

Traditional *Kethoprak* Theater of Java: The New Challenges and Transformations *)

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Abstract

The history of traditional *kethoprak* theater of Java dates back in early 19th century when predominantly Javanese farmers playfully make some rhythmic music on a wooden-canoe-in shaped used to manually crush the rice paddy. By the time being they incorporated their percussion playing with some story telling mostly based on local myths and legendary stories. This became the first traditional *kethoprak* known as *kethoprak lesung*. *Lesung* itself is a wooden-canoe-in shaped used to crush the rice paddy with a mortar during the good harvest season. Using the large mortars a group of women, normally comprises of four or five women, crush the rice paddy over and over until it becomes the white rice ready to be cooked.

The needs of expressing the story telling to be more dramatic have motivated them to make it to become a performance art. Moreover they incorporated it with some gamelan musical instruments, costumes and acting and thus it became the second development of traditional *kethoprak* and was called as *kethoprak campuran* (mixed *kethoprak*). This traditional theater was so much popular during the years of 1925 - 1927. The comedy part was the most awaited by the audience, despite the whole story that now has been incorporated with the historical events of Javanese kingdoms and thus the needs of actors and actresses to perform the roles has become importance considerations ever since.

The history of the traditional *kethoprak* kept on flourishing and the most of it development was that it already using a complete set of gamelan orchestra, and thus it called as *kethoprak gamelan* (gamelan *kethoprak*), and the stage has become more attractive with the use of light and sound system, back ground effects and the art of performance has also been modernized as well. Hundreds of professional *kethoprak* groups can be found anywhere in most cities in Java. One professional group of it can stay for a whole moth to stage in one city before they move to another city over and over just to imagine how popular this traditional theater used to be.

But, contemporary life styles of people have made so many challenges for the traditional *kethoprak* groups to survive. Television programs have been dominated by popular cultures mostly of Western pop music, imported soap operas and reality shows. Moreover, television programs have been based on a rating system from the people responses to its programs and thus those programs that have only a view number of rates will automatically be wiped out from the programs lists. Traditional *kethoprak* was the one of those unfortunate genres of performing arts that has no more position to be aired on television or radio programs. However, several creative young artists of the *kethoprak* have begun to transform the art of the stage and performance as well as the artistic of

the traditional *kethoprak*. So many new sub-genres have emerged since then despite the long for the traditional *kethoprak* to comeback.

Keywords: *Kethoprak, Challenges, and Transformations*

I.

As the stories of Indian epics Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as original romance of Java known as “The Story of Panji”, have been transformed into many kinds of performing arts in Indonesia sometime in early 8th century, it can be supposed, thus, that the story telling has become very common forms of Indonesian traditional performing arts. For the purpose of this paper, I will trace back the very old form of story telling that almost already disappeared, the one that elaborate singing with the accompaniment of ‘*lesung*’, i.e., a canoe-in-shaped wooden rice paddy mortar. The majority of Indonesian farmers believe to the existing of the rice paddy goddess namely Dewi Sri, who protect them and give them a good harvest. Following a good harvest, the people celebrate it in so many forms of offerings and festivals in order to thanks giving to Dewi Sri.

A form of rhythmical improvisation on any instrument was also very common for the villagers. Anything that might produce sound can be treated as an instrument for playing around rhythmically. That what happen to the ‘*lesung*’ which actual function is for crushing the rice paddy, but then being used to play around during spare time by the youngsters. It can produce interesting sounds and with their musicality, they incorporated the instrument with the story telling that must be very enjoyed by people of the time. The most common story telling of the time must be about the good and the bad things. For instance, during the lunar eclipse, it was told that a giant monster is going to swallow the moon. In order to make the monster giant afraid and would not swallow the whole moon, the people should make a large noise everywhere, and thus the monster will go away and the moon back to its form as a brightly full moon. The people then kept on going to make the noise happily with the addition of some singing and the story telling not only rather just beating around the ‘*lesung*’ and many other ‘percussion instruments’. In my village when I was a kid, I experienced myself with this tradition. It was noisy all around the village. Noises from the beating of the bamboos, the wooden blocks, the zinc plates, etc., and of course from the ‘*lesung*’

as well as from the people shouting can be imagined to what contemporary so-called the bustle of electro acoustic music. But all of this now was left for nostalgia.

