a national, pan-Indonesian character, especially after the Second World War (Vaníčková 1965:440-441, 1967:169-191, 214-217). Certainly, during the late New Order period when the genre was disseminated nation-wide by Indosiar and efforts were made to cultivate its popularity among non-Javanese audiences, it was still categorized by the public as Javanese, not a pan-Indonesian, entertainment.

2 Mediating kethoprak: radio and cassettes

The use of electronic mass media as a vehicle for the dissemination of local cultural expressions began in the 1930s, when gramophone recordings and live performances of local music were broadcast by the newly established radio stations. Listeners were spell-bound by the new technology of radio: the ‘transmission of real performance in real time’ was a fascinating novelty and it offered a sense of immediacy of communication between physically disconnected performers and listeners; a band reinforced by the familiarity of the content of the radio broadcasts – ‘music of the listener’s own locality’ (Lindsay 1997:108-109).

In 1935, the Mataramsche Vereeniging Voor Radio Omroep (MAVRO) Yogyakarta broadcast a kethoprak performance by the troupe Krido Rahardjo (Wijaya and F.A. Sutjipto 1977:44). Afterwards performances by this troupe became part of the standard MAVRO radio broadcasts during what remained of the colonial period (Mardianto and Darmanto 2001:96-97).

Acting for radio required adaptations that would aid the listeners’ visualization of the performance: all the attention was concentrated on the evocative strength of the voice, the music and sound effects (Widayat 1997:44-46). Consequently Mardianto and Darmanto (2001:118) have called radio kethoprak a separate genre. In tune with the aural character of radio, Krido Rahardjo –called Ketoprak Mataram RRI Yogyakarta after Independence – , began to use written dialogues. A real novelty was the exclusive use of the voice as a means to convey dramatic expression, as the actors were invisible to the listeners. The length of the dialogues was extended concomitantly and the use of and playing with language were raised to new heights. The accompanying music was complemented by sound effects. Also, some of the principles of western dramaturgy were introduced to reinforce the basis of kethoprak. The performances worked towards a climax and the contents of the dialogues were attuned to the theme of the lakon. Another innovation was the presentation of foreign stories – *Hamlet* was adapted to a Javanese lakon, for instance (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:36).⁸⁰

The weekly kethoprak broadcasts by the local radio station RRI Nusantara II Yogyakarta (founded in 1945) were transmitted live, following in the footsteps of the MAVRO broadcasts (until 1942) and the local *Jawa Hôô Kanrikyoku* (Java Broadcasting Superintendent Bureau) radio services during the Japanese occupation. These RRI performances took place in the studio and were tailored to fit the constraints imposed by the medium of radio. Therefore live broadcasts required the utmost concentration and creativity of the director, the actors and

⁸⁰ On the history of Ketoprak Mataram RRI, see Sudaryono 1997.

musicians. One of these constraints they faced was on-the-spot adaptations. If, for instance, the 22.00 news bulletin ran over time, the time slot available for the play had to be reduced. To finish the whole story in time and not disturb the climax, impromptu condensations of dialogues were resorted to (Mardianto and Darmanto 2001:96-136).

At the time of writing, the Yogyakarta RRI still presents live broadcasts of monthly performances for a public in the RRI studio.

From the 1970s, popular music and local dramatic genres, including kethoprak, were recorded on cassettes, to be sold either as a commercial product or to be broadcast on radio. The cassette industry tended to be more selective than radio as it presented only the top range of performers (Sutton 1985:26), whose prestige and power flourished in the wake of the popularity engendered by these recordings (Sutton 1985:40). This dissemination of local performing arts genres on cassettes, Sutton argues, had an important consequence: it facilitated imitation. Sutton also underlines its potential to standardize and homogenize (Sutton 1985:25), but concludes it nevertheless did not expunge diversity (Sutton 1985:26). Cassette recordings of local performing arts genres whetted the public's expectations of live performances (Arps 1985:49) and honed the reception of the listeners (Suryadi 2014:185).

The introduction of cassette tapes encouraged the broadcasting of kethoprak by private radio stations. Even in places without electricity, battery-operated tape recorders and radios enabled people to listen to cassettes and broadcasts of traditional performing arts. Although some kethoprak troupes hailed the advent of the cassette industry, others feared it, because one of its side-effects was a decline in live performances. The validity of this point can be disputed on the grounds that the tapes were popular precisely because they contained recordings of well-known troupes; consequently their audiences were even more keen to attend a live performance of this troupe. Therefore, Wijaya and Sutjipto conclude that modern technology was unquestionably a useful tool in boosting the art of kethoprak (Wijaya and F.A. Sutjipto 1977:44-45).

