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Producing the local: Javanese performance on Indonesian television

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8 *Mbangun Desa*: From government information to infotainment¹⁸⁵

Familiar. Den Baguse Ngarso is a unique name. The character is truly fictive. Den Baguse was born of a very popular programme, a production of TVRI Yogyakarta, named *Mbangun Desa*.

In this city, there is an unwritten rule: do not pay a visit during *Mbangun Desa* broadcasts.

They say, the host might ask his guest to wait until the end of the programme.
(Joko Indro Cahyono 1994b:52)¹⁸⁶

Familiar, *akrab*. Such was the characterization of *Mbangun Desa*, in its time a very popular production of the Yogyakarta TVRI station. Den Baguse Ngarso, *Mbangun Desa*'s antagonist, 'a truly fictive character' with a compelling name, received most attention of the viewers of the series. However hyperbolic and the very antithesis of Javanese hospitality, the unwritten rule not to pay a visit during *Mbangun Desa* broadcasts represents how much in its heyday *Mbangun Desa*, a rural development programme, featured in people's lives and in public opinion.

Rural broadcasting (*siaran pedesaan*) was set up as a medium by which the Indonesian government could pass on informative messages to local villagers (Chu, Alfian, Schramm 1991:46; Priyono 1994:175-181). To voice the government's missions, elaborate use was made of the government-owned electronic mass media, whose main task was to improve the regional villagers' knowledge and skills and encourage the people in rural areas to become more actively involved in supporting the development (*pembangunan*) of the local standard of living and prosperity (Sudarmiyono, 1995:127). The government devised the programmes as part of a transmedial network. Both Radio Republik Indonesia and Televisi Republik Indonesia broadcast rural development programmes. Development information was also disseminated in print in newspapers and magazines in a special section known as *koran masuk desa* (newspapers enter the village) (GBHN 1983 in Aziz 1994:334).¹⁸⁷ The contents of several development programmes resemble other informative and persuasive programmes. Kitley perceived intertextual associations between *Siaran Pedesaan* and the programmes *Si Unyil* and *Ria Jenaka*, all 'produced to build consent for the national development program'. He sees a 'a blurring of generic characteristics and a sameness of content' (Kitley, 2000:120-121).

The success of the rural broadcasting programmes cannot be seen apart from the task of the social organizations of newspaper-reading, radio-listening and television-viewing groups.

¹⁸⁵ *Mbangun Desa*: Developing the Village.

This chapter is an elaborate and reworked version of the paper '*Mbangun desa*: From government information to a nostalgic representation of Javanese village life' (2001).

¹⁸⁶ *Akrab*. Den Baguse Ngarso adalah sebuah nama yang unik. Tokoh ini benar-benar fiktif. Den Baguse lahir dari salah satu acara yang sangat populer produksi TVRI Stasiun Yogyakarta, yakni *Mbangun Desa*. Di kota ini, ada peraturan tak resmi: jangan bertamu selagi ada acara *Mbangun Desa*. Kabarnya, tuan rumah bisa menyuruh menunggu tamunya sampai acara itu usai.

¹⁸⁷ Ketetapan MPR RI No. IV/MPR/1983.

These *kelompencapir* (acronym of *kelompok pendengar, pembaca dan pemirsa*), as these organizations were called, gathered regularly to discuss the contents of the media information and disseminated the government messages to their fellow villagers (Sudarmiyono 1995:127; *Surat Keputusan* 1995). The *kelompencapir* were founded in 1982 and grew rapidly and extensively. In 1996 there were about 90,000 groups, each consisting of about thirty people (Buchori 1996:29).¹⁸⁸ Also village co-operatives supported these development programmes.

Although the national media determined the character of the various rural broadcasting programmes, these information programmes had an impact on the identity of the media themselves. The national broadcasting institution TVRI was often referred to as rural television (*televisi pedesaan*), because of its many programmes focusing on rural topics designed for village audiences (Buchori 1996:28).¹⁸⁹ From the national perspective, *siaran pedesaan* broadcasts were tailored to the aims of the national government that defined television as a development medium (Aziz 1994:334).¹⁹⁰ Developing the country and the nation was one of the main priorities of the New Order regime, and all the media were assigned a role in the grand plan. In 1981 the broadcasting of commercials on TVRI was banned in order, President Soeharto claimed, ‘to focus television more on facilitating the [national] development program and to avoid the detrimental effects [of advertising], which do not promote the spirit of development’ (Kitley 2000:64). This ban on advertising and the concomitant loss of revenue made the station more government- and hence development-oriented (Kitley 2000:68).

From an international perspective, the use of mass media to disseminate government information on subjects like family planning, health issues, improving the position of women, illiteracy and so on, was not typically Indonesian; it was happening worldwide. Kitley (2000:331) says, ‘Indonesian television is best understood as guided by the theory of development communications, and in that way it is similar to television in “developing” countries such as China, India, and Malaysia’.¹⁹¹ Nonetheless, Indonesian media practices did have their own peculiarities. The ways the *siaran pedesaan* programmes were produced and disseminated by the Indonesian media, and how they were received by Indonesian audiences, were specific to the country, even to the different Indonesian regions. The ways in which the development themes were cast also differed from locale to locale. In Yogyakarta, for instance, television as a medium played an important role in the rise and fall of the development series’ popularity among Yogyakarta and Central Javanese inhabitants.

¹⁸⁸ On *kelompencapir*, see McDaniel 1994:239-240; Quinn 1996. Film Discussion Groups are a comparable phenomenon. See Yang (1994) on such groups in China.

¹⁸⁹ These included *Bina Tani*, *Bina Desa*, *Yang Berkarya*, *Kotak Pos 3256*, *Perbincangan*, *Potret Desa*, *Asah Terampil*, *Timbangan Pendapat* (Wahyudi 1994:10). Chu, Alfian and Schramm (1991:46) mention the programmes *Dari Desa ke Desa* (From Village to Village), *Desa Kita* (Our Village) and *Daerah Membangun* (The Region Develops) that were specifically designed with village audiences in mind. TVRI Yogyakarta also broadcast programmes like *Menapak Hari Esok* and *Wawasan Mitra Tani* (Marsono 1994), *Liputan Pedesaan* and *Sambung Rasa yang Berkarya* (Arsip Sepekan 1994).

¹⁹⁰ GBHN 1983, Ketetapan MPR RI No. IV/MPR/1983 Bab IV D4 (Penerangan dan media massa).

¹⁹¹ On Indian development television, see Mazzarella 2012.

In this chapter I discuss *Mbangun Desa* (Developing the Village), a rural development programme created by TVRI Yogyakarta, on the basis of fragments of the series and the scripts, reviews and articles in newspapers and Javanese-language magazines, and interviews with the producers, script-writers and actors. The study of *Mbangun Desa* offers another instance of localized persuasion, different from but nevertheless showing similarities to localized persuasion through the advertisements on commercial television I discussed in the previous two chapters. Originally designed as a government programme to inform and persuade inhabitants of rural areas, *Mbangun Desa* developed from an overt propaganda medium into infotainment. The programme catered to more than just the Indonesian government and its development messages. In a mixture of various styles of presentation, the multiple narrators and agents conveyed an amalgam of topics, messages and ideologies in intersecting and coexisting narratives, genres, appeals and modes of address (White 1992:191). While keeping to the mission of developing the people by means of information and instruction, the producers of the programme were convinced that the entertaining character of the series and the preservation of local culture in the modernizing world needed to be foregrounded too.

My first point is that, just as the kethoprak sayembara serials and the programme *Pangeran Mangkubumi Wisuda* did, *Mbangun Desa* became popular because of the ways in which it produced ‘the local’. As I explained in my introduction to this research, I see the local as ‘a complex phenomenological quality’. It does not only represent a specific geographical space, but also encompasses common ground and co-presence (Scannell 1995:13). Because of this specific production of the local, the whole series breathed *akrab*-ness, familiarity, designed to capture the attention of the audiences, that was after all the goal of the programme’s persuasive character. My second point is that, while this representation of the familiar made the series so attractive in a specific period, it caused the entertaining character gradually to prevail over the persuasive messages. TVRI’s mission to make persuasion more effective was actually self-defeating.

In the following sections, I demonstrate how the series was constructed to allow it to approach its audiences closely – a form of pre-persuasion. *Mbangun Desa* was strongly tied to the locations that were the setting of the series, to TVRI Yogyakarta and to Yogyakarta as a region. It was characterized by the use of the Javanese vernacular (in various forms) and by representations of local cultural expressions. I concentrate on how the producers and the crew imbued the setting, the contents, cast and characters, language use, humour, the persuasive and cultural messages with ‘the local’, permitting audiences the potential to engage in an *akrab* feeling. First, I offer some historical background to the creation of the programme.