Years by years, story telling with the accompaniment of '*lesung*' has been improved by some addition of the singing and dancing. Moreover, the function of the story-telling person has turned out to become the leader or the '*dalang*' of the performance. And it is now become the performing arts out of its early forms and functions as merely of the people playing around with the rhythmic patterns on the '*lesung*' anymore. The '*lesung*' playing that was also called as '*gejog lesung*' has since been incorporated with some other folk instruments made up of bamboo such as percussive '*kenthongan*' and traditional rattled-shake '*angklung*'. Insofar, this music was born from the folk culture of people, functioned as folk festivals of the farmers living in the countryside, and was so much enjoyed by the people of the culture itself. Therefore, I would like to categorize it as folk music in accordance to what Bohlman has defined what folk music is. When describing the concept of folk music he said specifically to the recent years that have witnessed considerable criticism of the most fundamental concepts of folk music. In its most extreme form, this criticism has questioned the basic validity of recognizing any genre of music and folklore that could rightfully be called folk music. (Bohlman 1988: xv).

As a typical of folk culture the '*gejog lesung*' playing has been widely popular among the most agrarian people of Java. From daily play games to the regular public festivals and rituals, it can be found almost anywhere around the archipelago. The earlier form of this music can be assumed as so much elaboration of *ostinato* as it is necessary that for crushing the rice paddy on a *lesung*, it is a must that one should beat in timely of each person, normally all together comprises of four or five person, and they should played the tempo and rhythmic pattern constantly. Therefore, interestingly, *ostinato* is quite related to the agriculture, as assumed by Henry Spiller when he says that "*Ostinatos* were already attuned to the cycles of seasons that govern agriculture; it was a small adjustment, then, to associate *ostinatos* with more sophisticated Indic ideas of cyclic cosmic time. In the courts of Hindu-Javanese god-kings, these cycles grew into

enormously complex aural *mandalas* that made audible these rulers' roles as the interface between the cosmos and the kingdom. (Spiller 2004: 262).

Spiller was quite right when he said that as it can be seen that even today, so many kinds of the art of '*kotekan*' (beating around) are based on the *ostinato*. During the early morning of *ramadhan* fasting for instance, there are always groups of '*kotekan*' on bamboos that made noise to awake the people who should take their early breakfast called '*sahur*' before they start the whole day fasting. So this '*kotekan*' and story telling based on daily rural life all together have made up what was so-called '*gejog lesung*' as early form of traditional *kethoprak* found mostly in Central of Java and East Java. Interestingly, even on this simple rhythmical playing, there is always a leader who has the role to control and to manage what is going on when the music is marching on and sometime become complicated interlocking patterns.

From time to time for hundreds of years, this folk music culture developed quite significantly. The instruments has been added with some gamelan instruments, songs have been improved with a more formal types of composition, the story has been improved as well, and last but not least the roles and the characters as well as the art of acting have been integrated too. From simply percussive playing incorporated with a simple story telling, it has turned out to become theatrical arts in a complete sense, from rural folk music playing it has become courtly arts. Moreover, we will see how surprisingly this folk culture has turned out to become an important genre of performing arts that developed in the court of Java. It should be noted here with some apologies that in describing the history of *kethoprak*, I have relied only on two existing books on *kethoprak*, one was a book of Handung Kussudyarsana's *Ketoprak* (1989) and the other one was of Herry Lisbijanto's *Ketoprak* (2013).

1. The era of Wreksadiningrat (1908 - 1925)

The early notes about *kethoprak* can be found in a book written by Handung Kussudyarsana, a prominent historian of *kethoprak* and a person who is recently being honored as a literary man ('*pujangga*') of *kethoprak*, because of his creativity towards the study and the modernizing the art of *kethoprak*. (Indra

Trenggono 2014: 16) Kussudyarsana based his narrative on his three assumptions; firstly, the role of the *kethoprak* in nurturing and improving itself as the performing arts, secondly, many elements of the *kethoprak* itself has not been elaborated yet, and thirdly, *kethoprak* deserves to become the lively documentation of its development from folk culture to become as one of the highly valuable of the traditional Javanese performing arts.