3 Mediating kethoprak: television

Not long after the launch of the national TVRI in Jakarta in August 1962, traditional performing arts were already featuring as an important item in its programming. One of the main goals set by *Televisi Republik Indonesia* was to disseminate and preserve national culture. Therefore, the programmes of both the Jakarta-based national and the regional government-owned television stations featured quite a high percentage of cultural programmes in their daily broadcasts. Although the reasons regional performing arts programmes were allotted a significant position in the broadcasting schedules of both the national (TVRI Jakarta) and the regional government television stations might have been several, the fact that broadcasts of Javanese drama were assigned a fair amount of scheduling

time by the regional television stations TVRI Stasiun Yogyakarta⁸¹ and TVRI Stasiun Surabaya⁸² certainly played an important part in promoting these genres. Later, private television stations broadcast kethoprak for commercial reasons. As I shall show in Chapter 5, from 1995 Indosiar tried to win the hearts of the Javanese, the largest potential consumer market, with broadcasts of traditional Javanese theatre genres including kethoprak. Since 2002, local Javanese private broadcasters have certainly focused on local genres like wayang kulit and kethoprak (see Chapter 8; Bogaerts 2017a).

Broadcasts of kethoprak on television once again confronted its performers with new challenges. Bondan Nusantara has noted that the first kethoprak programme was broadcast in 1965.⁸³ At the time, in the period following 1965-1966, only a few troupes could be televised: Kethoprak Budi Rahayu, Dahono Mataram, Sapta Mandala, Eko Budoyo, Among Mitra and PS Bayu (Bondan Nusantara 1990:43). Although Bondan Nusantara does not explain his remark, it is reasonable to assume that, in the light of the contemporary upheavals in the political situation, many kethoprak actors had either been killed or imprisoned in the resultant turmoil or, at the very least, had been banned from performing.

In the early 1970s when kethoprak began to be broadcast weekly on television, it was – although warmly received by rural audiences – not regarded as ‘genuine’ kethoprak, but as an interesting novelty (Hatley 2004:67). As Hatley describes, it was not the filmic medium but

ketoprak on stage, playing out stories of Javanese history and legend through improvised dialogue and familiar characterisations and scenes, which kampung people referred to as “our own art form”, through which they claimed to learn their own history and cultural traditions. (Hatley 2004:67)

Despite such unpromising beginnings, slowly but surely the attitude of the audiences changed. Just as in the past radio technology had created a sense of immediacy between performer and listener (Lindsay 1997:108-109), TVRI Yogyakarta, as fitted its barometer function, achieved the same with its broadcasts of performance genres originating in the audiences’ own locale.

In the period under scrutiny in this research, 1988-2008, the majority of the troupes invited to appear on TVRI Yogyakarta’s screen originated from Yogyakarta villages, the city of Yogyakarta and Yogyakarta academic institutions; they were supplemented by some troupes from Central and East Java. Several sub-genres or styles developed on and by television can be distinguished: when performed by students of the Gadjah Mada University or the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (Institut Seni Indonesia, ISI), artistic and aesthetic aspects prevailed. Usually the setting was simple but subtly grand, and the whole atmosphere was ‘classical’, kraton-like, and the dialogues sustained the images. When performed by village kethoprak groups, the furnished studio settings and the abundant use of the stage props created a ‘realistic’ effect. When recorded outdoors, these performances achieved an even more ‘realistic’ effect: instead of miming horse-riding against a backdrop depicting a forest, actors representing characters from a far distant Javanese past, historical or imagined, rode real horses in a real forest.

⁸¹ TVRI Stasiun Yogyakarta was established on 17 August 1965.

⁸² TVRI Stasiun Surabaya was established on 3 March 1978.

⁸³ If he is not mistaken, he adds.

In 1977, during a seminar on kethoprak in Yogyakarta organized by the Department of Education and Culture, when a young actor was requested to specify the point of climax in the play *Arya Penangsang Gugur*, the following happened:

The actor looked puzzled and embarrassed and finally replied that it depended on how many nights were to be taken to present the story! To him the lakon represented not a fixed dramatic whole with a key point of climax but a more fluid entity, shaped by the contingencies of the performance. If necessary it could be divided into several sections, performed on separate nights, each section ending sufficiently climactically to draw viewers back for the next night's performance. (Hatley 1985: 112)

As Hatley goes on to demonstrate, several other factors can play a part in shaping the progression of a live show: for instance, the late arrival of certain performers or the over-extension of particular scenes and routines. Actually, although this anecdote refers to a live/non-televised performance, it does betray the characteristics of a televised kethoprak performance, in which exactly the opposite is happening.

Whereas in nascent years of TVRI's history, it adapted traditional performing arts genres so that these could be broadcast on television,⁸⁴ when these genres became a regular feature in the television programming, they were formatted so that they would meet the constraints of the medium. This meant that 'the relationship of the theatrical event to the televisual one' (Auslander 1996:200) changed – the live versions 'had been constructed to be seen *as television* – they were pre-adapted [...] to the demands of their new medium' (Auslander 1996:200). An example of how a live performance was shaped to the demands of the medium television was the three-night kethoprak performance by the troupe PS Bayu, in early September 2000. It had been designed to be recorded by the Yogyakarta TVRI and broadcast in a serial consisting of twelve episodes. The preparations included the strengthening of the troupe by the addition of some mainstay actors, the tightening-up of the timing, the acting model of each scene and the improvisation, traditionally the basis for kethoprak acting ((R-4) 2000).

