

Inventing the performing arts

The title of Matthew Cohen's book seems, on the face of it, somewhat provocative. Surely, one might suggest, there were always performing arts in Indonesia. Coming to terms with Cohen's thesis here hinges on how the terms 'invention' and 'performance' are defined, for which the subtitle, 'modernity and tradition in colonial Indonesia', points the way. For Cohen, 'performing arts' needs to be conceived of within a paradigm of modernity which emphasizes its consciousness of purpose; and the 'modernity' of which the book speaks is, of course, a colonial modernity, primarily as it was manifested in Java and Bali.

Reviewer: Joost Coté



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WITH THE NOTION of 'invention' furthermore, Cohen certainly does not have in mind a 'one off' moment. The reference to colonial in this book, roughly covering the period from the latter 19th century to the end of the Japanese occupation and its immediate aftermath in Indonesia, indicates that Cohen is positing an understanding of 'invention' as a process, something that took place over a time span of almost a century and across a colonial public space constituted by Indonesian (mainly Javanese and Balinese) Chinese, and Eurasian communities. The book, then, details the way the interaction of ideas, practices, and innovations, and of artists and publics, came to create Indonesia's pre-Independence vibrant performing arts world of which today's Indonesian artists, performers and impresarios – and publics – are the inheritors.

Part One, 'Common ground for arts and popular entertainments', opens on the world of 'plezir', the world of public entertainments available to a hybrid colonial urban population in Batavia and other cities on Java in the late 19th century, before proceeding to delineate the different, community-linked genres available to its diverse audiences. Here Cohen creates the atmosphere wonderfully by drawing on contemporary newspaper advertisements and reports. The title of Chapter One signals that what appears from a distance to be a random cacophony in fact represents the 'intersecting art worlds' and traditions of the different communities who inhabit the expanding urban public space. Despite the close proximity induced by the urban environment which blurred and made porous the boundaries of artistic practice, each ethnic group drew from their cultural separateness to experience and stage

these different practices differently. Thus, Eurasian military and school music, Javanese wayang and court-based *tari*, and Chinese opera, co-existed in diverse public spaces. Over time however, as Chapter Two then goes on to demonstrate, increased leisure time, improved economic circumstances and the increased penetration of European goods and ideas that expressed the growing culture of urban modernity, brought with it new forms of entertainment, such as circuses, puppet theatres, Malay language theatres and commercial wayang wong. Detached from their specific local cultural or ethnic traditions, these newer forms began to construct an appetite for the diversification of performances that could be enjoyed 'in common'. They were, in that sense, 'modern'.

Part Two then launches the reader into the more full blown culture of modern performing arts. The first topic (Chapter Three) reprises Cohen earlier ground-breaking work on the world of the European opera-style influenced Komedi Stamboel. This popular theatre gradually morphed into forms of modern (Eurasian) theatre, as *Indische toneel*, with scripts by, and reflecting the interests of, the growing European community, and in a somewhat different styling, as Opera Derma, or Sino-Malay spoken drama, reflecting Chinese inflections. Chapter Four focuses on the performances of popular music in public locations, such as markets and dance halls and, with the encroachment of modern technology, also within homes as phonograph recordings. In the eclectic world of music, 'hybridisation' too soon become evident. But, contrary to those who might see 'Artistic hybridity ... as a sign of the weakness of indigenous culture', and representing the submission of the local to the foreign incursion, Cohen's argument, articulated here in relation to music, but relevant across the performing arts, is that 'musical innovators of the 1920s and 1930s ... were strongly grounded and confident in the musical idioms of their local cultures ... [while] also quick to respond to market contingencies, curious about exogenous practices and inventive in catering to new modes of patronage' (pp. 100-1). And, indeed, the next two chapters address the growing 'ethnic awakenings' that were inspiring a revival of interest in and the revitalisation of traditions alongside further developments in new theatre forms.

