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### Community and the Metropolis: *Lenong, Nyai Dasima* and the new New Order

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**Community and the Metropolis: *Lenong*, *Nyai Dasima* and the new New Order**

Keith Foulcher

Like other great metropolises, the city of Jakarta has long been a centre of intellectual exchange, cultural debate and the self-conscious articulation of national cultural identity. The terms of this intellectual activity have often involved a definition of the 'modern' and 'national', as against 'tradition' and 'region', sometimes establishing a simple cultural dichotomy between them, but more often seeking to reposition both, in an accommodation between the cosmopolitan and international outlooks of the nation and the lived cultures of the Indonesian people. There has often been a strong sense of pride evident in the intellectual response to the indigenous cultural heritage, and an urge for documentation and conservation of cultural forms perceived to be under threat from the juggernaut of modernisation or, in more recent times, the spectre of a globalised world culture. Sometimes, the conservation ideal has been accompanied by an urge towards renewal and revitalisation, the belief that the survival of 'outmoded' cultural forms is best assured by their reinterpretation in the light of change in the life of the communities whose values they enshrine.<sup>1</sup>

In most cases, of course, the interest in the indigenous heritage directs the gaze of Indonesian intellectuals outside Jakarta, into the regions themselves. Yet within the borders of its own multi-ethnic, internationally-oriented metropolitan culture, Jakarta has always been home to an 'indigenous' culture of its own, that of the people still known by the epithet 'Betawi'. This is the community that developed in the urban centre and rural environs of the colonial city of Batavia after its foundation in the early seventeenth century, a hybrid amalgam of Malay, Javanese, Sundanese and Balinese ethnicities, interacting further with Chinese, Portuguese and Dutch communities and their cultures. The language of the Betawi people, Jakarta Malay, still exists independently of the modern forms of 'Jakarta Indonesian', with which it is sometimes popularly identified. In the 1920s and early 1930s, as the popular theatre forms *ketoprak* and *ludruk* were emerging in Central and East Java, and *tonil* and *bangsawan* theatre cultures flourished on the east coast of Sumatra, this language became the medium for a distinct form of community theatre, known as *lenong*.

Like other folk and community theatre forms in Indonesia, *lenong* developed as a type of theatre loosely structured around a play performance staged through non-scripted dialogue and liberally interspersed with clown sequences and musical interludes. Traditionally, performances were all night affairs, held to enliven the atmosphere of community or family rituals. The musical accompaniment to the play was provided by the distinctive Betawi *gambang kromong* orchestra, which was made up of instruments originating from the Javanese and Sundanese gamelan orchestra,

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<sup>1</sup> Especially during the New Order period the concern of intellectuals with the conservation of local cultures was often pitted against conservation '*proyek*' managed by government authorities. These were often seen by Indonesian and foreign anthropologists as part of the nation state's attempts to manage the political implications of local cultural identities. See Rodgers (2003: 153-154) for comments on the 1980s *Proyek Dokumentasi dan Inventarisasi Kebudayaan Daerah* and reference to some of the critical literature. The response of critical intellectuals to the same type of task is epitomised in the *Penelitian Kebijakan Kebudayaan di Indonesia*, conducted under the auspices of the Indonesian Academy of Sciences (LIPI) in 2000.

supplemented by a single flute and two or three Chinese stringed instruments. The stories performed were either historical tales known in Betawi folklore, or original compositions, often deriving from adaptations of popular films, print narratives and comic stories (Kleden-Probonegoro 1996, and below). In independent Indonesia, the term *lenong* itself came to be a powerful evocation of Betawi culture, a symbol of the regional cultural identity that lay at the geographical heart of the nation. As a result, *lenong* has long been a focus of attention for metropolitan intellectuals and cultural figures concerned with the indigenous cultural heritage; in recent years it has also attracted the interest of the metropolitan media and entertainment industries. The effect has been to give *lenong* a history not only as a form of performance art, but also as an object of study, promotion, conservation and ‘modernisation’. At times, and as part of this process, the performance of *lenong* in the city of Jakarta has illustrated the interplay of community and metropolis which underlies this history. *Lenong* has functioned both as the ritual enactment of community and as a theatre of display, commodity and professionalised performance art.

### ***Lenong and the metropolitan stage: observers and performers***

One of the earliest recorded instances of the intellectual engagement with *lenong* as folk art comes in an article of 1954 by the musician, Amir Pasaribu. The article, entitled ‘Lenong: Observasi MSDR di Lenteng-Agung’, was a report of a ‘fieldwork observation’ of *lenong* in the (then) environs of Jakarta by a small group of young intellectuals, all of them men who were to leave a significant mark on the history of post-independence modern Indonesian culture. Besides the author himself, the group was made up of Rivai Apin, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Joebaar Ajob and Basoeki Resobowo – all names that were to become prominent in the socially-engaged and communist party-associated cultural organisation *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* (LEKRA), formed four years earlier on 17 August 1950. The article is in fact a lively encapsulation of the characteristic way Lekra in Jakarta came to view the folk arts as part of its vision of a progressive modern Indonesian culture. In this report, the tension between elite aspirations and popular taste is already apparent, from the anxiety about ‘authenticity’ and a fear of ‘contamination’ by undesirable foreign elements to a concern with the taste for ‘entertainment’ that can overwhelm the admirable ‘simplicity’ of the people’s art. The picture which emerges from the report is of a folk art form which is literally ‘on the edge’ of the metropolis and its culture. The setting for the performance was physically removed from the capital: the band of urban intellectuals found they had to walk for an hour along the railway tracks to reach their goal, where they entered upon an atmosphere of excited community festivity, everyone wearing their post-Lebaran new clothes, partying with a variety of drinks and food or stretched out on mats in front of the stage and under the stars. The whole event struck them as overwhelmingly ‘Chinese’, recalling the characteristics of Peking Opera. This, in their view, did not discount the authenticity of the occasion; what they did object to, however, was the signs of the modern metropolis and its creeping cultural influences:

The performers [...] are aware of how much the public, and they themselves, enjoy American films, for example. [...] And because they are lacking in their own convictions, they think they have to imitate all the mannerisms of film stars, like raising and lowering their eyebrows or tossing their hair away from

their foreheads. The *lenong* clowns copy idiots like Danny Kaye, with his ‘air-conditioned’ clothes. This is to be regretted, because it is immediately obvious that these are not organic attributes of *lenong* itself, but misguided attempts to accommodate *lenong* to popular tastes which are in a constant state of flux. In this respect, there are many characteristics of *lenong* which have to be regarded as ‘corrupt and outworn’.<sup>2</sup>

It is very clear that in the view of these observers, the people must be the agents of this desired transformation themselves, rather than have their culture appropriated by those from outside:

But one thing must be clear. They must not be TOLD how to do things, along the lines of ‘you must do it this way, or that way, because that is what artistic standards require’. Reform must grow out of the awareness and understanding of *lenong* communities themselves. And there are many of them these days who feel the need for a new orientation. In fact they are very much in search of guidance and leadership about how to move *lenong* forward. Of course this has to be done with respect for many aspects of the *lenong* world and its performers. The difficulty comes in knowing how much change can be undertaken, which characteristics are in need of change, and how the proportions should be managed.<sup>3</sup>

The ‘improvements’ necessary to advance *lenong* would, in this view, involve a return to the essence of the story being performed, and a reduction in the singing and dancing interludes which gave the performance of a story from Betawi folklore the length of a ‘drama by Richard Wagner or a symphony by Bruckner or Mahler’. The modernisation of *lenong* was clearly already on the intellectual agenda. As with Lekra’s approach to other popular arts, the form itself was to be valued because it was a part of the rich cultural heritage of the Indonesian people. But to become a vital participant in a forward-looking modern Indonesian culture, it needed to be renewed, and this would best happen through a process of interaction between the people themselves and their intellectual mentors.

Ironically, however, when modernisation came, it was to be at the hands of a new metropolitan culture, the great wave of confidence and rebuilding which characterised the period after the demise of the communist party and the thinking about Indonesian culture that came to be associated with it. If our first glimpse of

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<sup>2</sup> Pelaku<sup>2</sup>nja [...] mengetahui betapa nikmatnja film<sup>2</sup> Amerika misalnja dalam kesukaan publik, termasuk mereka sendiri. [...] Dan karena tulang punggungnja tidak teguh, maka para pelaku<sup>2</sup> tadi menganggap bahwa mereka harus pula meniru semua lagak<sup>2</sup> bintang<sup>2</sup> film, menurut mode film alis turun atau naik, djambul turun atau naik. Para komik<sup>2</sup> badut lenong mengikuti pula idiote sematjam Danny Kaye dengan pakaian ‘air-conditioned’. Ini menjadi keberatan sebab segera kelihatan, bahwa bukanlah ini sesuatu attribut jang organisch dalam alam lenong itu sendiri, akan tetapi sesuatu tjara keliru dalam menjesuaikan diri lenong itu pada selera chalajak ramai jang senantiasa beralih bersama manusianja. Dari sudut ini lalu banjak tjorak lenong jang harus dianggap ‘corrupt and outworn’ (Pasaribu 1954: 41).

<sup>3</sup> Tapi satu hal ialah mesti terang. Djanganlah mereka itu hendak DIGURUI, kau harus begini, harus begitu, sebab begini begitu taraf seni. Haruslah orang<sup>2</sup> lenong itu sendiri atas dasar understanding dan pengertian jang telah tumbuh kedjurusan perbaikan. Dan mereka sendiri dewasa ini banjak jang merasakan perlunja orientasi baru. Mereka malahan mengharapkan sangat tuntutan dan pimpinan supaya lenong mereka itu mendapat kemajuan. Ini tentu dengan me-respecteer banjak segi<sup>2</sup> dari alam lenong itu sendiri maupun manusia pelakunja. Jang pelik-sulit ialah berapa banjak dan tjorak bagaimana dan dalam proporsi bagaimana perbaikan itu dapat diadakan (Pasaribu 1954: 42).

*lenong* in post-independence Indonesia comes through the lens of ‘progressive’ cultural attitudes, it was to be the early New Order, under city governor Ali Sadikin, that provided the material conditions for *lenong*’s revival, and the creation of an environment which saw the abandoning of its ‘corrupt and outworn’ characteristics.

Indeed, according to Umar Kayam, it was a common view that *lenong* in Jakarta was not only ‘outworn’ but virtually extinct by the time the early New Order intervened in its fate. (Kayam 1981: 118) This intervention took the form of the new performance environment and the new audiences for *lenong* that were generated by the establishment of Taman Ismail Marzuki, the Jakarta Arts Centre, on the site of the former Zoological Gardens in busy downtown Jakarta in mid-1968. This Centre, with its complex of theatres, performance spaces and meeting venues, came about through a process of consultation and cooperation between the city’s dynamic new military governor and a coterie of its senior anti-communist arts practitioners (Hill 1993: 246-248). Managed by the twenty-five member Jakarta Arts Council, it quickly became Indonesia’s leading arts institution. Particularly in the period up until the mid-1970s, the Centre presided over a great flourishing of the Indonesian performing arts, in both their modern and traditional forms. In its various performance spaces the creative experiments of contemporary dramatists, musicians and choreographers alternated with top quality performances of regional, popular and folk art genres. One of the biggest and most impressive of the Centre’s performance venues was the 2,000 seat capacity Open Air Theatre (*Teater Terbuka*), and it was here, under the balmy night skies of the inner metropolis, that *lenong* entered a new phase of its history. On this stage, a loose company of highly-skilled performers began to attract large audiences to scaled-down and professionalised *lenong* plays. The reputation and popularity of these performances spread, and for another ten years, *lenong* became a permanent part of the Centre’s performing arts program. Meanwhile, in the city’s environs, troupes began to re-form, in response to invitations to paying performances staged as part of community and family events.