1 *Mbangun Desa*: Developing the Village

On 24 September 1968 *Mbangun Desa*, a production of the local television station TVRI Yogyakarta, saw the light of day.¹⁹² Government information was presented directly by showing experts on the spot, talking to the farmers in the rice-fields and teaching them how to improve their farming methods or how to use fertilizers.

This dialogic form was considered effective because the development themes were being discussed openly in the (imagined) presence of the audiences. Both the government officials and the farmers were as it were representing themselves and the political and social groups to which they belonged. The 'story', depicting the meeting between the experts and the farmers, was developed in a simple, linear way. No use was made of any entertaining devices (Setyadi et al. 1995:15ff.), like dramatic scenes performed by professional actors or local cultural expressions. The topics treated were connected to the following subjects: clothing, food, housing, education, health, jobs, population and family planning, transmigration, co-operatives, the role of women and development, local industries, tourism, environment, saving energy, legislation and national discipline, national defence and safety, and so on (Wahyudi 1994:23).

The top-down persuasion and one-way communication did however not lead to the results the Indonesian government and NGOs had hoped for. Besides, the tone of the programmes was often perceived to be patronizing (*Kini TVRI rajin* 1981). Because the broadcasting organizations in Southeast Asia focused almost solely on mobilizing mass participation in development programmes, they failed to serve the tastes of the viewers, as McDaniel has concluded (McDaniel 2002:73). Disinterest grew among the target groups.

Several dynamics, however, caused changes in the audience approach and presentation of informative content. New views had been developed as a result of studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s by Unesco and other international institutions, as well as by government departments, NGOs and academic institutions in Indonesia.¹⁹³ These views, that were discussed during national and international seminars, stressed the importance of a grassroots approach and the need to step up audience participation. In the meantime, the launching of the Palapa satellites had altered the Indonesian mediascape. They provided the villages with instant communication and television (Chu, Alfian and Schramm 1991:257), and enabled them to receive foreign content. These developments had an inevitable impact on the televised development programmes, including *Mbangun Desa*. Inhibited by its radio-like and chronological presentation of the facts and total absence of suspense, *Mbangun Desa*, dismissed by its audiences as awkward (*kaku*) and unfamiliar (*kurang akrab*) (Setyadi et al. 1995), was not very popular. Ahmad Sofyan, who had produced the programme since the

¹⁹² Personal communication by Ahmad Sofyan, Yogyakarta 22 January 1998. See also Marsono 1993. Priyono (1994:175) says that before the broadcasting of *Siaran Pedesaan* on a national level in 1981, the Yogyakarta TVRI station had been broadcasting *Mbangun Desa* to regional audiences since 1969. This initiative was followed in 1978 by TVRI Surabaya. Kitley 2000 also mentions 1969 as the beginning of *Mbangun Desa*.

¹⁹³ The bibliography in Oepen (1988) gives an idea of the research that was conducted in that period.

early 1980s, realized the knowledgeable and critical attitude of the public required a new approach. The former format, featuring specialists from government institutions who communicated the information *in situ*, no longer worked. These institutes, eager to disseminate as many messages as possible to the audiences, tended to forget about the artistic aspects and their oversight had made the series boring ((a) 1994c). The view that television was not just a medium to inform its viewers, but also to entertain was rapidly gaining ground. The target groups had shifted, Sofyan added, from rural audiences to general audiences. Thus, to make the persuasive messages strike home, the producers conceived a new format, presenting a story in each episode, involving professional actors from the Yogyakarta-based Teater Gandrik Troupe and combining entertainment with information.¹⁹⁴

In 1988 a workshop on Development Broadcasting (*Siaran Pembangunan Televisi*) was organized as a co-operation between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Netherlands ((Hrn/Rsv)-a 1988). It was decided that all future TVRI programmes disseminating government information should be based on thorough research and should represent specific realities with which the people had to contend. They also should apply the 'local approach' technique, and strive to approximate the local idioms as these were used in the different regions ((Hrn/Rsv)-a 1988).

In October 1990, a new *Mbangun Desa* was ready to face its audiences. This time the programme enjoyed an unparalleled success. The production and broadcasting of *Mbangun Desa* survived the abolition of the Department of Information in October 1999 (Van Dijk 2001:547) and the dissolution of the *kelompencapir*. Even as TVRI Yogyakarta was facing the fierce competition of private national and international television broadcasts, *Mbangun Desa* remained on the screen. It lasted until 2008.

2 Creating a Javanese rural setting

TVRI Yogyakarta transformed *Mbangun Desa* into a series that soon captured the viewers' attention, not because of the government messages, but because of its setting (a 'traditional' Javanese village), its main characters and guest stars, its storyline and its use of the Javanese language and culture. I use the term series as a drama category in the sense defined by Williams: each episode of a series is normally self-contained, but certain regular characters recur, thus building up through several items (Williams 1990:80). Indeed TVRI's idea was to maximize entertainment (*memaksimalkan unsur hiburan*) and to present information without patronizing (Ahmad Sofyan in (gea) 1993a). Humour and suspense gained the upper hand (Setyadi et al. 1995:21), while identification with 'Javaneseness' played an important role as well. During its heyday the thirty-minute programme, that was broadcast once or twice a month, earned the title of TVRI's primadona as it was viewed by tens of thousands of people from all layers of society, both rural and urban, in the Special Region of Yogyakarta and Central Java ((gea) 1993a).

¹⁹⁴ Ahmad Sofyan in (gea) 1993a, and personal communications during several meetings in 1998.

Production

One broadcast of thirty minutes cost ten days of preliminary work, including the writing of the script, the preparation of the location, three or four days' shooting and the editing of the material into a finished product. The target was one episode a month. The production was low budget. In 1994, for example, the relatively small amount of Rp. 700,000 was spent per episode.¹⁹⁵

Employing simple technical devices and one camera, exterior and interior takes were shot in the village. Studio recordings were ruled out. The material was edited into short fragments, focusing on the different storylines. In the studio, music and extra sounds produced by a synthesizer were added. During the recording, extensive use was made of the script (*naskah acara siaran*), usually written by Heru Kesawa Murti, a well-known Yogyakarta actor, co-founder of the Gandrik Theatre Troupe and character voicing the persuasive messages in *Mbangun Desa*. The scripts contained a meticulous description in Indonesian of the scenes, indications for the takes and for the accompanying music, sound (and the absence of sound), as well as indications of the way the dialogues should be spoken. Although completely committed to paper, the Javanese dialogues were personally interpreted by the actors and enlivened by improvising on the written text.

Setting: 'When the real is no longer what it was'¹⁹⁶

Villages on the outskirts of Yogyakarta provided the setting for the new series.¹⁹⁷ These villages were deliberately chosen to build an emotional link between the village-dwellers and the programme, engender empathy among the villagers and build alliances with the local viewers. After all, as producer Agus Kismadi said, the series was of the people, for the people and by the people (*dari masyarakat, untuk masyarakat, oleh masyarakat*).¹⁹⁸ TVRI employed various strategies to represent the local and enhance *akrab*-ness.

The opening shot of each episode set the rural atmosphere in which the story would unfold: in the midst of green rice-fields, surrounded by trees with rustling leaves, the villagers were going about their lives, while the sound of a cock crowing or a traditional Javanese song injected an idyllic tone. The inhabitants came and went, met each other, worked or enjoyed performances, encountered interrelational and other problems and solved them. However, the setting was tranquil and clean. No vendors, motorbikes or cars disrupted the peace. No sounds of radios or television sets were heard, except when dictated by the script, no sawing or hammering of house constructors. The streets were empty of people, except the characters of *Mbangun Desa*: the vendor selling brooms, calling out "Puuuu, sapu", children playing in the dusty lanes, Dhik Padma, anxiously hiding under the trees from her brother who wants to

¹⁹⁵ Personal communication Ahmad Sofyan, 22 January 1998. Rp. 700,000 corresponded to US\$ 323.96.

¹⁹⁶ 'When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning' (Baudrillard 1994:6).

¹⁹⁷ In 1994, for instance, the hamlets (*dusun*) Randubelang and Semail, in the village Bangunharjo, Sewon, Bantul ((a) 1994a); in 1997-1998, Jetak, a hamlet in the village Sidokarto that is in the area of Godean (Sleman, Yogyakarta), where I witnessed a recording in 1998.

