

Freedom of expression at the Jakarta Art Centre during Soeharto's New Order

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the self-imposed freedom of expression in art performances during Soeharto's New Order at the Jakarta Art Centre, which was established in 1968. It used a historical approach to collect and analyse data. The study shows that the transformation of some traditional dances into contemporary ones, representing aesthetic values of the time, was possible by making the centre immune to political motives and refrain from criticising the New Order regime. The regime equipped the Jakarta Art Centre with supporting facilities for art performances, allowing the artists to develop their own talents and creativities. This relatively favourable condition led to significant changes in Indonesian traditional arts for their survival at that time. Unlike the Old Order, which used arts—especially dance—as instruments for partly building the national political identity, the New Order saw arts as confined to their basic conviction: to entertain, not to be politicised. This study also finds that the smart strategy for freedom of expression adopted by the Jakarta Art Centre had helped develop contemporary creative arts during that period.

1 INTRODUCTION

Several choreographers in Indonesia have strong traditional dance backgrounds. However, current developments have made them aware of the need to re-style traditional dances to create new choreographic techniques that may adapt to new situations. Herein, we discuss such developments by focusing on the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, which demonstrated an evolution from traditional to modern dances and eventually to contemporary dances. In this case, development is the emergence of new knowledge, creative process and choreography setup.

The development stages can be divided into two periods: the first period (1950s–1960s) with two major figures, Bagong Kussudiardja and Wisnoe Wardhana, and the second period (1960s–1970s) with three major figures, Sardono W. Kusumo, Huriah Adam and I Wayan Diya. These names are part of the largely inclined choreographers in Indonesia who had produced new masterpieces beyond traditional works. The new creations emerged not only from the artists but also under certain conditions to accommodate the government's policy, with respect to the artworks and the public factors or the audience, as well as reports in mass media and reviews by art critics.

The first transformation process (1950s–1960s) was initiated by Bagong Kussudiardja and Wisnu Wardhana, both of whom had a strong background in the aesthetics of the classical traditional dances from Yogyakarta. They created new dances because they were discontented with the traditional dances, which they regarded as static, leading to the confinement of these dances from expressing opinions, comments, questions and criticisms. These were actually related to traditional dances. In addition, both artists were influenced by the knowledge obtained from reading and watching performances abroad when participating in Indonesian art missions. The torrent of modern views entering Indonesia and the experience of studying modern dances in the United States had encouraged the artists to initiate a reform on their own creative process. Thus, Kussudiardja and Wardhana were considered pioneers of the development of modern dance in Indonesia from the 1950s to the 1960s, without negating

the traditional aesthetics embodied in their artistry. Both of them asserted the transformation from traditional to modern dance by establishing dance schools, which they named 'Padepokan Bagong Kussudiardja' and 'Sekolah Tari Kontemporer Wisnu Wardhana'. The inclusion of their names also indicated that they had established their own style, or, as stated by Murgiyanto (2015), each of them had established their own techniques of movement following the footsteps of the American modern dance figure, Martha Graham.

Afterwards, from the late 1960s to the 1970s, other dance artists brought a spirit of novelty for choreography in Indonesia. They not only mastered traditional dances, but also aspired to make new creations with traditional materials: Sardono W. Kusumo with a background in the aesthetics of Surakarta classic dances, Huriyah Adam with a background in Minangkabau dances and I Wayan Diya with a background in Balinese dances. In the search process, these three artists even conducted deep creative explorations because of their close associations with the workshop at the Jakarta Art Centre in Taman Ismail Marzuki, which was just built by Governor Ali Sadikin in 1968. In the closeness of the standardised dance practice room, each of them contributed the best of their abilities to create a form of transculture in motions and thoughts. It opened their minds in creating masterpieces from new perspectives by placing the standards of tradition into a modern area, which inevitably required a reform in thoughts and body motions to achieve the transformation.

Based on this elaboration, this study seeks to understand the tendency of choreography development in Indonesia from the 1950s to the 1960s, as well as to the 1970s, by observing the shifts from traditional dances to modern and contemporary dances. Furthermore, this study endeavours to discover the influence and the role of the government and the public in these two periods.