A perceptive observer of this revival and its sociological context was the sociologist and essayist, Umar Kayam. In an essay of 1978, Kayam reflected on the type of audience that came to watch *lenong* at the Arts Centre, and the possible reasons for its appeal (Kayam 1981). He noted that these audiences were made up of both *orang pinggiran* – the people from the environs, the Betawi people displaced from the metropolis by its burgeoning population of incoming migrants – and the *orang gedongan* – the ‘people from brick houses’, the migrants themselves, or more particularly, their long-haired, jeans-wearing sons and daughters. These were the new Jakartans, young people who came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, but who identified as metropolitan youth, the children of an incipient new middle class who would soon become both the bearers and beneficiaries of the New Order’s programme of development and its attendant cultural modernisation.

In his article, Kayam notes that among these young people, *lenong* acquired, for a time, the status of a fashion trend: ‘There was a time during these years that watching *lenong* and mastering its jargon was a ‘must’ for Jakarta’s young people’ (‘Ada satu masa pada tahun-tahun itu di mana nonton *lenong* dan menguasai *jargon lenong* dianggap sebagai semacam keharusan di kalangan muda-mudi Jakarta’ [Kayam 1981: 124]). He suggests that for these ‘cultural commuters’, moving between the ethnic cultures of their home environments and the public culture of the metropolis, the experience of *lenong* at Taman Ismail Marzuki was of quite a different order from the experience of their Betawi counterparts. For the latter, there was most likely something distinctly uncomfortable about watching *lenong* on stage at the

*Teater Terbuka*, because the setting was so alien to their own experience of *lenong*. In place of the intimacy of community, which *lenong* encapsulated in the kampungs of the environs, these observers here found themselves sitting in fixed seating, alongside people not necessarily known to them, as paying customers in a vast theatre space. For the young long-haired Javanese from the 'brick houses', however, this was possibly an experience of new community awareness. Here, on the *lenong* stage, he (although Kayam does not specifically say so, he appears to be thinking primarily of young men in the audience) perhaps found heroes with whom he could more readily identify than elsewhere in his cultural commuting. They spoke his language for a start, and they were possibly much closer to his own experience than were the Arjuna and Kresna he might hear of at home, or the Charles Bronson he might find in the city's movie theatres:

Maybe he saw these characters from real life mixed with semi-caricatures, classic *lenong* figures dealing with the problem of how to come to terms with an environment that was always out to control them. In short, Jakarta characters. And for this young, long-haired, Jakartan-Javanese cultural commuter (and along with him hundreds, thousands of other young cultural commuters) what more straightforward way was there to get to know these Jakarta characters than through a dialogue with *lenong*?<sup>4</sup>

Among Kayam's 'cultural commuters' in the audience for those late 1960s performances of *lenong* at Taman Ismail Marzuki was a young anthropology student at the University of Indonesia who, like many others of her generation and ethnic background, was coming into contact with *lenong* for the first time. By the early 1970s, her fellow students in the audience were beginning to move on, but it was at this time that Ninuk Kleden-Probonegoro began what was to become the most comprehensive study of *lenong* ever to be undertaken. Her findings initially formed the basis of a Masters thesis defended at the University of Indonesia in 1974, but in 1993, Kleden-Probonegoro revisited the site of her original research to undertake the 'comparative diachronic study' which appeared in book form in 1996. In the introduction to her book, Kleden-Probonegoro introduces herself to her readers under a sub-heading entitled '*Lenong* and I'. Her opening words enliven Umar Kayam's sociological observations with the presence of the individual subject:

I was born into a Javanese family, but I grew up in Jakarta, where the original inhabitants are known as Betawi people. Nevertheless, it wasn't until my student days that I came to know *lenong* theatre. As one of a group of students interested in traditional arts, I often went along with all my friends to watch the performances of *lenong* that were organised by Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM). Why did it never happen before? It was because I always lived in the circles inhabited by newcomers to the city, people who never had anything in particular to do with the Betawi people and their arts, even though we lived quite close to some of them. In fact at that time it was impressed upon us as

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<sup>4</sup> Mungkin di situ dia melihat tokoh-tokoh sebenarnya yang bercampur dengan tokoh-tokoh setengah karikatur, tokoh-tokoh klasik *lenong* yang selalu mempersoalkan bagaimana bisa hidup sesuai dengan lingkungan yang selalu saja mau mendiktenya. Dengan pendek: tokoh-tokoh Jakarta. Dan bagi pejalan-budaya Jawa-Jakarta muda-gondrong (dan bersama dia beratus, beribu pejalan-budaya muda yang lain) apakah yang lebih langsung daripada berdialog dengan *lenong* mengenal tokoh Jakarta? (Kayam 1981: 126)

children that these people who lived quite close by were ‘kampung people’ who didn’t speak a ‘proper’ language. That’s how it used to be, back when we were non-Javanese speaking Javanese children living on the land of the Betawi people but forbidden from speaking Betawi language.

