



# Indonesian Dancing Bodies: Massacres and Reostrategizing the Postcolonial State

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## **Introduction**

THIS ARTICLE ARGUES that the Indonesian state promoted a “choreographed national identity”<sup>1</sup> in the wake of the 1965-1966 massacres. This cultural reconstruction marginalized many traditional dances, privileged others, and projected a homogenized, standardized notion of Indonesian identity. Such a complex process fulfilled various political functions and hewed to an international discourse of cultural preservation. However, despite its hegemonic thrust, this cultural reconstruction also opened up a space that allowed female dance practitioners to shape and even resist the process.

## **Indonesian Massacre of 1965 – 1966**

The Indonesian people experienced mass killings during the Cold War. This was due to internal political turmoil and also to the prevailing anti-communist policy of the United States. During his tenure as Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno considered establishing a new relationship with China to promote trade and economic cooperation, and to determine other common interests. This potential alliance alarmed the United States and its allies, who feared the advance of Communism. Indonesia was a democratic republic, but its Communist party had a large membership (Zubritzky 2000).

The mass killings and imprisonment of Indonesians were the military's brutal response to an **alleged** communists' attempt to overthrow the state in 1965. The massacre also implicated the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Roosa 2006). Political violence in Indonesia therefore began in a Cold War context with the goal of eliminating those opposed to the large, right wing factions within the national military. Many Indonesians who disappeared during that period were suspected of having Communist ties. Plenty of artists were also accused of being members of Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI), the Indonesian Communist Party, and many dancers were also imprisoned or executed in the 1965–1967 period. In the years that followed, until 1998, the government responsible for the killings remained securely lodged in power.

### **Choreographing a National Identity**

In the aftermath of these massacres, a new form of state representation emerged as the nation-state promulgated a choreographed national identity. Under the rule of Suharto's "New Order" the state targeted a variety of local dance practices, submerging them as variants and re-categorizing them under the preexisting dominance of Javanese and Balinese courts. The result was a literal disembodiment of dance practices, lifting them out of the contexts and people that traditionally performed them and moving them to a standardized aesthetic context based on the court as ideal. And while the project maintained images of Indonesia's ethnic and cultural diversity, it also generated homogenous representations of a "national" Indonesia. The Indonesian state has seen and promoted itself as a rich traditional culture, forging, from over 17,000 islands and thousands of ethnic groups and ecologies, a singular national cultural identity.

Indonesian state-sponsored depictions of national culture have typically emphasized court culture and Hindu epic-based performing arts to the exclusion of other ethnicities and art forms. This policy on cultural representation, with a focus on Bali and Java, is not new and not wholly

attributable to Suharto's decisions during the era. It is a continuation of Dutch colonial policy and Sukarno's policy (Robinson 1995). Building on the symbolic manipulation of Balinese and Javanese court culture enacted by the Dutch, the New Order under Suharto differed from previous attempts by politicizing such cultural reconstruction.

### **The Politics of Cultural Reconstruction**

The choreographed national identity operated under the assumption that certain local dance practices were tinged with Communist ideology, which gave the military, with the support of civilian militias and later the government, an excuse to kill, ban, and imprison excluded dancing bodies—the non-refined and the suspected communist dancing bodies. It was a political rather than an aesthetic choice.<sup>2</sup> Certain dances and dancing bodies were approved, but those that did not align themselves with the state were demonized and marked as dangerous (Larasati 2012).

The standardization and homogenization of Indonesian dance also served two other political purposes: the embodiment of Indonesia's cultural tradition and decontextualization of the dances for a global market. The decontextualization erased the contexts in which these indigenous practices occurred, as well as their histories and practitioners. Further, the cultural reconstruction was undertaken in order to gain the trust of the international community, glossing over the violence and human rights abuses of the past, and opening opportunities for economic development. It was a project that displaced the memory of violence, injustice, and human rights violations by insisting only on the traditional/cultural value of the dances.

### **Indonesian Dance and International Cultural and Economic Policy**

Side by side the reconstruction of Indonesian cultural practices is the financial and cultural collaboration between Indonesia and the United States and international funding agencies. Because the Indonesian state

actively promoted these dance traditions, there was an increase in foreign support for the arts and in international awareness of Indonesia's "rich" culture. In addition, the cultural practices became a means to attract investments and trade to Indonesia, especially the ones that included dance and cultural representation as a way to build and expand the globalizing local tourist economy.