Moreover, he mentioned that early *kethoprak* was developed by Raden Mas Tumenggung Wreksodiningrat in Solo (Surakarta), elaborating the musical instruments such as *lesung*, *terbang* or '*rebana*'(hand drum) and *suling* (traditional bamboo flute). Names of the *gending* (songs) that usually played were 'Megamendung', 'Kupu Tarung', 'Bak-Bak', 'Simah-Simah', 'Bluluk-Tiba', and 'Randha Ngangsu', all of the kinds of simple songs made up of simple melody and lyrics of the life of rural life. Despite that all of the songs have no significant roles in supporting the dramatic acts on the stage. This certainly supports the theory that claimed that early *kethoprak* was existed from and among the people out of the sultanate palace circles. (Kussudyarsana1989: 7-10).

It is important to re-mention, however, that early *kethoprak* was the development of '*gejog lesung*' as the art of playing around the rhythmic patterns in *ostinato* and improvisation on a *lesung* and with the addition of narrative story telling, folk dancing and folk singing. With some addition of the musical instruments, *gendings* and stage acting, the '*gejog lesung*' has transformed to become the early *kethoprak*. It was the traditional performing arts that Wreksodiningrat has brought to the palace of Surakarta on the occasion of the royal wedding ceremony of Kanjeng Gusti Pangeran Adipati Arya Paku Alam VII with his bride Gusti Bendara Raden Ajeng Retno Puwoso, taking place at the Kepatihan Surakarta in 1909. This was a phenomenal occasion when a folk culture or folklore has been welcome and well accepted by the sultanate palace for the very first time of the history of the *kethoprak*. And this, therefore, confirmed the first assumption of Kussudyarsana when he said the role of *kethoprak* in nurturing and improving itself as the performing arts.

2. The era of *Kethoprak Peralihan* (the transition of *kethoprak*) 1925 -1927

According to Kussudyarsana, the transition of *kethoprak* mainly of the transition of its musical instruments from *lesung* as the main percussive instrument to the mixture of instruments with the addition of *rebana* (hand drum) and *biola* (violin). This transition has a consequence of the need to improving the *gending* (songs) from countryside folksongs to the formulae standardized *gending* such as “Pucung”, “Mijil”, etc. The very basic acting on stage was just simple movements of dancing and simple dialog in improvising, but now the Javanese language that was used has been improving to various levels, from *kasar* or *ngoko* (harsh) to *kromo* (polite) and *kromo hinggil* (highly polite). The story being employed has also been widening, not only based on folklore and folktales, but also “The Story of 1001 Nights” from the Middle East (so-called *stambulan* or *Mesiran*), as well as the story about the kingdoms of Java and its inner life of the royal circles. The costumes have also being improved from simply daily costumes of villagers to the various kinds of costumes being used by the *sunan* or the Islamic religious leaders to the many ranks of the sultanate palace. (Kussudyarsana 1989: 17- 8).

Different accounts can be found from Herry Lisbijanto when he described this period as the era of *kethoprak Wreksatama*. He made his account based on the role of Ki Wisangkara who has brought (the transition) *kethoprak* outside of the *Keraton* or Sultanate Palace of Surakarta or Solo. Wreksatama has improved further the number of instrumentations of the *kethoprak* by adding some more gamelan instruments such as *saron*, *kenong*, *kempul* and gong and with addition of *biola* (violin), mandolin and the guitar (guitar). (Lisbijanto 2013: 7-8). Whereas during as the ‘*gejog lesung*’ many of the folklore derives form the “Story of Panji” but in so much simpler forms, it was during the era of Wreksatama that the “Story of Panji” has been employed in a more sophisticated ways. Now it is an interesting fact that the early folk culture namely ‘*gejog lesung*’ as the seed of the *kethoprak* has been brought into the sultanate palace but then after a while being improved for the taste of the royal circles then it was brought back to the people as the public arts and as a highly form of the performing arts.

3. The era of *Gamelan Kethoprak* (1927 – 1930)

During this era, the historical instrument of '*gejog lesung*' has been eliminated and the whole gamelan instruments of *pelog* and *slendro* have taken a place as the main source of accompaniment. According to Kussudyarsana, a *keprak*, an instrument made of wooden block, has been added with the function as the leader of the whole instruments as to begin and to stop as well as to enhance the dramatic effects, similar to that of the *wayang orang* (men puppet theater) and the *wayang kulit* (puppet shadow) performance. The repertory of songs and the story has also been widened as well as the art of the performance has also significantly improved. Never before that the roles of scriptwriters, stage designers, and accompaniment managers have such significantly accounted. Improvisation still played a great role and the dialog in Javanese language is still very dominance, but almost all of the dance part have been dismissed unless for the comedian parts. The performance normally took place on the stage especially prepared for the performance or often time on the *pendopo* house, an open space typical of Javanese front house, and thus this type of *kethoprak* was also called as *kethoprak pendhapan*. There were more models of the costumes not only of typical Javanese and *Mesiran*, but also various models of *Gedog* (like *wayang orang*) and *Basahan* (daily costumes). The function of the *gending* was no longer as merely to accompany the whole acts but sometime some acts need a special sound illustration, and thus the role of *penata gending* (music illustrator) was very important. The *dhalang* however was still as the man behind the success of the performance. (Kussudyarsana 1989: 18-22).

