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Playful Identifications and Hybridic Performativity at Urban Indonesian *Acara*

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If performance events are crucial sites where ideologies, perceptions of self, and relations of power converge in the context of intense multisensory experience (as ethnomusicologists and performance studies scholars would have it) then it is surprising that so few studies of cultural globalization have focused on the meanings of local performances that incorporate “global” forms. This paper will probe the deployment of “global” sounds and styles at student-organized concert events, or *acara*, in Indonesian cities, examining the ways in which they are parodically contrasted and combined with signifiers of regional and Indonesian national culture. Such an investigation reveals that performances at *acara* not only provide means by which performers and audience members can identify with global cultural forms, but also reveal the limitations and absurdity of such identifications by simultaneously confronting audience members with essentialized representations of their own “Indonesianness” evoked through humorous and provocative juxtapositions of global, national, and regional cultural elements.

Daylong popular music festivals organized by and for middle class students in large Indonesian cities provide an arena for the performance of cosmopolitan youth subjectivities relatively free from direct adult interference and surveillance. As such, I would argue that they provide an ideal lens through which to view processes of identity formation and semiotic play involving signifiers of global culture that characterize the everyday lives of urban, middle class youth in contemporary Indonesia. Student-

organized concert events in Indonesia can last over twelve hours, with forty or more amateur and professional performing ensembles participating. The most elaborate of these festivals are held in sports stadiums, attracting thousands of spectators – mostly fashionable, cellphone-toting middle class youth. These young people are able to afford the price of admission, which in 1999-2000 ranged from 11,000 to 15,000 rupiah. At the time, this was less than US \$2, but was nonetheless a substantial amount for working class Indonesians. Student-organized *acara* are put together by committees (*panitia*) and a sponsor or sponsors, usually corporations that cover the costs of mounting the event in exchange for the opportunity to advertise their products at the event site. *Acara* are advertised through colorful flyers that list the sponsors, headlining bands, and the time and location of the event. These flyers are posted on university campuses, cafes, and other locations where middle class youths tend to congregate.

Major sponsors for musical events I attended during my field research included Close-Up toothpaste, Sprite, Arby's Roast Beef, McDonalds, Smokey Burger (a local burger chain), Teh Kita ("Our Tea", a national bottled tea beverage), Chips Ahoy! Cookies, Bisik.com (a student-oriented Indonesian web site), *Hai* (a youth-oriented pop culture magazine), Baskin Robbins Ice Cream, and Indomilk (the national dairy product company). Sponsors' products are heavily promoted at *acara*. Fast food companies operate well-staffed booths selling refreshments during the event, banners and posters advertising the sponsors' wares decorate the stage and the surrounding area, and television advertisements for the products are played continuously on large projection video screens between acts. While not usually involved with school-affiliated concerts, Indonesian *kretek* (clove cigarette) brands such as Djarum Super, Gudang Garam,

Bentoel, and Sampoerna are frequent sponsors of other youth-oriented live musical events, particularly those featuring *underground* music, and audience members at these *acara* often receive a free pack of cigarettes with the price of admission.

Because most *acara* obtain sponsorships from major corporations, they tend to be larger and more elaborate affairs than student-organized events in the United States. Standard provisions include an enormous stage with professional quality sound and lighting, a high-end drum set, a wide assortment of instrument amplifiers, two enormous video projection screens on either side of the stage, and (invariably) a fog machine. The most humble student group participating in the event has the opportunity to play their music under these conditions, with the same sound equipment as the headlining artists. In addition, committees can often afford to invite the most popular recording artists of the day to perform at the event. These artists, who play short sets of five or six songs, commonly take the stage at ten or eleven at night—more than twelve hours after the official start of the event.

Most bands that performed at student-organized *acara* were relatively inexperienced and played other bands' songs exclusively. In Jakarta and Bandung, they seemed to cover English-language pop and rock songs exclusively; at concert events I attended elsewhere in Java bands also performed songs by Indonesian rock bands like Gigi, Pas, and /rif. Bands that played at *acara* were divided into three categories: *band seleksi* were amateur bands that paid a fee to audition and were selected by the organizing committee, *band dukungan* (“supporting bands”) were more experienced and accomplished student groups invited to perform at the event, and *bintang tamu* “guest

stars” were often full-time professional musicians, and included nationally recognized recording artists.

“Guest star” bands were paid for their appearance; they included bands that performed skillful covers of Western groups and groups that played their own compositions in both English and Indonesian. Artists in the latter category, which included established underground groups as well as bands signed to major labels, usually had recorded albums, while those in the former group had not. In fact, many successful Indonesian rock and pop groups began as cover bands on the live performance circuit, and many remained strongly associated with the Western groups whose songs they used to play. For example, rock group The Fly was well known among Jakarta students as a U2 cover band before they began to record their own material, which, not surprisingly, resembles the Irish band’s music.