Indonesia's choreographed national identity hewed to the internationalist projects of "development" and "progress"—terms that originally came from industry and economics but can also be applied to cultural practices. After the mass killings, the United States' involvement in Indonesia shifted from political and military affairs to economic and cultural arenas. The resulting cultural policy draws directly from economics-based concepts like "sustainability", a move that connected cultural preservation to development and productivity. Such policy is evident in the funding efforts of the United States and international associations such as the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO 2002). UNESCO is an international body whose work mostly focuses on the so-called Third World countries. UNESCO operates according to universalistic standards of "progress" and "development," against which these countries are measured in terms of their level of industrialization. The prevalent conception of these nations is that although they are in need of economic and even political help, they can and ought to share their culture with the rest of the world. This is the context that underpins UNESCO's funding efforts to preserve local cultures. While such efforts are admirable, they also have the effect of decontextualizing, even ignoring the specificities of local cultural practices, which are seen not on their own terms but rather within global discourses on economic development and cultural preservation. For example, in 2011 when UNESCO placed the Saman dance from Aceh on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, it categorized Aceh as a part of Indonesia—an international geographical agreement—while ignoring the fact that Aceh is embroiled in a regional dispute with the Indonesian state.

Cultural policies in Indonesia align with UNESCO's policy of cultural preservation of the so-called "intangible arts." International cultural philanthropy is grounded in the notion that these cultures are endangered by politically volatile situations and fragile security. This view justifies particular kinds of cultural preservation in the Third World. Instead of having a clear mandate for the preservation of cultural life or of living artistic practices in Indonesia and Cambodia, international cultural policy emphasizes that the ancient arts have to be preserved and protected from any kind of new interpretation, approach, or expansion of repertoires. Indeed, international cultural policy serves to police the interpretation of cultural practices. New interpretations are possible, but only if they are under the control and guidance of the "expert," who has funding from the United States, unlike local funding agencies who are not as well-endowed.

When I was working as a civil servant of the Indonesian government, I learned that international funding for projects in Indonesia is focused on two types of cultural practice. The Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Education collaborate with foreign funding organizations in their mission to preserve indigenous forms. The first type of project draws attention to Javanese court dance and Balinese mystic ritual dance as dominant representations of Indonesian culture, especially after Suharto took power (1965–1998). The second focuses on newer forms that have developed, and it aims to support cultural practices of peoples living in remote forest areas or those of ethnic groups that are not part of the dominant Indonesian state representation. The latter approach is mostly taken by foreign funding institutions that have a branch office in Indonesia. The programs also mainly fund local choreographers who have studied abroad but practice and teach locally. Further, the staging of new dance forms is restricted to certain audiences (educated) or locations (metropolitan). This new choreography eventually becomes a cosmopolitan practice, requires sponsors, and entails a costly production process. This new work then becomes part of the list of activities supported by the United States' cultural philanthropy in order to uphold "diversity."

At the same time, several processes allow performance and cultural practices of Indonesia to be exported to the United States. Cultural diplomacy is a significant part of state-to-state interaction between Indonesia and the United States. Apart from trade and foreign aid agreements with the US government, Indonesia has produced and sent so-called “cultural missions” abroad and vice versa (Prevots 2001). International arts exchange is another mechanism for the migration of Indonesian artistic practice. These workshops, residencies, or collaborations are for the most part initiated by the United States. At the same time, the granting of US funds to support artistic exchange is always mediated by American foreign policy and, in turn, its immigration policy. Lastly, the “re-production” of Indonesian culture in the United States has also occurred because of the migration of individual artists to that country and because of massive anthropological inquiry into Indonesian traditional culture.

### **Women and Cultural Reconstruction: Resistance**

Women are central to the cultural reconstruction project of the Indonesian state. Indeed, the female body, specifically the female performer, is placed at the center of spectators’ gaze in most performances. This practice is reminiscent of both Dutch and Indonesian-era constructions of Balinese Hindu cultural representation, which foreground the female dancer as a goddess, princess, or the object of desire of some evil character. Marta Savigliano (1994) suggests that this exotic depiction of women is a process of an industry that requires distribution and marketing. As such, women have become an icon that helps market Indonesian culture and represent the nation in the international community. They participate and intervene in the process of cultural reconstruction of the Indonesian nation-state.

This representation demands mastery. For example, the staging of the character Shinta in performances of the Ramayana or Dewi Kunti from the Mahabharata frequently deploy methodological approaches, or

dance techniques, that aim to embody the idealized cultural values of beauty, grace, and acquiescence in the case of Shinta, the princess, while Dewi Kunti, a strong, assertive female character, as portrayed as an evil and murderous queen. Yet as lead practitioners of these highly valued “traditional” Indonesian dance forms, female dancers and choreographers gain a sense of artistic ownership, and become actively involved in the rethinking and re-choreographing of the forms. In doing so, they help shape and define the cultural construction process itself. This aspect of the system creates a potential space of intervention, opening a possibility for the assertion of non-subordination through artistic involvement.