Cogently Bondan Nusantara distinguishes three kinds of kethoprak performances broadcast on television. As examples of the first kind, kethoprak for television, Bondan Nusantara gives the kethoprak fragments broadcast in the framework of regional news programmes or in programmes focusing on Javanese culture. Kethoprak on television, his second category, consists of broadcasts of kethoprak performances that would have taken place irrespective of television. These broadcasts can be live or else consist of pre-recorded, edited kethoprak performances in the studio. This kind of kethoprak still faithfully observes the constraints of a stage performance, ranging from the creation of the story and the structuring in scenes and sub-scenes to the plot, the costumes and the make-up of the actors (Bondan Nusantara 1990:54). The production process of kethoprak on television is not too complicated. Using a

⁸⁴ See Soenarto (2008:1-9), then programme director at TVRI Stasiun Jakarta, on his adaptation for television of the traditional dance fragment *Gatutkaca Gandrung* by Rusman, famous performer of wayang orang at the Sri Wedari theatre in Solo, and Rusman's wife Darsi. The broadcast was at the special request of President Soekarno to the director of TVRI.

synopsis of the story, the group rehearses two to three times, after which the performance is recorded. Both TVRI Yogyakarta and Surabaya produce such broadcasts.

When the Yogyakarta TVRI station created kethoprak sayembara, serialized kethoprak that included a contest for prizes, Bondan Nusantara postulates this marked the birth of the third category, television kethoprak: created especially for the television medium and existing only on television. In 1988, TVRI Yogyakarta broadcast the first kethoprak serial, *Prahara* (Storm), based on a script by the novelist Singgih Hadi Mintardja and performed by the troupe Sapta Mandala Kodam IV Diponegoro directed by Bagong Kussudiardja.⁸⁵ Despite the fact that various artists did regard this broadcast as the initiation of kethoprak *televisi*, others were adamant that the serial *Prahara* was no longer worthy of the name kethoprak, arguing that it failed to replicate the traditional constraints of the genre (*sawetawis pakulinan* (tradisi) *Kethoprak*) (Bondan Nusantara 1990:44). In his justification of the new dramatic and filmic approaches adopted in television kethoprak, Bondan Nusantara points out the close relationships between the medium film and television, and between drama, film and *sinema elektronik* (*sinetron* or soap) – after all film and television are both part of modern culture (Nusantara 1990:44).

In fact most kethoprak productions broadcast by Yogyakarta TVRI in the 1990s did go beyond just televisualizations of live performances. Recorded either in a studio setting or outdoors, these productions deviated from the traditional live performances on a stage using backdrops, in the presence of an audience and improvising lengthy dialogues. TVRI kethoprak was a genre conceived for the medium television: because of the directness of the images, long-drawn-out dialogues were made superfluous; improvisation was restricted because of the restraints imposed by scenarios and scripts whose content was dictated by time limits and censorship; the scenes were condensed and reduced to the essentials; the acting, the costumes and the make-up were influenced by modern drama and tailored to the circumstances and television techniques available in that studio. Any direct audience response was eliminated since people were not usually present during studio recordings.⁸⁵ In short, the performance had been adapted to the constraints of the medium and the aesthetics had been adapted to those dictated by television.

4 Kethoprak: traditional drama?

As demonstrated by kethoprak performers and researchers, the genre has swayed to the incessant process of innovation and adaptation to the dynamics of the society to which it belongs and in which it is performed. They all stress the dynamic character of *kethoprak* and its open attitude towards a changing context. In making their claims, they might have had in mind *wayang kulit* and *wayang wong*, that are cast in a more conservative image – although these genres have also been accommodating contemporary influences, explicit in Ki Manteb

⁸⁵ Personal communication Habib Bari, Yogyakarta, 14 August 2001. Darma Putra (1998) mentions similar characteristics of televised Balinese drama gong.

Soedharsono's comment at the beginning of this chapter.⁸⁶ This confirms Vaníčková's conclusion that kethoprak is 'an excellent example of the interweaving of Javanese stage traditions with new art trends' (Vaníčková 1965: 399). Umar Kayam argues that this tendency towards engaging in a dialogue rather than approaching it as a confrontation with foreign elements is typical of traditional art in Southeast Asia. As he has shown, traditional art will embrace foreign elements and integrate them as it has always been receptive of the streams of cultural influences that have marked the history of Southeast Asia (Kayam 1981:63-65). Although kethoprak has a complex hybrid character and is in a continuous state of flux in its efforts to adapt itself, so far it is still invariably associated with 'tradition'.