¹⁹⁸ Personal communication Agus Kismadi, 27 June 2001.

give her in marriage to a close relative, or Den Baguse Ngarso, whining and grumbling as usual. Villagers were involved when the drama needed their presence: in walk-on parts, acting the role of villagers during a local dance performance or at Den Baguse Ngarso's wedding ceremony and reception. As discussants, they reflected on the programme contents and the issues raised in gatherings that were organized a few weeks after a broadcast. As onlookers, they witnessed the filming in their village, after the crew had taken charge of their natural habitat to transform it into the *Mbangun Desa* village.

The imaged world consisted of a representation of traditional rural Java that had been in touch with the global, symbolized by radio and television sets, mobile phones and karaoke, but had not been touched by it. Even though in actual fact traditional Javanese village life was continuously being reconstructed, the TVRI production team did strive for authenticity. The producer told me that, because of encroaching urbanization, to maintain an 'authentic' setting, the crew had to move several times, each time farther away from the city of Yogyakarta. Although for many years the national government had been promoting the building of brick houses, the walls of an 'authentic' village house in the series were still made of woven bamboo (*omah gedheg*). Developments in the 'real' village had overtaken the 'original' quietness, symbols of modernity disturbed the picture of 'reality', hence the recordings had to take place in another setting. Although the scenery was live, the way it was used by and for the medium TV, made it into a mere décor, a rather idyllic representation of a remote 'traditional' Central Javanese village, a simulation cut off from its referentials (Baudrillard 1994:2) – referentials that slowly but surely were disappearing. When asked why he considered this representation of a Javanese village so important, the producer said he wanted to create a village of nostalgia, because that was what the people liked (*nostalgia, karena disukai penonton*).¹⁹⁹ Nostalgia, a central mode of image production and reception (Appadurai 1998:30), was used as a device to make the series more alluring to the viewers. The representation of an idealized village suited this rhetoric. Consequently, *Mbangun Desa* was said to present a dream village (*desa impian*) (Hariadi SN and Ons Oentoro 1996:64), in which conflicts were solved easily, quickly and smoothly.

Research carried out in 1996 by Hariadi SN and Ons Oentoro (1996:61-65) revealed that the villagers were well aware of the fact that the *Mbangun Desa* village was no more than a representation of a rural environment. This fictional locale had been specifically designed to voice government messages, not to discuss the villagers' actual struggles and solve their complex problems. How could television do this, they asked, in a thirty-minute episode? Researchers claimed that the purpose of the programme *Mbangun Desa*, to paint a portrait of a village in the development era, had actually become a portrait of development itself. It showed how the development programmes were carried out (Hariadi and Oentoro 1996:61-65). Both the awareness of the villagers and the perception of *Mbangun Desa* as a portrait of development conform to the reflexive character of media.

¹⁹⁹ Personal communication by Ahmad Sofyan, August 1999.

Cast and characters

To make *Mbangun Desa* more lively, the then producer, Ahmad Sofyan, involved members of the Yogyakarta theatre group Gandrik. He had realized that, if information were to be disseminated effectively, this exercise would need more than just the presence of government experts who bestowed their expertise and knowledge patronizingly on the villagers. The Gandrik actors could and would influence and change the presentation, adding new dimensions to the programme.

Gandrik was founded in Yogyakarta in 1983, in a period in which the New Order government promoted ‘modern theatre with an indigenous, populist flavour’ (Hatley 2008:138). The troupe performed modern Indonesian theatre, inspired by local Javanese folk plays and traditional theatre and music genres derived from a multitude of locations (*Brigade Maling* 1999). In its plays it featured present-day themes and social criticism, expressed by humour and parody. In their performances, the actors strove to blur the boundaries between the stage and the audiences.²⁰⁰ Although known and appreciated by the public for their *sampakan* style, ‘a new mode of performance’ (Hatley 2007:96) that was introduced by Gandrik and its predecessor, Jeprik, the group later tried to move away from this label (*Brigade Maling* 1999). Hatley describes the term *sampakan* as ‘derive[d] from the simple, repetitive gamelan piece *sampak*, which accompanies fights and other energetic action in wayang and other forms of Javanese theatre. Applied to the new style of play, it suggested simplicity, lack of subtlety, and dynamic vigour’ (Hatley 2008:137).²⁰¹ As Hatley (2008:143) states, Gandrik attracted and entertained a cross-section of the population. Middle-class audiences attended its live performances and ‘the mass of ordinary people’ watched them on television. Likewise, familiar as they were to the Javanese/Yogyakarta public, the Gandrik actors infused *Mbangun Desa* with their own popularity. Most of the Gandrik actors were experienced television and film performers and this influenced the staging of their plays.²⁰²

Gandrik’s contributions to *Mbangun Desa* were manifold. The use of performance to entertain and educate ordinary people (Hatley 2008:139) and reflect ‘on issues of immediate interest and concern to audience members’ (Hatley 2008:141) had been concerns of the group. These attitudes suited both the approach of *Mbangun Desa* to entertain and educate rural audiences and the topics discussed. More of its contributions can be found in their modelling of the character typology and the introduction of other influences from traditional regional theatre forms, the presence of ‘Yogyakarta’ as expressed in the language use, the puns and the characteristic humour, and their acknowledged proximity to the Yogyakarta audiences. Nevertheless, the worlds of Gandrik and *Mbangun Desa* differed significantly in the aims and character of the mediation: Gandrik’s theatrical role was to be critical and sharp. In *Mbangun*

²⁰⁰ <http://www.kuaetnika.com/gandrik.php?ver=ina> [Last accessed July 2013].

²⁰¹ On Teater Gandrik, see Hatley (1995:58-60, 1999:276, 2004:72, 2007:96, 2008:137-148).

²⁰² See, for instance, *Mas Tom* (2002), an adaptation of Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, that was transposed to the Yogyakarta’s batik business scene of the 1980s. The contemporary drama was given a cinematographic touch (Hasani and Poer 2002). Almost all the Gandrik actors had performed in the sinetron *Badut pasti berlalu* (Indosiar 2002), Heru Kesawa Murti, Susilo Nugroho and Sepnu Heryanto played in *Mbangun Desa*, and Djaduk Ferianto and his brother, Butet Kertaradjasa, frequently appeared on television and acted in the children’s movie *Petualangan Sherina* (Hasani and Poer 2002). The 2013 critical comedy *Gundala Gawat* made use of audiovisual techniques and animation (Lutfie 2013).

Desa there was no room for this, hence the more subtle approach to the outside world (Hariadi and Oentoro 1996:63).

Heru Kesawa Murti and Susilo Nugroho wrote the scripts for *Mbangun Desa* and appeared in the series as actors. Sepnu Heryanto and Yayuk Kesawamurti, other Gandrik members, joined the club.²⁰³ Together with Sudiharjo they formed the *sanggar* Lima Sekawan (the Gang of Five studio). This studio was founded to keep the interests of Teater Gandrik separate from the *Mbangun Desa* interests. In co-operation with popular guest actors, *bintang tamu*,²⁰⁴ and occasionally with villagers, the five protagonists carried the series.

The inhabitants of the *Mbangun Desa* village were represented by these ‘Lima Sekawan’, five characters each with his or her own typological features, representing specific human traits.²⁰⁵ The most popular character, after whom the series was often called, was Den Baguse Ngarso,²⁰⁶ performed by Susilo Nugroho. He was rich, stubborn and cocky, a feudal man who sometimes tried to appear more clever than he was (*sok pintar*). He expressed himself using a highbrow vocabulary, occasionally deteriorating into offensive language. Ngarsopareng was the story’s antagonist, but he was good at heart. In many episodes he had to be convinced that he was wrong. Pak Bina, played by Heru Kesawa Murti, the playwright, was an informal character. He was moderate, rational, intelligent and active, and protected those who needed it. Pak Bina was a negotiator (*musyawarah*) who was an arbitrator in conflicts. As he voiced the messages of the authorities, he became an authority himself; protecting the source credibility in his role, he tried to persuade his conversation partners. Sepnu Heryanto as Kuriman puts a ‘businessman’ (a *bakul*) on the village stage. Kuriman was materialistic, liked to weigh up the pros and cons of everything, and he bore a grudge against people and was arrogant. Sranta, played by Sudiharjo, was Ngarsopareng’s servant. He was honest, patient and good-natured, and poorly educated. His wife, Yu Sranta, a role of Yayuk Kesawamurti, was active and tended to give in easily. She was involved in a local women’s organization. The characters did not develop over the course of time. Their portrayal and their stereotypical features were inspired by the typology of kethoprak and Javanese wayang characters.²⁰⁷ Pak Bina and Den Baguse Ngarso carried the series, and attracted the most attention. This was obvious in the way both the producers and newspaper articles dwelt on their characteristics and roles.

