



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Shaping the Javanese Play : improvisation of the script in theatre performance**

Bosnak, J.E.

### **Citation**

Bosnak, J. E. (2006, December 19). *Shaping the Javanese Play : improvisation of the script in theatre performance*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/5567>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/5567>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## CHAPTER I

### The development of the Javanese script

In this chapter I provide a chronological overview of the development of Javanese play texts. I focus on the appearance and use of scripts within different genres, looking at continuity and change in development. I show how Indonesian and Javanese theatre forms have influenced each other in production of script and performance.

#### *Guidebooks of Javanese dance drama*

*Wayang kulit* (shadow theatre) has received a lot of attention from many scholars as one of the major theatre genres of Java. In this book, I only refer briefly to wayang kulit because I focus on theatre performed by actors. But I bring up shadow theatre occasionally when mutual influences between *wayang* and the theatre forms of my case studies are visible.

Little is known about the way the puppeteer of shadow theatre composed his story in former times. The first written wayang kulit play dates back to the second decade of the 19th century (Pigeaud 1968, II:716). It is very likely that the Dutch, starting from the mid-19th century, stimulated the Javanese to write down wayang stories (*lakon*) and produce handbooks (*pakem*) with wayang plots (Kleinsmiede 2002:55). These handbooks consisted of a summary of each scene and served as a guideline or scenario to present the wayang stories (Poerbatjaraka 1940:39-40, 55).

*Wayang wong* (dance drama) bears a lot of resemblance to wayang kulit. Comparable to the wayang kulit tradition stories are based on Javanese adaptations from the Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (I Made Bandem and Sal Murgiyanto 1996:82). Not puppets but real actors figure on stage. They dance in a stylised manner accompanied by the gamelan. Meanwhile they improvise their movements, talking and singing according to a fixed plot (Hardja Susilo 1987:1).

Wayang wong developed at the courts of Surakarta and Yogyakarta around 1760 (Soedarsono 1984:15). The oldest written text found of a wayang wong play

dates back to 1781 (Suripan Sadi Hutomo 1993:60). During the reign of Sultan Hamengkubuwana V (1823-1855) written texts were used as guidebooks during the rehearsals and the performance. These guidebooks were of two kinds, called *The book of the narration* (Serat Kandha) and *The book of the dialogue* (Serat Pocapan). Each performance consisted of a combination of gamelan music, narration (*kandha*) delivered by a narrator and dialogues (*pocapan*) uttered by the dancers. The narrator who was seated in front of the gamelan orchestra read aloud from *The book of the narration*, whereas the dancers delivered their memorised lines from *The book of the dialogue* on the dance stage. The player of the wooden slit drum (*keprak*) directed the performance. While sitting next to the narrator he indicated to both musicians and dancers that they had to start or finish their actions. Furthermore, he added to the dramatic atmosphere of the scenes by playing on the slit drum (Soedarsono 1984:142-3).

Soedarsono who has done extensive research on wayang wong suggested that ‘The introduction of the written text may have been intended to help the narrator and the dancers to use perfect Javanese language’ (Soedarsono 1984:22). He calls the wayang wong text made at the court of Yogya ‘a literary work: it is a play in the modern sense’ (Soedarsono 1984:111). It is interesting to note the way Soedarsono values the script. The adjectives ‘modern’ and ‘literary’ seem to refer to a text with an extraordinary format: a format not common in the domain of Javanese language drama.

More ‘extraordinary’ play texts were created during wayang wong festivals held at the court of Yogyakarta in the second half of the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> These ‘magnificent editions de luxe’ were written down in calligraphy for the sultan. Apparently the texts were of great status: Sultan Hamengkubuwana VIII (r. 1921-1939) gave two copies to the Dutch Queen Wilhelmina. They are kept in the Royal Household Archives at The Hague in the Netherlands (Pigeaud 1967, I:249).

Towards the end of the 19th century, interaction between Dutch scholars of literature and the Javanese royal elite grew more and more intensive. Javanese performing arts got innovated according to European standards:

---

<sup>1</sup> These texts, however, should be considered post-production scripts since they were made after the performance had already taken place.

Art, in European conception, could not be left to the vagaries of oral tradition; it needed writing in order to stave off the inevitable ‘corruptions’ of oral performance. And it needed writing to exist as legitimate art, to have a presence other than in the ephemeral moments of actual performance. (Sutton 1997:101.)

As a result of these innovative ideas, texts of wayang kulit and wayang wong performances were written down as well as musical pieces for the gamelan. Moreover new types of performing arts saw the light of which the ‘dance opera’ *langendriya* is a striking example. *Langendriya* (lit. ‘entertainment/pleasure of the heart’) developed around 1870 in Yogyakarta and Surakarta. From the start, this genre had a stronger emphasis on text than wayang wong. Accompanied by the gamelan the langendriya singer-dancers provided their fixed, memorised lines in sung poetry (*tembang*) (Sutton 1997:81, 84). Their reliance on the script was remarkable:

Langendriya was the first genre in which text, choice of music, sequence of episodes were fully recorded in writing. In langendriya, even the lines of the clowns are fixed prior to performance, for the clowns (with only rare exception) sing *tembang* just as the other characters do. (Sutton 1997:101.)

It is mentioned that the audience in places outside the court cities got bored by the langendriya performances since the singer-dancers literally stuck to their lines. Apparently the spectators missed the spontaneous jokes of the clowns and the skilled improvisation of popular-theatre actors (Sutton 1997:100). The *tembang* indeed did not leave any room for improvisation:

The sung dialogue of *langendriya* could not easily have been varied, as each line had to conform to the constraints of the particular *tembang* meter. Thus, langendriya required of its performers a level of memorization hitherto unknown in Javanese performing arts, since the dancer-singer-actors, unlike the narrators in Yogyanese wayang wong, could not read while they performed. (Sutton 1997:101.)

The *langendriya* performers indeed had to learn all lines by heart. Their repertory however was not as varied as that of the wayang wong actors. They had to memorise scripts that were all based on the story of Damar Wulan. This hero was rewarded with the hand of the Queen of Majapahit for defeating the rebellious King Menak Jingga

(Sutton 1997:84). In the 1890s another type of ‘dance opera’ was created in Yogyakarta that strongly resembled *langendriya*, the so-called *langen mandra wanara*. The main difference was that this genre did not represent stories of Damar Wulan but stories of the *Ramayana* epic instead (Sutton 1997:105).