1.1 *Creation of new dances from the 1950s to the 1960s*

Bagong Kussudiardja (1928–2004) and Wisnoe Wardhana (1929–2002) contributed to the creation of works during the era of Soekarno's Presidency. From 1950 to 1966, Soekarno initiated a number of cultural activities with a fervent spirit of nationalism to expunge the image of colonialism. For Soekarno, the new enemy in the struggle for preserving the independence was neo-colonialism and imperialism in all forms, both in and outside the country, including in the form of arts (Soenarto, 2007).

Soekarno's concrete steps in making Indonesia a sovereign nation with self-assurance were shown by sending artists to perform in dance, music and puppetry shows abroad. They performed various dances and local traditional music, as well as puppetry shows as emissaries in the Indonesian art missions. In addition, dance artists were sent to teach or learn in several friendly countries. For Soekarno, introducing Indonesian arts also meant introducing Indonesia. Bagong Kussudiardja and Wisnoe Wardhana were the dance artists who had the opportunity to participate in the mission of arts and to study abroad with scholarships from Rockefeller¹ in 1957 to learn modern dances in the United States, particularly at the Connecticut College School of Dance and the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance. The scholarship was awarded based on the development of Kussudiardja's

1. After World War II, Indonesia became an important place in the political scene of a global culture and was considered a contested arena for various international influences. Burt (1998) stated that American foreign politics perceives arts and culture (including dances) as means for strengthening its domination in global arena, including Indonesia. Thus, it was not without calculation when the American government sent the Martha Graham Dance Company to perform in Jakarta and Asia in 1955. Prevots (1998) revealed that the Martha Graham Dance Company was a consequence of the United States' foreign policy and cultural diplomacy. Asia was considered important in politics and military, and cultural export was enforced. The same thing went for offering scholarships for artists to study in the United States. Although the political situation became heated and the Indonesian government acted in a hostile manner to the United States, the performance of Martha Graham was well received by the audience. The audience's reception demonstrated that Indonesia was inseparable from the frequency of international modernity (Murgiyanto: 1976; Lindsay, 2011).

choreography in terms of the creation of new arts, which revealed the search for the self. On the contrary, the scholarship for Wardhana was awarded based on his talent and creativity as a dancer and choreographer; furthermore, he was seen as being gifted in portraying dashing figures in the performance of *Wayang Wong* with Yogyakarta style.

Back to Indonesia in 1958, Kussudiardja and Wardhana had the determination to create new pieces, inspired by the resonance of the second generation of modern dances in the West, as represented by Martha Graham (1894–1991) – from whom they learned new experiences without forsaking the aesthetics in Yogyakarta traditional dances, which they had mastered. The new dances were then combined with several elements of techniques and Graham’s style. Both dance artists also developed their own techniques and styles as an expression of individuality. Afterwards, Kussudiardja even actively and creatively learned various traditional dance techniques from different parts of Indonesia, in training as well as creating new masterpieces and becoming synonymous with the Indonesian modern-traditional dances at the time (Sedyawati, 2006).

Bagong Kussudiardja was the figure who leaped from traditionalism to modernism, and Soedarsono (2002) explained that Kussudiardja was an expert in portraying dynamic and naughty characteristics with aggressive roles and rich motions that provided him with the opportunity to demonstrate his creativity as well as express his passion to move freely. All of this was his way of expressing his discontentment towards the rigid standards within the classic traditional Yogyakarta dances, as well as marking the creation process of an individual named Bagong Kussudiardja (Murgiyanto, 1991).

Before leaving for the United States, Kussudiardja’s inclination towards novelty was already shown in his new dances, such as *Kuda-Kuda* (1954), *Batik* (1955) and *Layang-Layang* (1955), with themes developed from familiar, everyday life situations. The movement of *Layang-Layang* was as simple as the costumes and accompaniment. Although it continued to use a number of motion elements that characterised the Javanese traditional dances, the motion had nonetheless been reworked in such a way into something new that combined the movements of dances from Bali, Sumatera, China and India. The costume consisted of a pair of knee-length pants, a sleeveless top, a shawl tied around the waist and ankle bracelets that made tinkling sounds according to the rhythm—they also strengthened the dynamics and created a cheerful situation. The musical accompaniment of the dance consisted of *ketipung*, *kentongan* and a large *kendang*. Inspired by his experience in the United States, Kussudiardja was directly influenced by the techniques and style of Martha Graham. He reworked the *Layang-Layang* dance in 1959 using several of Graham’s techniques.