Whereas in the previous format, the gap between those who gave the information and those to whom the information was directed, had been enormous, in the new format ‘the authority’ was presented as being one of the villagers, those who were being taught. The aim of this change was to enable the easy identification of the television audiences with the inhabitants of

²⁰³ In Teater Gandrik’s *Brigade Maling* (1999), of these four, only Heru Kesawa Murti was performing.

²⁰⁴ Like comedian Yatie Pesek and actress Tatiek Wardiyono (Joko Indro Cayhono 1994:53).

²⁰⁵ The typologies are based on interviews with Ahmad Sofyan (among others on 22 January 1998), on Hariadi and Oentoro (1996: 61-65), (Tulus DS/Job)-h 1993, *Djaka Lodang* 1 January 1994, and on the descriptions of the characters in the *Mbangun Desa* scripts.

²⁰⁶ His full name, Den Baguse Ngarsopareng, was not often used.

²⁰⁷ I am very grateful to Mas Eko Santoso Ompong who drew my attention to this similarity.

the *Mbangun Desa* village and, consequently, participation in the learning process. Since sources of information should have faces that can be trusted, to vindicate the veracity of the message, it was further helpful that the actors were not only popular as characters in the series, but also known as persons in 'live' (non-mediated) contexts.

On the other hand, the typical features of the main dramatis personae did draw the viewers' attention to something else. The gestures, the mimicry and the dialogues reminded the audiences of the acting practises of the Gandrik theatre troupe, and especially the language use and parody, irony and satire (*Heru Kesawa* 1997), while the humour and jokes provoked laughter. Consequently, the fictional world of the Gang of Five remained fictional, but captured the audiences. They recognized the codes and enjoyed themselves. Since the episodes did not initially conclude with a cliffhanger, the fans did not expect a continuation of the story. A repeated exposure to the adventures of their favourite *Lima Sekawan* in a recognizable setting was what was promised for the next broadcast. Hence, the 'field of tension between the fictional and the real' (Ang 1993:50) was maintained.

Contents

The presentation of the message in another format and style was innovative. Embedded in a story, the message was made part of the narration in an apparently natural manner. Non-fiction was dramatized and turned into fiction.

Within the confines of a fixed format, variation was put in the contents. Each episode, called a *lakon*, a term used in traditional Javanese drama, told a different story, always revolving around the same main characters. One or two story-lines introduced the issue that had to be tackled. In half an hour, the 'inhabitants' of the Javanese village were confronted with a problem that caused suspense or raised emotions, whereafter Pak Bina, the wise man, intervened and helped them to solve the problem, giving them the information needed/the persuasive message. Informative topics ranged from a healthy living environment, nutrients for pregnant women, the optimal use of the area surrounding the house, co-operation among villagers, transmigration, the importance of discipline to all kinds of legislative issues. In short and sometimes dramatic scenes, the different storylines were developed in a simply structured way; sometimes in a chronological order, sometimes making use of flash-backs. The simultaneity of certain actions was suggested by the editing and montage. The pace was rather slow, especially compared to the glamorous productions of the private Indonesian television stations.

In spite of the new format, the dissemination of government information remained important. In many interviews published in magazines and newspapers, the producers stressed that the main mission still consisted of providing information and supporting the rural people trying to improve their standard of living. However, now they strove to present the material in a natural way, without sounding too pedantic (*tanpa menggurui*), they claimed (Ahmad Sofyan in (gea) 1993a). The themes were chosen because of their topicality. Social and cultural problems and all kinds of topics connected to village life were tackled – but political issues were avoided (Cahyono 1994b:53). As the contents were often linked to special events,

like Independence Day or the Day of the Co-operative, or specific circumstances, like the economic crisis in 1997-1998, the series gained currency.

The National Department of Information (Departemen Penerangan) was not the only body that provided the producers with themes to be expanded; local government institutions on different administrative levels like the National Family Planning Board of the Province of Central Java (Badan Koordinasi Keluarga Berencana Nasional, *BKKBN Propinsi Jateng*)²⁰⁸ or the Information Department of the City of Yogyakarta (Departemen Penerangan Kotamadya Yogyakarta, *Deppen Kodya*)²⁰⁹ actively contributed to the programme's content. Even after the abolition of the National Department of Information in October 1999, government institutions continued to sponsor *Mbangun Desa*. Increasingly, however, the role of local NGOs as contributors to the programme began to grow. Nevertheless, the script-writer and producer of the series were keen to retain their independence as far as possible. This desire for independence had an effect on the financial aspects of the production, that constantly had to be kept low-cost (Hariadi and Oentoro 1996:64).

*An electronic medium of persuasion and information*²¹⁰ – Genre

From the point of view of genre, *Mbangun Desa* remains difficult to define. The various people who were involved with the programme used different labels when they tried to classify the programme.

In a personal communication, Ahmad Sofyan called the series Javanese drama (*sandiwara bahasa Jawa*).²¹¹ Although this term stresses the dramatic and entertaining characteristics of the series, TVRI did not consider the programme to belong to the drama department, but to the sub-section Reporting and Information (Subseksi Reportase dan Penerangan). During the same interview, Sofyan also used the term 'infotainment', explaining that the viewer was lured in by entertainment, then informed. The local Javanese magazine *Djaka Lodang* called the series a soap opera (*sinetron mBangun Desa*) (Indriyasiwi 1994). Heru Kesawa Murti, *Mbangun Desa*'s most active playwright, used several terms as well. In 1993 he said that the aims of the programme were to package the conflict of the story in a sinetronic (soap opera) touch (*mengemas konflik lakon itu dalam sentuhan sinetronis*) (Heru Kesawa 1993). In an interview with the local newspaper *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, he referred to the series as a sitcom (*komedi situasi*) (Heru Kesawa 1997). In her exposé of the Gandrik Theatre Group, kethoprak expert Hatley calls *Mbangun Desa* a television comedy sketch (2008:141).

Whereas in the early days it was clear that the programme was disseminating information, whose origin and genre were obvious to the viewers, the new style and format made the classification of the programme as a specific genre more diffuse. Interviews have shown that *Mbangun Desa* was usually bracketed together with *kethoprak*. Both performance genres were associated with the concepts traditional and local.

²⁰⁸ *Mbangun Desa* 1984.

²⁰⁹ *Di layar TV* 1984.

²¹⁰ 'Media persuasi dan penyuluhan elektronik' (Hariadi and Oentoro 1996:65).

²¹¹ On 22 January 1998.

3 Approximating local idioms

The 1988 workshop on development broadcasting advocated a local approach. Producers of development programmes – with respect to their informative and persuasive aims – were recommended to approximate the local idioms as they were used in the Indonesian regions. The production of the local encompassed language use and cultural expressions, the term local idiom referring to *kearifan lokal* ('local wisdom') rather than to just the vernacular.

Language use and persuasive messages

The narration in *Mbangun Desa* was carried by the spoken dialogues more than by the visual images, and supported by sound. Consequently, the programme contained features of traditional Javanese theatre (like *kethoprak*) and oral traditions.

In their 'daily' conversations, the *Mbangun Desa* 'villagers' used the Javanese vernacular, just as Javanese is the mother tongue of most of the Javanese, their first language of communication and reflection and the vehicle through which to express Javanese culture. However, as with the language use in the programme *Obrolan Angkring*, the Javanese spoken was not the 'proper' Javanese, the language that is taught in schools and discussed during the Javanese language congresses. However, in contrast to *kethoprak* in which specific styles of Javanese are spoken and *Obrolan Angkring* in which *ngoko* is usually used, the characters in *Mbangun Desa* more often than not tended to speak *basa madya* and *ngoko*, a reference to quotidian language use and suggesting an everyday rural atmosphere. Script-writer Heru Kesawa Murti said Jakartan youth jargon (*prokem*), slang, reversed speech (*walikan*) and Indonesian had been incorporated in the dialogues for communicative purposes. As he explained in an interview during the 2001 Javanese Congress in Yogyakarta, when it was all said and done not all media needed to use the standard Javanese (*Heru Kesawa Murti* 2001). As such, language use was part of the representation of contemporary village culture. Fans often commented positively on this in their letters to TVRI.

Javanese was also used to 'translate' government legislation into the conversational style of the local language and represent government discourse, the original message of which was spoken in Indonesian. Usually Pak Bina took the role of messenger, addressing the people in their own language, but also using the language of authority. He conveyed the informative texts in a mixture of legal jargon and explanations in Indonesian, pronounced in a Javanese accent and spoken respecting Javanese etiquette. In between, a translation and more explanations were given in Javanese. Although the producers tried to avoid a pedantic tone, the message was conveyed in a persuasive and rather pompous way, akin to Javanese *piwulang*, a traditional Javanese manner of instruction. To the audiences it was clear that when THE authority spoke, a different kind of language and a different mode would be used to that the *Mbangun Desa* villagers spoke among themselves in regular dialogues or when they made puns. Conveying the message, Pak Bina acted as the wise intellectual of the village who was trying to dismantle old customs and assist his fellow villagers in the intricacies of

legislation. Gradually, over the years, also other characters conveyed loaded messages, but did so more indirectly.

