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Inventing the Performing Arts: Modernity and Tradition in Colonial Indonesia

MATTHEW ISAAC COHEN

Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016.

In *Inventing the Performing Arts: Modernity and Tradition in Colonial Indonesia*, Matthew Isaac Cohen focuses on how “modernity” and “tradition” are woven together in shaping the practice of performing arts in Indonesia. Using E.J. Hobsbawm’s term “invented tradition,” this book uses a similar approach to Hobsbawm’s by questioning the difference between tradition and modernity and showing how both are interwoven and unavoidably connected rather than opposites. This book discusses the century-old process of invention of performing arts in Indonesia, in chronological order from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, depicting the many agencies and dynamics involved in the process.

Starting with an advertisement of a family circus from Batavia, as well as postcards and images from museum collections of the nineteenth century, the author beautifully demonstrates the many agencies involved in the process of invention, including those from Europe, China, and Java, to show the complexity of the invention of performing arts in Indonesia. Through the rest of the book the author illustrates how the development of performing arts in Indonesia has been subjected to influences from many agencies, not only local but also international, and how the development is connected to the trends of performing arts at the international level. It is reasonable to suggest that the performing arts in Indonesia are not only the result of tradition, which is isolated from the outside, but are also influenced by, and adaptations of, trends in other countries as well.

This book consists of three parts arranged in chronological order. The first part focuses on the “common ground for arts and popular entertainments” in the setting of the nineteenth century; the second focuses on the “maelstrom of modernity” of the twentieth century; and the third focuses on “occupation and ‘Greater Asian’ modernity,” informed by the 1942–45 period of Japanese occupation.

The first part introduces the topic of performing arts and their significance in and for Indone-

sia; the multiple agencies involved in the development of performing arts in Indonesia in the nineteenth century; and how early modernity was absorbed in the nineteenth-century performing arts of the country. The development of performing arts during this period is very important for Indonesia as the seed for what happened next, in the twentieth century. Several basic types of performing arts are mentioned in this part of the text, including the European theater, military and missionary music, Chinese opera, Javanese royal court performances such as court dances, and *wayang kulit* or shadow puppet theater. All of those basic types underwent changes as a result of social changes, technological advancement, and education. There was also growing commercialization during this period, as previously noncommercial performances were turned into popular entertainment by various entrepreneurs. The change to commercialization brought new cultural forms into performing arts such as circuses, puppet theater, and commercial *wayang wong* (Javanese dance drama). New rules were set for the new cultural forms, as by then they were considered public performances.

The second part of the book focuses on the peak of modernity in Indonesia, after the nineteenth century. This is the period when modern drama and modern music from international, including Western, sources influenced the practices of the performing arts in Indonesia. The remarkable influences on drama discussed in this book are from *Komedi Stambul*, *Indische Toneel*, and Malay and Sino-Malay drama, which underwent changes resulting from interactions with local conditions. The music performed during this period was varied: the music of the *pasar malam* (night market), classical music, jazz, and the unique Hawaiian-style music. The invention and development of the phonograph brought new ways to express music as well as spread various styles. It should be noted that all of these music sources are from countries outside of Indonesia. They created richer cultural forms of hybridity, which gave rise to some resistance, particularly from those in favor of traditions. This resistance led to established traditional cultural practices becoming more modern by adopting modern organizations as well as modern school and education systems, despite efforts to use tradition to oppose modernity. This resistance unexpectedly gave rise to a more popular culture by making the arts more available to common people rather than being exclusive as they were in the past. Some of the organizations and schools founded during this period had a role in the next period, for example the Java Institute, Boedi Oetomo, Kridha Beksa Wirama, and Taman Siswa. In the last stage of this period there was growing nationalism as a result of education, which in turn initiated a debate on Indonesian cultural identity driven by prominent agencies including Sukarno, Muhammad Yamin, and Sanoesi Pane.