Since very young, Wisnoe Wardhana had studied the classic traditional Yogyakarta dances before attending a short course in the Martha Graham School. Wardhana had worked on *sendratari* for a long time, even before the term ‘sendratari’ emerged as a new genre, i.e. a dance drama without verbal dialogues, which in 1961 debuted in the performance of *Sendratari Ramayana* in Prambanan Temple (Soedarsono, 2002).

After going back to Indonesia, Wardhana developed several dances, such as *Introspeksi*, *Nada Irama* and *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which were inspired by many things in life. The dance movements and techniques were a mixture of the traditional Javanese dances and the styles from Yogyakarta, Sunda and Bali, combined and explored with Graham’s modern techniques. The musical accompaniment is a fusion of the Javanese and Sundanese gamelan, and the costume—not as glamorous as the traditional dance costumes of Yogyakarta and Sunda—was a new rework based on the dance themes. Wardhana was also known as a good and productive teacher and choreographer, and he had created hundreds of solo, duet and group dances and dance dramas. In the 1970s, he studied teaching and education and earned a doctoral degree from the Institute of Teacher Training and Education Science (IKIP) Yogyakarta, where he was also teaching.

1.2 Contemporary dances from the 1960s to the 1970s

During his early presidency period in 1966, the cultural policy in Soeharto’s era was all about institutional reinforcement; freedom of creativity should stay within the boundaries

of security and stability. As long as it did not create a disruption that could lead to security-related issues—including voicing harsh criticism toward high-ranking officials—freedom of expression in arts was not prohibited. The limited freedom was sufficient to make artists actively pursue artistic musings, from exploring traditional works to venturing into international artistic developments, particularly in the West. The approach of modern and contemporary arts, found through the search and the expression of the original, had the opportunity to develop (Supardi, 2012), and some artists did that without forsaking the traditional arts of various ethnic groups in Indonesia.

The institutional reinforcement and the freedom of creativity within the corridors of security and stability were provided by the Governor of Jakarta Ali Sadikin when he built the Jakarta Art Centre in Taman Ismail Marzuki (also known as PKJ-TIM) in 1968. Since then, the centre had become the host of various programs and activities relating to arts. One of them was the dance workshop (known as *bengkel tari*) proposed by Sardono W. Kusumo, who had just returned from the United States. The workshop was conducted with several fellow dance artists who lived in Jakarta and had various cultural backgrounds, among them were Huriah Adam and I Wayan Diya. The main purpose of the workshop was to build the participants' motivation and creativity. Kusumo aspired to show them that preserving traditional dances could be done not only by preserving the tradition but also through creative interpretations.

Through this *bengkel tari*, valuable seeds of ideas, such as freedom, passion, creativity and togetherness, were planted. Thus, the forum became one of the momentums that marked a new artistic search of dance arts in Indonesia. Furthermore, the forum also succeeded in widening the artistic horizons of the participants and promoting the birth of new and contemporary dances in Indonesia from the workshops' participants at that time.

Huriah Adam (1936–1971) worked on the story of *Malin Kundang* (1969), adapted from a Minangkabau (West Sumatra) legend, in a form of a dance drama. Adam reinterpreted the story because she believed that a Minang mother would not have the heart to curse her own beloved son. Adam modified the story by depicting the mother as pleading to Allah to send a reminder to her son.

Malin Kundang became the first work of a Minang choreographer successfully produced and performed in the newly opened PKJ-TIM, and it was well appreciated by the audience. *Malin Kundang* was reworked as a dance drama without any dialogues (*sendratari*), which in 1969 was a popular form. However, Adam modified the form of presentation by excluding pantomimic movement common in *sendratari*. In addition, she included characters that did not exist in the original story; these inclusions were *Orang Bunian*, or supernatural beings. *Orang Bunian* was materialised as an evil spirit that influenced Malin, the titular character, not to acknowledge his own mother. The other creative ideas and concepts of Huriah Adam in this work include, among others, a setting that illustrated the ruins of a ship.

