

Relieving Stress, Resisting Desire: Gendered Exchange at Jakartan Dangdut Performances

Jeremy Wallach  
Bowling Green State University  
jeremyw@bgsu.edu

The scholarly encounters between gender studies and Southeast Asian studies have been extraordinarily fruitful, particularly for ethnomusicologists of Southeast Asia. I want to suggest that the valuable insights contained in recent studies and edited volumes by researchers such as Suzanne Brenner, Nancy Cooper, Sarah Weiss, Aihwa Ong, Michael Peletz, Laurie Sears, Anna Tsing, Sean Williams, and others derive in part from the ability of these authors to reflect productively on the contrast between two radically different gender ideologies that tend to compete with one another in contemporary Southeast Asian societies. In simplified form, the first ideology views men and women as mutually hostile groups locked in an unending and unequal struggle for power, a struggle in which women's bodies are objectified and made to serve a patriarchal order. The second gender ideology, on the other hand, regards men and women as comprising two halves of a complementary whole. In this view both groups ideally struggle to preserve harmony between the genders through actions in their respective spheres of influence.

During the course of my fieldwork in Jakarta I found that residents of the Indonesian capital city were influenced by both ideological systems: patriarchal

capitalism and the commodification of female sexuality coexisted uneasily with older discourses of complementarity and respect for women's power. This paper examines how this uneasy coexistence is manifested in performances by women before audiences of men which take place in the urban environs of Greater Jakarta.

My first case study involves dangdut, an erotically charged, working-class identified, national popular music genre regarded by many as quintessentially Indonesian. In Jakarta, scores of dangdut performances take place on any given night, but whether they occur in a smoky, darkened nightclub, at a wedding celebration in a cramped urban backyard, or in front of thousands of revelers at a large outdoor festival, the female singer-dancers at dangdut concerts interact in similar ways with their largely male audiences. The following video depicts the typical onstage interactions which take place between male musicians, male audiences members, and -- the focus of all that male attention -- the solitary female singer-dancer.

[Play video clip].

As this video clip makes clear, women dangdut singers' costumes are markedly different from everyday Indonesian clothes. They fall into two basic categories: long evening gowns and high heels (as depicted in the video example), or skimpy outfits usually involving miniskirts, black leather, and knee-high boots.<sup>1</sup> Traditional, "ethnic"

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<sup>1</sup> The men onstage also have distinctive costumes. Male dangdut instrumentalists (as well as male singers, when they are present) frequently wear brightly colored, matching jackets and ties. This is also unusual dress in Indonesia, particularly in poor and working-class communities where the members of the urban elite are contemptuously called the *kaum berdasi*, (necktie-wearing caste).

clothing styles are rare at performances of dangdut, a music forever tainted by its association with backward village life. The extravagant outfits of dangdut singer-dancers index wealth, prestige, Western-style urbanity, even a bit of Hollywood sex appeal. Yet simultaneously, the cheap fabrics and bright colors of dangdut costumes and the “scandalous” outfits worn by some female singers suggest a distinctly working class sensibility, and dangdut fashion differs not only from the traditional costumes of “regional music” performers, but also from the MTV-inspired sartorial choices of Indonesian pop and rock artists. Thus, like dangdut music itself, dangdut costumes are not “traditional” yet not quite “modern.”

The most common form of direct interaction between performers and audience at dangdut concerts is *saweran*—monetary offerings audience members present to the performer during the course of their performance. To *nyawer* is to hand one or more rupiah bills to the singer while he or she is singing. Depending on the performance venue, a single *saweran* can range from the equivalent of eight U.S. cents to eight U.S. dollars or more. In most cases, after graciously but wordlessly accepting the money, the singer, singing all the while, casually tosses it onto the floor near the back of the stage. The total amount of *saweran* is split among the singers and musicians at the end of the night.

At some dangdut concerts, male audience members also climb onto the stage and dance. Most are not brazen enough to actually dance with the singer but rather ascend the stage in pairs and *joget* (dance) on either side of him or her. During the dance, one or both dancers presents *saweran* to the singer before finally descending from the stage before the song concludes. While male dangdut singers may also receive *saweran* from

the audience during their performance, in situations involving women singers, the offering of money appears to bring a release of built-up sexual tension between the singer, the audience member, and the onlookers. In her study of what she calls “seduction scenarios” in rural Central Java, anthropologist Nancy Cooper demonstrates how performances by women singers called *waranggana* (a more polite term for the more widely-used *talèdhèk*) provided the opportunity for male spectators and musicians to express their “potency” by remaining “impassive in the face of temptation” (2000: 618). She writes, “In these seduction scenarios, men are publicly exposed to situations involving women who test their personal control and thus their ability to avoid a commotion and preserve the general harmony...” (2000: 620).