### *The popular theatre scene at the turn of the 19th century*

The turn of the 19th century marked a new period in the development of the Javanese popular theatre scene (Cohen 2002:101). In an era of rapid economical and cultural developments the Javanese literary landscape was transformed significantly (Anderson 1996:27-9). The advent of ‘print capitalism’ changed the approach of the people towards literary works. Whereas in former times literature reached its audience in performance, now the individual reader could consume it in silence (Anderson 1990:209-10).

Due to the arrival of theatre troupes from outside the archipelago new theatre genres developed on Java at the turn of the 19th century. Both *parsi* theatre from India and *bangsawan* from the Malay Peninsula strongly influenced the Indonesian scene (Cohen 2001:320). As a result many different kinds of popular theatre forms flourished at the beginning of the 20th century like *komedie stamboel*, *kethoprak* and *ludrug*.

*Parsi* theatre had its roots in the 1850s Parsi community of Bombay. It was characterised by its mixed repertoire including stories from many parts of the world, its stage effects and its alternation of drama, dance, music and comedy. In preparation of a new stage production the manager of the troupe provided his playwright with a story theme. The playwright in his turn wrote a script that, if necessary, could be revised during a series of performances (Cohen 2001:315-7).

The *parsi* groups that toured Southeast Asia in the 1870s and 1890s were so successful that many local groups started imitating them. In this way, new theatre forms developed gradually: ‘Long-established traditional forms of expressive culture, including dance, drama, music, magic, and storytelling, merged with *parsi* theatre, resulting in emergent hybrid forms’ (Cohen 2001:318-9). One of the examples of a

new theatre genre brought about by parsi theatre is *bangsawan*, originally referred to as ‘imitation parsi theatre’ (*wayang parsi tiruan*) (Cohen 2001:320).

Similar to the repertory of parsi theatre, the repertory of a bangsawan group consisted of stories with varied ethnic flavour. Their content ranged from local history to stories with Chinese, English, Hindu or Islamic backgrounds (Dumas 2000:50). Unlike the parsi actor who could rely on a script the bangsawan actor had to be able to improvise since there were no scripts available. The director told the story to the players and assigned them their roles (Tan 1993:65). From the early 20th century onwards a list of scenes on a blackboard served as a reference point for the actors (Tan 1993:108). This type of list used by bangsawan actors became an important mnemonic and structuring device within other theatre forms that developed throughout the 20th century.

At the end of the 19th century touring groups of bangsawan from the Malay Peninsula regularly visited the Netherlands Indies. They performed in Sumatra, Borneo and Java (Cohen 2002:104-5). Bangsawan was very popular in the Dutch East Indies during the 1920s and 1930s and then started to decline (Dumas 2000:48).

While bangsawan troupes toured the Malay Peninsula, *komedie stamboel* developed in the East Javanese city of Surabaya. As an important port city Surabaya attracted many theatre and opera companies from Italy, England, France and the Netherlands. Bookstores had play texts for sale in several European languages (Cohen 2001:325).

The *komedie stamboel* companies performed stories from the Arabian Nights and stories based on adaptations of European literature. The playwright-director prepared a quite detailed script including remarks on the plot for each scene, the effects, music and the dialogue. He orally conveyed his scripts to the members of the group. The actors had to memorise lines provided by their playwright-director. Rather than extemporising they had to stick to the lines as transmitted by their playwright-director (Cohen 2001:338-9).

Komedie stamboel played an important role in the development of modern popular theatre, Indonesian contemporary theatre and Indonesian films (Cohen 2001:313). *Kethoprak* and *ludrug* are examples of the so-called modern popular theatre that came into being under the influence of komedie stamboel. *Kethoprak* developed in Central Java in the beginning of the 20th century. Unlike the use of

Malay in *bangsawan* and *komedie stamboel* the actors performed the whole play in Javanese. Influenced by both *wayang wong* and *komedie stamboel*, *kethoprak* gained its specific features: the actors speak and move in a naturalistic style but often express their feelings by singing *tembang*, traditional Javanese songs (Hatley 1985a:4-6).

*Kethoprak* groups had a huge repertoire of plays with various backgrounds ranging from Javanese folk stories to *Tales of a Thousand and One Nights* and from Indian epics to Western films (Handung Kus Sudyarsana 1989:18). The actors improvised around a story plot provided by the playwright-manager. Like in *bangsawan* theatre a 'scene list' served as a manual during performance. 'This skeletal list of scene locations, set up in the wings during the show, serves as a reference point for actors as they put together a show four, five, six hours in length' (Hatley 1985a:86).

From 1935 onwards *kethoprak* was broadcast by MAVRO (*Mataramsche Vereeniging voor Radio Omroep*, later called RRI Nusantara Yogyakarta). Although there are no reliable records of this time it is believed that the actors did not use a script for performance. They played on the basis of a discussion with their *dhalang* (director) before their performance took place (Wijaya and Sutjipto 1977:39).

While *kethoprak* developed in Central Java the popular theatre genre *ludrug* emerged in East Java. Rather than depicting palace life, as was often the case in *wayang wong* and *kethoprak*, *ludrug* performances were based on daily life stories from the local region. The actors improvised their monologues and dialogues using the Javanese language, occasionally alternated with Malay (Supriyanto 1992:30-2).

So-called *dhagelan* skits used to be part of *ludrug*, *wayang wong* and *kethoprak* plays. These were humorous interludes performed by comedians. From the end of the 1930s, however, *dhagelan* developed into a separate theatre genre and was broadcast by MAVRO. The programme was entitled *dhagelan Mataram* (Soepomo Poedjosoedarmo and Soeprapto Boedi Santoso 2000:222-4).

The group *Srimulat* that was established in the 1950s became an important interpreter of *dhagelan* (Herry Gendut Janarto 1990:37-9). Like in *kethoprak* and *bangsawan* the *Srimulat* actors improvised on the basis of a briefing (*penuangan*) by their playwright-director. The briefing consisted of a half-hour explanation of the plot and the casting. The one-page script consisting of a story outline was placed

backstage to help the actors to keep on the right track (Herry Gendut Janarto 1990:71).