Since its coming into being, kethoprak seems to have displayed an accommodating attitude to external artistic concepts and modern technology (Widayat 1997:41-51). Sources from the nineteen twenties, when kethoprak was a familiar, fast-growing and attractive form of entertainment, reveal that this combining of elements borrowed from several artistic spheres was a distinguishing feature from a very early stage.⁸⁷ Rather than making a choice, people tend to retain aspects of tradition and incorporate them into their contemporary lives (or vice-versa). In the words of Thompson

For many people, the option of maintaining traditional ways or adopting modern life-styles does not present itself as an 'either/or' choice. On the contrary, they are able to organize their day-to-day lives in such a way as to integrate elements of tradition with new styles of living. Tradition is not necessarily abandoned in the quest for 'bread and enlightenment' but is, on the contrary, reshaped, transformed and perhaps even strengthened through the encounter – partly through the media – with other ways of life. (Thompson 1996:95)

The same principle holds for a performance genre like kethoprak. In the process of their exposure to developments in society, some of these were creatively integrated into kethoprak, but others were discarded. They moulded kethoprak into a dynamic dramatic genre that has been able to survive for more than a century. Bondan Nusantara argues that the changes it underwent armed the dramatic genre with the powerful weapon of invulnerability (*senjata ampuh*) with which it could resist the challenges of the era (Bondan Nusantara 1997:53). Similarly, Thompson (1996:106) sees the 'process of intermingling' as

a source of enormous cultural creativity and dynamism. In the sphere of literature or popular music, of art or cinema, the weaving together of themes drawn from different traditions – this continuous hybridization of culture – is the basis of some of the most original and exciting work. It creates a cultural restlessness which is constantly shifting directions, assuming new forms and departing from established conventions in unexpected ways. And it attests to the fact that, in a world increasingly traversed by cultural migrations and communication flows, traditions are less sheltered than ever before from the potentially invigorating consequences of encounters with the other.

As kethoprak developed, views on and perceptions of the genre changed. Festivals and congresses played an influential role in defining the genre and its role in society. They were

⁸⁶ See also Kitsie Emerson's *Transforming wayang for contemporary audiences* (2016).

⁸⁷ To give one example: 'The gamelan orchestra consisted of the flute, drums and a wooden rice pounder. We cannot understand why, when a Buddhist story was performed, they sang Malay keroncong and other new songs.' (Gamelan jang digoenaken adalah soeling, gendang dan lesoeng. Kita tiada abis pikir, kenapa kaloe itoe lelakon jang diambil ada dari Boedha, di sitoe ada djoega lagoe krontjong Melajang dan laen laen lagoe baroe) (*Wajang orang 'Ketoprak'* 1926).

organized to exchange ideas and discuss what could be done to improve the quality of the genre (from artistic and organizational perspectives) and how to mould it to the needs and aims of the parties involved. Kethoprak was defined from the point of view of these needs.

The first two kethoprak festivals and congresses emphasized the fluid and dynamic character of the genre and its modern identity, untrammelled by traditions. Only later, in the New Order period, was kethoprak defined as a traditional performance genre that required protection and should be preserved. The first Kethoprak Festival and Congress, held in Yogyakarta on 5-7 July 1957, gathered professional and non-professional kethoprak troupes and organizations (Yuliantri and Dahlan 2008:339). In his opening speech, Sultan Hamengku Buwana IX declared that the world of art could not be seen disconnected from the context of modern influences. In the Indonesia of that time kethoprak artists were eager to develop the genre in response to the requirements of 'our modern era' (*era yang maju*) (Yuliantri and Dahlan 2008:339).⁸⁸ The second Kethoprak Festival and Congress was held in 1964 in the Gedung Kesenian Sriwedari in Solo. In a written speech, read during the congress by his representative, Minister of Education and Culture Prijono stated that kethoprak was a very popular and highly flexible expression of folk culture (*populer dan luwes*), unencumbered by the restrictions of the old traditions as was the case with wayang kulit and wayang orang. Kethoprak's repertoire and technique were much freer than those of the wayang and this quality made it much easier to use kethoprak for educational and moral purposes, and as a revolutionary tool. Minister Prijono emphasized the importance of presenting 'our modern moral, the moral of Indonesian socialism' in the kethoprak stories (Yuliantri and Dahlan 2008:345).⁸⁹ He proposed the genre be performed in regional languages other than Javanese or even in Indonesian. An important topic raised at the second congress was the need to innovate kethoprak for the benefit of the revolution and the people. The proposed innovation focused on the content of kethoprak, without rejecting the primary characteristics of the genre.

The necessity to pay due attention to the development of the genre and strive for the improvement in its quality continued to be important topics raised again in later periods. In 1974 and 1976 the Yogyakarta branch of the Department of Education and Culture organized two seminars (*lokakarya*) on kethoprak.⁹⁰ The results of both seminars were published in 1977 by Wijaya and Sutjipto, who presented a written history of the development of kethoprak, replete with ample information on existing kethoprak troupes and their contributions to the dissemination of persuasive government messages and to innovations, and presenting a recapitulation of the points made in the papers presented at the two seminars. The publication was accompanied by an audiovisual documentary. It became an influential study, and many of its findings recur in later views on kethoprak. The purpose of the work was to

⁸⁸ 'ingin ikut maju sesuai dengan tuntutan zaman kita jang maju. Seperti segi2 kebudajaan lain, alam kesenianpun tidak lepas dari pengaruh2 modern. Begitupula kesenian ketoprak tidak mau ketinggalan' (Yuliantri and Dahlan 2008:339, quoting *Harian Rakjat* 6 April 1957).