The episode *Nyurung karep* (March 1998) offers an example of Pak Bina explaining Indonesian legislation about child welfare (Undang-Undang Kesejahteraan Anak) to a fellow villager. One of the story-lines in this episode concerns the daughter of a seller of meat-ball soup (*bakso*) who has to leave school to assist her parents in their business. Pak Bina explains to the girl's father the possibilities of combining school and work. He indicates the regular high school system and the Open School system (SLTP Terbuka). Referring to a recent Family Legal Awareness meeting (Keluarga Sadar Hukum, Kadarkum) (Pompe 2005:202) in the village, he clarified the relevant clause as follows, switching between Javanese (in the explanation) and Indonesian (for the juridicial text, here in italics):

Indeed, according to the law... a child has rights.

This reminds me: recently, on Tuesday Pon the Kadarkum symposium in the village hall tackled *the legislation on child welfare*. This law mentions that *children have the right to have access to services that will enable them to develop their social and existential capacities that fit in with the culture and identity of the nation and so become good and useful citizens*.

That's more or less the story.

Now, when your daughter wants to continue her education and go to junior high school, this falls within the category of developing one's capacities. That's the long and the short of it. *The rest* is up to you, after all your children want this themselves.²¹²

While explaining the legislation, Pak Bina pretended not to be the source of the information alias authority himself. He referred to the Kadarkum village meeting at which he had learned this, he said. Alluding to this event that had been organized for the villagers, Pak Bina shaped a common frame of reference and strengthened source credibility, making the message more easily acceptable to the recipients. This kind of persuasion is pretty direct. Examples of more indirect persuasive messages will feature in the final section of this chapter.

Humour and suspense

As humour and parody are part and parcel of Javanese culture, they were important devices in *Mbangun Desa*. They ensured that the situations represented were even more recognizable to the viewers. Besides, parody was the instrument used to put the representation of the local and the national into perspective. Typical aspects of Javanese culture were taken as a basis for this parody, as a mode of reflection, to explore whether Javanese was able to tune in to contemporary developments (*Heru Kesawa* 2001).

Susilo Nugroho and Sudiharjo have stated that comedy (*kesenian lawak*) is the most suitable medium for the communication of development messages. Therefore they (and the

²¹² Anak kuwi pancen nduwe ... secara hukum nduwe hak.

Aku kok malah dadi kelingan: wingi, Selasa Pon wingi neng bale desa Sarasehan Kadarkum sing rembug soal UU tentang Kesejahteraan Anak, neng nggon Undang-Undang kuwi dikandhakke yen *anak berhak atas pelayanan untuk mengembangkan kemampuan dan kehidupan sosialnya sesuai dengan kebudayaan dan kepribadian bangsa untuk menjadi warga negara yang baik dan berguna*.

Kira-kira ngono kuwi.

Nah anakmu kepingin neruske le sekolah kuwi, neruske neng SMP, klebu nembangke kemampuan. Ning ya kuwi. *Seterusnya* ya ming mangga kowe, wong ya sing ngarahke ya anak-anakmu dhewe.

other members of the Lima Sekawan) invariably resorted to verbal and other forms of humour in their performances (Tulus DS/Job)-h 1993). This tactic corresponds to the humour of the clowns in wayang, kethoprak, ludruk and Srimulat when they communicate government messages and ‘tell the truth’. Hatley argues, ‘Humorous performances conveying government information have a long history in Yogyakarta in the form of *dagelan Mataram*, Javanese language comedy skits’ (Hatley 2008a:305). As I have demonstrated in the Introduction to Part II, in colonial times even the Dutch took advantage of the authoritative position of the clowns to get their messages across.

However, although *Mbangun Desa* developed into comic drama (*didramahumorkan*),²¹³ it did not become a comedy factory (*pabrik tawa*), says Heru Kesawa Murti. Despite the humour and the comedy, the mission to disseminate information remained ever present. Therefore, suspense was given a key function in all the episodes (*Heru Kesawa* 1992); its mission to arouse and retain the curiosity of the viewers.

Local culture

Another layer of narratives, genres, appeals and modes of address can be found in the representation of local culture. Alongside the informing and persuading of audiences, the preservation of local culture had emerged as another aim of the programme. Several strategies were used to represent local culture. Cultural events and traditional ceremonies celebrated in villages were made part of the setting and incorporated into the storyline. A horse dance (*jathilan*) performed in Semail, Bangunharjo (Bantul), became part of the narration, for instance ((cr11) 2001b). In the episode *Kakung putri padha wae* (Men and women are the same), a discussion on gender relations was embedded in a storyline about a group of young villagers rehearsing for the performance genre *gejog lesung*. Dancing and singing to the rhythmic percussion sounds obtained by beating on and in a wooden rice-pounder, the *lesung*, they prepared for the celebration of Hari Sumpah Pemuda (Youth Pledge Day),²¹⁴ while Siniwaka obstinately insisted that the organizing committee should arrange a karaoke performance. The two parties, the young villagers representing tradition and the adult Siniwaka representing modernity, were juxtaposed. In this episode, members of an existing *gejog lesung* group enacted the performance.

Another strategy consisted of a reconstruction of cultural expressions, played by actors, representing local villagers, while some of the local villagers – inhabitants of the recording locale – played themselves. We could see Den Baguse Ngarso trying to get a *campursari* group together (Deskim 19), and in several episodes we could hear a character vocalize traditional Javanese poetry (*tembang macapat*). For various reasons, the original ceremonies or performances were depicted only in part – a characteristic of representation. For instance, when Den Baguse Ngarso was married for the second time, a traditional Javanese wedding ceremony was staged. In this reconstruction and reinterpretation of the ceremony, the programme only paid attention to most important stages, and even then in a condensed form,

²¹³ <http://www.indonesia.com/bernas/082001/04/UTAMA/04hib1.htm>

²¹⁴ Hari Sumpah Pemuda commemorates the Youth Pledge (Sumpah Pemuda) at the Youth Congress on 28 October 1928: One motherland, one nation, one language.

whereupon a man in a village who had watched the broadcast claimed that the wedding was fake since important parts were lacking. I shall return to the relationship between ‘the real’ and ‘the represented’ in the final part of this chapter.

The presentation and representation of local culture had both functional and aesthetic purposes (Surjodiningrat 1982:13). They were not only used to preserve Javanese culture. One of the aims was to present traditional art forms to members of the younger generation and to show them how it used to be,²¹⁵ addressing feelings of nostalgia. As in other TVRI Yogyakarta programmes like *Obrolan Angkring*, they were also an asset to improve communication, enable identification and establish alliances with local audiences to facilitate the penetration of *Mbangun Desa*’s messages in a quasi-homely atmosphere.

4 Audience contact

If it were to succeed in ‘developing the village’, TVRI Yogyakarta needed audience participation. It resorted to various strategies to interact with those whom it imagined to be the *Mbangun Desa* audiences. In their turn, the audiences had several channels at their disposal to respond to the programme in various ways.

Print press and radio were involved in propagating *Mbangun Desa*. Preceding each broadcast, the contents of the forthcoming episode were announced in the magazines *Mekar Sari* (in the section Koran Mbangun Desa) and *Djaka Lodang* (in the section Koran Mlebu Desa), and in the regional newspaper *Bernas*. Interviews with the producer of the series and the script-writers and actors were published in the Yogyakarta newspaper *Kedaulatan Rakyat*. The series also attracted critical attention in *Minggu Pagi*, the *VISTA-TV* magazine and Jakarta-based newspapers. In his efforts to promote special broadcasts like *The Week of Mbangun Desa* (*Sepekan Mbangun Desa*), producer Ahmad Sofyan also relied on local government radio services (Radio Siaran Pemerintah Daerah, RSPD) all over the Special Region of Yogyakarta and Central Java and disseminated brochures (*Sepekan Mbangun* 1994, Sobirin 1994, Marsono 1994).²¹⁶

Initially, *Mbangun Desa* targeted a rural public, the majority of whom earned their living by farming. In its heyday, these rural viewers were joined by an urban public, including students, urban intellectuals and middle-class people who fell into the habit of watching the programme. Until May 1996 *Mbangun Desa* was broadcast all over the Special Region of Yogyakarta and Central Java. In April 1995, when the new regional TVRI station in Semarang began transmitting and *Mbangun Desa* disappeared from screens in Central Java, its many fans grew restive. They complained *en masse* since it was not only impossible for them to watch their favourite development information programme, other productions of TVRI Yogyakarta like kethoprak and popular quizzes were also no longer available. Initially TVRI Semarang chose to ignore the complaints and refused to relay the programmes produced by the Yogyakarta station. In response to the overwhelming demand of its audiences

²¹⁵ Personal communication Agus Kismadi, 27 June 2001.