Lisbijanto described this period as a period of *kethoprak Krida Madya Utama* after the name of a group that was established by Ki Jagatrunarsa and Ki Citra Yahman. Accordingly it was the only professional group of *ketoprak* outside of the sultanate palace that performed from one district to another by demanding the audience to give some money before the show began. The show normally took place on a temporary stage in the field yard for several days and once the number of audience decreasing, they moved to another place to have another performance. (Lisbijanto 2013: 8-9). The moving *ketoprak* was also called *ketoprak tobong* as it performed on the temporary stage called as *tobong*. From

this period, the *kethoprak* has returned as the public art and steadily growing outnumbers since then.

Lisbijanto made further classification of the history of *kethoprak* as follows:

4. The era of *Kethoprak Gardanela* (1930-1955)

After the era of *kethoprak* Krida Madya Utama, some changes in the art of performance and further development of the repertoires have taken a place. More repertoires from “Babad Jawi” (the history of Java) have been used not only to entertain the audience but also to attract them with the historical facts of the Javanese social and political stories and tragedies, roman and heroism as well as the living legends of the past. Moreover, the stories adapted from foreign countries have also being explored creatively to make the performance more interestingly. For instance, ‘Sampek Eng Tay’ was a love story adapted from Chinese literature about a Javanese young man and a Chinese lady who were in love but was prohibited by their parents, society and cultural gap amongst the two ethnic groups. Despite an existing motto of ‘*semangat pembauran*’ (the spirit of unity) the fact is that until at present day, the cultural gap is still there. Some mixed marriages do happen at many places but indeed the sentiment of superiority and inferiority complex among each ethnic group is still the most burdened to realized the big ups spirit of unity. The flexibility in adapting foreign stories has enriched the art or performing of the *kethoprak*. Therefore more and more foreign stories have been added. At this stage of it development, the *kethoprak* was now called as *kethoprak Gardanela* (*sic.* Some people re-call it as *Dardanela*) as Libijanto stated out. (Lisbijanto 2013: 9) Also at this time, the whole necessary technical terms for making the *kethoprak* as an art of drama have been included such as the story, the players, the dialog, the acting, the blocking, the costumes, the make up and music or sounds equipments. Kussudyarsana pointed out that *kethoprak* is not a modern drama yet since many of its elements are Javanese, for instance the blocking, acting, costumes and accompaniment of the gamelan. He described that during the Workshop of *Kethoprak* in 1974, it was defined that *kethoprak* was the folk drama of the

Central of Java with regard that Yogyakarta was included in term of ethnology. (Kussudyarsana 1989: 25).

5. The era of *Kethoprak Moderen (modern kethoprak)* 1955 – 1958

During this era, more sub-genres of *kethoprak* have emerged such as localized group of *kethoprak* with its own style and loyal audience. (Lisbijanto 2013: 9). According to Kussudyarsana, the *kethoprak* has growing steadily in number. Amateur groups of *kethoprak* can be found almost everywhere in the villages of Yogyakarta and Surakarta. The performance activities happen not only during the village festivals but also during the good harvest and wedding ceremonies. The performance normally took place in front of the house or the open square and open to the public for free of charge. The show usually began at 9 pm and finished at 5 am for a total of 8 hours performance. In the royal palaces of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, some royal circles have become importance patrons for the life of the *kethoprak*, to named some of the them; Gusti Pangeran Harya Mangkusumo, the son of Sri Sultan Hamengku Buwono VII of Yogyakarta Palace has contributed for the performance of *kethoprak* inside the palace which has taken the story of wayang kulit purwa (puppet shadow) of “Pergiwa-Pergiwati” to be adapted for the *kethoprak*. Bendara Raden Mas Kartolo, the son of Sri Sultan Hamengku Buwono VIII has contributed his role for the establishment of a group of *kethoprak* inside the palace which members were all of the sultanate servants in place. He adopted the Javanese history of “Prince Menakjingga” with the title of “Minakjingga Mbalela” (The Angrily Minakjingga). Bendara Raden Ayu Pudjaningdyah, the wife of Sri Sultan Hamengku Buwono VIII, has also contributed for the establishment of *kethoprak* inside the palace and during her patronage that the collection of costumes and many other properties has been improved in numbers. Accordingly, the same phenomenon did happen in the palace of Surakarta when some royalties have dedicated themselves as the patronage for the development of the art of *kethoprak* inside the sultanate palace. (Kussudyarsana 1989: 32-3).