It wasn’t until the end of the 1960s, or to be precise, in 1968, that I began to become familiar with *lenong*. It was at this time that a few followers of traditional Betawi theatre like Sumantri Sastrosuwondo and Djaduk Djajakusuma began to ‘popularise’ *lenong*, in the sense of making it known outside its own cultural environment, or ‘revitalise’ it when, like other traditional forms of theatre, it seemed in danger of extinction. The performances held at TIM at that time were monthly events, or a part of festival programs.

As time went by, I found that I came to enjoy *lenong* performances [...]<sup>5</sup>

This self-positioning with which Kleden-Probonegoro introduces her study is indicative of the style of ‘participant observation’ which guides it throughout. Unlike the single-visit observers of 1954, Kleden-Probonegoro conducted her study through an intimate engagement with the communities and individuals who made up two *lenong* performance troupes, charting the history and character of *lenong* as a form of performance art over a twenty-year period. The framework for her study is the practice of ethnographic research, but in her approach to this research, her sense of self-positioning in relation to the people ‘who lived quite close by’ is always present. This means that the study is not the work of a disinterested academic anthropologist, but rather the effort of a metropolitan intellectual to learn about and learn from the people in her midst, and to document for posterity an aspect of the Indonesian heritage in a climate of rapid social change. As the author herself relates, the study became ‘diachronic’ when, after an absence overseas, she found herself bemused by the appearance of something called *lenong bocah* (‘little kids’ *lenong*) on Indonesian commercial TV in the early 1990s. ‘Where was the *lenong* in this?’ she describes herself wondering (‘... saya tidak mengerti apa yang menjadi ciri kelenongannya’) (Kleden-Probonegoro 1996: 4). It was the urge to understand whether *lenong* had changed in essence or whether the form had spawned a variety of sub-genres which

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<sup>5</sup> Saya yang kelahiran Jawa ini memang dibesarkan di kota Jakarta yang konon penduduk aslinya disebut orang Betawi. Meskipun demikian, teater lenong baru saya kenal ketika masa mahasiswa. Sebagai mahasiswa pemerhati kesenian tradisional, kami sering berbondong-bondong menonton acara pementasan teater lenong yang diselenggarakan oleh Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM). Mengapa demikian? Karena saya selalu tinggal di lingkungan pendatang yang tidak pernah berurusan secara khusus baik dengan orang Betawi maupun dengan kesenian Betawi, meskipun ada dari mereka yang tinggal tidak jauh dari rumah. Pada waktu itu memang ada ide yang ditanamkan pada kami, anak-anak, yang mengatakan bahwa tetangga yang tinggal tidak jauh dari rumah itu adalah ‘orang kampung’, bicaranya ‘jorok’. Itu kisah dulu, masa kecil kami yang Jawa tetapi tidak berbahasa Jawa dan tinggal di tanah Betawi yang tidak boleh berbahasa Betawi.

Baru di penghujung tahun 1960-an atau tepatnya tahun 1968 itulah mulai saya kenal teater lenong ketika beberapa tokoh pemerhati teater tradisional Betawi seperti Sumantri Sastrosuwondo and Djaduk Djajakusuma mulai ‘mempopulerkan’, dalam arti memperkenalkan teater termaksud ke luar lingkup kebudayaannya, atau ‘menghidupkan’ kalau teater itu, sebagaimana layaknya teater-teater tradisional lain, dianggap akan mati. Pagelaran-pagelaran yang diselenggarakan di TIM saat itu bersifat pertunjukan bulanan dan festival-festival.

Waktu berjalan terus dan saya mulai senang dengan pertunjukan teater lenong [...] (Kleden-Probonegoro 1996: 1-2)



led her back into the communities whose lives and performances she had begun studying twenty years before.

The contrast which Kleden-Probonegoro draws between the lives of *lenong* performers in the 1970s and the 1990s is a story of the expansion of the metropolis and a commercialisation of its culture. In her ethnography of *lenong* communities, she describes the lives and work of two families of *lenong* performers, separated by a distance of twenty years and a massive expansion in the metropolis and its infrastructure. The first couple she observed, Jembar and Kokom, were villagers from the city's outskirts when Kleden-Probonegoro first visited their home in 1973. Both were members of a troupe which performed at festival occasions in the environs of the city. They had little or no formal education, and they lived off a meagre income derived from what they earned from performances and Jembar's work as a truck driver's offsider (*kenek*) in the city. They followed a way of life that was hardly touched by the urban world of modern Indonesia: Kokom had been married four times before she and Jembar became wife and husband; they had no children of their own but were parents to an adopted daughter, and later an adopted son; formally Muslim, they placed importance on propitiation of local spirits, and regarded the task of living well in the community as more important than the observance of the five daily prayers. Their lives revolved around the rhythms of work and the nightlong village performances, which often left Kokom and their daughter to return home together at dawn, while Jembar left immediately for work in the city. (Kleden-Probonegoro 1996: 155-163).

By contrast, Nunung and Kholiq, who began life as children of *lenong* performers and were themselves active members of troupes formed in the 1970s were, by the 1990s, living the lives of small entrepreneurs. They participated directly in the city's commercial life, from a base in their brick house just metres from the busy highway linking the metropolitan satellite towns of Bekasi and Kerawang. They had met as members of the same troupe in 1980, but early on in the decade, both had drifted away from *lenong*. Kholiq was making a living as a teacher of Koranic recitation, while Nunung was leader of a women's drama group associated with the New Order 'Family Welfare Education' movement. As Kleden-Probonegoro tells their story, Nunung was attracted back to *lenong* by the cassette tape of *gambang kromong* music which she used to accompany the performances of her women's theatre group. She founded her own *lenong* troupe in 1984, but by this time, engagements were not enough to make Nunung and Kholiq a living. Undaunted, they turned to television, looking for work with a TV station that was filming its own *lenong* performances for broadcasting. This involved a substantial outlay, because they were required to purchase for a considerable sum the manuscript of the story which the station wished to film. As a business investment, however, this proved worthwhile, because whereas payment for a village performance was normally shared among more than 25 performers, the TV production involved only six performers, so the returns to the individual performers were much greater. By the late 1980s, Nunung and Kholiq's troupe was also getting work with local government authorities, staging performances at events of national importance, as well as making appearances for shopping mall proprietors. The work was easy, because in contrast to the 1970s village performances, shows in the early 1990s never lasted more than two hours. Work was steady and payments were quite reasonable, but the old feelings of community associated with belonging to a *lenong* troupe had gone. Kleden-Probonegoro quotes Nunung's own words to describe the change:

‘Life is easier now, we go everywhere by car, and when we do performances they are quite short, two hours at most. But the surprising thing is that it used to be fun, and now it’s just tiring. I remember there were times when we had to travel five hours [to get to where we were performing], but we made jokes with each other all the way and it was fun ...’<sup>6</sup>

Another metropolitan observer, writing in 2001, nevertheless suggested that *lenong*’s successful revitalisation at Taman Ismail Marzuki and subsequent move to national TV not only raised the income of performers, but increased the cultural pride and confidence of the Betawi people in general (Sulhi 2001). The popularity and wide dissemination of *lenong* that followed on this revitalisation meant that a new form of the Betawi language, mixed with modern Indonesian and elements of Javanese came to acquire the status of a *bahasa pergaulan remaja* (language of interaction among young people) which raised the status and image of Betawi culture, especially among young people, right across the archipelago. In Muhammad Sulhi’s view, the success of *lenong*-based TV shows like *Lenong Bocah* and *Lenong Rumpi* in the early 1990s suggested that the form could indeed respond to the demands of the age, and of the market place. Sulhi quotes Harry De Fretes, whose *Lenong Rumpi* group enjoyed high ratings on Indonesian commercial TV in the early 1990s:

‘If there are those who are asking why *Lenong Rumpi* isn’t like traditional *lenong*, well, the answer is that *Rumpi* is modern *lenong*, designed more as an entertainment product, or “show-biz product”, to use the trendy term.’<sup>7</sup>

There were, however, those who vigorously opposed the commercialisation and commoditisation of *lenong* at this time. Sulhi suggests that in 2001, while the controversy still raged, *lenong* as a form of popular theater was in serious decline. Some performances were still held at the Beautiful Indonesia in Miniature Park, but the fully-costumed and staged performances of the early New Order period were now rarely, if ever, to be found. Sulhi quotes the senior Betawi writer and film maker S.M. Ardan, saying that the ‘prestige’ (*pamor*) of *lenong* was now being eclipsed.

In 2001, *lenong* artists were still looking to the Jakarta city government to establish its long-promised Betawi performing arts centre, pointing to the moral lessons that were to be had from *lenong* as still relevant to the metropolis and its problems (Sulhi 2001). By 2003, however, it seemed that *lenong* was only surviving as a sign of Betawi ethnicity for the purpose of commercial TV comedy dramas. *Juragan Lenong*, broadcast by SCTV in September 2003, was a tale of rivalry between two *lenong* performing troupes, produced as a mini series on the theme of Betawi families and their problems (SCTV...2003). The venture provided work for some of the *lenong* revival’s former stars, but as the generations of performers continued to pass without being replaced, it seemed likely that the communities of performers and audiences which formed around *lenong* for much of the twentieth century would no longer be part of the life of the metropolis and its culture.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Hidup sekarang lebih enak, kemana-mana naik mobil, manjak juga bentaran paling-paling dua jam. Tapi heran, dulu mah senang aja dan sekarang capek. Inget-inget dulu pernah jalan lima jam, jalannya sambil bercanda sama temen-temen, senang ...’ (Kleden-Probonegoro 1996: 170)

<sup>7</sup> ‘Kalau sementara pihak menanyakan kenapa *Lenong Rumpi* tidak seperti *lenong* tradisional, ya karena *Rumpi* adalah *lenong* modern yang lebih berorientasi pada produk hiburan, istilah kerennya *product show-biz*.’

These bleak projections of *lenong*'s future suggest that the 'golden age' of *lenong* is likely to remain fixed in the early New Order period, when its popularity among audiences at the Jakarta Arts Centre spawned a performance revival in the Betawi villages of the city's environs. I would suggest that both these types of performances – those in the Betawi villages and those on the Arts Centre stage – can be seen as community events. Both enacted a commonality of experience, expressed through shared language, knowledge and outlooks between performers and audience. Both types of performance took place in settings where the problems of daily life could be set aside and laughed at, and group identity and togetherness could be enacted and celebrated. The village performance accompanied the celebration of community events or family and individual rights of passage, while the Arts Centre moved *lenong* towards an urban commercially-based theatre culture. As Umar Kayam's 1976 essay suggests, however, these latter performances were not merely commercial or aesthetic events. They also brought together a new urban community in a new ritual of belonging.

In the second part of my paper, I want to look in some detail at the way in which a particular *lenong* performance, held at the Jakarta Arts Centre on 29 September 1969, not only illustrates the nature of the revival which the Centre sponsored at this time, but also the way in which the performances of this time can be understood as both a professionalisation of *lenong* and a new enactment of *lenong* as community ritual. Taken together, these two characteristics of this performance can be seen as encapsulating a brief moment of transition in the history of the metropolis and its people.