While Jakartan dangdut differs in *numerous* respects from Javanese village performance traditions, the presentation of money to dangdut singers by male patrons can likewise exhibit men’s self control and power. For the audience, the offering of *saweran* is almost a cathartic event, since it signifies the giver’s intention to refrain from embracing or otherwise initiating disruptive physical contact with the singer, in spite of her charms as a temptress. Not surprisingly perhaps, the consumption of alcohol -- a ubiquitous activity in dangdut nightclubs despite the prohibitions against this activity in Islam -- appears to be a factor in determining the amount of *saweran* offered by patrons. I have observed that visibly intoxicated men were frequently the most generous, perhaps because the alcohol lessened their tendency toward frugality, but also because the temptation to lose one’s self control, which they were paying off, so to speak, with their cash offering, was that much greater as a result of their physiologically compromised state. I occasionally observed visibly intoxicated patrons who did in fact initiate intimate

physical contact with women on the dance floor of dangdut nightclubs, but this complete surrender to desire was unusual and perceived in a negative light by the other patrons. Furthermore, such behavior was never directed towards a singer-dancer while she was performing.

Thus, the monetary gift bestowed upon a female dangdut performer has value not only as a display of personal wealth but also as an index of personal restraint: the patron temporarily enters the performance frame to reward the singer and the musicians for providing an opportunity to test his resolve in the face of sensual temptation. The greater the skills of the performers, the greater the temptation, and the higher the reward. The practice of *saweran* then, can be viewed as an example of gendered role playing in dangdut which illustrates the tensions in Indonesian working class life between village-based conceptions of female and male performative power on the one hand, and urban culture's tendency to commodify (and thus remove agency from) female sexuality on the other. In a sense, female dangdut singers and their male audiences embody the unresolved tensions between these different constructions of gender and agency through engaging in cultural practices such as *saweran* that seem to simultaneously honor and objectify the female performer.

What motivates male dangdut audience members to engage in such expensive displays of manly fortitude in the face of sexual danger? "Getting rid of stress" (*hilangi stres*) is the most commonly voiced justification for male behavior at dangdut concerts. Activities like dancing to dangdut music, watching attractive women singers, and consuming alcohol are deemed necessary for relieving stress, which many Indonesian men view as caused less by one's problems than by constantly worrying about them.

Stress, according to one young working class dangdut enthusiast, results from “too much thinking about something” (*terlalu banyak mikirin*), which can be cured by activities considered *represing* (“refreshing”) such as dancing, traveling to the countryside, and going to dangdut bars. But, as my friend’s father (also a longtime dangdut fan) commented, too much “refreshing” can anger one’s wife. After hearing this remark, I asked him what *wives* do when *they* feel stressed. “They keep it bottled up inside (*membuntu*)!” was the man’s lighthearted reply, and he held his breath and puffed up his cheeks to demonstrate.

In her ethnography of Solo, Central Java, Suzanne Brenner (1998: 149-157) argues Solonese men are expected to engage in “naughty” (*nakal*) activities and spend money irresponsibly in order to satisfy their “desires” (*nafsu; nepsu*, Javanese) whereas women, considered the anchors of the domestic sphere, are expected to repress their passions for the sake of the household. In Jakarta the Western-influenced concept of “stress” is invoked to explain and/or excuse similar male behavior – an indication of the heterogeneity of discourses surrounding Jakartan dangdut performance. Of course, spending all of one’s money on overpriced alcoholic drinks and *saweran* at a dangdut club may ultimately increase ones’ stress level, but this possibility did not seem to concern the dangdut club patrons with whom I spoke.

So much for the men. What can be said about the women performers themselves? “Most women in dangdut clubs,” a middle-aged Betawi man told me with obvious distaste, “are women who do not have husbands [*yang tidak punya suami*]”. In Indonesia, widows, divorcees and abandoned wives are called *janda*. These “women who do not have husbands” (but were once married ) are commonly perceived as

vulnerable and sexually available, and in everyday male speech they are contrasted with “virgins” (*perawan*), never-married women whose virtue must be respected and guarded.

The majority of the dangdut singers I interviewed were *janda* with children. Unlike the *waranggana* described by Cooper, dangdut singers cannot use a respected Javanese or other ethnic “tradition” to legitimate their vocation, and in the face of dominant cultural values they can only cite economic motivations, resulting from a condition of poverty and want, to explain why they sing (cf. Pioquinto 1995). “I only sing to get money [*cari duit*],” one club singer told me matter-of-factly. The husband of this particular singer had taken a second wife, leaving her essentially to her own devices to support herself and her young daughter. Often she had to leave her child at home alone when she was out at night singing at the clubs; on those occasions she gave the neighborhood watchman some “pocket money” (*uang saku*) to check on her daughter periodically during her absence.

But while the economic motivations for singing dangdut are painfully real, they do not account for the pride with which one singer told me she knew over one hundred songs, nor for the fact that the singer quoted above enjoyed singing dangdut at informal gatherings of musicians and had taught her daughter (who was in fact quite talented) to sing dangdut songs as well. Moreover, while “good wives” might be unwilling to dance in public to dangdut music, dangdut cassette producers informed me that, according to their market research, married women constituted the majority of those who purchased commercial dangdut recordings. Indeed, the lyrics of popular dangdut songs frequently portray the typical agonies and heartbreaks of working class Indonesian women: husbands remarrying, husbands’ infidelity, and abandonment by deceitful lovers. It is

therefore entirely plausible that financial need is not the sole motivation for dangdut singers, and that some singers use dangdut songs as a vehicle for singing about their own feelings and experiences, for their own enjoyment as well as to entertain a crowd. While dangdut performances can be easily deemed events that objectify and exploit women, dangdut *songs* appeal to both men and women, albeit for different reasons, and provide a means for them to cope with life's problems and disappointments. In other words, dangdut music *relieves stress*.