6. The era of *Kethoprak Gaya Baru (New Style Kethoprak)* 1958-1987

Because of the demand from the public to see modernized *kethoprak*, it was necessary that the scriptwriters and the *kethoprak* managers to work hard in the searching of new elements that can be employed to modernized their *kethoprak*. Rather than to innovate on the art of the *kethoprak* itself, it was likely that more or less the innovation has been made only to the improvement of the stage performance visually. But due to the need of nurturing the creativity among the so many groups of *kethoprak*, the possible easiest way was to establish a national price awards to the existing groups of *kethoprak*. Thus it was a group of *kethoprak* based in Tulungagung, East Java that has received the best performance and creativity award in 1958. (Lisbijanto 2013:10). The popular group named Kethoprak Siswo Budoyo was lead by Ki Siswondo who has brought the group until it has been known as the longest existing group in the history of *kethoprak*. The group kept on surviving until 1998 when sadly it was left by the dead of the master because of the illness that made the loyal members left the group and when many of them chose to set up their own groups for good.

II

1998 was also the fall of New Order regime in Indonesian politic when the late Soeharto who has led the country for 32 years with the support of militarism has been ousted by the people power. Ever since many people have no intention to the traditional performing arts for the sake of materialism and consumerism which start to become more and more occupying the standard of the living of the people. Not only *kethoprak* but also more and more of traditional culture and performing arts have dying out and lost uncontrollably.

However, from the historical point of view, it was generally understood that decreasing the numbers of *kethoprak* has happened since the 1950s, during the era of modern *kethoprak*, when the number of *kethoprak* has reached of more than 2000 groups spread out all of the areas of Central of Java (including Yogyakarta and Surakarta) and East Java with the city of Tulungagung as the central point. Moreover, during the years of 1950 – 1965, many of the performing group has been trapped in becoming the members of two Indonesian political poles, one was the communism with its affiliation so-called Lembaga

Kebudayaan Rakyat (the Association of People Culture) or LEKRA and the other one was Lembaga Kebudayaan Nasional (the Association of National Culture) or the LKN. The tug of war between the two bodies resulted a huge human tragedy of the 30 September 1965 when thousands of people affiliated to the LEKRA have lost their life whether being killed or being kidnapped and then being put into the prison without justification in front of the law.

Among the prominent groups of *kethoprak* that were trapped into the affiliation were the Mardi Budoyo lead by Atmonadi and Krido Mardi lead by Jadi the younger brother of kethoprak master Cokrojio. They established the Badan Kontak Kethoprak Seluruh Indonesia) or BAKOKSI. Cokrojio himself in contrary to his brother Jadi, established an organization so-called Lembaga Kethoprak Nasional (National Kethoprak League) which was affiliate to the Nationalist Cultural Association that his movement has received support from another masters such as Glinding, Setopangarso, Suyatman, Widjaja and Widayat.

Interestingly, in this political situation, the aforesaid 1958 champion group namely *Kethoprak* Siswo Budoyo was not involved to any political wings and thus it was saved from any threats of its distinction and thus its popularity kept on going until 1998. The group always moved from one place to another and every time stayed longer than a month in one place to perform, shortened if sometime not many people enthusiastically came to see the show. But for sure that Siswo Budoyo was a success story of moving kethoprak so-called *kethoprak tobong* (*tobong* means not permanent stage). The invention that has been employed by Siswo Budoyo in order to attract the audience to enjoy the show was that every performance was made to glamour in terms of decoration and side effects as well as more effects of entertainment and comedy that certainly have made people to come back for tomorrow performance. In musical aspect, Siswo Budoyo has included drum set to enhance the sound effect and the richness of rhythmic strength. The intensity of the *gendings* (songs) has also being improved steadily as well as the opening dance that performed the eloquence of classical dance in wide selection of repertoires. Lighting system and sounds system have been improved in modern technology that has the

possibility of synchronization with the stage dynamism. (Kussudyarsana 1989: 36)