²¹⁶ 20,000 in 1994.

and the attention the local mass media devoted to this topic, eventually the Secretary of the General Directorate of Radio, Television and Film (*Sekretaris Dirjen RTF*) urged TVRI Semarang to relay the most popular productions of TVRI Yogyakarta ((sam) 1995). By the end of August 1995, TVRI Stasiun Semarang had begun to relay the broadcasts on a temporary basis, one year only, just until it had developed its own formats. After the official launch of TVRI Semarang by the Indonesian president on 29 May 1996, the station stopped these relays (MH 1995:58). In short, the expansion of TVRI by the addition of the new station in Semarang and bolstered by the strong political backing it received from the local governor affected TVRI Yogyakarta negatively, turning it into the competitor of the Semarang station.

The producers of the programme claimed that they catered as much as possible to audience needs and wishes and that they provided space for their voices, both in the content and context of the programme and in off-air activities: they looked into requests to change the broadcasting schedule, increase the broadcast frequency (to twice a month in 1994) and to transform the programme into a serial with a continuing storyline ((abi/gea) 1993). Other suggestions and requests from the public that were met included locating the *Mbangun Desa* village in the Banyumas area instead of Yogyakarta, henceforth it would feature speakers of the Banyumas dialect and give glimpses of Banyumas culture (*Paket Mbangun* 1993, Cahyono 1994b:53). It acquiesced in requests to play a walk-on part in the programme or to obtain a picture of the Lima Sekawan. Some viewers asked the producer to tackle a problem with which they were personally confronted.

One way to establish firmer contacts and relations with the audiences was the organization of *The Week of Mbangun Desa*, consisting of the broadcasting of the programme daily in a specific week. The purpose of these *Mbangun Desa* weeks was to obtain information about the effects of the programme on the audiences ((gea) 1993b), to stir up *Mbangun Desa* fever (Cahyono 1994b:53), to evaluate the series' popularity among the general public ((sam) 1994) and win back the hearts of the public (Marsono 1994) and, finally but very necessarily, to attract sponsors.²¹⁷ To achieve these goals, TVRI Yogyakarta combined on-air activity with a quiz (*quizz berhadiah*). Viewers were invited to choose their favourite programme out of the seven *Mbangun Desa* broadcasts of the week and give arguments to support their choice. The quiz was open to individuals and groups – members of the *Kelompencapir* and Farmers Groups (*Kelompok Tani*). The sponsors provided the prizes, including a hand-tractor, colour TV sets, radio-compo sets, agricultural equipment and the capital to begin a business (Gatot Marsono 1994). In 1993 the TV station received around 65,000 postcards with audience reactions,²¹⁸ not only from the areas within its reach, the Special Region of Yogyakarta and Central Java, but from other places as well; in 1994 the number of postcards rose to more than 90,000.²¹⁹ Contests between *Kelompencapir* Groups on the provincial level featured in *Mbangun Desa*; the winners joined in the national *kelompencapir* contest ((SAB) 1986).

²¹⁷ The question was whether they still enjoyed watching the programme, or whether they had grown bored ('apa pancen isih didhemeni, apa wis padha bosen') (*Sepekan Mbangun* 1994).

²¹⁸ Setyadi et al., 1995 give 65,145 on p. 6 and 64,043 on p. 21; most newspapers give 65,000.

²¹⁹ Setyadi et al. (1995:22) give 89,936; *Kompas* (*TVRI Yogyakarta mengacu* 1994) gives 95,000.

Another incentive consisted of the letter-cum-present system (*surat berhadiah*), rewarding the senders of every first ten letters offering criticism and containing suggestions for improvements that TVRI Yogyakarta received after a *Mbangun Desa* broadcast. TVRI organized this in co-operation with *Koran Mlebu Desa*, *Mekar Sari*, *Djaka Lodang* and *Bernas*, the local magazines and newspaper that published a synopsis before the broadcast of an episode (*Mbangun desa* 1996).

Direct contact was made with members of the audience in discussions after the programme was broadcast. The episode *Manten anyar* (Newlyweds), for instance, was evaluated in a discussion with the inhabitants of the village Dayu (Gadingsari, Sanden) in Bantul on 11 August 2001. Present were the TVRI producer, some of the actors and representatives of the sponsoring organization, the Institute for the Study and Development of Women and Children (Lembaga Studi Perempuan dan Pengembangan Anak, LSPPA), who wanted to gain an insight into how the programme content was received in the village. The villagers who had played themselves as villagers in the episode and those who had watched the programme joined in the session.²²⁰

The popularity of the *Mbangun Desa* characters, an important asset in the creation of *akrab*-ness with the viewers, spread beyond their life on the screen. When *Mbangun Desa* artists made an appearance in other television programmes or in off-air TVRI or other activities, their presence always attracted large audiences. For example, from 13 December 1994 to 15 January 1995, the famous kethoprak troupe Siswo Budoyo performed at the Sriwedari Theatre in Solo. The final performance of the series was staged in collaboration with members of the *Mbangun Desa* troupe, Den Baguse Ngarso in particular, and with the popular Javanese artists Yati Pesek and Didik Nini Thowok. Audiences from various towns in the Solo area flooded the performance premises. Before this event, after Den Baguse Ngarso and the Surabayan comedian Kirun and friends had joined Siswo Budoyo as guest actors, the income of the troupe had increased significantly ((Asa) 1995).

The artists performed at events organized to disseminate government development messages, for instance, to make people aware that they had to pay taxes. Their comic performance was their forte in conveying these messages ((Tulus DS/Job)-h 1993). When they contributed to social welfare activities, they expressed their solidarity with the people. Susilo Nugroho alias Den Baguse Ngarso performed comedy for the victims of the earthquake in Yogyakarta in 2006, for example. Together with some fellow comedians, he entertained the people and seized the opportunity to criticize the official aid agencies' slowness to act. One of his jokes, presented as a pun on words, tackled the postponement of financial aid from the government (Sulistiyawaty 2006). Whenever the actors who performed the *Mbangun Desa* characters participated as speakers in external activities, they were invariably associated with their role in the series, again blurring the fictional and the real. This association has continued to the time of writing.

²²⁰ After the evaluation and discussion I attended personally the producers gave me a written report of the event.

The public responding

The public had several channels through which it could discuss its reception of *Mbangun Desa*, make its wishes, questions, requests and criticism known and offer suggestions to improve the programme. Its members sent letters to the editors of the print press with whom the *Mbangun Desa* staff co-operated, contacted those responsible for the programme and the actors at TVRI Yogyakarta directly. The letters came from inhabitants of the Special Region of Yogyakarta and Central Java, from people from a variety of social backgrounds (but mostly middle class), gender, age and profession. All the while, the audiences imagined as ‘the’ target audience were not really represented in these letters – their voices were presumed to be represented by the *kelompokcapir* and the farmers’ groups. Some of the letters to the station were written in Javanese, but most of those I saw (of December 1995 and January 1996) were in Indonesian.

The majority of the correspondents in the mid-1990s confirmed the discourse on the programme in the print press: the viewers said they looked forward to watching the programme, even if they had to do so at the neighbours’ as they did not yet own a television set. From young to old, they gathered in front of a television set, impatiently waiting for the broadcast to begin. Afterwards they liked to discuss it with their colleagues at the office or their fellow pupils at school, imitating the characteristic dialogues and typical expressions (like Den Baguse Ngarso who indicated his disapproval with the expression ‘*Sengit aku!*’ (How awful)).

The letters also reveal why *Mbangun Desa* was so attractive to the public:²²¹ the use of Javanese, easier for older villagers to understand than Indonesian, its entertaining and educative aspects, the familiarity with the main characters of the series, the incentives to develop the villages, the efforts to combat poverty and to inform the people and make them more knowledgeable were praised. The formulaic expressions that conformed to the Orde Baru development ideology and rhetoric were striking. One writer referred to the incentives offered in the programme to improve rural environment, and closed her letter with an enthusiastic ‘Come on! Let’s get on with development!’ (*Ayo! Terus membangun!*). The communicative character of the programme, representation enabling identification and the relevance and effects of the issues it tackled were mentioned. In particular the comic aspects of the programme, especially Den Baguse Ngarso’s humour, received much attention in the letters. *Mbangun Desa* was called an attractive regional show (*tontonan ‘daerah’*), that did not seem traditional when it was compared to conventional kethoprak and was refreshing when compared to the westernized movies and soaps on TV and to foreign programmes (in one letter referred to as ‘Chinese kethoprak, India-style drama and Latin American telenovelas’) that were dismissed as boring.