As we have seen, travelling theatre companies from India and the Malay Peninsula transformed the Javanese theatre world. Local theatre traditions fused with those from abroad developing into new genres of a hybrid character. An important script-like phenomenon that emerged during this period of rapid changes was the scene list. This artefact will be the subject of discussion in the second chapter of this book.

While popular theatre groups travelled around Java to make a living, several amateur groups started collecting money for charity.

#### *Amateur theatre and the nationalist movement*

In the first decade of the 20th century *opera derma* developed amongst members of the Chinese community of West Java. As revealed by its name, performances of *opera derma*, meaning ‘charity opera’, were meant to raise money for charity funds. Volunteer actors performed stories about the Chinese community using Betawi Malay language. Jakob Sumardjo, in his studies on the development of modern Indonesian drama literature, stresses the need for using scripts within this genre. He maintains that the opera derma actors had no professional experience in theatre and thus had to rely on a written script (Jakob Sumardjo 1992:110). Here it has to be noted that although the actors were not professional, it does not necessarily mean that they were not able to improvise.

From 1912 onwards opera derma scripts were published and sold in public. During performance these scripts not only served as a guideline for the actors, but also as a source of reference for the audience who could buy them in advance. Stories were embedded in the world of the Chinese community, bearing educational and moralistic messages (Jakob Sumardjo 1992:110).

While opera derma performances gained popularity, another kind of amateur theatre developed amongst the Eurasian and native Indonesian population that received Dutch education at STOVIA (School for Indigenous Doctors) in Weltevreden (a suburb of Batavia, now Gambir) and OSVIA (School for Indigenous



Civil Servants) in Bandung. The students organised charity performances and played on the basis of full scripts at special occasions like the end of the school term. Scripts were written in the Dutch and Malay languages (Jakob Sumardjo 1999:11-3).

In the environment of well-educated indigenous playwrights the call for independence started to grow. Malay-language play texts of the 1920s and 1930s show the affiliation of their authors in the struggle against the colonial power. A well-known example of this tendency is the allegorical drama *Bebasari* that was published in 1926. This script written by the author Rustam Effendi from Sumatra is generally regarded as the first literary drama text in 'Indonesian' (Jakob Sumardjo 1999:15).<sup>2</sup> The dialogues are written in poetry form (*syair*) and are more likely to be read at home than performed on stage (Taufiq Ismael 2002:xi).

*Bebasari* is part of a new drama tradition created by young intellectuals propagating nationalistic ideals. 'Realism', 'modernism' and 'Western' were the keywords of the dramatists of this time (Ikranegara 1996:1-2). The Dutch authorities banned *Bebasari* because of its anti-colonial sentiments (Teeuw 1996:18).

Little is known about the few Javanese language scripts written during the same period. Soedarsono describes how wayang wong scripts were composed under the supervision of the Sultan of Yogyakarta. The Sultan had several people engaged in the process of writing one single *lakon*: the expert in narration, the expert in dialogue, the choreographer/composer and the court scribe. During the reign of the 'great patron of wayang wong' Sultan Hamengkubuwana VIII (r. 1921-1939) *rites de passage* of the Sultan and his family members were celebrated with grand wayang wong performances. On these occasions, performance programmes were published in Dutch with a synopsis of the play (Soedarsono 1984:97-8). These performance programmes, which I consider a kind of play text, provide an overview of each scene and at times provide information on the background of the story itself.

Langendriya performances in both Yogyakarta and Surakarta also resulted in the production of performance programmes. These booklets provide some insight into the content of the play and development of the plot. The Jakarta based publishing house Bale Pustaka published langendriya play texts in Javanese script in 1932 and in 1939 (Sutton 1997:91).

---

<sup>2</sup> Although Jakob Sumardjo speaks of 'Indonesian' (Bahasa Indonesia) it was not until 1928 that this term was applied to the national language. A more appropriate term in this context would be 'sophisticated/high Malay'.

In the early 1920s detailed *tonil Djawa* scripts were published in both Javanese as well as in Latin characters. The word *tonil*, derived from the Dutch word *toneel* (theatre), reveals something about the background of this genre. It ‘was created by and performed for *priyayi* [...] presenting Javanese language versions of the sort of boulevard farces and living room tragedies enacted by Dutch professional and amateur actors’ (Cohen 1999b: 269).

As information about the genre is scarce, it is difficult to trace how a *tonil Djawa* script was actually produced and used. For this reason I limit myself to a description of two scripts I encountered. These play texts have an appearance that thus far did not exist within the realm of Javanese language theatre. They provide full-fledged dialogues including side descriptions of the settings and inner feelings of the characters. Moreover, these texts got published and they were sold to the general public.

The Javanese language used is realistic, alternating from low into high Javanese and vice versa like in regular conversations. It does not bear any resemblance to the *tembang* texts used in the *langendriya* script or the sophisticated courtly language of the *wayang wong* narration. It is very likely that the well-educated *priyayi* playwrights who were acquainted with European theatre deliberately made use of Javanese language that was not artificial but realistic like the language they used in daily life.

In *Javanese literature since independence* Ras refers to one stage play entitled *Cariyos men-men lampahan cobaning sesemahan* (The play of trials and tribulations of marriage) written in 1924, which according to him represents ‘the non-traditional theatre’ (see Illustration 1.1 and 1.2).<sup>3</sup> He suggests that it was written for an amateur group and laments the fact that more of such plays did not reach the printing press (Ras 1979:20-1). In 1920, however, at least one more *tonil Djawa* script was published. This script, written by K.H. Soebrata, is entitled *Kadadeane mim teteloe; Main, madat, maling* (The consequences of the three M’s: gambling, smoking opium and stealing). Note that these verbs in Javanese language all start with the letter ‘M’; hence the expression the three M’s. This play text has a very moralistic content. It shows that those who indulge in the act of gambling, smoking opium or stealing will always meet adversity. At the very end of the story we are even warned for an extra

---

<sup>3</sup> Ras considers *wayang* as representative of traditional theatre (Ras 1979:4).

pair of M's: 'Be aware. Don't give way to the five M's: gambling, drinking, womanising, smoking opium and stealing' (*Diprajitna, adja lakoe ma lelima: main, minoem, madon, madat lan maling*).<sup>4</sup>