### *Nyai Dasima and the mutation of genre*

The tale of Nyai Dasima has long been included in the sub-section of the *lenong* repertoire variously known as *lenong preman* or *lenong karangan*, stories performed in everyday dress that derive from an original composition for the stage, screen or written text. The story itself has been well-known in Jakartan – and later Indonesian – traditions since the early twentieth century, when its earliest versions, composed as written texts in the late 1890s, began to find a place in the popular imagination and the folklore of the city and its surroundings. It probably originates as an original composition in Malay by the Eurasian writer G. Francis in 1896, although there has been some speculation that earlier oral versions may also have once existed (Hellwig 1992: 4). Two versions of the tale in the narrative verse form *syair* were published by *peranakan* Chinese authors in the following year (Hellwig 1992) and in 1926 a famous Dutch-language version followed, written by A. Th. Manusama. By the end of the 1920s *Nyai Dasima* was already appearing in film, and it seems likely that it was via these early film versions that the story made its way into the *lenong* repertoire. In independent Indonesia, the story was reconfigured in post-colonial terms, first in a Jakarta Malay version of 1965 by S.M. Ardan and then again in film in 1970 (Taylor 1996).

In her 1996 article, Jean Gelman Taylor shows how the tale has been used by both colonial and post-colonial authors to portray the venality of the colonial Other, both the native and the European Other. The story lends itself to these shifting possibilities of interpretation, because it is built on the perpetually fascinating trope of the 'contact zone', the meeting of coloniser and colonised in the social institutions peculiar to colonial societies. In this case, there is an added frisson, because the social

institution held up to review in the story of Nyai Dasima is the regulation of sexual relations between European and native; moreso still, it concerns the competition for possession of the desired female by the European and the native man, and it concludes by identifying this woman as a victim of sexual relations across the colonial racial divide. As the title signals, it belongs to the genre of *nyai* stories, a body of narrative which emerged in the late nineteenth century around the figure of the native concubine of a European man who was temporarily resident in the Indies. In the case of *Nyai Dasima*, the setting is historically quite specific: Dasima is the concubine of an Englishman, who is living in Batavia during the British interregnum of the early nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

The story is set in the year 1813. In the colonial versions of the tale, Dasima is a village girl from the environs of Batavia, living as the housekeeper and respected partner of the Englishman, Edward Williams. She enjoys a comfortable and happy family life with him and their daughter, Nancy, but her wealth and beauty (and possibly also her status as the possession of a European male) make her an object of desire among the local kampung men. One of them, Samiun, resolves to take her as a second wife. He enlists the help of a go-between, an old woman named Mak Buyung, who inserts herself into Dasima's house as a servant and exerts psychological pressure on her, preying on her conscience as a Muslim woman living with a non-Muslim man in a relationship unsanctioned by her religion. Mak Buyung also facilitates the practice of *guna-guna* or 'witchcraft' (though its practitioner is a Muslim man, Haji Salihun) to undermine Dasima's commitment to her way of life. Eventually she persuades Dasima to leave Edward and her daughter and return to the kampung. Here Dasima becomes Samiun's second wife, but she is so mistreated by Hayati, her gambling, shrewish co-wife and Mak Leha, Samiun's mother, that she ends up demanding a divorce. Divorce is one thing, but along with it, Dasima also demands return of her property, the wealth bestowed on her by her Englishman, which she brought into the marriage with Samiun. If this property is not returned she has the right under colonial civil law to demand redress. It is at this point that Dasima's tragic fate is sealed, because predictably, her property is by now all gone, squandered by Hayati at the gaming table. Samiun desperately fears the legal consequences if Dasima acts on the threat she has made. Blindly seeking to protect himself from the exercise of colonial law, he hires a local hit man, the *jago* Bang Puasa, to murder Dasima as he leads her along the river bank at night. In fulfilment of the demands of melodrama, the murder is discovered, and Samiun and Puasa must pay for their crime. Dasima becomes a tragic victim, a warning of the dangers that surround the *nyai*'s transgression of the boundaries of race and the containment of desire in the world of colonial society.

As Taylor suggests, and as Pramoedya Ananta Toer also pointed out in his introduction to a republication of the Francis text (Pramoedya 1982: 31), the original versions of the Nyai Dasima story stress the 'rectitude of the European and the moral turpitude embedded in the daily practice of Islam' in the kampung world of the Betawi people (Taylor 1996: 240). Islam is the marker of native identity (in the Francis version, the term *orang slam* in fact is the designation for an indigenous person), and is the source of all the backward and corrupt practices which are seen as defining the indigenous world. Even the crime of murder, Samiun is assured, may be

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<sup>8</sup> The specific historical setting of the tale in the British interregnum has encouraged speculation that it is based on an actual event. However no evidence to support such speculation has ever been found (see Cohen (forthcoming) and Hellwig 1992: 4). Pramoedya (1982: 29-30) relates that Francis, the author of the original version of the story, himself came from a prominent English family in the Indies.

pardoned by Islam, if the murderer makes the pilgrimage to Mecca, circles the Ka'abah and gives alms (Taylor 1996: 242). In the post-colonial retellings which Taylor examines, however, the tables are completely turned: the issue here is national identity, and Dasima's misery and death as the tragic outcome of backward Islamic custom is now replaced by 'a woman's courageous search for her rightful place within her own society, an escape from the personal corruption of Western imperialism' (Taylor 1996: 247). In the Ardan version, it is even Dasima's spurned Western master who arranges her murder, while the corrupt European justice system sheets the blame home to the innocent party, Samiun (Taylor 1996: 246)! In each case, the beautiful and tragic heroine of the tale is intended to evoke the antipathy of the audience for a rival masculinity, both literally and symbolically. At stake is the presumed superiority of the moral order associated with the colonial or the post-colonial male.