By the way, the 30th September 1965 tragedy was the first tsunami that wiped out quite a lot of numbers of *kethoprak* groups in the society. The rest of the groups that die hard one by one because of the political stigma of the left wing could not help themselves but to die. Only some groups that have a strong financial help could stay for some more time of its existence such as *Kethoprak Sapta Mandala* that was patronized by the military office of Kodam IV Diponegoro in Central of Java. Kussudyarsana described how this group has successfully managed to survive by its invention that has been made on artistic elements, the artistry and the organization management. The traditional *lakon* (story) has been replaced by the new one, in which the *jejeran* (the introduction of the story) no more being held in the palace background but it moved to the woods or in the stalls instead. The tempo of the anticlimax of the story has been speedy up in order not to destroy the intensity of the climax itself. The art of the dialog has been improved by elaborating the dynamism of intonation and articulation as well as the effectiveness of its tempos. (Kussudyarsana 1989: 36-7).

The second tsunami that wiped out the existence of *kethoprak* was the television when it changed the life style of so many people from enjoying the life performance of *kethoprak* to the entertainment of soap operas by popular artists in Jakarta. Slowly but for surely that the television has changed the life of people taste to the performing arts as well. The art of traditional *kethoprak* accordingly has been regarded as out of trend and backward. Popular drama and 'sinetron' (soap operas) has replaced the popularity of *kethoprak*. No matter how some groups of *kethoprak* have tried to modernized itself but still less and less people were coming to the show of modern *kethoprak*. And when the national television has kind-heartedly life-aired the *kethoprak* show on its programs, it was only a matter of click that people would prefer to move to another channel to watch the various choices of *sinetron* or soap operas. Has the government detected this phenomenon of the dying of the art of *kethoprak*? The answer was 'not at all'.

Was there any attempt to save the *kethoprak*? Yes by individually, not so many in number, but not by the government.

The third tsunami for the distinction of *kethoprak* was the cause of the flood of Information Technology products such as mobile phones and many other gadgets that made many people could enjoyed so much on virtual spheres such as virtual games, choices of movies and videos on the hand held, and many other luxuries that a short before could not be imagined to happen. In this situation the *kethoprak* and many other genres of traditional performing arts could not stand any longer but to wait to die unless there is a political will of a good government who will set out a policy of putting them into a special treatment of cultural products as the pride of the people existence. But this is a kind of *fata morgana* (false view) when you walk tiredly in the dessert and see a shadow of a lagoon in front of you. Actually there is no water at all!

The fourth tsunami for the disappearing of *kethoprak* was the globalization when more and more penetration of the foreign cultures and the life styles has instantly changing the focus and orientation of people's life. We were celebrating the freedom of speech as well as the freedom of expression but there is also materialism and consumerism that constantly spread out like a cancer grows in the body of our nationalism. Market economy has been profoundly welcome by a view people for the price of loosing a huge numbers of non-marketable of our intangible traditional cultural products and expressions. And thus the story of the *kethoprak* and many other genres of traditional performing arts have become the perfectly past tenses.

III

Like fish out of the water, there is still a movement of creativity of the people of *kethoprak* to keep on struggling for the comeback of *kethoprak*. As the results, some kinds of newly compromised forms of *kethoprak* have born but normally did exist only as a temporary new trend. I described it as a compromised forms of *kethoprak* because plenty of traditional elements of *kethoprak* as well as it

aesthetic values must have been sacrificed for the sake of compromising to include the new element of changing that sometime over exploring the absurdity and vulgarity of the performance. I believe that people enjoy it not for the aesthetic enjoyment but for the pleasure of absurdity and vulgarity that caused by it.

1. *Kethoprak* in Bahasa Indonesia

The incredibly excessive sideline of *kethoprak* has made a call to revitalize and modernize it in order to be able to compete with television popularity as well as popular culture in general. One of a hard effort was to change the use of the language from traditional Javanese into *bahasa* Indonesia (Indonesian language), a national language that already beginning to be used widely especially by the family of younger couples who embrace the modern life including the use of *bahasa* Indonesia as daily communication. Accordingly, the use of *Bahasa Jawa* (Javanese language) as daily communication in the family has been regarded as old style and thus anything that has relation with *bahasa Jawa* mistakenly under valued as backward.