Guest star cover bands specialized in one Western popular genre or a specific recording artist; for example, Tor, one of the more creative Jakarta-based performing groups in 1999-2000, specialized in performing the songs of Jimi Hendrix. Similarly, a Jakartan group called Rastafari played 1970s reggae, the popular cover band T-Five was well known for its versions of contemporary hip hop and R&B songs, and a dozen or so groups specialized in replicating the sounds of “hip metal” groups such as Korn and Limp Bizkit. These groups often not only endeavored to reproduce the sounds of the bands they covered but also their costumes and stage moves, which are usually based on observation of live concert videos. In general, the guest star bands’ repertoire differed little from that of the younger groups that preceded them. At a single event it was not

unusual to hear the same Rage Against the Machine or Korn song performed five or six times by different bands possessing vastly different skill levels.

Not all cover bands aimed to create exact replicas of pre-existing recordings. Tor, one of the bands mentioned above, was unique among the cover groups I observed in that it included in its lineup a “traditional musician” – a Sundanese *kendang* (barrel drum) player –who added his own parts to the Western rock songs performed by the band. Often the rock instruments in the ensemble (keyboards, electric guitar, electric bass, drums) drowned out the *kendang*, though Tor did play one song which featured the *kendang* prominently. This song was a humorous version of the New Kids on the Block hit “Step by Step”. Not only was it unusual for a rock group to play a song by the quintessential 1980s “boy band”, this particular rendition featured a virtuosic *kendang* solo in the middle, which was always met by enthusiastic cheers from the audience.

But why were the students cheering? The answer is complicated, but the audacious aural and visual juxtaposition of traditional drumming with a song regarded as a paragon of Western pop commercialism appeared to be an undeniable source of pleasure for audience members. In Tor’s performance the “local,” represented by an “ethnic” musical tradition, could be heard and seen “colonizing” a globally hegemonic music product, and the response was (perhaps slightly embarrassed) laughter and applause. Significantly, Tor *chose* to incorporate traditional music – they were not “resorting” to ethnic sounds due to an inability to perform global popular music properly. In fact the band’s ability to master Western rock was well demonstrated elsewhere in their set by their energetic and tight renditions of the Jimi Hendrix compositions “Crosstown Traffic” and “Purple Haze.”

Most *acara* featured a variety of other types of performances in addition to the usual succession of rock bands. Occasionally, even performances of ethnic regional traditions are added to the bill. In the late afternoon at one all-day concert event in Central Jakarta, a group of young women in colorful folkloric dress sang and performed a traditional Acehnese dance . I later learned that the members of the troupe were students from SMA 70, a Jakarta high school, and that none were actually from Aceh, a province in North Sumatra that has long been the site of a separatist rebellion against the Indonesian government.¹ This same event also featured a clown (*pelawak*) act, a demonstration by a *silat* (Indonesian martial arts) troupe, a cheerleading routine, and a male a capella group that performed songs from a number of different styles, from a Bob Marley reggae composition to 1970s Western soft rock. Their clever all-vocal arrangements of two *dangdut*² songs received an especially positive response, and a few audience members even began to dance enthusiastically.

In addition to live performances of various sorts, televisual images are an integral part of most pop and rock *acara*. In addition to showing sponsors' advertisements, *acara* video screens are also used to project Western rock videos and concert footage during the breaks between bands. These sequences of imported videos, which are often painstakingly assembled beforehand in a video editing studio, generally receive positive

¹While the young women in the ensemble were not members of the Acehnese ethno-linguistic group, they were part of the same nation as the Acehnese. Their appropriation of Acehnese expressive cultural practices could therefore constitute a grassroots example of the folkloricization that accompanies nation-building projects, an attempt to “domesticate” the people and cultural forms of an unruly province.

² Dangdut is a working class identified, hybridic popular music genre wildly popular with ordinary Indonesians throughout the country. Dangdut performances were usually conspicuously absent from student-organized *acara*, thus the choice of repertoire by the group was unusual, and even a bit scandalous.

responses from the audience, often far more positive than the responses received by most of the local bands. In addition, many *acara* screen their own custom-made computer animation sequences, which incorporate the event's logo and the list of event sponsors. These multimedia presentations are not supplements to the live performances but rather are an integral part of the *acara*. In fact there is little reason to assume that the bands' presentations are any less "mediated" than the video sequences, since the performances are often themselves self-conscious replications of the sounds, movements, and images of imported concert videos.