⁸⁹ 'Ketoprak [...] adalah kesenian Rakjat jang sangat populer dan luwes, karena tidak terikat atau terkekang oleh tradisi2 lama sebagai misalnja wayang kulit dan wayang orang jang lebih terikat pada tradisi2 tertentu. Lain halnja dengan ketoprak, baik dalam repertoirnja maupun tehniknja djauh lebih bebas dari wayang. Karena itu ketoprak dapat digunakan sebaik2nja dan djauh lebih mudah untuk mendjadi alat pendidikan dan moral, alat revolusi pada umumnja.'; 'moral modern kita, moral sosialisme Indonesia'.

⁹⁰ 5-7 February 1974 and 29 April-1 May 1976 (Wijaya dan Sutjipto 1977:45).

introduce kethoprak, ‘a Central Javanese folk theatre genre that still is enjoyed by the people’ (Wijaya and Sutjipto 1977:7). The book hopes to offer those readers who were already acquainted with kethoprak material to encourage them to contribute ideas about how the genre might be developed and how its quality could be improved (Wijaya and Sutjipto 1977:7). Another result of the seminars was a performance of the lakon *Pangeran Harya Timur*, a performance with which the team involved wanted to demonstrate the characteristics (*ancer-ancer*) of a kethoprak show (Wijaya and Sutjipto 1977:58). The idea of upgrading and improving local performing arts genres was definitely a concern of Orde Baru government institutions. Sedyawati commented on this, urging the readers of her articles to question whether Indonesian traditional art indeed needed be developed (Sedyawati 1981:48, 51).

In 1997, in the framework of the ninth Yogyakarta Art Festival (Festival Kesenian Yogyakarta IX), a new volume on kethoprak, edited by Lephien Purwaraharja and Bondan Nusantara, saw the light of day. Focusing on the genre in the New Order period, it tackled various discussions like the exposure of kethoprak to the electronic mass media, newly created kethoprak styles and the New Order development discourse (*pembangunan*) in the performances.

How was it possible to combine this drive for innovation and development with the perception of kethoprak as a traditional performance genre? While a definition of ‘traditional’ is rarely given, a comparison of the views of several authors on the factors determining the context of ‘traditional’ reveals their fairly overlapping conclusions. Wijaya and Sutjipto question whether kethoprak should still be considered a folk performance, in the sense that it only attracts the attention of the *rakyat kecil*, people of the lower social classes. They refer to artists like Bagong Kussudiardja and Handung Kus Sudyarsana of the kethoprak troupe Sapta Mandala, who claimed that the word ‘rakyat’ should be interpreted in a broader sense, namely: people from all layers and classes in society. Wijaya and Sutjipto consider the consequences of this view on the way kethoprak should be presented: artistically it should be mature, it should retain traditional characteristics and it should be adapted to the conditions and situation at the time of performance. ‘Traditional characteristics’ encompass ‘several aspects of the lives of Javanese people, such as language, philosophy, status levels, and so on’ (Wijaya and Sutjipto 1977:43).

Kethoprak practitioners

The principal contributor to the creative development of kethoprak with an eye on tradition has been Handung Kus Sudyarsana, journalist with the local Yogyakarta newspaper *Kedaulatan Rakyat* and a famous and influential kethoprak innovator, actor and playwright.⁹¹ Whereas Vaníčková concludes that kethoprak was transformed into modern Javanese theatre, Handung Kus Sudyarsana classifies it as traditional drama because he believes that the traditional elements in kethoprak still prevail over the modern ones (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:25). The two views, Vaníčková’s and Kus Sudyarsana’s, are an apt reflection of the

⁹¹ On Handung Kus Sudyarsana, see also *Marisi semangat* 1991; *Handung Kus* 1991; Sastrosuwarno 1991.

changing perception of the genre in the course of time. In the process of building the new nation after Independence, the search for the modern and the corresponding discourse of modernity prevailed in (part of) the Old Order period. Kethoprak, perceived as a modern genre, therefore suited Soekarno's ideas on nationalism and was used as a tool to propagate revolution and progress. Conversely, Soeharto thought national culture should be built on tradition and the rich heritage of the past. As kethoprak was then perceived to be a traditional genre, and later even incorporated in the *adiluhung* discourse, it was used as a medium to disseminate New Order rhetoric.

