

"Our laughter balances our tears": Humor in Sundanese Arts

by Sean Williams

In the middle of a typical performance of the very popular form of social dance in West Java known as jaipongan, a dancer climbs onstage. Instead of wearing the normal jaipongan outfit, which consists of flashy, loose-fitting clothes in primary colors, he is dressed like a peasant. His head is covered with a dancer's scarf, but it is tied so that it hangs awkwardly in several points, like a European jester's hat. As the introductory section of the music begins, he strides forward in jerky motions, imitating the bouncy walk of a tukang bakso, a vendor who sells hot soup by the roadside. As he begins to dance, his movements are a reminder of the roots of jaipongan in ketuk tilu, an unrefined and occasionally erotic style of couple dancing that appears in many areas of Sunda. As the gong cycle approaches its conclusion, the dancer stretches his arms out in typical jaipongan fashion, simultaneously pushing his shoulders back and snapping his head forward to correspond with the powerful drum beat that always occurs before the gong. But the drummer doesn't play the expected drum stroke, which throws the gamelan ensemble and audience into gales of laughter and makes the dancer look ridiculous, his unaccented motions suspended in mid-air.

Humor is a very important aspect of Sundanese life, constantly discussed in Sunda and occasionally mentioned by foreign researchers (Baier 1986 and Foley 1979, 1985). Many Sundanese describe themselves as lighthearted, frequently enjoying practical jokes and barnyard humor. The above scene is a frequent occurrence in performances of jaipongan: one member of the dance troupe acts as the *pelawak* or comedian, and does a stand-up comedy routine with a second man while the dancers change costumes or as a break between different dance styles. Vaudeville or slapstick humor is very popular, and bawdy or scatological jokes seem to have their place in almost every sector of society. Practical jokes on foreigners and foreign researchers are particularly enjoyed and are described repeatedly with enthusiasm and embellishments. People engage in constant word play and are particularly acute with puns, a fun and easy pastime because of the vocabulary of the five levels in the Sundanese language.

The use of humor extends throughout many musical genres and art forms. In some cases it is a thinly disguised power play for musical control; other times it is used

deliberately to make fun of someone under the guise of *ngaheureuyan* [just messing around]. Most often, however, it is simply an attempt to make things more lively and fun, if only for the performers. A person with a good sense of humor is popular and is often sought after for performance engagements or as a companion or ice-breaker in social situations. Such people frequently act as masters of ceremony for performances at weddings or minor government events, and they very often lampoon the host or government official in a non-threatening way.

Verbal, Physical and Musical Jokes

One example of word play is the following statement, often heard by this author: "*Orang Amerika makan kéju; saya makan kéjo.*" ["Americans eat cheese; I eat rice."] *Kéjo* is the coarsest way of saying the word "rice" in Sundanese; the humor is in its similarity to the Indonesian word for cheese, *kéju*. This statement makes a lot of people laugh and in particular points out a difference between American and Sundanese. To the Sundanese, rice is food; if you haven't eaten rice, you haven't eaten. Although Americans don't have an equivalent staple food, some Sundanese think the Americans *must* have a particular type of food without which they can't survive. Because cheese is strongly associated with wealthy foreigners, it must, according to many Sundanese, rank with rice as the most important type of food for Americans. Contrasting something coarse (the lowest way of saying "rice") with something elite (cheese is frequently eaten by wealthy and upwardly-mobile Sundanese as well as foreigners) appears again and again, not just in word play, but also in music and dance.

Musicians often tell inside jokes to one another during performances to keep things lively. A group of musicians who accompany a vocalist may tell jokes just loud enough for her to hear and then laugh while she is trying to sing. A vocalist may contrast physical features in her lyrics (*Abdi gaduh pesek; hoyong mancung*, meaning "I've got a flat one, want a tall one" [nose]) in specific reference to someone either onstage or in the audience. A *dalang* may refer in his performance to people falling asleep when they have important work to do just as the musicians begin to fall asleep behind him.