As to be expected, the reader is here introduced to the important contribution of the Java Institute, in its elaboration of a discourse of cultural nationalism and its practical support of local Javanese (and Sundanese) cultural groups, such as Kridha Beksa Wirama in Yogyakarta. This cultural revival, nevertheless, marked another phase of cultural interaction, in this case that between indigenous artists with artists and progressives intellectuals from Europe, such as the architect, Thomas Karsten, in Java, and the artist, Walter Spies, in Bali, inspired by the various new arts movement in Europe. While both sides were concerned to generate greater appreciation of Javanese and Balinese arts by 'tweaking' traditional cultural performances to meet the 'demands' (of taste and comfort) of modernity, they were differently inspired: the one by cultural nationalism, the other by an academic or artistic interest in the conservation of cultural heritage.

Part Two ends with a discussion of the link between the performing arts and rising nationalism of the thirties. It was a period not only of continuing development, such as the rise to popularity *ket(h)oprak*, the staging of Javanese stories, but also of intense debate on culture and modernity. Cohen is not concerned here to close off interpretation with definitive conclusions, but to emphasize that the 'reinvention of tradition occurred in conjunction with the emergence of artistic modernism'. Quoting here an apt observation by Perry Anderson, Cohen concludes that the invention of the performing Arts in Indonesia at this time flourished 'in the space between a still usable classical past, a still indeterminate technical present, and a still unpredictable political future' (p. 172).

Part Three addresses the Japanese interregnum. Long ignored by historians and histories that have been more fascinated by war, Cohen adds his contribution to a number of new histories that see the initiatives of the Japanese civil administration not only as significant in themselves, but as forming an important continuation, if in some ways contrasting, of the history of colonial modernity. The book devotes three relatively brief chapters from the limited detail available for this period, once again drawing heavily on contemporary war-era Indonesian media accounts. Highlights of this period include the founding of a theatre academy, the Sekolah Tonil, with the mission to develop theatre for propaganda purposes, and the 'rebranding', and to some extent standardisation, of existing theatre forms that had become popular during the Dutch period as '*sandiwara*', Javanese and Sundanese drama. Some traditional dance forms were also encouraged.

It was also during this time that, quite naturally, new foreign influences arrived from Japan, including the performance of Japanese folk dances, and the art of *kamishibai*, a form of Japanese mobile street theatre for children, but these were 'perceived as an alien art form, indelibly Japanese' (p. 197) and ceased immediately after the end of the war. On the other hand, performances and artists were also censored during the Japanese occupation where scripts fell foul of Japanese dictates. Although the Japanese established an 'elaborate cultural infrastructure' (p. 233), ultimately their presence had little long-term influence in the performing arts due, Cohen suggests, as much to the brevity of the Japanese presence compared to the earlier Dutch era, as the 'brutalities and deprivations of the occupation' (p. 197).

The book closes with a 'Fast forward', a rapid overview of the immediate post-war period. Independence brought with it a whole new dimension to the themes of modernity, invention and performing arts. This conclusion provides just enough detail to make clear that a second volume is required (if not already in the making).

Matthew Cohen has of course a well-established reputation in this field, not least through his first monograph, *Komedi Stamboel: Popular theatre in Colonial Indonesia 1891-1903* (Matthew Isaac Cohen, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), and this book builds on and extends on this earlier volume. In providing this broader history of the evolution of Indonesia's eclectic and hybrid performing arts, Cohen has provided a benchmark study, much of it the result of an original mining of contemporary colonial era Indonesian and Dutch newspapers and journals. The whole is effectively (if lightly) contextualised in terms of the broader history of the colonial period, sufficient to remind the reader of changing times, a crucial dimension of the thesis as a whole. The discussion also draws on the relevant standard historiographical and more theoretical writing when required to underscore a more general point, without overwhelming the central focus. This is, therefore neither a heavily historical, nor overly theorised text: it is and does what it sets out to do, which is, to provide a detailed picture of a vibrant and evolving popular urban culture centred on the performing arts.

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Below: *Kebyar Duduk*, performed here by dancer of the Balinese dance troupe *Sekar Jepun*. Courtesy of Crisco 1492 on Wikimedia Commons.