In the introduction of *The play of trials and tribulations of marriage* (1924) the writers (using Javanese script) call the text a 'proposed arrangement of a performance' (*calon dhapukan menmen*). They describe this *menmen, komedie* [Latin script] or *toneel* [Latin script] as a performance that is able to compete with *wayang cucal* (wayang kulit) and *ringgit tiyang* (high Javanese for wayang wong). It differs from these classical Javanese theatre genres because the actors do not have to stick to rules (*pathokan*) of movements according to rhythm (*wirama*) and speech according to the correct voice pitch (*antawacana*). Thus, the authors explain, there is more freedom of movement for the actors and room for 'realistic' speech (*solah tingkah lan muna muni sagêd saplak kados kawontênan ingkang têtênan*) than in wayang. Dialogue is in colloquial Javanese from the East Javanese town of Kedhiri (Sasradiharja and Kartawibawa 1924:3-4).<sup>5</sup>

This introduction suggests that not many people were familiar with realistic plays of tonil Djawa, depicting ordinary people speaking colloquial Javanese. If one compares the tonil Djawa scripts to other Javanese play texts produced around the same period (the first decades of the 20th century) they seem to be unique in form and content. They are unique in the sense that they are very detailed: including an introduction on the way to use the text as well as side texts on setting, clothing, movements and speech level.

*The play of trials and tribulations of marriage* tells the story of a policeman (*den bei mantri poelisi*) and his wife (*den nganten mantri*) who face marital troubles. Because the wife believes that her husband is betraying her with another woman she runs away to her parents' home, leaving husband and children behind. The parents remind her of her duty as a woman to serve her husband. Finally, she is reunited happily with her spouse and children. The story bears moral lessons for life like the other tonil Djawa script.

---

<sup>4</sup> In search of the background of these M-words I came across a Javanese-language manuscript from Bogor published in 1912 by the 'Board of the Association of the Seven M's' (Bestiring Pakempalan Ma Pipitu). This booklet entitled *The lesson of man's real enemy; About the M's that should be avoided* (*Serat piwoelang bab satroening manoengsa sedjati; Bab mim kang wadjib tjinegahan*) shows the ideas of the Association.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Revi Soekarno who helped me to transliterate this play text.

Tonil Djawa had only a short-lived moment of fame. There may have been a link between the growing popularity of kethoprak from around 1925 onwards and the decline of tonil Djawa around the same time (Cohen 1999b:269). Despite increasing dominance within the theatre realm kethoprak play texts rarely reached the printing press. I came across two printed scripts of the group Langen Darma-joega. The first one, entitled *Djaka Darmana inggih Djaka Waloeja* (Djaka Darmana alias Djaka Waloeja) was published in 1928 and the second *Peti wasijat* (The inherited box) in 1929. These ‘short scripts’ consist of a summary of each scene in chronological order. They may have served as performance programmes. On the cover page of *Peti wasijat* the location and date of the performance are mentioned in Dutch: Lodge of the Star in the East; 5/6 January 1929 (*Loge de Ster in het Oosten, 5/6 Januari 1929*; see Illustration 1.3).<sup>6</sup>

In late 1935, the weekly magazine *Panyebar Semangat* published the drama text of *Ken Angrok-Sri Redjoso* (Ken Angrok and Sri Redjoso), a kethoprak play written by the editor of *Panyebar Semangat* Imam Supardi. The writer explains that his aim is to provide a guideline for the kethoprak or *tonil* player. Apart from that he hopes that the text ‘could serve to stimulate our experts of culture to enrich our culture bringing it towards a higher level’ (*bisia [sic] menangi [sic] semangate para ahli budaya, kersoa mbeciki kahanane kabudayan kita, njunjung drajate kang luwih dhuwur*) (Suripan Sadi Hutomo 1975: 14). Apparently Imam Supardi wanted to set an example for playwrights to ‘upgrade’ their piece of art.

It is this idea of producing play texts in order to enrich culture and society that seemed to stimulate playwrights in the first decades of the 20th century to create full scripts. The plays were used for charity means, containing realistic stories with moralistic lessons. Furthermore, the play texts were meant to improve the quality of existing genres. This wish to improve and upgrade theatre by producing fully-fledged play texts is a reoccurring theme in history. I come back to this matter in Chapters IV and V.

---

<sup>6</sup> This was the Freemasons’ Lodge in Weltevreden (Batavia).

*Propagating Asian super-power*

The Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 marked a new period in the development of theatre on Java. Theatre activities came under the supervision of the newly established Propaganda and Information Department Sendenbu. In order to upgrade the quality of drama and drama texts, Sendenbu opened a drama school in Jakarta where professional theatre makers were trained in the production of modern Indonesian theatre. Furthermore, Sendenbu set up new theatre groups, which got the special task to perform new scripts. The Japanese tried to make drama into a propaganda tool by stimulating and upgrading it. Their control of performing arts became more severe with the establishment of the art council Keimin Bunka Shidosho in April 1943 in Jakarta. This institution encouraged well-known Indonesian and Japanese writers to engage in the production of new high quality play texts in the Indonesian language. The plays had to depict stories with a clear message from the government. They dealt for example with cruelties of the Dutch, self-sacrifice for the nation and the need for forced ‘coolie’ labour. The scripts that got selected by Keimin Bunka Shidosho were distributed to the new theatre groups that had been established by Sendenbu. Some play texts were published in magazines in order to reach smaller theatre groups operating outside the region of direct Sendenbu control (Kurasawa 1997:81-2).

Dramaturge and playwright Saini speaks about the positive influence of monitoring by the Japanese. Before staging a play the script had to pass a process of censorship. To pass the censor process troupes were in need of detailed scripts. As a result many scripts were written down during the Japanese occupation making it into ‘one of the most productive periods in the history of Indonesian drama literature’ (Saini 2000:38). Literary activities in Javanese however were prohibited, apart from popular theatre performances with a clear propaganda message. No novels were published in Javanese. As the Japanese banned almost all Javanese-language newspapers and magazines (Quinn 1992:28) it is not likely that drama texts reached the printing press in this period.