Kus Sudyarsana sees tradition as stipulations that have become common practice (*ketentuan-ketentuan yang sudah menjadi kebiasaan*) (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:25). Kethoprak is a traditional folk drama, he says, thereby distinguishing it from modern drama and traditional classical theatre. He argues that its traditional character predominates in the performances, in particular in the elements that belong to Javanese tradition: the structure of the lakon/story, the dialogues, the acting, the positioning of the actors in the performance space (blocking), costumes, make-up, the properties used, as well as the music played on traditional instruments (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:25). The dialogues, the acting and blocking, and the accompanying melodies still adhere firmly to the principle of improvisation, he writes. On the other hand, he emphasizes that, since the very beginnings of kethoprak, efforts have constantly been made to breathe new life into the dramatic genre in order to adapt it to the alterations in society and the requirements of the era in which it is performed. His study contains many examples of innovative changes and developments. From 1927 onwards, for instance, the kethoprak repertoire was enlarged with stories originating from Turkey, India, the Middle East, Cambodia, China and Europe, together with stories from Indonesian regions other than Java, like Sumatra, Kalimantan and Bali (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:18). Ever increasingly, stories were being based on fiction, featuring plots borrowed from novels, films or scripts (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:18, 20). Musical influences also introduced changes. In 1928, the group Bekso Langen Wanodyo, the first female kethoprak group, was not accompanied by the *lesung* or a gamelan orchestra during its performances, but by an *orkes*, consisting of western instruments (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:28). When kethoprak was performed on a conventional stage instead of in a traditional space, dance movements, with the exception of those of the clowns, were sometimes even dispensed with. The costumes were made fit the atmosphere of the lakon, dependent on the representations of specific historical periods, social contexts (court or village scenes), geographical locales (Yogyakarta Javanese, East Javanese, Middle Eastern) and so on (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:21).

Bondan Nusantara, another prominent kethoprak practitioner and script-writer and director of a large number of television productions, thinks that conventional kethoprak (*ketoprak konvensional*) – he does not use the term traditional here – is characterized by the absence of a full script or scenario; the dramaturgy of the lakon refers to the wayang kulit purwa, the shadow puppet theatre; it has improvised dialogues, intuitive acting and use of the space, realistic costumes and make-up; it is performed to the musical accompaniment of a gamelan orchestra playing in the pelog and slendro tonal systems (and therefore is also called *kethoprak gamelan*), traditional vocalizing (*tembang*) and wooden slit drums (*keprak*); the

duration of a performance is between five and six hours and it has a curved development of the plot (Bondan Nusantara 1997:56). The author distinguishes conventional kethoprak from newly created kethoprak (*kethoprak garapan*) that displays the following features: it uses a script (full play); the dramaturgy follows western conventions; the acting and the use of space follow specific patterns; costumes and make-up are realistic and/or symbolic; backdrops marking the setting (as used in conventional kethoprak) are dispensed with; the musical accompaniment is free, meaning both diatonic and pentatonic orchestra/instruments can be used either separately or in combination, keprak and tembang can be employed but are sometimes omitted; the whole performance lasts for a maximum of two-and-a-half-hours; electronic equipment is used for amplification and there is a lighting design (Bondan Nusantara 1997:55). He states that the different kethoprak styles, whether conventional or newly created, have their own fans (Bondan Nusantara 1997:57). The former is popular in rural areas and among aficionados of local Javanese culture. The latter finds a large market in urban environments and among younger audiences. As an example of the latter, Bondan Nusantara mentions *kethoprak plesetan*, of which I shall give a brief description below.

Two aspects that are often mentioned as characteristics of traditional kethoprak are language use and improvisation. Language use might indeed be an important factor in determining whether a regional performing arts genre is defined as traditional or not. As Darma Putra has shown, the character of the Balinese drama gong, that was initially performed in Indonesian, ‘gradually changed from a modern into a traditional theatre genre’ after it had become ‘a fully Balinese language theatre style’ (Darma Putra 2008:107). However, the case of language use in kethoprak differs from drama gong: even when Indonesian is spoken, kethoprak is still categorized as traditional theatre; therefore language is not the only determinant. Some authors distinguish kethoprak from other forms of drama, like Javanese-language drama (*sandiwara Jawa/drama berbahasa Jawa*), modern theatre in Javanese (like Teater Gapit’s performances) and drama in Indonesian, on the basis of the language use in the various forms. Wahyana Giri MC (1992) postulates that the dialogues in kethoprak are specific; they contain expressions that are characteristic of the dialect used at the court and are replete with sentimental clichés.⁹²

Kus Sudyarsana (1990) presents an exposé on the use of Javanese in his article about the utilization of language etiquette (*unggah-ungguh*) in kethoprak. He explains which language levels and styles should be used according to the status and position of the character in the play, and according to the descent (*awu*) of the personages. To make his point, he gives examples of correct and incorrect language use among characters. Among these examples is the proclamation of Prince Mangkubumi’s installation on the throne as the first Sultan of Yogyakarta in the lakon *Pangeran Mangkubumi*, that was performed by Kethoprak Mataram Sapta Mandala Kodam IV Diponegoro (Kus Sudyarsana 1990:32). The proclamation formed the highly appreciated final scene of this story and Kus Sudyarsana’s text has been an often used source of inspiration for later interpretations of the lakon.