Criticism was levelled at the overacting of Den Baguse Ngarso (the writer of the letter acknowledged that he was a fictive character, but wondered if such a character would be encountered in the ‘real’ world). Some considered Pak Bina’s style of communicating information too patronizing. However, the heaviest criticism was reserved for the content of

²²¹ See also the outcome of Hariadi’s and Oentoro’s research (1994), conducted in several villages in 1996, about the reception of *Mbangun Desa*.

the programme and the representation: the audiences saw *Mbangun Desa* as pure fiction, unrepresentative of real village life and it did not offer solutions to the social and economic problems with which they as real villagers had to cope.

Various letters contained suggestions. These ranged from using different spaces as shooting locations to introducing more contemporary environments into the programme. Hot topics at the moment that were being talked about in Yogyakarta or Indonesia should be paid more attention. One letter-writer tackled a more central problem with which TVRI was confronted. If it were to compete with the private television stations, TVRI should be allowed to resume broadcasting advertisements, he wrote. This would raise the quality of its broadcasts (Agus Trie Prasetyo 1994).

These responses from the public demonstrate the insight the audiences had into the workings of the media and how they reflected on the multiple persuasive voices that were woven into the *Mbangun Desa* broadcasts. In the next section, I shall show how the *Mbangun Desa* staff produced the local, thereby shaping a familiar context in which to present the persuasive messages.

5 Persuasive voices: Men and women are just the same²²² – An example

Originally *Mbangun Desa* carried the development messages of the national government, but from the 1990s sponsoring by local government institutions and NGOs became more frequent.

In 2001, TVRI Yogyakarta broadcast a series of seven *Mbangun Desa* episodes that were produced in co-operation with the Institute for the Study and Development of Women and Children (Lembaga Studi Perempuan dan Pengembangan Anak, LSPPA). Taking up on one of the main topics of concern of this NGO, the series raised the issue of gender (in)equality, hence the title of the first episode, *Kakung putri padha wae*, men and women are just the same. This theme recurred in all the seven episodes. Because it was set in different situational contexts and conveyed in different ways by means of spoken text and images, the producers could approach the theme from various angles. The traditional interpretations of gender-dependent divisions of labour were countered by scenes depicting some of the protagonists crossing the gender divide. This was presented in several ways.

In the second episode, for instance, we see how Pak Bina is sweeping the floor and washing the dishes, while his wife Bu Bina is out running her own business. At a certain moment, Yu Sranta asks Bu Bina whether she can borrow a kerosene stove as her own needs repairing and her husband is not at home to do this. Bu Bina then invites Yu Sranta to use her kitchen. Whereas Pak Bina usually formulated the main message to be conveyed to the villagers – as he also continued to do in other episodes of this serial – , in the second episode it is his wife Bu Bina who pronounces the message. She explains to Yu Sranta that by dividing the work-load, her family did not differentiate between male and female, whether

²²² *Kakung putri padha wae*.

adults or children. They were all able to tackle the jobs that had to be done at home. After all, what is known as work does not differentiate between men and women, she concludes.²²³ This scene presents the viewers with a problem in a recognizable situation, facilitating their process of identifying. The solution to the problem is to be found in the message about gender equality. Direct persuasion is avoided, as is the case in the example about Child Welfare Law (in the episode *Nyurung karep* of March 1998), but was directed towards one of the protagonists of the show as part of the story.

The discussion of the gender issue culminated in the fifth episode, entitled *Manten Anyar* (Newlyweds), featuring Den Baguse Ngarso's second wedding, after his divorce from his first wife. The immediate reason for featuring this theme was that the actress playing Den Baguse's wife had commitments elsewhere, so a new actress had to be introduced – a wonderful mixing of the real and the represented, the live and the mediated world. Her character was similar to that of Den Baguse Ngarso's previous wife: *galak* (fierce). In this episode, the traditional Javanese wedding ceremony was represented in three short scenes: the arrival of the bridegroom and his retinue in procession at the house of his future parents-in-law; the meeting of the bride with the bridegroom (*panggih*) and the bride washing the right foot of the bridegroom (Figure 8.1); the wedding reception.



8.1 The bride washes the foot of the bridegroom



8.2 Maiti asks her grandmother about the meaning of the ritual

This way of representing a Javanese wedding ceremony in the episode *Manten anyar* was commented on during the earlier-mentioned evaluation and discussion with inhabitants of Dayu village in August 2001. Apparently, the friction between realism and fictionalism was the main source of criticism. One of the villagers participating in the discussion said he was left dissatisfied as the ritual was incomplete (*kurang puas dengan pakem karena ada kekurangan*): according to Yogyakarta tradition, a wedding ceremony should include a ritual

²²³ Bu Bina: Nek ten keluarga kula, ning niki nek ten keluarga kula lho yu nggih, padha. Kula, bojo kula, anak kula lanang, wedok padha. Nek kula tinggal kesah, bojo kula ngliwet, ndamel wedang, ngenget jangan. Kompor rusak, nek mas Bina seg repot nggih kula sing ndandani. Anak kula sing lanang, resik-resik, ngewangi kula nggoreng lawuh. Padha yu. Kajenge saged mbagi peran. Gaweyan kula isa ditandangi bojo kula. Gaweyane anak kula wedok isa ditandangi anak kula lanang. Tur sing jeneng damelan niku rak mboten mbedake lanang wedok ta yu. (Episode 2, scene 24, dialogue 52-54, script Heru Kesawamurti LPPDES2)

meal (*slametan*). This was omitted from the programme. Another missed the actual celebration of the marriage (*adegan ijab-ijaban*). The producers, pointing to the media constraints, claimed that, as each episode lasted only thirty minutes, time constraints meant the choice of scenes was very limited.

The second scene, depicting the bride pouring water with flower petals over the bridegroom's foot, was reflected upon twice in the episode. After the wedding, one of the village children, Maiti, her feet in a bucket full of water, asked her grandmother about the meaning of this ritual (Figure 8.2). Her grandmother explained that it showed the wife paying her husband respect.



8.3 Maiti: 'It is not fair!'



8.4 Pak Bina (left) and Den Baguse Ngarso discussing the Marriage Act

Maiti wonders why Den Baguse Ngarso did not perform this ritual for his wife. She thought that as a husband he should have done so too.²²⁴ Later, when Maiti asked her grandmother whether the same had happened at the wedding of her own parents, the answer was far from clear. The issue was discussed again in a play, put on by the village children who imitated Den Baguse Ngarso's wedding. But there was an important difference: Maiti, who took the role of the bride, wanted her bridegroom – in the play and at her 'actual' wedding in the future – to wash her foot too.²²⁵ It was not fair, she exclaimed, that only the wife showed her husband respect but the husband did not reciprocate (Figure 8.3). Tuman, the boy playing the role of Maiti's bridegroom was nonplussed and did not know how to react to Maiti's request. He just stared at her, speechless. Pak Bina, who had been watching the children's play, commented on Maiti's request, agreeing with her point of view. His statement reinforced LPPSA's mission: in all contexts women and men were equal and should be treated equally. Maiti's friend, Enggar, represented yet another point of view: she wanted to skip the ritual

²²⁴ Yu Dalimuk Sapu: Mantene putri, den ayu Ngarso, wingi kae mijiki sukune mantene kakung, den baguse Ngarso, kuwi ki nadhakke supaya den ayune Ngarso bekti karo garwane, den baguse Ngarso kuwi.