Wayang wong, wayang kulit and especially kethoprak performances were used by the Japanese to reach the lower class (Jakob Sumardjo 1999:24; Budi Susanto 2000:29). On one hand kethoprak became a tool for propagating anti-Western ideas

and on the other hand it became a tool to mobilise the people for the ‘great war’ to gain Asian super-power. Youth organisations affiliated with the Japanese government organised performances to raise money for their war activities (Budi Susanto 2000:29, 95-6).

After the Allied Forces defeated Japan in August 1945 the Indonesians declared their independence. Until the end of the 1940s theatre activities were rare because of the ongoing struggle between the Dutch and the revolutionaries (Ikranegara 1996:4). With the establishment of two drama academies in the 1950s, The Academy of Indonesian Drama and Film (ASDRAFI, Akademi Seni Drama dan Film Indonesia) in Yogyakarta and The Academy of Indonesian National Theatre (ATNI, Akademi Teater Nasional Indonesia) in Jakarta, theatre received a new impetus. As these academies were very much oriented towards Western theories of theatre, there was a great emphasis on the production and use of full-fledged scripts. Many Western scripts were translated into Indonesian. Those attached to the academies considered Indonesian-language drama an important instrument in the development of the young nation (Jakob Sumardjo 1992:150-1). Because of the focus on national theatre in the national language, theatre activities in Javanese did not receive attention.

#### *Kethoprak as weapon against the bourgeoisie*

With a presidential decree in July 1959 a new political climate was initiated: the ‘Guided Democracy’. In order to stimulate the development of national art and culture, President Soekarno imposed a ban on several books and movies of Western origin. The ‘Institute of the People’s Culture’ Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat), affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI, Partai Komunis Indonesia), had an important share in conveying the new cultural policies to the public. Tight governmental regulations regarding (performing) art affected the activities of artists (Jakob Sumardjo 1999:47).

As leading parties of the moment both PKI with communist background and PNI, the Indonesian Nationalist Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia) with its base in the bureaucracy, tried to spread their ideas by stimulating art productions. Theatre groups

were forced to bring ideological messages on stage (Ikranegara 1996:6-7). Before performance took place playwrights had to provide a full script. Party officials screened the text and gave instructions on how to fit in the party's ideology. In this way scripts were adapted to the demand of the ruling elite (Brandon 1967:216-7, 230-1).

In 1957 the 'All Indonesian Kethoprak Organisation' Bakoksi (Badan Kontak Organisasi Kethoprak Seluruh Indonesia) was founded under the umbrella of the PKI (Brandon 1967:215). The policy of Bakoksi shows a very clear example of artists becoming the voice of the party. They propagated kethoprak as 'weapon' of the people against the bourgeoisie (Moeljanto and Ismael 1995:73). A script had to go through a long process of changes until it was accepted as conforming to the PKI ideology (Foulcher 1986:132-3).

Lekra and Bakoksi organised courses of 'ideological schooling' for kethoprak groups. For example a course was set up in Yogyakarta at the end of 1962 in which the most prominent troupe of the time, called Kridho Mardi, participated (Vanicková 1965:423). The kethoprak actors were taught to take part in 'the revolution':

Our kethoprak is revolutionary kethoprak. It is kethoprak that serves the people who are busy finishing the revolution. You, Comrades, are the Cultural Army with the task to develop and educate the masses. That's why, Comrades, your task is very important. Before teaching the masses you have to learn first from the masses.<sup>7</sup>

With the slogan 'moving down' (*turun ke bawah*) the cultural institute Lekra sent writers and artists into the field to get to know the problems of the masses. By immersing themselves in the life of farmers and workers, the artists became acquainted with the problems of the people. It was their task to provide books, play texts and other works of art about the topics they encountered during their field research (Helmi 1981:17-8).

During the 'National Conference on Literature and Art' (Konferensi Nasional Sastra dan Seni) of 1964 the chairman of the communist party Aidit talked about the importance of the development of both 'regional drama' (*drama daerah*) and 'national

---

<sup>7</sup> Ketoprak kita adalah ketoprak revolusi. Ketoprak yang mengabdikan Rakyat yang sedang menyelesaikan revolusi. Kawan-kawan merupakan Pasukan Tentara Kebudayaan yang bertugas membangkitkan dan mendidik massa. Karena inilah peranan kawan-kawan sangat penting. Sebelum mendidik massa kita harus belajar dulu dari massa. (Moeljanto and Ismael 1995:75.)

drama' (*drama nasional*).<sup>8</sup> He called for the help of writers to renew the repertoire: repertoire that is 'realis', 'revolusioner' and 'artistik' (Aidit 1964:44, 46). The content of scripts had to be cleared from feudal influence:

Generally speaking, regional drama is drama of the peasants. Its main weakness lies in the stories that are not yet freed from influence and glorification of feudalism. Development of the drama has to follow the principle of the innovation of the contents along class lines that reflect the present struggle of the peasants while maintaining its tradition.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, playwrights had to adjust their work to the principles of the communist party. In this way, they could serve the aims of the revolution.

#### *New fusions of local and global*

The abortive communist *coup d'état* in 1965, defeated by General Soeharto, changed the political climate once again. At the start of the 'New Order' the communist party PKI and all other leftist organisations linked to it, were disbanded and their members were either killed or imprisoned (Ricklefs 1993:280-2, 287-8). Many kethoprak actors from Yogyakarta were either killed or detained because of their (supposed) involvement in activities under the guidance of Lekra and Bakoksi. It took several years till kethoprak groups started to perform again (Hatley 2005:23).

In the meantime, the Indonesian-language theatre scene started to develop in a new direction. Although performance of translated and adapted Western play texts remained important, playwrights were no longer preoccupied with the imitation of Western plays. Instead of using sophisticated literary language they wrote in colloquial language that could be spoken easily on stage. The practical value of the

---

<sup>8</sup> It is common practice in Indonesian governmental/political discourse to distinguish between the 'national' language Indonesian and 'regional' languages like Javanese. Hence, distinction is made between 'national' (Indonesian-language) theatre and 'regional' theatre.