⁹² ‘awujud tetembungan (dialek) khas kraton kang klise sentimentil’.

Alongside language use, improvisation is often mentioned as one of the main characteristics of 'traditional' drama. Actors provided with a minimum of information about the story and the characterization of the roles before the performance will have ample room for improvisation (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:22). As Vaníčková (1965:431) observed

the *kethoprak* is centered on the acting of the cast. The *kethoprak* actor is at the same time playwright, shapes the play directly on the stage, in contact with the audience. This type of acting demands exceptional powers of improvisation.

and

[Improvisation] is an art with a long-established tradition on Java, and not only on the stage, but also in dance and musical performances, where especially the *gamelan* provides music improvised on a very wide variety of basic motifs. Such improvisation requires not only routine and sensitive reactions, but above all creative fantasy and invention. Of assistance to actors and producer, both in the staging and in the acting, is contact with the audiences, its perceptiveness and receptiveness and its familiarity with the story. (Vaníčková 1965:431)

From the 1970s, Handung Kus Sudyarsana was personally actively involved in the world of kethoprak, and in the mediating of the genre on the radio and television. In collaboration with his elder brother Bagong Kussudiardja, he established the group Sapta Mandala Kodam VII Diponegoro (later Kodam IV) in 1971. One of the aims of the group was to renew kethoprak, and not only on the artistic level; both the artists and the organization had to be innovative. The structure of the lakon was changed; earlier it had always begun with an audience scene, the *babak jejeran*, and ended with the *tancep kayon*; after the innovations had been introduced, it commenced with a scene at a foodstall or in a forest, *adegan warung* or *hutan*; in scenes that formed an anticlimax, the tempo was speeded up so as not to hamper the climax. This means that the traditional structure of the kethoprak lakon was abandoned, although sometimes, on certain occasions, it was still used. The conventional characterization of the personages underwent a change. The dialogues were moulded to fit the lakon, both in form and in contents. A condensed dialogue system (*dialog padat*) was used. On the level of the acting and the blocking, shortcomings in the traditional movements were improved; gestures and movements were enriched, and other forms of movement were developed. Costumes were newly designed, but were still Javanese in style, and in appearance and use close to traditional garments (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:38). Without deviating from the theatrical principles the make-up was made more realistic. The kethoprak musical pieces were no longer used to support the action and atmosphere in each scene, but just as a musical accompaniment, and hence were assigned a different function (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:22). In the stage design (*panggung*), naturalism prevailed over artistic principles. Professionalism became important and the way kethoprak was organized was reformed.

The writing down of the lakon as full-length plays, a break with tradition, was not an improvement from the perspective of creativity, claims Kus Sudyarsana, as it decreased the spontaneity of the performances. It also became more difficult for kethoprak actors, especially the younger ones and those who had appeared on television, to perform without adhering strictly to the written script (Kus Sudyarsana 1989:39). This intense clinging to written texts

and scripts was opposed to the (idealized?) image of traditional art which was connoted to spontaneity.⁹³

Barbara Hatley acknowledges the important influence of these innovations on kethoprak as a genre and calls it the Sapta Mandala factor. Through the annual kethoprak competitions in Yogyakarta and, above all, via television broadcasts ‘the Sapta Mandala model of innovative *ketoprak*, script-based and strongly influenced by Western drama and film’, using the Indonesian language rather than Javanese when performing on national television, ‘spread widely and became entrenched as a new standard for other *ketoprak* groups’ (Hatley 2004:75-76). To clarify this change in more detail, it is necessary to take a closer look at another type of kethoprak that developed in the 1990s, *kethoprak plesedan*.

Kethoprak plesedan

From the end of 1991 kethoprak plesedan became very popular, among younger spectators in particular. Rooted in existing artistic traditions, it developed from comic kethoprak, as Didik Nini Thowok (1997:149), one of the contributors to this development, demonstrates when he describes its history. The *plesedan* (punning) is all-encompassing and that was novel, according to Hatley. Not just the language use itself but all the aspects of the performance could be subverted and overturned: the characterization, plot, standard interactions and scenes. Stage conventions were opened up: innovative dance choreography was used in the depiction of battle scenes, keyboard was combined with gamelan for the musical accompaniment (Hatley 2004:77-81).⁹⁴

In his contribution to the edited volume on kethoprak during the New Order, Kristanto explains why kethoprak plesedan, as performed by the group Sapta Mandala, can still be called traditional. That a play is traditional is determined by a host of factors like the background of the actors, the choice of the stories to be performed, the linear presentation of the story, the open attitude of the actors towards improvisation on all levels, the absence of a strict and complete script including the full dialogues in the consecutive acts and the adroitness of the actors in handling and reacting to unforeseen situations (Kristanto 1997:132-133). The key to the meaning of ‘tradition’ in traditional art is the training in *rasa* he writes, quoting Bondan Nusantara. The term *rasa* encompasses feeling, sense, intuition and inner meaning. But he immediately admits that this is also one aim of avant-garde art, in Indonesia and elsewhere, a concession that undermines his reasoning.