In the martial arts dance known as *penca silat*, a solo performer may, after executing difficult movements and defending himself from multiple invisible attackers, turn

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tail and run, covering his rear with his hands in mock fright. A jaipongan dancer may throw in a comic imitation of a classical dance movement for an element of surprise and humor. Drummers leave out beats or change the tempo; male dancers omit key movements or abruptly change from the serious to the humorous by staring at their dance partners' chest or hips from a distance of several inches. A classical dancer may, in rehearsal, run from his own arrow after executing the difficult and serious dance movements required to shoot it. A *saron* player in an ensemble might remove one of the keys of his neighbor's *saron* and hide it. In performances of *angklung* (a processional bamboo percussion ensemble), drummers try to trick each other in competing acrobatics so that one of them loses the rhythm (Baier 1986:2-6).

Maintenance of Social Practice

Humor is used for social and musical control at the *latihan*, or public lesson/jam session. A voice, instrument or dance lesson is never private. Groups of up to twenty people or more may gather to watch the lesson and to offer shouted and conflicting criticism, asked or unasked. For the



A comic takes the stage during a folk theater performance. This clown of the Topeng Cisalak troupe is called Bapak Jantuk.

non-musicians who join in, it is a type of entertainment. Many say that a *latihan* is more fun if there are more people present, and claim that they attend to give a spirit of enthusiasm to the proceedings.

The fun begins when a mistake is made, whether by the student or any other musicians or dancers. Uproarious laughter ensues, embarrassing the one who made the mistake and causing him or her to work harder at correcting the problem. Teachers are not above making mistakes, but it is rare that a teacher of real status would be laughed at. Students are never exempt from laughter. This situation is dramatically amplified in actual performances, when not just the musicians but the entire audience (if it is paying attention) laughs, imitating and making comments about the mistake. In performances for weddings and circumcisions, the audience rarely pays enough attention to discern mistakes, but performers are acutely aware when the audience consists of musicians. It is extremely bad form to become angry after being laughed at. Sadly for some performers, particularly embarrassing musical mistakes are remembered for years afterward and imitated repeatedly for the general enjoyment of those who were present as well as those who only heard about them.

Laughter also works very effectively in controlling musical experimentation. If a performer produces a particularly unusual or interesting *senggol* (ornament) that pushes at the borders of appropriate musical style, everyone laughs as if he were a child attempting to act like an adult. Although innovation is acceptable, particularly among the top-ranking performers, it must be within certain appropriate stylistic limits. This principle applies as well to performers who attempt to sing, play or dance differently from what is expected. If a *kacapi* player of the *tembang Sunda* genre (a repertoire of poetry sung to *kacapi* accompaniment), for example, attempted to sing during an actual performance, everyone would laugh even though they know that instrumentalists must have a strong grasp of all *tembang Sunda* songs and may even guide vocalists when they make mistakes. The shift to a role as a vocalist, which would entail crossing a status boundary as well as a musical boundary, is unacceptable for *tembang Sunda* performances. An occurrence so unexpected might provoke commentary and nervous giggling among onlookers reacting to what they consider unfamiliar and inappropriate. As a result, *tembang Sunda* instrumentalists only rarely double as singers.

Professional Comedians

While much Sundanese artistic humor is covert and used simply to make the action more fun, music-comedy revue groups perform quite frequently. These groups often amplify traditional Sundanese instruments, such as the *kacapi siter* (a plucked board zither) and *kendang* (drum). As the member of one humor group mentioned, these

instruments are amplified in the hope of attracting the interest of the teenage members of the audience, who often dislike traditional Sundanese performing arts. Knowing the attraction of humor, comedy groups engender fresh enthusiasm for traditional Sundanese music by packaging it attractively.

Humorous behavior by women musicians onstage is culturally inappropriate in most circumstances. Exceptions are the female *pelawak* who act as a comedy team with their husbands. Professional female comedians are often dressed in clashing colors and are either much larger or older-looking than their husbands. They almost always act as the joker, with the husband in the role of "straight man." A song performed by one of these women could include lyrics referring to the size of her husband's "key" and how it never seems to fit in her "lock." In offstage contexts such as the *latihan*, female musicians and singers are just as entertaining as men, peppering their conversations with off-color remarks and outrageous puns. Jokes about body parts seem to be particularly popular.