In her study of dangdut performances in Yogyakarta, Susan Browne argues, “[I]n a society where the poor have no economic, social, or political power, for male audiences at *dangdut kampungan* [sic] performances, singer-dancers represent an escape from their lack of power into a classless world of gendered power” (2000: 34). This is an intriguing claim, but I believe it obscures the class oppression inherent to the institution of the *janda* singer-dancer and her imposed role as temptress.

To illustrate the importance of class and economic need in the evaluation of women performers I want briefly to turn to another example of women's performance in contemporary Jakarta, one that involves middle class student-oriented music festivals held on university campuses, in soccer fields and in stadiums.

These student organized concert events, which almost never included dangdut music and were instead dominated by cover bands playing Western rock music, often featured troupes of young women in tight fitting, matching outfits who, much like cheerleaders at an American athletic event, performed dance routines to a pre-recorded soundtrack. These troupes collectively composed their own choreography, and their internal organization seemed to parallel that of the male-dominated rock bands.



[See handout illustration.]

The dancers' moves and costumes were extremely suggestive and risqué by Indonesian standards, and for that reason their performances often receive an enthusiastic response from male audience members. The soundtrack for their dances was usually a cassette containing a homemade montage of electronic dance or R&B songs, each segment usually lasting less than a minute before an abrupt transition to another.<sup>2</sup> The dance moves occasionally drew on traditional sources (many middle class Indonesian children study Balinese and Javanese traditional dance much like many Western girls study ballet) but were clearly inspired by the dancing in Western hip hop and R&B videos. Unlike dangdut singers or the women who dance at dangdut clubs, the young women's performance did not appear to signal a lack of virtue or sexual availability. Their cosmopolitan style signified the impersonation of global divas, not village sensuality. In a sense, the "truth value" of their impersonations was analogous to that of a cover band playing a Western pop song.<sup>3</sup> The sensual moves of the Indonesian dancers were thus not intended to permanently liken their (presumably virginal) bodies to the dancing, sexualized bodies of the virtual (but not virtuous) Western women who "originally" performed these movements.

Rather, the women in the dance troupes temporarily inhabited the roles of Western women — like those on MTV — whose sexuality was not subject to the moral

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<sup>2</sup> These songs were invariably of foreign origin. While Indonesian R&B and electronica recordings do exist, these were never used as dance soundtracks at the events I attended.

<sup>3</sup> For example, a frequently performed Western composition at student band festivals was Sting's "An Englishman in New York." When the vocalist sang the line in the song's refrain, "I'm an Englishman in New York," the audience was well aware that in reality he was neither British nor currently residing in the Big Apple.

reprobation of Islam or traditional Indonesian values. As a result of this cultural mimesis, they possessed a freedom of expression that women in other parts of Indonesia, even other cities, lacked.<sup>4</sup>

The different meanings attributed to dangdut performance and the performance of middle class R&B dance troupes are not necessarily the product of value differences between the more conservative lower classes and the cosmopolitan middle to upper classes, but are perhaps products of class difference itself. The young women onstage at student-sponsored pop music festivals were not *janda* (divorcées/widows) and they were not performing for economic survival. Their troupes were formed “just for fun” (*iseng-iseng aja*), and, like playing rock music, the women were pursuing a “hobby” (*hobi*), with all the wholesomeness that term implies in both English and Indonesian usage. The privileged status of these middle class, educated teenagers—their freedom from economic want—protects them from exploitation. While dangdut singers display themselves on stage out of economic necessity, becoming an R&B dancer is a *lifestyle choice*. The disparity between these two types of female performers becomes apparent when one imagines the absurdity of a spectator presenting a cash offering to one of the MTV dancers in the middle of their performance.

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<sup>4</sup> Marc Schade-Poulsen (1999) describes the male fans of Algerian *rai* music as dividing women into three categories, “good” Muslim women, “bad” women who only want money, and Western women, who are perceived as attractive and offering unconditional love and devotion, standing somehow outside the moral standards and expectations of reciprocity that characterize their society. The third category existed largely in the imagination of Schade-Poulsen’s informants, yet it nonetheless had powerful effects on their attitudes toward the opposite gender. These three categories correspond remarkably well to those discussed by contemporary Indonesian young people.

Ultimately, the “gift” of *saweran* reinforces the subordinate position of the performer in relation to the giver. The visible presence of money demystifies the relationship between audience and performer, highlighting the financial dependence of the latter. Furthermore, the expected smiling acceptance of the monetary gift reveals the recipient as a fallen woman who performs not because she wants to, but because she must. Thus we are reminded that no analysis of gender, power, and performance is complete without careful consideration of class differences and of precisely who bears the brunt of objectification.

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