Conclusions

Musical performance events in Indonesia enact an ethic of *inclusivity*, within which musical differences indexing both social differences between people and the divergent allegiances within individuals are rhetorically transcended. Through the juxtaposing, parodying, and blending of musical genres, performers and audience collaborate in the creation of a hybridic, self-aware, ephemeral community in which unassimilated differences coexist as a dizzying array of alternatives – Indonesian, modern, traditional, trendy, American, global, populist, elitist, Muslim, ethnic, etc.— that not only do not line up into simple binary oppositions but also cannot be easily subsumed under a single coherent framework. This performed multiplicity nevertheless conforms to an ethic of radical inclusiveness and promotion of social solidarity, both of which happen to be key components of a vernacular, cosmopolitan Indonesian nationalism that is perhaps expressed more eloquently in popular music than in any other Indonesian mass medium.

To borrow a phrase from a foundational text in the anthropology of Indonesia, the hybridic performances by participants at student-organized *acara* are a form of “deep play” that enact various possible, utopian, and impossible configurations of identity, indexing the array of choices available to Indonesian middle class youth confronted with a boisterous cultural marketplace of heterogeneous commodities, images, styles, and sounds.

BONUS TRACK: ACARA EXPRESI: Noceng Nodrugs

The following is a description of a medium-sized *acara* organized by the Faculty of Communications at Moestopo University, Jakarta that was left out of the oral presentation of this paper. The name of the *acara* was a combination of Jakartanese (*Noceng* means “two thousand”, from the Hokkien Chinese) and English words; together they described the main theme of the event. Many youth-organized *acara* of the time shared a “say no to drugs” theme, as awareness of the problems of drug abuse grew more widespread among Indonesian youth in the late 1990s.

12:30 PM, July 30, 2000

It is a hot afternoon in the Senayan Sports Complex in Central Jakarta. Student rock bands have been playing since morning but very few audience members have arrived. A tent covers the stage; the unprotected, sun-drenched concrete basketball courts in front of the stage are still devoid of people. Behind the basketball courts is a larger tent housing a series of booths: food stands, a student photography exhibit, a display of leftist books and T-shirts run by the Universitas Moestopo School of

Communications, an exhibit advertising a drug rehabilitation facility, and a large stand operated by a store called Underground, which has branches in Bandung and Bintaro, South Jakarta. The stand is selling pirated Western recordings and videos, and a few non-pirated Indonesian underground music cassettes. Also on sale are T-shirts, wool hats, jewelry, bandanas, sunglasses, and other accessories, as well as a row of large posters, mostly of popular Western bands like Blink 182, Slipknot, Rancid, and the Beastie Boys. There was even a colorful Che Guevara print.

The student photo exhibit provides a fascinating glimpse into middle class Indonesian student culture. The display includes several photographs of the November 13, 1998 “Semanggi Tragedy”, a notorious incident when nine unarmed student demonstrators were murdered by soldiers. The photographs include depictions of a violent confrontation with riot police, a group of student protesters observing evening prayers (syolat maghrib) during a demonstration, a profusely bleeding student being carried away by his comrades, and a large picture of cars set ablaze in front of Atma Jaya University, which is located in the Semanggi area. Another category of photographs portrays typical scenes from Indonesian life: schoolchildren in uniform, a young mother and child in a poor neighborhood, a garbage-strewn Jakarta cityscape. Finally, there is a still life, an abstract figure study, and two pictures of Indonesian rock singers performing (Armand Maulana from Gigi and Andy from Irf). The exhibit combines some recurring themes in student life: a somewhat detached and exoticizing view of the life of ordinary Indonesians, the desire for artistic self-expression and at least a sentimental attachment to politics. The day’s performances provide further examples of these central themes.

The headlining “guest stars” at this particular *acara* included alternative rock band Netral, veteran Jakarta hardcore group Step Forward, alternative pop band Padi (which would later release one of the most commercially successful recordings in Indonesian history), a cover band specializing in the music of the 1960s rock group The Doors, and Balcony, a Bandung-based “emo-core” (emotional hardcore) band. But these bands did not take the stage until long after sundown. Until evening arrived an assortment of ensembles performed in the hot sun for a small but growing crowd.

3:30 PM – 10:00 PM

The musical offerings at the start of the day were rather predictable. The stage was occupied by a succession of high school and university student-aged bands covering songs by contemporary Western rock groups. Their audience consisted of a mere ten people huddled under the shade of an umbrella below the stage. To the right of the performers the event planning committee (panitia), all dressed in matching white T-shirts emblazoned with the acara’s name, gathered under the shade of a small grove of trees. They have their own water cooler, off limits to regular audience members.

By sundown, after the break for evening prayers (which, as usual, I saw no one actually performing), the audience had grown to around two hundred fifty people. As the evening progressed, The M.C.’s staged dancing contests, quizzed the audience, and gave out prizes in the intervals between band performances.