Interestingly, a detailed look at the 1969 *lenong* performance of the Nyai Dasima story, positioned as it is between the two post-colonial versions examined by Taylor, suggests that when we move to the local, as distinct from the national, cultural world, the competing claims of colonial and post-colonial morality are no longer the focus of attention. Indeed, the content summary of the performance I have included as Appendix I suggests that the idea of competing value systems is almost completely absent from this version of the story. Instead, what we find here is a version much more attuned to the reality of the everyday life experience of the *lenong* performers and their audience. Moreover it is one that turns the tragic tale of a female victim into a comic celebration of the trials and tribulations of personal and community life. Nyai Dasima herself is not really the focus of the performance; the struggle of good and evil is muted, and though the demands of melodrama must be satisfied in conclusion, the real interest of both performers and audience lies in the scenes of the play and the exchanges between characters which are not integral to the plot itself. It is almost as though the plot is so familiar it can be assumed. Attention moves straight to the character types, and especially to the potential for comic interaction between them.

In my summary of the performance in Appendix I, I have attempted to indicate how the character of the performance is shaped by the nature of each individual scene. I have provided a brief summary of the content of each of the 42 scenes in the play, and categorised each scene as 'plot', 'relationships', 'money' and 'humour', or a combination of each. These categorisations are not meant to be more than approximate, but they serve to indicate the primary function of each scene in relation to the performance as a whole. 'Plot' scenes are those scenes through which the essential elements of the Nyai Dasima story are narrated. 'Relationships' refers to scenes where the primary interest is on the way characters negotiate the problems of living together in households and communities; it is worth noting that the relationships concerned are overwhelmingly those between mother and son and wife and husband, where the man is constantly the weaker party, trying to survive the stratagems of the stronger female character as she attempts to direct or manipulate his behaviour. Very many of the 'relationships' scenes turn on the problem of managing money, and it is for this reason that I use 'money' as another designation of scene type. In 'money' scenes, characters negotiate the problems of loans and debts, of never having enough money for the necessities and pleasures of life; conversely they may delight in the appearance of little unforeseen financial windfalls. 'Humour' indicates scenes where there is a significant element of humour, marked in the language and interaction of characters and the response of the audience. The presence of these scenes indicates that the 'tragic tale' of Nyai Dasima here functions as a

framework for lighthearted comedic exchange which from a ‘textual’ point of view would seem to be totally at odds with the nature of the narrative structure itself.

The designation of scenes according to these four types yields some interesting results. It shows how the play begins with a presaging of important elements of the plot, but immediately thereafter diverts into a series of scenes where the predominant interest lies in various combinations of the elements of ‘relationships’, ‘money’ and ‘humour’. It is not until Scene 10 that ‘plot’ again becomes dominant, signalled by the re-appearance of the Englishman, Edward Williams. Edward, in fact, appears only in ‘plot’ scenes; of all the characters he is the least three-dimensional, serving only as a plot device rather than a real-life character. There is a stiffness and awkwardness about him and his language, indicating his ‘apartness’ as a European, but his role in the play is so incidental that there is never any possibility that he will be used as a focus of anti-colonialist sentiment. The other European character, the Superintendent of Police, who appears right at the end of the play in Scene 40, is a bumbling figure of colonial authority, but his language and demeanour again suggest an awkward apartness that could occasion humour, but does not sustain the type of ‘Indonesianising’ of the plot which Taylor identifies in the 1965 and 1970 versions of the story.

Overall, it seems significant that out of a total of 42 scenes in the play, only 25 emerge as scenes where developments integral to the plot occur. Nearly half the total number of scenes are concerned in some way with ‘relationships’ and/or ‘money’, the markers of the problems of everyday life; ‘humour’ emerges as an element of nearly one third of the play text as a whole. It is interesting to note that ‘plot’ becomes much more significant in the second half of the performance, and in fact becomes dominant from Scene 37. This contrasts sharply with the characteristics of the early part of the performance, and perhaps serves as a reminder of the performance context. In contrast to the night-long kampung performances, this staging of the story is likely to have been constrained by an aspect of the professionalisation of *lenong* which took place on the stage of the *Teater Terbuka* in the Jakarta Arts Centre. Performances at the Centre were always of less than three hours in duration; therefore it seems likely that the actors took the performance in the direction of ‘everyday life’ before finding that time constraints required a more speedy wrapping-up of the plot than might have otherwise occurred. If this is the case, the performance may be seen as containing a certain tension between *lenong* as community ritual and as performance art.

The detailed ethnography of *lenong* by Ninuk Kleden-Probonegoro serves as a good guide to other ways in which this performance epitomises the changes which were taking place in *lenong* at the Jakarta Arts Centre at this time. On the one hand, the essential characteristics of the traditional form still seem to be fundamental: Kleden-Probonegoro’s overall description of *lenong* as ‘melodrama interspersed with comedy elements’ (‘melodrama yang dijalankan dengan unsur komedi’ [1996: 38]) seems to explain the apparent incongruity between comedic exchange and tragic narrative which I noted above. Seen from this perspective, the notion of ‘incongruity’ only arises if expectations of theatrical genre outside the *lenong* context are brought to bear on the performance. Furthermore, the high proportion of scenes that emerge as not central to plot development in my analysis seems consistent with Kleden-Probonegoro’s remark that ‘unlike other theatre forms, *lenong* performances are not focused on the essential elements of narrative’ (‘[p]ertunjukan teater lenong tidak sebagaimana lazimnya suatu pertunjukan teater yang mengemukakan unsur pokok cerita’ [1996: 41]). Similarly, her comment that ‘*lenong* works with two types of dialogue, one which is related to the story being performed and another which has no

connection with it' ('[p]ertunjukan teater lenong mengenal dua macam bentuk dialog, yaitu dialog yang berhubungan dengan cerita yang dipentaskan, dan dialog yang lepas dari cerita itu' [1996: 43]) seems entirely consistent with my description of the way in which 'the tragedy of Nyai Dasima' studied in various versions by Jean Gelman Taylor is only one part of the totality of this performance. The comic interaction between characters which occurs independently of the narrative in fact illustrates the *lenong* tradition of *bodoran*, the term which designates the characteristic form of humorous exchange between clown characters that lies at the heart of *lenong* as form and its popularity as performance (Kleden-Probonegoro 1996: 43-47). In all these respects, the 1969 performance lies close to the origins of *lenong* as a form of entertainment designed to accompany communal rituals in the life of semi-urban village communities. What we find here appears to be a 'traditional' performance in a 'modern' setting.