The third part of the book focuses on the Japanese occupation of 1942–45 and its influence on cultural and performing arts. Japanese fascism and propaganda, along with Japanese policy on censorship and obligatory registration, brought something new to the cultural life of Indonesia. All forms of Western culture were banned, and the performing arts and entertainment were made for—and dictated by the needs of—Japanese propaganda. This climate of thought made way for

some traditional art forms previously banned by the Dutch to be reborn, while Western-influenced arts were banned and the adoption of Japanese arts was facilitated. This also made way for the making of *sandiwara* (spoken drama) as a new art form. The last year of the Japanese occupation was the time when resistance started to flourish in cultural practices. This resistance was a result of all the hardships Indonesian people had to face during the occupation, when they were forced to work as laborers for the Japanese military and give most of their harvest to the Japanese—an obligation that inevitably resulted in the Indonesian population experiencing famine and suffering. As the Japanese military government was close to being defeated by the Allies, it introduced the idea of independence to the Indonesian people as part of the “Greater East Asia” concept, through propaganda. The propaganda was spread through art forms that were centrally organized by the Japanese colonial government. This initiative created new art forms and a new generation of art performers who used art performance as a propaganda tool. The propaganda was successful in that it increased the nationalism of the Indonesian people, but the people refused to be part of “Greater East Asia” under Japan. This part of the book closes with a short discussion on the dynamics of performing arts in the following period—from the end of Japanese colonialism up to the 2000s.

The elaborate discussion in this book will be particularly helpful for scholars interested in the development of Indonesia’s performing arts. While the nature of this historical book needs it to be elaborative in order to thoroughly explore information relating to the life of Cornel Simandjoentak and the details of Dardanella (pp. 141–147), some of the information might not be necessary to support the author’s main arguments. The information about the life of Simandjoentak, who suffered from tuberculosis, is an example of unnecessary detail. However, the details in this book are remarkable, making it an important source of information on the cultural dynamics of Indonesia in the nineteenth to twentieth century, with particular relevance to the development of Indonesia’s performing arts. The book’s detailed and complex information, involving many agencies and events over a long period of time, has the potential to render the narrative somewhat confusing at times. However, the author makes it simple enough for the reader to understand the big picture, thanks to the book’s structure and narrative flow.

This book will best suit Indonesia- or Southeast Asia-focused researchers, scholars, and academics specializing in cultural issues. Its abundant details are invaluable for such specialists, as they serve as data sources and can be used as background to inform and facilitate other research. However, this book would be challenging for a more general audience in that its meticulous details, including specific names and terminology, can be confusing and therefore distract readers from the bigger picture. The glossary is seven pages long and consists of Indonesian and local words, which shows the abundance of foreign words the reader has to absorb in order to understand the text. In addition, specific names of people, organizations, and groups appear frequently throughout. The combination of both can be overwhelming for a reader who does not have preliminary knowledge about Indonesian history or culture. At the same time, the specific names and terminology show

how much information offered by this book could be of benefit to readers whose interests are in related fields and who have a sufficient basic knowledge of Indonesia, its people, and its culture.

Overall, the book is a valuable contribution to the literature of Indonesian studies, Southeast Asian studies, and studies on performing arts in general. Its extensive examination of the concepts of modernity and tradition in the performing arts of Indonesia, and how both concepts are intertwined and inseparable, will be of great benefit to specialists in the field of Asian cultural studies.

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Thailand: Shifting Ground between the US and a Rising China

BENJAMIN ZAWACKI

London: Zed Books, 2017.

Thailand: Shifting Ground between the US and a Rising China is an indispensable handbook for those who study Thailand or whose work involves the kingdom. A detailed review of the past several decades, it itemizes the steps with which the various governments of Thailand have dealt with the rise of China and its intensive expansion into Southeast Asia, which has been matched by progressive American withdrawal and occasionally the United States completely ignoring the region and its longstanding ally Thailand.

The book is backed up by Benjamin Zawacki's 15 years as a resident of Thailand, and his extensive and thorough interviews with major players in the United States and Thailand, including former US secretaries of state and ambassadors, and former Thai premiers, ministers of foreign affairs, as well as Thai military, political, and social leaders.

In fact, the intensity of the details and the argument contribute to the one negative of the book: the unusually complex and oblique sentence structures, which make it a challenging read even for someone familiar with modern Thailand. It can be a challenge for the casual reader or the undergraduate student. If anything, Zawacki is too absorbed in the historical events he reviews and the people he interviews.

The people Zawacki thanks and those who are quoted by the publisher with very positive comments on this book are a who's who of Thai political leaders, respected commentators, activists, and scholars. The list also includes a large number of leading foreign scholars and news analysts. Underlying all this is the significance of Zawacki's main point: the historic turn of Thai foreign policy and internal values toward those of China, as the United States willingly fades into the historical distance from modern-day Southeast Asia. This is described in several dust-jacket quotes as a "wake-up call." It turns out that Zawacki has a few more timely and profound insights to share