Humor in Greater Perspective

Musical humor in Indonesia is certainly not exclusively Sundanese. Javanese musicians also use overt musical humor in many of the same ways, during both their performances and their own *latihan* (Pemberton 1987:25). Lyrics of the extremely popular Indonesian music-and-dance form *dangdut* are often quite humorous. Because *dangdut* frequently contains serious, socially-conscious or proselytizing lyrics (Frederick 1982:122), phrases such as the following make fun of the genre's reputation and style: "*Aku mau bunuh diri tapi takut mati!*" ["I want to kill myself but I'm afraid of dying!"]. Many non-musicians deeply appreciate humor in music and dance when it is at a level accessible to them, either in the lyrics of a song, in a particular vocal timbre or in visual slapstick. Many are able to find humor in what could be regarded as a sad song, such as *Hati Yang Luka* ("A Wounded Heart"), a major hit in the *pop Indonesia* genre during 1988 (Yampolsky 1989:7). Among ethnic groups in Indonesia, however, it seems to be the Sundanese who are not only the most famous for their sense of humor but perhaps the most conscious and proud of it.

Some Sundanese like to make fun of the music of other ethnic groups as much as their own. Musicians enjoy doing parodies of Javanese, Balinese and Batak music; for example, a singer might imitate the high-pitched sound of a Javanese *pesindhen* singing in the *slendro* tuning, causing everyone to laugh at the expense of the Javanese. Javanese musicians with whom I spoke were more vocal about the sadness in Sundanese songs than the humor. "We defeated them, of course," said one musician, "they have plenty to be sad about." He was referring in part to the humiliation of the Sundanese kingdom of Pajajaran by the Javanese



Cepot (wearing the head scarf) and his brothers Dawala (behind Cepot) and Gareng.

kingdom of Majapahit over a proposed marriage, a tragic 14th-century event resulting in the deaths of the king of Pajajaran and his followers. Although this occurrence took place centuries ago, the Sundanese and Javanese have been engaged in political and cultural rivalry ever since.

Cepot, the Sundanese Everyman

One of the strongest images of humor in the performing arts is the *wayang golek* (rod puppet theater) character named Cepot, a Sundanese clown figure who is dearly beloved. In a *wayang* performance, he represents the Sundanese Everyman, from his common black outfit to his crossed eyes, bad teeth, rough, everyday speech, and his gawky and unrefined physical actions. He is uncomfortable around noblemen, giggles frequently and faces many of the same situations that audience members confront in making decisions and coping with daily life. Cepot provides a link for many Sundanese between who they are now (*becak* drivers, petty officials, vegetable hawkers, servants, minor businesspeople) and those they associate with their collective past (gods, kings, princesses, warriors and their clown attendants). According to several musicians and dancers who spoke at length with this author, Cepot's ubiquitous presence in performances of *wayang golek*

assures the audience that they belong in the same company as their lofty ancestors. (See Foley 1979 and 1985 for more information about the lively character of Cepot.)

Taking Humor Seriously

Some of the Sundanese with whom I spoke said that humor represents the opposite extreme of the depth of sadness and longing they feel and express in their songs. One artist explained, "Our laughter balances our tears." Others assert that musical humor, and laughter in general, prevents people from becoming too *sombong* [arrogant] about their musical ability.

Examining the balance between highly refined forms of music and dance and the raucous humor that punctuates them may provide us with a more complete understanding of the Sundanese. Research that stresses only the more serious and refined aspects of the performing arts presents a slanted perspective on Sundanese expressive culture. The importance of humor in the lives and art forms of musicians and dancers cannot be overstated. Humor is an effective means of social as well as stylistic control in performances of music. It functions as a means by which anger or frustration can be expressed in a lighthearted manner. It offers an avenue of interest and pleasure for those who do not enjoy traditional music. It provides a balance against the difficulties of daily life. Humor is an essential component of Sundanese culture and should be considered in any serious study of Sundanese performing arts. ▶

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