In the scenes of *Malin Kundang*, the *Barabah* dance was also inserted. This was a separate dance created by Adam that contained martial arts movements, which illustrated the fortitude of the Minang people in life, accompanied by the *Talempong Pacik* and *Gandang* dances. In the last part of the *Barabah* dance, there was a scene where Malin Kundang and his wife were dancing together in an elegant style when they were disrupted by the appearance of *Orang Bunian*. The evil spirit danced with hard and sharp movements, accompanied by *rebana* sound played by the dancers in improvisation. When Malin Kundang was embarrassed and did not want to acknowledge his mother, and then kicked her, the Minang song *Palayaran* was played as an expression of the heartache of a mother rejected by her beloved son. In the scene when Malin Kundang's ship was destroyed by a storm, the musicians hit the large drums (*dhhol*) to illustrate the bleak situation. Only Malin Kundang could slowly stand strong and tall but with a stone soul; he was not turned into stone because of his perfidious act as written in the original legend. Malin Kundang continued to live, although in regret. Adam believed that Malin Kundang was meritorious and did not deserve to be put to death.

During a performance in Minangkabau, Adam modified the interpretation and the choreography of *Malin Kundang*. Several dramatic moments were omitted, and the scene with the *Orang Bunian* was removed to avoid any controversy. The dance costumes were designed

to mimic the traditional Minang dance costumes, which were glamorous. For the accompaniment, Adam used Minang songs, music and instruments, both wind instruments (*saluang*, *serunai* and *bansi*) and percussions (*talempong*, *canang* and *gandang*). However, for certain scenes, Adam played the traditional instruments in uncommon fashion, such as hitting the *canang* with the back of a plate to obtain a particular sound.

The differences in the performance of *Malin Kundang* in Jakarta and in Padang occurred because Adam realised that the Padang (West Sumatra) audience was not ready to accept such novelty in their traditional arts.²

The work, of course, stepped out of the original narration. In *Malin Kundang*, Adam reviewed the original story and came upon a transcendental answer that the entity who punished Malin Kundang was not the mother, but Allah. The faith in the mother's morality made Adam doubtful that a mother had the heart to curse her own child.

Meanwhile, I Wayan Diya (1937–2007) always departed from his Balinese cultural background when working on his dances. Nevertheless, according to the dance observer Edi Sedyawati, Diya was capable of creating works according to the artistic condition in the area where the work was presented, which was in PKJ-TIM. He understood that in PKJ-TIM there was a physical boundary between the audience and the performance, unlike the Balinese traditional performance, where both felt as one. In addition, although there were no parts in his works that deviated from the basics of Balinese dances, Diya continued to absorb the non-Balinese elements, which he obtained from working together with artists from various ethnics, as well as from exploring various places in Indonesia. All non-Balinese elements were working side-by-side with the Balinese elements. The main elements in the Balinese traditional performance—previously categorised into different types, such as *Topeng*, *Gambuh*, *Arja* and *Baris* – were worked into one coherent unity. The unity created forms, motions and implementations that were uncommon in Balinese dances.

This unusual act became a mark of novelty in Diya's work. Although he continued to present strong Balinese characters, other elements outside Bali were inserted and they blended in with the other ingredients to create a flavour that was not entirely Balinese. In the temporal context (1973), this was considered as contemporary. Diya belonged to a group of creators who were passionate about new creations as a trend at that time. Diya, who truly understood Balinese dances, was in tune with a group of artists who were also experts in their own fields. Here, the creative vision was formed, and it was not only for protecting each other's traditions but also for producing novelty by exploring various possibilities through experiments.

The performance of *Jelantik Bogor* was a historical story from Bali, which had usually been used in the performance of the *Topeng* dance drama, in which the dancers also wear masks. One thing that stood out from the reworked piece was that Diya conducted more experiments in compiling the accompanying music. He combined musical instruments that were not commonly used in Bali, such as *Gong Gebyar* with *Luwang Gamelan*, *Gending Ple-gan-juran*, *Tambur Baris Cina* and *Tektekan*. The dance movements were derived from the basic gestures and techniques of the Balinese dances complemented with the non-Balinese

2. Chairul Harun, a Minang literature artist who watched the performance of *Malin Kundang* in Padang, revealed that most of the 600 Minang audiences who watched the performance of *Malin Kundang* were impressed with Huriah Adam's work. Many educated Minang people were enthusiastic for the well-received progress of Adam's work. However, there were also some in the audience who questioned whether the performance could be considered as a Minang dance. The movements and the musical instruments indeed came from the Minang tradition, but the manner of playing the *lempong*, *canang* and *bansi* was different from the traditional way. Adam argued that the accompanying music of *Malin Kundang* was designed that way because part of it had to be adjusted to the need of the artistic choreography, such as for accompanying the movement created or creating a dramatic ambience (*Tempo* Magazine, 1971; Murgiyanto, 2000). An interesting finding revealed from the performance of *Malin Kundang* in Jakarta was that not all dancers came from Minangkabau, and they did not have a background in traditional dances or Minang martial arts. This situation encouraged Adam to make use of the diversity and the strengths of each dancer as part of the experiment in the search and the creation of the movement.

dance movements, i.e. the Javanese, Malay and Minang dance movements—all conducted through improvisations of movements and explorations.