Indonesian female artists may thus be said to possess significant authority in the development of national representation, both domestically and in the global market. In addition, since dance training has become part of the national education curriculum, female artists, in their role as educators, are able to play an important part in the construction of a national culture. The practice of performing arts therefore creates agency for women because they can actively participate in nation-building and national representation, although they must largely rely on artistic knowledge transmitted through official channels.

In this context, despite the hegemonic nature of Indonesia’s cultural reconstruction, it is also necessary to consider how the process of cultural reinvention has allowed the strengthening of various forms of resistance used by “subaltern” – non-Javanese, Balinese, or politically mainstream – performers and choreographers who have entered the national system of cultural representation. I locate this possibility in the continuing existence of certain covert, non-official channels for the transmission of alternate aesthetic knowledge and dance techniques, as well as in the dance and religious practices of marginalized groups and certain indigenous, traditional ceremonies. Anna Tsing notes that from the perspective of marginalized peoples, cultural construction is a strategy to redefine marginality on the periphery of state power (1993, xiii-9). In this vein, the participation of female practitioners in cultural construction can be viewed

as a form of resistance. Indeed, Jeffrey Tobin (1994) suggests that cultural construction can be a strategy employed by native nationalists for cultural resistance and as an instrument in the decolonizing process. In 1945, at the time when nationalists pursued independence, it was necessary to reconfigure a nationalized cultural identity to strengthen Indonesia's nation-building process as a new postcolonial state. During the Sukarno era (1945-67) however, the state's approach to national culture as a medium for development and identity formation was vastly different from that of Suharto's New Order, as detailed above.

In the same way, a few female practitioners have attempted to bring more dissonant voices to cultural representation, engaging in subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle, attempts at resistance and "decolonization" vis-à-vis the state and religious patriarchy. In the Indonesian academic context, certain female performing artists, through hard-won creative leverage attained via success within the rigid national system, have created a limited space for experimentation with different approaches to traditional dance and exploration of contemporary themes. For example, Setyastuti, a choreographer, dancer, and Professor of Dance from the Institute of the Arts in Yogyakarta (ISI), choreographs dances that take a daring approach to the issue of women within a violent society, strategically breaking with state-approved dance techniques and embracing narrative content that is considered taboo onstage.

Although it is possible to experiment when funded by foreign institutions and, to a small degree, by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, few instances of new political content and radically resistive choreographies are occurring. This despite several years after the fall of Suharto. Furthermore, funding for contemporary projects often comes from institutions with their own agendas (i.e. earmarked for Muslim countries, "third world" states, developing nations, etc), which may impose, or attempt to impose, restrictions and categorizations on the work of artists who depend on such institutions. Such possibilities, with all their attached limitations, are also mostly on offer for dancers who are educated at the university level and/



or abroad, since they can apply for support through grants and competitions. Many politically, economically, and culturally marginalized artists who perform in villages or on “remote” islands are largely shut out from the above possibilities, or must access them, as suggested above, through a qualified, “expert” mediator.

Thus, through their participation in cultural construction, established female artists may use the above forms of agency and space accorded through cultural practice to begin to redefine the relationship between women and the state-center, gaining mobility and access to discourses of artistic expression that exist beyond the national standard. Yet as implicated in, and dependent on, a complex, highly politicized global system of preservation and funding for the arts, women are still structurally positioned as objects of the male gaze, even as they decolonize themselves from state patriarchy and play out the feminist praxis of Indonesian female performer.

### Notes

- 1 The term is used in Hill, Amy. “Choreographing National Identity: The Political Use of Samba and Tango.” In *Latin American Studies Honors Projects*. Paper 2. <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/lashonors/2/>
- 2 I would like to extend my gratitude to Marta Savigliano for all her comments during my presentation at the UCLA 2007 symposium “Arts, State and Violence,” which I curated. Michael Ross and to Geoffrey Robinson for their help and hospitality during my fellowship at UCLA CSEAS. This paper also benefited from the many comments of Matthew Santa Maria and other anonymous reviewers.
- 3 My observation refers to the description of Gerwani dance as represented within the form of “folk culture” in the film *G 30 S PKI*, produced by the Ministry of Defense and Education under Mr. Nugroho Notosusanto and released in 1983–1984, and in a documentary entitled *Shadow Play* by Chris Hilton, released in 2002. I also refer to many interviews during my research in Bali, Java, Aceh and Kalimantan region and has been publish in my book *The Dance That Makes You Vanish* (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming, 2013).

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