<sup>9</sup> Drama daerah pada umumnya adalah drama kaum tani. Kelemahannya yang pokok terletak terutama pada belum bersihnya pengaruh dan pemudjian feodal dalam tjerita. Mengembangkan drama daerah harus berprinsip pada pembaruan isi sesuai dengan garis klas yang mentjerminkan perjuangan kaum tani sekarang sambil meneruskan tradisi. (Aidit 1964: 43.)



script, as a tool for staging a play, became more important than its literary value. Unlike theatre productions before the 1960s, when performances had been strongly script-based, there was ample room for experiments and improvisation (Jakob Sumardjo 1999:49-50). Theatre practitioners produced drama that fused elements of traditional theatre forms (for example kethoprak) with Western drama styles and conventions. Drama and film director Putu Wijaya called this new type of drama 'new tradition' (*tradisi baru*) (Gillitt Asmara 1995:155-66).

In 1968 the Jakarta Arts Council (DKJ, Dewan Kesenian Jakarta) as well as the art centre linked to it called Taman Ismael Marzuki (TIM) were established with government subsidies (Jakob Sumardjo 1999:50). Throughout the 1970s, TIM was an important meeting point for actors, dancers and musicians from different parts of the archipelago. It became the ideal place for the interaction between people from different backgrounds and disciplines. Modern theatre actors were stimulated to indulge in the world of popular theatre. It was this environment in which *tradisi baru* ideas flourished (Gillitt Asmara 1995:169-70).

In 1972 the Arts Council started with the collection of scripts in a 'Script (data) Bank' (Bank Naskah). They set up projects for the translation of foreign play texts. To stimulate the production of Indonesian scripts they organised script competitions and theatre festivals in which the winning entries were performed (Jakob Sumardjo 1999:50). The activities of DKJ and TIM were numerous until 1980 and then started to diminish because government subsidies were reduced.

From 1975 onwards, the Orde Baru regime started to control theatre activities. Performances that were considered a threat to law and order were banned (Jakob Sumardjo 1999:55-7). Before a performance took place the text had to pass a censorship process. Many theatre groups found creative ways to avoid this censorship. They submitted for example a 'clean' script to the authorities, but used an alternative one during the actual performance (Erven 1992:200-1). Another method to avoid trouble with the government was to compose a script that at first glance did not contain any suspicious information: 'playwrights and directors purposely mount productions that can be understood on many levels, and they often employ tactics of understatement, veiled meanings, and oblique expression' (Gillitt Asmara 1995:171). In this way, the script could pass the censorship without problems and keep its initial message.

*Stimulating the regional language and culture*

Government radio stations in Yogyakarta, Solo and several other towns in Central Java started broadcasting Javanese language radio plays (*sandiwara radio daerah*) in the second half of the 1960s. The scripts used during these broadcasts had a detailed format. They contained educational, moralistic messages in accordance with current social-political conditions. Playwrights either derived plays from foreign literary sources and adapted them to a Javanese setting or based them on local stories and issues. An important playwright and initiator of the Javanese radio play in Yogyakarta was Soemardjono who was also active in kethoprak radio plays throughout the 1970s (Herry Mardianto and Antonius Darmanto 2001:218-9, 233-4). The *sandiwara radio daerah* scripts have always been produced in a detailed format, including side texts on the state of mind of the characters and the use of music and sound effects.

While full scripts became the common format of radio plays, most stage performances were based on short scripts and improvisation. As part of the promotion of 'regional' arts attention was drawn towards a 'modern' Javanese script: a script written in realistic style that dwelled upon contemporary matters. In order to stimulate the development of drama literature the institute of the Development of Central Javanese Art (Pengembangan Kesenian Jawa Tengah, henceforth PKJT) organised a series of script competitions (*sayembara naskah*) in Surakarta. The first took place in 1979. In 1980 the PKJT published the three winning entries: *Pangurbanan* (Sacrifice), *Kali Ciliwung* (Ciliwung River) and *Sacuwil ati lan wengi* (A piece of broken heart and a piece of night) (Suripan Sadi Hutomo 1993:59, 64).

According to Mochtar Hadi, participant of the Javanese-language drama contest in 1981, it was still hard to find Javanese drama as good as Indonesian drama (Suripan Sadi Hutomo 1993:65). Suripan Sadi Hutomo agreed with Mochtar Hadi stating that Javanese-language drama was indeed far behind compared with Indonesian-language drama. He added, quoting one of the members of the jury of the competition called Sutadi Wiryatmadja, that playwrights still lack 'creative maturity' (*kedewasaan kreatif*) (Suripan Sadi Hutomo 1993:65). However, despite this negative criticism, the script competition of 1981 brought about an important new theatre group in Solo called Gapit that was active until the mid-1990s.

Playwright-director Bambang Widoyo Sp. (1957-1996) of Gapit composed seven detailed play texts, written in Javanese colloquial language. The plays describe the lives of lower class people struggling to face the insanity of modern society. Compared to other theatre groups active in the same time of controlled public expression, Gapit delivered a great amount of social criticism against the New Order government in its plays. All through the plays, humour is revealed in a satirical and sometimes sarcastic way (Weix 1995:24-6; Feinstein 1995:619-21). In 1998 a book was published about Gapit, containing four play texts by Bambang Widoyo Sp. (Bambang Widoyo Sp. 1998).

While the Solo script competition resulted in the birth of 'modern' scripts, Yogyakarta competitions added to the innovation of kethoprak scripts. During the annual kethoprak festival between the five town regencies (Bantul, Kulonprogo, Gunungkidul, Sleman and Kotamadya Yogyakarta), new scripts were produced and used. The aim of the festival was to stimulate young amateur actors to involve themselves in 'regional' art. The full script was considered as an important tool for the inexperienced participants to get acquainted with kethoprak (Handung Kus Sudyarsana 1989:39). It is interesting to note that the use of full scripts was stimulated during kethoprak festivals throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but a new type of festival in 2001 meant the return of kethoprak based on improvisation. This time the organisers called for a revival of kethoprak in which the theatre makers worked without a full script (Indra Tranggono 2001a:11, 2001b).

### *Innovative trends in the Yogyakarta theatre scene*

After a period of difficulties in the 1960s, the kethoprak scene in Yogyakarta started to recover again in the early 1970s. Professional troupes toured Yogyakarta and its surroundings with their commercial shows in makeshift theatre buildings. Amateur groups were often invited to perform at people's homes during the celebration of a rite of passage. Unlike the 1960s when the use of a full script was compulsory, the kethoprak players had the freedom to produce their performances on the basis of improvisation. Some individual playwrights however called for full scripts to upgrade

the quality of a performance. A prominent holder of this view was playwright-director Soemardjono of the kethoprak group of the Radio Republik Indonesia.