Kristanto argues that the borders between the traditional and the modern have become blurred within the genre. But kethoprak actors and directors also carry this blur within themselves: although they are strongly rooted in tradition and in the past had often enjoyed little schooling, they had the ability to free themselves from the traditional ways of thinking and traditional theatrical forms. Hence, their performance in kethoprak can compete with the performance of actors in modern plays, like Teater Gandrik in Yogyakarta or Teater Koma in Jakarta. Their jokes are intellectual and have a bearing on contemporary political and social

⁹³ On spontaneity and tradition, see for instance Bagong Kussudiardjo in *KR* 21 August 1993:4; Kasim Achmad 2006:4-5; Noor W.A. as quoted in Hatley 2008:137.

⁹⁴ For more information on kethoprak humor and kethoprak plesedan and their legacies, see Hatley 2004:77-85.

issues, thus differing from traditional kethoprak groups, according to Kristanto, who forgets that in the past contemporaneous political and social issues also lay at the heart of kethoprak performances. Other features that have changed are the form of the organisation and the discipline of the actors in rehearsing and performing. When preparing a performance, the main lines of the story, the order of the acts, the patterns of movement and the choice of the cast are fixed and rehearsed. Just as in modern theatre, he says (Kristanto 1997:133-135). In its turn, traditional theatre has frequently been used as a source of inspiration for actors and theatre groups working in a non-traditional way.

Conclusions

Kethoprak is still ‘essentially a Javanese affair’, even though in some cases it is (partly) spoken in Indonesian, and retains its traditional connotation, even if it displays an innovative format or style. Kethoprak broadcasts feature troupes from Yogyakarta, Central and East Java who use various Javanese dialects and ideolects in their performances. However, the genre is rooted in local society to such an extent that it is perceived to be very local, namely: belonging to Yogyakarta. Therefore it is very well suited to the vision, mission and aims of TVRI Yogyakarta and has contributed to what the station in its early stage called the barometer function.

Several views on tradition in relation to kethoprak have been described in this chapter. New Order culture policy and discourse made tradition into a construct. As I have shown, the image of kethoprak changed, from a modern genre, as explicitly stated during the first and second kethoprak festival and congress, to a traditional genre in the New Order period. Tan Sooi Beng claims that, since the 1970s, for *bangsawan*, a theatrical genre that resembles kethoprak, the Malaysian government has created a traditional past (Tan Sooi Beng 1997:vii-viii). Wijaya and Sutjipto’s *The coming into being and development of kethoprak: Folk theatre of Central Java and the Special Region of Yogyakarta*, the outcome of two seminars published under the auspices of the Indonesian Directorate General of Culture in 1977, might have performed a similar function.⁹⁵ Therefore, it supported and promoted the preservation discourse. As the aim of the New Order government was to get a grip on and keep control of the regional performing arts in Indonesia, the fixing of kethoprak by the imposition of specific constraints would have been helpful.

Kethoprak practitioners Handung Kus Sudyarsana and Bondan Nusantara both perceive tradition as a process, a movement in time that is consonant with its context, carrying within it the potential to be ‘reshaped, transformed and perhaps even strengthened through the encounter’ (Thompson 1996:95). Their stance concurs with the tradition of kethoprak itself. As the history of kethoprak demonstrates, it has always been in flux. This dynamic character is inherent in the genre – which has not always been acknowledged in criticism about kethoprak. Mass media – gramophone, film, radio, cassette tapes, television – , each with its

⁹⁵ *Kelahiran dan perkembangan kethoprak: Teater rakyat Jawa Tengah dan Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta*.

own technology and constraints and hence specific character, have significantly contributed to the incessant reshaping and transforming of kethoprak, and to the increasing popularity of and expanding access to the genre. Kethoprak's accommodating stance towards the media has made it trendy, enabling it to survive for more than a century. The reverse of the mediatization of kethoprak is that it has enabled the government to disseminate information and persuasive messages on a large scale and in a rapid tempo.

Nonetheless, the dynamic quality of kethoprak did not lend itself to being fixed into a tight-fitting corset, the aim of the policy makers, not even after it had evolved into a traditional genre to be preserved, and not even when it was ascribed an *adiluhung* quality on the perceived grounds that that traditional arts were there to be used for the purpose of building an Indonesian culture, tradition here being part of an ideology. Apparently, New Order discourse on the deterioration and loss of a genre like kethoprak had become deeply rooted and was still abroad at the time of writing. Fortunately, kethoprak artists who have appreciated kethoprak's potential to adopt new developments and adapt to new contexts, have succeeded in innovating the genre in their co-operation with regional TVRI stations, as I demonstrate in the following chapter.