Bahasa Jawa has no longer as a source of oral literature, but at the same time *Bahasa Indonesia* could not replace the flexibility of *Bahasa Jawa* in the performing art. Therefore, the use of *Bahasa Indonesia* in *kethoprak* was not as fit as *Bahasa Jawa* was. It seems like that the idiom was not proper, like an analogous of a gentleman wearing on a skirt. It can be supposed thus that even though many people outside Javanese language speaking could easily understood the dialog in the *kethoprak bahasa Indonesia*, however, they could not feel the essence of *kethoprak* as good as when it is performed in Javanese language. In other word, *kethoprak* in *bahasa Indonesia* has lost its *rasa* (taste) as original *kethoprak* in *bahasa Jawa*. The meaning of the Javanese term *rasa* is one of the most elusive in the Javanese language for a nonnative speaker to grasp. 1) The closest all-purpose translation is “feeling.” 2) In most musical contexts, this is not a

bad approximation, though it can be misleading. *Rasa* (in music) may also be translated as “sensation” or “inner meaning.” But it sometimes means “the ability to express or perceive feeling or inner meaning,” or “the faculty through which these are perceived” (“intuition”). (Benamou 2010: 40).

According to Barbara Hatley, this sub-genre of *kethoprak* derived from the collaboration between *kethoprak* actors and performers and performers of modern theater. This kind of *kethoprak* did exist only for a short period of time whereas the number of the group was not many. But in contradictory, according to Hatley, a huge audience turned out, including large numbers of students, youths and young professionals who had formed the standard constituency of modern Indonesian-language theater. Many other performances followed, on stage and television, audiences boomed and the media avidly followed the new craze. (Hatley 2008:162)

2. *Kethoprak* Humor

On a regular traditional *kethoprak* performance, normally comedian part was so much awaited by audience and a favorite comedian was as important as the role of popular actors or actresses in the *kethoprak*. With the declining of the art of *kethoprak*, some of the groups have tried to explore more on the comedian parts in order to survive. Over exploration of the comedian parts sometime have made that *kethoprak* has become more absurdity and thus destroying the aesthetic or the eloquence of the *kethoprak* itself. Hatley recalled it as subversively humorous style (Hatley 2008: 162) that almost all of the parts of the performance, including the serious dialog parts, have been modified to become as humorous as it can in order just to attract the audience to stay fresh from the beginning to the end of the performance.

One of the popular of it kind nowadays is a group stage regularly on television show namely Opera Van Java or OVJ with the most popular comedian named Sule. The group sometime performed out of it regular show on television and many people would enjoy to see them enthusiastically. Only that the basic function of dalang is remain in their performance but the whole acting on stage totally based on improvisation. OVJ is the only modification of the contemporary *kethoprak* that is still gained its popularity among the television watchers.

3. *Kethoprak Plesetan*

Plesetan is a specific type of parody (Jurriens in Heryanto 2008: 148). More specifically Jurriens described *plesetan* as literally means 'slip of the tongue', but here refers to punning or wordgames, in which humorous effects are achieved by interchanging words and their meanings on the basis of sound association (Jurriens in Heryanto 2004: 154).

Jurriens in citing Heryanto (1996) identified three types of *plesetan* that circulated in society during the New Order. The first type was wordplay for entertainment, not serving any explicit ideological goals. The second type aimed at reversing hierarchies and power relations, for instance by turning around names of official institutions or making a curse sound respectful. It was used as a counter-strategy by, or on behalf of, the weak, poor, or suppressed in society. The third type was *plesetan* as a radical and serious discipline, which was not merely oriented towards laughter or the reversal of social power relations, but questioned and undermined any grand narrative with truth claims (Heryanto 1996: 102–3).

In the performance of *kethoprak plesetan*, the use of the three types of *plesetan* can be interchangeable. It can be imagined how the whole story of the drama was very often being interrupted by so many vulgarities, sarcasm as well as allusion in forms of *plesetan*. Certainly *kethoprak*

plesetan is fully entertainment merely for enjoyment but similar to those of *kethoprak* in *bahasa Indonesia* and *kethoprak humor*, this sub-genre was also lasted for not very long period. The audience might be very boring to hear the same vocabularies of *plesetan* to be repeated over and over again. Thus the story of *kethoprak plesetan* has gone for the time being.