With his knowledge of dramaturgy, Soemardjono managed to put the script in the spotlight. He introduced ‘a system of fully-fledged scripts’ (*sistem full teks*) and made his actors actually rehearse. The main reason why he introduced this new system was to stimulate the young actors to improve their Javanese. Initially the actors of the older generation were not very happy about the new system as they considered improvisation the starting point of kethoprak. Moreover, some of the actors could not read. After a while though the use of the new script was generally accepted and the illiterate were stimulated to read (Herry Mardianto and Antonius Darmanto 2001:121).

In the meantime, another person, too, worked on full scripts: writer and journalist Handung Kus Sudyarsana, leader of the group Sapta Mandala that had been established in 1972. Handung Kus Sudyarsana (1933-1991) influenced the kethoprak world of the late 1970s and 1980s with his innovative approach towards the production of kethoprak. He tried to bring kethoprak to a higher artistic level by applying concepts from Western drama and film to the production process of performances. At first the Sapta Mandala members were quite reluctant to follow the new ideas of their leader. Instead of improvising their dialogue they now had to memorise their lines: ‘There was grumbling about the stiff, awkward quality of memorised dialogue and the restriction it placed on actors’ creativity’ (Hatley 2005:34).

Handung Kus Sudyarsana wrote numerous detailed kethoprak scripts of which five were published by the Yogyakarta-based publishing house Kanisius in 1988. These scripts have a similar preamble entitled ‘Instructions for performing a kethoprak play’ (*Ancer-ancer caranipun nindakaken lampahan kethoprak*), which gives insight in the writers’ motives to produce what he calls with an English term ‘full play’ scripts:

Performing kethoprak is basically a process of improvisation. Those who play kethoprak just receive the ‘*wos*’ or the essentials of the dialogue from their playwright-director (*dhalang*). [...] Studying kethoprak by way of improvisation is not only difficult but also needs years. Moreover [it is difficult] for young people nowadays who are more and more detached from the Javanese language. That is why

the author has tried to make kethoprak plays with the ‘full play’ method as he has the intention to make it easier for whoever wants to study kethoprak.<sup>10</sup>

The full scripts were especially meant for young actors who were not yet acquainted with the language and conventions of the kethoprak stage.

In 1977 Handung Kus Sudyarsana established the theatre group Sandiwara Jenaka KR (Witty Theatre of KR, henceforth referred to as SJKR) together with several colleagues from the daily newspaper *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, popularly known as ‘KR’. Until the end of the 1980s, SJKR regularly organised stage performances as well as shows for TVRI Yogyakarta. In humorous sketches full of social criticism SJKR depicted scenes from daily life. Handung Kus Sudyarsana produced numerous full scripts in Javanese language of which five were published in a book entitled *Gambare awake dhewe* (Portraits of ourselves) by *Kedaulatan Rakyat* press in 1979 (Herry Mardianto and Dyah Tavipa 2001:321). A very short preamble to *Gambare awake dhewe* (Handung Kus Sudyarsana 1979:1) reveals something about Handung Kus Sudyarsana’s intentions in writing the scripts: ‘With this theatre I tell the truth. What I tell is my own portrait and portraits of the people around me. I tell it as I please’.<sup>11</sup>

SJKR comedies written between 1977 and 1989, the moment Handung Kus Sudyarsana handed over his job to junior playwright Bondan Nusantara, have a central theme in common: the habit of people to break rules and violate conventions. The 67 plays contain social criticism, didactic elements and witty entertainment. They are for example about corruption, gambling, illiteracy and about the controversial phenomenon of unmarried couples living together (*kumpul kebo*) (Agus Supriyono 2001:49, 61).<sup>12</sup>

Apart from writing full scripts in Javanese for Sapta Mandala and SJKR Handung Kus Sudyarsana also made full scripts in Indonesian. The local newspaper *Kedaulatan Rakyat* reported in June 1985 about an ‘extraordinary’ kethoprak event:

<sup>10</sup> Nindakaken kethoprak menika miturut nalurinipun ngangge cara ‘improvisasi’. [...] Ingkang sami dados kethoprak namung dipunsukani wos utawi deleging rembag dening ki dhalang. [...] Manawi sinau kethoprak mawi cara ‘improvisasi’ menika kajawi boten gampil, ugi mbetahaken wekdal tetaunan. Menapamalih tumrap para mudha sakmangke ingkang saya tebih saking basa Jawi. Mila pangripta nyobi damel lampahan kethoprak ngangge cara ‘full play’ menika ugi gadhah sedya supados nggampilaken sok sintena ingkang sinau kethoprak. (Handung Kus Sudyarsana 1988: 5.)

<sup>11</sup> Nganggo sandiwara iki aku kandha nyata. Sing tak kandhakake gambarku lan gambare wong-wong sakiwa tengenku. Lehku kandha sakkepenake.

<sup>12</sup> This literally means ‘live together like water buffaloes’.

Sapta Mandala performed a play written by their playwright-director in Indonesian. The play raised questions among kethoprak followers, including theatre makers and theatre critics, about the artistic value of Javanese theatre presented in Indonesian. It was considered important that the dialogue kept a sense of 'Javaneseness' (*nJawani*) (Niesby Sabakingin 1985:7).

Two other writers who contributed to the innovation of Javanese theatre are S.H. Mintardja (1933-1999) and Suryanto Sastroatmodjo (born 1951). Mintardja became famous for his interpretation of historical legends. He wrote many novels and kethoprak plays in both Indonesian and Javanese about the rise and fall of Javanese empires. These plays were enacted by several kethoprak groups and appeared as *sayembara* (contest) serials on TVRI Yogyakarta in the beginning of the 1990s. The audience could actively participate in each episode of a *kethoprak sayembara* serial by answering questions linked to the development of the story (Jayadi K. Kastari 2001; Budi Susanto 2000:77-9).