Sardono W. Kusumo (born in 1945) created *Samgita Pancasoma I-XII* (1969–1971) in his endeavour to seek a new cultural expression. This piece was inspired by an Indonesian ethnic tradition taken from one of the episodes of the Javanese version of the *Ramayana* epic, *Sugriwa-Subali*. The musical creation continued to use the Javanese traditional singing (*macapat*), but he accompanied it with a *gamelan* orchestra with fewer instruments than the conventional *gamelan*, composed of a fused form of *sekaten*, *langendriyan*, *kendhangan* Bali and two *kendangs* with a fast *imbal* rhythm. As for the dance movements, the dancers' inspirations and body patterns were adapted from visual sculptures found in the Prambanan Temple. Moreover, the dance movements were built by the energy coming from the sound of the song, sung by the main character that did not follow the convention of tunes in the traditional Javanese songs, and without the accompaniment of the conventional *gamelan*.

The dancers were no longer in *tanjak* gestures or simple poses, which were illustrative and could be seen in the traditional Javanese dances (Sedyawati, 1970). Through the processes of attempting to move and continually feeling it, the dancer achieved an intense movement, which was essential as well as expressive, as the movement was performed to be in line with the ambience and the message that the piece sought to accomplish (Kusuma, 1974). In *Samgita*, Kusumo eliminated the boundaries between the male and female dance movements, which have clear boundaries in the Javanese Surakarta traditional dances. The dancers' costumes were minimalistic: the male dancers were bare-chested and wearing *batik* as *cawat*, while the female dancers wore long fabric and faded-coloured *kemben*.

Another interesting thing about *Samgita* was that every time it was performed, at least 12 times, there had always been a different element in the piece, hence the making of versions I to XII. The shift was the result of a loose choreography in the composition and its rich improvisation, slowly coalescing into a structured choreography.³ *Samgita Pancasona* could also be categorised as an Indonesian contemporary dance.

2 CONCLUSION

Indonesian choreographers from two periods, 1950s–1960s and 1960s–1970s, mostly came from traditional dance disciplines. Their mastery of traditional dance philosophies and techniques was so strong that it did not easily disappear with the passing of time. Quoting Sardono W. Kusumo, 'Preservation has to be done, not only through preservation, but also through creative interpretation, and it is the characteristics of the dance artists who bring these changes, departing from traditional dances toward contemporary dances.' The objectives of their explorations are to obtain new inputs from various artistic dance sources, including from abroad, to open up wider horizons and to enrich techniques or dance styles that cannot be obtained from traditional arts. There is no discontinuity between the past (traditional) and the present (modern/contemporary) in the universe of Indonesian dances. All are owned by dance artists without removing the original roots, i.e. the tradition. This is what makes modern works of art, including the most innovative and contemporary ones, which always contain a traditional aura that can be seen or felt. Time may change but the traditional spirit must not disappear from Indonesian dances, created for space and time, and must include even the most recent ones. This may explain why dance performances in

3. Approaches in the performance of *Samgita*, which discarded the glamorous elements from the traditional dances and the conventions of customs and values in the Javanese traditional dances and music, were well received by the audience in Jakarta when performed in PKJ-TIM. However, when *Samgita* was performed in Surakarta (1971), which was the birthplace of the artist, the novelty in the choreography was considered odd: the dance accompaniment, the vocal and the costume were deemed too simple, the storyline was unclear and the minimalist dance movements felt strange. This was considered crossing the boundaries by the traditional Javanese audience. A number of people in the audience were so disappointed and 'angered' that they threw rotten eggs at the stage.

Indonesia, which the Soeharto's government perceived as creating disturbance to the sense of order and security, did not clash with the government's security apparatus. Indonesian choreographers tend to create new works imbued with traditional characteristics and make them focus more on aesthetic expressions.

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