

# **A (CATHOLIC) POWER TO DEMOCRATIC WILL**

## **Empowering People Performing Arts In Postcolonial Indonesia**

### **1. Background of the Project**

Since May 1998 Reformation, democratization and socio-cultural changes have occurred in Indonesian societies. The Reformation showed that “the will to power” associated with the dominating regime, was castigated by “the power to will.” The later one is a kind of democratic power that is more of the moral, spiritual and creative resource to be or to remain or sometimes to become a people with self-confidence and self-affirmation. (Alejo 2000). After the Reformation, the societies' life-styles, social classes, and political structures have been modified or dissolved. Accordingly, the subjects need to be redefined and repositioned too. Performing arts in its broadest sense is a medium to constitute the subject most effectively. It offers its imagined communities new forms of reflection. The arts have been perfect means to express newly democratic developing ideas, wishes, demands, doubts, and visions.

In the past, Indonesian ruling class elites somehow knew and manipulated those social, cultural and political changes. The elites (capital owners, clergies, scholars, officers, etc.), the New Order military regime (1966-1998) under Suharto, for instance, had the power and knowledge to exploit the translation, interpretation, ceremonial representation, etc. required to stage the arts - for their vested interests. Clifford Geertz (1980) showed that a typical Indonesian theatre state believed that "Power served pomp, not pomp power." However, periodic general elections as well as operation of usual democratic institutions are not the only guarantee of a true democracy. It is the motivation of its people, public independence and altruism, and strong civil society - among others - that supposedly contribute to a national development as illustrations that it is possible for the so called democracy to do better.

Certain scholars of Indonesian studies (i.e., Anderson 1990), also noted that progressive Indonesian people in the 1930s, particularly in Java, started to orchestrate modern types of mass political communication long before they knew the so called democratic access in dealing with power. A typical Indonesian people performing arts, for example, the Javanese Kethoprak has been a mean of creating collective consciences in people without access to bureaucratic or other institutionalized forms of political muscle. Kethoprak is the most popular traditional people theatre that perform deconstructed a kind of royal and religious life of the Javanized past with regard to articulate a kind of communal democratization.

### **The Questions Addressed**

Contemporary (post)modern communication mass-media, fortunately, also has been domesticated by certain kethoprak communities (actors as well as spectators) who are mostly rural people and working urban lower middle and lower class people. This common people “power to will” is not derived from the past; it is the dynamic of intimate life and its related matters. This research will do a kind of thick description ethnography on: how certain kethoprak actors as well as spectators have the opportunity to listen in an ordinary conversations and hear the stories of intimate life, where over and over again power is negotiated, contested and re-valued in a (democratic) dynamic, fluid process. It should also be remembered that injustice and human rights violations are often made possible as much by the silence of the victims as by the deceit and greed of the perpetrators.

In dealing with events and practices in daily life, the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises based Christian tradition appreciates that sight came first and hearing and touch followed. The tradition

has created an image that is not a vision, but a view. It considers that the view, the worldly event and its experience is not just as a "scene" but in fact is a "scenario" (Barthes 1976) offered to the spectators' imagination. It is good to know how the Ignatian tradition may appreciate the kethoprak performing arts for a mutual cultural and religious enrichment with regard to a people democratization. Certain Christian biblical narrative based kethoprak plays certainly have been performed by several "enlightened" Indonesian translators and interpreters of cultural and theological studies related to the kethoprak communities. They hardly use previous classical paradigm of romantic and mimetic theological task. This research will find, hopefully, by way of a deconstructive approach on: how the Christian narratives of the texts that do not exclude the intimate life histories of marginalized people may enhance contemporary kethoprak communal discourses which may have democratic possibilities.

### **The Project Objectives**

A well known notion of "the extension of the tongue of the people" (*Penyambung Lidah Rakyat*) that was labeled to the first (1945-1966) nationalist president of Indonesia, Sukarno (1901-1970) also would be rightly given to the Kethoprak. A democratic label that its meaning supposedly was heard by those who felt, afterwards, that he or she spoke for them, the people. It means that he/she said what the people thought.

Today, one does not lack for those willing - named as agencies - to bear the aspirations of the people. But it is hard to find those who feel spoken for. And it is, precisely, these missing persons who are simply put out of mind in a modern scenario-less hyper-reality world. A kind of modernism that is against the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises' Principles and Foundations of his contemplated world. A traditional people performing arts, i.e. the Javanese kethoprak, as a kind of the nationalist tongue, supposedly has articulated absences of the presence of modern simulated socio-cultural and political scenes and events in Indonesia concerning the notion of democratization. .

### **Research Methodology**

A Focus Group Discussions with selected Christian as well as non Christian kethoprak directors and producers will be organized to know further how the notion of agency, "the tongue of the people" in particular, with its effective and operative meaningful politico-cultural symbols have been performed at a kethoprak stage.

Following Anderson's (2006) argument on modern imagined communities, a contemporary kethoprak performance and its related matter likely also has built that kind of community. It is imagined because the spectators who feel a camaraderie will not know even most of the audience, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. A kind of thick description ethnography (Geertz 1973) on certain kethoprak performances will show how the imagined community that is inherently limited and sovereign is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship required for a democratic society.

The ethnography of kethoprak democratization also will use a post-colonial criticism that aims to expose gaps, absences and ambivalence in historical representations, to identify moments of rupture where the exercise of imperial power is incomplete and/or compromised by colonial resistance, to elicit suppressed or forgotten (subaltern) histories, and to problematise the very mode through which "history" has accrued its authority as "truth."

### **Anticipated Results**

In the past, the grounds of comparison were undeniably Eurocentric. Not only was the material starting point of comparison always from Europe or the North Atlantic; comparison also had a teleological aim. Familiarity with Indonesian traditional people performing arts as well as

appreciation of the Ignatian scenario based biblical narration, hopefully, will help Christian as well as non Christian Indonesians to articulate better certain experiences of democracy in contemporary post-colonial societies and cultures.

### Academic Contributions

Increasingly modern people all have the same experiences, hear the same messages from the same media, buy the same products, are governed by the same laws, depend on the same technology. This research paper will show that certain Christian narrative based kethopraks, or any Indonesian performing folk arts of the same kind, likely represent a contemporary democratic cultural strategy to be able to stand upright in the face of the allures and threats of a global hegemonic modernization which parades and sells out language, imagination, and identity so recklessly.

### The Publication Outlets

Several possible publication outlets are: *Antropologi Indonesia*. Indonesian Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology. *Indonesian Society*, a journal published by The Indonesian Institute of Sciences. *East Asian Pastoral Review*, published by the East Asia Pastoral Institute, Ateneo de Manila. Australian Theological Forum Press: Adelaide, Australia. Jesuit institutes' journals: *CIS (Centrum Ignatium Spiritualitatis)*. *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, and *Religion and the Arts*.

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