Maiti: Ning den baguse Ngarso kok ora mijiki den ayune Ngarso mbah? Lho den ayune Ngarso rak ya garwane den baguse Ngarso ta, den baguse Ngarso rak ya kudu bekti karo garwane ta? (Episode 5, scene 13, dialogue 31-32, script Heru Kesawamurti LPPDES5)

²²⁵ Maiti: [...] sesuk nek aku dadi manten, aku arep njaluk, sikilku ya diwijiki karo bojoku. Dadine aku ora ming mijiki sikile bojoku. Wong lanang bekti karo wong wedok rak ya oleh ta, mbak?
and: Saiki gentenan aku sing diwijiki! Mongsok sing diwijiki ming cah lanang thok? Mongsok sing ngabekti ming cah wedok thok? Ora adil, ora adil. Cah lanang mestine ya isa ngabekti karo cah wedok.

altogether at her future wedding. She did not want to indulge in rituals whose meaning nobody no longer understood.²²⁶

As the narration continued, in this and the next episode, the discussion returned to Den Baguse Ngarso and his wife Mayoni, and the questions of which of the two should chair the planned meeting at their house and whether Den Baguse Ngarso had to accept his wife's offer to fund the ritual white porridge ceremony (*jenang sungsuman*), as he could not afford it himself. Both Bu Bina and Pak Bina intervened in the discussions. Bu Bina explained to Mayoni that the equality between husband and wife was regulated in the Government Marriage Act (Undang-Undang Perkawinan). Pak Bina went even further and, in a dialogue with Den Baguse Ngarso and Kuriman (Figure 8.4), quoted from the Marriage Act – presenting the persuasive message loud and clear:²²⁷

Well, Clause 31 of the Marriage Act clearly states: *the rights and position of the wife are in balance with the rights and position of the husband when sharing their life and household in society*. But I only know this because I attended the Family Legal Awareness meeting in the village hall. But it's up to you. I am merely replying to what you asked me just now. If I didn't answer your question, you would accuse me of being arrogant.

In order to tackle the gender issue, the series made use of a context familiar to the Javanese audiences: the preparations for a wedding and the wedding ceremony itself. Each separate episode presented further opportunities to discuss topics about social issues. In the seventh episode, for instance, Yu Dalimuk (Maiti's grandmother who cycled around the village to sell brooms) decided to visit a community learning centre and take an English course. Her decision disrupts Den Baguse Ngarso's plans. He wants her to work for him. The other villagers who wanted to help her to attend the school also find their plans in disarray. This situation was used to explain the aims and mission of the Community Learning Center (the Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Masyarakat, PKBM),²²⁸ that offered all kinds of extra-mural education. Agus Kismadi argued the messages were conveyed subtly (*halus*), for example, by neither quoting from nor referring to Indonesian legislation on the issue.²²⁹

The weight of the topics discussed was countered by comic scenes and by the scenes focusing on expressions of Javanese culture. The *gejog lesung* sequence that I described in the section about local culture is a good example. The episode told the story of the village youth practising a traditional dance and music genre while another inhabitant of the village, who thought *gejog lesung* to be old fashioned, wanted to organize a karaoke evening. These scenes

²²⁶ Enggar: Nek aku, suk nek aku dadi manten, aku arep njaluk ora nganggo wijk-wijikan, ora nganggo bandhem-bandheman suruh, kaya mantene den baguse Ngarso wingi kae, timbangane ora ngerti tegese. (Episode 5, scene 26, dialogue 63-72, script Heru Kesawamurti LPPDES5)

²²⁷ Wong neng nggon UU Perkawinan (pasal 31) kuwi ki ya wis cetha disebutke kok; *Hak dan kedudukan isteri adalah seimbang dengan hak dan kedudukan suami dalam kehidupan rumah tangga dan pergaulan hidup bersama dalam masyarakat*. Ning iki lehku ngerti ya ming merga melu saresehan Kadarkum neng Balai Desa kae. Ning ya mangga lho. Aku ya ming sakderma njawab lehm u takon mau kang. Mengko nek ora njawab diarani priye, sombong (Episode 5, scene 33, dialogue 95-97, script Heru Kesawamurti LPPDES5). For this episode, the *Mbangun Desa* team also co-operated with the Kanwil Departemen Kehakiman dan Perundang-undangan DIY (District Office of the Department of Justice and Legislation of the Special Region of Yogyakarta).

²²⁸ See <https://pedulimasyarakat.wordpress.com/pusat-kegiatan-belajar-masyarakat-pkbm/> [Last accessed June 2017].

²²⁹ Personal communication Agus Kismadi, Yogyakarta, 27 June 2011.

‘embody the value system of the people including their attitudes, beliefs, customs, philosophies of life, behaviour patterns, even thought processes’ (Feliciano 1982:9), or, in other words, *kearifan lokal* (local wisdom). They functioned as the common ground between the producers and the audiences and also created a sense of co-presence, not only in the technological televisual sense, but also in the meaning of live co-presence.

Conclusions

From a sheer propaganda medium controlled by the national government, *Mbangun Desa* developed into a medium disseminating information from local government institutions, and to a co-operation between the producers and performers of the programme and local NGOs, thereby shifting its attention from government interests to the interests of groups in local society. The national government remained present in the idea of having begun the transmedial rural development programmes (*siaran pedesaan* and *Mbangun Desa*), the idea that the local rural people should be educated and developed and the legislative clauses quoted in the broadcasts about specific topics. Nevertheless, in the course of time, coinciding with the shift in Indonesian politics and the mediascape, ‘the local’ came steadily to the fore. Initially a programme of an informative character, *Mbangun Desa* transformed into infotainment in which the information was wrapped in drama, in which the entertainment aspect prevailed.

The national, official government discourse was the *raison d’être* for this programme’s creation and for the use of the medium television. This discourse was present in every episode. However, the embedding of the national discourse in a local discourse, drawn from local theatrical concepts and conventions, almost pushed the official discourse into the background. In fact, while the use of television to mediate patronizing Jakartan ideas had bridged the physical distance of hundreds of kilometres, the programme might have made the epistemological distance between national discourse and local practices even bigger. The national (ideas, language, perception of the local, information, legislation and development/*pembangunan*) had been localized (Javanized); government persuasion has been dramatized, made into theatre, or even more aptly: a soap opera (*sinetron*). Precisely because of its local approach and its thoroughly Javanese character, *Mbangun Desa*’s effort to ‘go national’ never really got off the ground. Although bearing this purpose in mind some episodes were spoken in Indonesian, the cultural context depicted in the series failed to catch the imagination of audiences among other ethnic groups; Javanese-ness was too pregnantly present.

The series was made attractive by the packaging of the information and the provision of an overwhelming common ground. ‘The local’ in the sense of ‘a complex phenomenological quality’ (Appadurai 1996:178) was produced in the setting, the representation of what was apparently everyday life, the story, the presence of the Lima Sekawan and their acting style, the use of Javanese, local cultural expressions, the word-play and jokes, the suspense. It was this common ground that enabled the audiences to develop a familiarity (*akrab*-ness) with

Den Baguse Ngarso and his fellow *Mbangun Desa* characters and their adventures. The television medium had influenced and changed the representation of government legislation and information, making use of Yogyakarta theatre. Vice-versa, television made the actors permanent *Mbangun Desa* characters: even in daily life encounters with fans, the actors were addressed by their *Mbangun Desa* names, famous soap stars alike. When they attended off-air TVRI happenings or cultural or social gatherings, they attracted special attention. However, the reasons students, intellectuals, residents of the city of Yogyakarta, or inhabitants of remote villages in the vicinity of Yogyakarta enjoyed watching the programme were probably different.

On account of the presence of various agents and narrators whose aims and messages diverged, *Mbangun Desa* had become multigeneric. The viewers knew how to distinguish the different narrators (national and regional government institutions, including TVRI, NGOs, *Mbangun Desa* producers, the characters and also the actors, the performers of the regional performing arts genres) of the different messages (the storylines, regional culture(s)/*budaya daerah*, the information mission/*misi penyuluhan*) and how these should be evaluated. They perceived the discrepancy between the seriousness of the government discourse and the humour and irony in the presentation of the story.

The programme sharpened the awareness of those watching in rural areas, reminding them that they were Javanese and that they were villagers. They participated neither in the national world, nor in the city/the metropolitan life and everything that belonged to it. The illusion, created by the local representation of life in a Javanese village, allowed those watching and enjoying the series to forget the problems of daily life for half an hour once (or twice) a month. What remained for the inhabitants of Sidokarto and the other villages in Yogyakarta was the laughter and fun generated by the humour, the jokes and the stupidity of the main characters of *Mbangun Desa*, embodied on screen by their favourite actors. What also remained was a sour taste of disillusion because, instead of offering solutions to the problems, the series elicited a twofold nostalgia: the longing for an idealized rustic village, tranquil and clean, where problems were simple and solved easily – as offered on the television screen; and the longing for the city, as depicted in Jakarta-made or foreign soaps, in which there were no problems at all (Hariadi dan Oentoro 1996:65).

Examining the effectiveness of the persuasive messages conveyed in *Mbangun Desa*, meanings diverge significantly. Obviously there was a discrepancy between statements about the need to develop the people using media broadcasts to guide them to enlightenment (Adrianto et al. 1997/1998:113) and the way village audiences proved quite capable of joining metanarratives and reflecting on both the programmes they watched and the government's communication strategies.