Expert of Javanese culture and journalist of the local newspaper *Bernas* Suryanto Sastroatmodjo wrote several Javanese scripts of which just a few have been published. A Yogyakarta-based publisher called Wirofens published three scripts in a book entitled *Jangkah saklima; Impunan lampahan sandiwara basa Jawi rinacik-racik* (In five steps; An anthology of Javanese theatre plays, 1981) and three others in *Aki matabiru, radiotonil sandiwara Jawi* (The blue agate jewel, Javanese radio plays, 1983). In 1987 Suryanto Sastroatmodjo provided a full script for a mega performance (*kethoprak kolosal*) of the play *Nyi Ageng Serang* by the group Sapta Mandala. For this occasion, he also wrote a performance programme with a synopsis of the play and an overview of the casting (Suryanto Sastroatmodjo 1987). The phenomenon of *kethoprak kolosal* (colossal kethoprak) became more common towards the end of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s. These were huge performances in terms of the large number of participants (more than 100 instead of 30 in a regular performance), the spectacular clothing and the grand stage (Budi Susanto 2000:85).

Playwright-director Bondan Nusantara (born 1953) was one of the instigators of *kethoprak kolosal* performances. Strongly influenced by his teacher and friend Handung Kus Sudyarsana (leader of Sapta Mandala) he has always been devoted to the innovation of theatre. As one of the most prominent theatre developers of the 1990s, he organised theatre festivals, acted as artistic leader and director of several

theatre groups and wrote numerous full scripts (personal communication with Bondan Nusantara in 1999). When he took over the leadership of Sapta Mandala in 1991 he made some successful productions with a strong emphasis on humour. The popular comedians Marwoto, Daryadi, Yati Pesek and Didik Nini Thowok performed key roles (Didik Nini Thowok 1997:151). From 1993 onwards Bondan Nusantara staged a new form of kethoprak/dhagelan with his group called DMB, Dagelan Mataram Baru (New Dhagelan Mataram).<sup>13</sup> Its detailed scripts contain satirical interpretations of current political developments. Most of the plays dwelled upon the peculiarities of the Soeharto regime and later Habibi regime. With their critical and daring attitude the DMB members attracted the attention of many students and middle-class people in Yogyakarta (Budi Susanto 2000:139-41).

*The turn of the 20th century: krismon and creativity*

From the monetary crisis (*krismon*) in 1997 onwards many theatre groups on Java have been facing difficulties or even ceased to exist. Because invitations for performances during ritual celebrations became rare, professional kethoprak groups tried to find alternative ways to make a living. They engaged in *telekethoprak*, serialised kethoprak performances for television and started to act as comedians on an individual basis. For example the group PS Bayu (see Chapter II) that had been established in 1964 managed to survive the times of *krismon* by performing in the studio of the local television station TVRI and by sending out their star players Sugati and Bambang Rabies to brighten a ritual celebration with their humorous skits (personal communication with Ki Sugati 2000).

Occasionally kethoprak groups were invited to give a short performance during big events like the anniversary of a political party, the anniversary of a military regiment or the opening of a new firm. The play seemed to be of minor importance, embedded as it was in an ongoing flow of entertainment with famous comedians, singers, dancers and wayang puppets. Humour and glamour were the basic elements of the whole show. Every half-hour the play was interrupted by the music of an orchestra playing *campursari*: Javanese ‘pop’ music combining traditional gamelan

---

<sup>13</sup> In this context, Mataram refers to the old name of present-day Yogyakarta. Theatre groups from Yogyakarta often use it as part of their name.

with keyboards and snare drums. The newly established kethoprak group Jampi Stress and Sasra Bahu (see Chapter II) specialised in humorous kethoprak. Meanwhile the group *kethoprak humor* became famous at a national level with a similar kind of humorous kethoprak that was broadcast by the private television channel RCTI (Chapter III).

The radio station RRI in Yogyakarta kept broadcasting its Javanese-language programmes *dhagelan Mataram* (see Chapter II), *kethoprak Mataram* (see Chapter III) and *sandiwara radio daerah* (Chapter IV) throughout the *krismon*. In 1997 the television station TVRI Yogyakarta launched the situation comedy *Obrolan Angkring* (food-stall talk). This programme (see Chapter IV) made use of a full script. A few years later the members of Sandiwara Jenaka KR (Chapter IV), the former comedy group of Handung Kus Sudyarsana, made their comeback on stage and on TVRI with their new playwright-director Bondan Nusantara.

### *Concluding remarks*

Most Javanese language mnemonic and structuring devices used during the process of staging a play had the format of a summary. My historical overview of their development, however, shows certain specific moments during which scripts obtained a more detailed appearance. The court dance drama's wayang wong and langendriya brought about the first detailed play texts in Javanese language. In the 1920s Javanese aristocrats wrote tonil Djawa: 'Western style' full scripts inspired by their Dutch coloniser. During the Japanese occupation and in the 1960s theatre groups were forced to bring ideological messages on stage. Scripts had to be written in detail in order to be censored and improvisation was prohibited. From the mid-1970s, theatre troupes once more made detailed accounts of their repertory. This was the result of censorship by the authorities. At the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s detailed scripts were produced as part of a competition of Javanese language drama. In short, detailed scripts were written because of influence from Western (Dutch) culture and because of the fact that the full script could be used as means of propaganda. Furthermore, at times, the authorities required a full script in their attempt to control performing arts.



In the last two decades of the 20th century several theatre critics and playwright-directors expressed the need to innovate Javanese-language theatre. In their opinion, a change in the script format was an essential part of the innovation process. They were convinced that the quality of performances could be upgraded by the use of full scripts. In this way performances could become shorter in performance time and more compact in content. The ideas about change in character of both script and performance had a strong connection with ‘regional’ cultural politics (for example concerning the promotion of local language, literature and identity) and the growing power of local and global media in Indonesia. If a theatre group had the ambition to appear on television, they first had to fulfil the requirements of the television station, which included the use of a full script.

Despite the strong encouragement of the use of full script by a group of critical individuals, most playwrights and directors tended to disregard the detailed scripts in practice. The ideas of the literary elite happened to be very different from the artists performing on stage. Whereas the literary critics were very concerned with transforming stage scripts into ‘literary art’, the theatre makers focused on their performance.

Scripts changed in appearance during the 20th century, adapting influences from ‘above’ and ‘abroad’. The Javanese staging process, however, remained the same throughout the century in the sense that improvisation skills and traditional conventions continued to dominate the scene. In the following chapters, I examine the attitude towards the script amongst theatre practitioners and theatre critics.