4. *Kethoprak Tokoh*

Reformation era short after the fall of Soeharto presidency in 1998 has brought not only freedom of speech for the people but also the era when public has become the center of political will for the politicians' agendas. The under pressured people life during Soeharto New Order era has turned out to become the people life of dreaming of a better life with a little prosperity. But that was only a sudden euphoria of a sudden changed in political surface of Indonesia. In fact the people life still remain very hard, the number of people who live below line of the poor was still very high in contrast to a small percentage of the haves and the increasing number of people in the middle line.

The direct vote by the people for every general election at all level of government offices has come up with money politics. Many politicians and political parties than have to compete to get the people's vote in order to win the election. One of the methods for the public figures and politicians to get people's sympathy were to get involve in any activities that have a high impact for his or her popularity. Getting involved in the *kethoprak* playing was certainly one of the choices since at the time *kethoprak* was fading away and needed some alternatives to get the audience back. It was the involvement of public figures (*tokoh*) in the *kethoprak* that it was called as *kethoprak tokoh*. As can be supposed, in this sub-genre of the *kethoprak*, professionalism was not the point, some *tokoh* sometime have no capability as actors but with a little practice they

were successfully managed to perform in collaboration with the professional *kethoprak* players.

In about 2010, the trend of *kethoprak tokoh* has no longer got its popularity and disappeared from the scene of the *kethoprak*. It seemed that *kethoprak tokoh* was as a personal project motive of some figures to gain popularity. Moreover, it can be said that *kethoprak tokoh* has been used by some public figures as his or her vehicle to gain an individual political agenda. During 2010 and nowadays, the performance of *kethoprak* was quite a little in number, perhaps if any, were some performances in the countryside for some special occasion such as wedding party or a celebration party by some important individuals in the villages.

IV

The art of *kethoprak* as a folk performing drama has a historical set beginning from the traditional *lesung* (rice mortar) percussive playing based on *ostinato* and the improvisation on a rhythmical pattern. By the time being, it was incorporated with singing traditional game songs or folksongs that have been popular among the people in a country life. Due to make the playing more interestingly the people then have made some addition with story telling. The role of the *dalang* as the storyteller then was needed. The agrarian people of Java who have been using the *lesung* to crush the rice paddy for hundred of years, and still using it in some remote places right now, would love to play on it rhythmically. Therefore, the playing on a *lesung* with some singing and story telling has widely become a common practice by the people. Many kind of story especially those of traditional folklores have been added and at the same time the need of performing it have called for some use of costumes.

So popular this folk performing arts in Central of Java and East Java that in 1908, KRMT Wreksodiningrat took the *kethoprak* to the Sultanate Palace of Surakarta

or Solo. He put his ideas to improve the *kethoprak lesung* by some addition of instrumentation, costumes and the dialog. Now the *kethoprak lesung* which was originally derived from the folk culture has become a new performing art of the sultanate palace. Moreover, many court family members have in favor of the new drama after some innovation have been put to make it suitable with the taste of courtly art.

In 1925 Ki Wisangkara took out the courtly *kethoprak* back to the life outside the sultanate palace. At this time he named his group as *kethoprak Wreksatama* that has gained popularity among the people. This was also the first *tobong* group that moved from one place to the other performing in a temporary built stage that has been re-known as *tobong*.

As a newly born of a genre of performing folk drama that has some improvements after being taken into the courtly life, the *kethoprak* has growing steadily out number in Central of Java and East Java alone. During the 1965, it was reported that the number of *kethoprak* that has affiliated to LEKRA alone has reached 800 groups, and it must be more in number of the groups affiliated to LKN or independent groups not affiliated to any of the two political wings such as the champion of the *kethoprak* in 1958 so called *Kethoprak Siswo Budoyo* from Tulungagung in East Java.

The modern era has changed the life of most people and the decreasing of the number of *kethoprak* because the lost of its audience was as a *conditio sine qua non*. Globalization and the sporadic attack of consumerism and materialism have made that the people would pay attention more to the materialized world rather than to spiritual life such as the enjoyment of arts. As a result, almost all of traditional folk arts have dying out and the same tragic happened for the *kethoprak*. No matter how some efforts have been made to make the *kethoprak* back to life in new transformations, but it already lost its audience. Only Opera Van Java -- which is adopted the element of *kethoprak* arts in terms of its story telling, but most of its performance was totally different with that of original

kethoprak -- that remain exist on the television only as an entertainment which explores comedy as the only motives of its shows.

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