Nevertheless, my comment above, on the hasty wrapping-up of the plot in the final scenes of the performance, is consistent with other aspects of the transformation *away* from tradition which the form underwent in its transition to the urban stage. In the re-packaging of *lenong* as a two-hour staged event, many characteristics of the form in its traditional setting were necessarily changed or abandoned. The lengthy musical prelude (*silih berganti*) and interludes (*selingan*) which accompanied traditional performances were foregone, as were the monologues with which characters introduced themselves and their roles to the audience when they made their first appearances (Kleden-Probonegoro 1996: 42-43, 65-67).<sup>9</sup> The role of the clown characters can no longer be compared to the *punakawan* tradition of Javanese and Sundanese wayang, where clowns function to subvert the master/servant relationship in particular situations (Kleden-Probonegoro 1996: 43-44). Here, 'clowning' is much closer to modern conventions of theatrical 'comedy'. And importantly, the 'traditional' characteristic of standard, stock scenes such as the '*adegan warung kopi*' is no longer present. Kleden-Probonegoro describes the *adegan warung kopi* as a part of the *lenong* performance which serves a number of functions. It brings together the good and evil sides of the melodrama on which the plot is built and lays out the issues at stake in the resolution of moral order; it also serves as a time-filler, because traditionally, it includes singing and *joget* dance, the timing of which depends on the performance schedule and the level of audience interest (1996: 67-68).

The abandonment of these traditional characteristics of *lenong* in the 'revitalisation' performances at Taman Ismail Marzuki was part of a general professionalisation of *lenong* as a theatre form. Aspects of this professionalisation involved technical matters such as costuming and scenery, as well as the use of 'special effects' technology (Kleden-Probonegoro 143-144), represented in this performance by the use of recorded voices to convey Nyai Dasima's premonition of disaster in Scene 38, and further sound effects in the murder scene which follows. Yet the most important indication of this professionalisation in this performance seems to me to be the high level of performance skills which the actors bring to the production. The actors involved here were some of the leading *lenong* performers of the time, including Toha as Samiun, Siti Saaman as Mak Buyung, Sunaya as Nyai Dasima and Nafsiah as Hayati. The surviving parts of the audio recording of the performance give

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<sup>9</sup> The only echo of the monologue tradition in the *Nyai Dasima* performance occurs in Mak Buyung's first appearance in Scene 5. She introduces herself to the audience with a short, humorous monologue that includes the words 'Oh dear, oh dear! I'm just an old woman without any children and I live by myself. Look, whenever I want to buy some tobacco, I've never got any money. I haven't had any coffee this morning, haven't had anything. No money!'

some indication of the great skill which these actors brought to their roles, performing the story through an unscripted dialogue characterised by the rapid exchange of humorous banter, an impeccable sense of timing and an ability to realise character type through mimetic use of language and gesture. The responses of the urban audience indicate the actors' ability to 'play' their audience in the manner of professional entertainers. The stage and the audience remain separate, as in modern urban theatre, but the actors are aware of the way in which the performance is being received and themselves respond accordingly.

I have included brief extracts of the performance in English translation in Appendix II in an attempt to convey something of the character of the play as performance art.<sup>10</sup> The first extract, Scene 14, is a rapid fire exchange between Samiun and Hayati, in which Samiun attempts to prepare his wife, Hayati, for Dasima's first visit to their home in the kampung, without letting her know his plan to take Dasima as a second wife. The tone and character of the language, which is responsible for much of the fun in the scene, is completely missing from the English translation, so it is only something of the way in which the characters interact which is preserved in this version. On this limited basis, however, it is possible to sense the skill with which the actors manage character and comedy in this scene. Samiun knows the delicacy of the situation, and in this version of the story, he can only achieve his aim of marrying Nyai Dasima by carefully managing relations with the other three women in his life: Hayati, his mother Mak Leha, and the go-between, Mak Buyung. His attempts in this scene to convince the shrewish Hayati to pretend to be his little sister when Dasima visits are very funny, because the audience knows what Hayati is capable of meting out to him if she rejects his proposal. Samiun plays at being self-effacing, but achieves his aim by playing on Hayati's weakness, which is her constant need for money to feed her gambling addiction. This means that the audience gets to enjoy the sight of Hayati won over to a role which goes so much against her character, and as the recording of the scene indicates, this is the source of much delighted laughter in the way the audience responds. Neither Samiun nor Hayati ends up with the moral high ground, and both can safely be laughed at as they show the compromises their weaknesses make them capable of.

If this first extract indicates how the clowning sequences of traditional *lenong* are transformed into the humour of character interaction on the professionalised stage, the second extract is more difficult to position on the village/communal – urban/professional continuum. This is the point in the play where Nyai Dasima leaves her English 'master' and follows Mak Buyung to Samiun's kampung. Initially we see Dasima pleading with Edward to be allowed to spend more time in the kampung and with the kampung people. He rejects her request, saying that her behaviour is ruining his reputation and will have a negative impact on their education of their daughter, Nancy. Nancy enters, and in just a few lines of dialogue, an event full of melodramatic potential occurs. Edward gives Nancy an ultimatum: does she want to be with him, or with her mother? Without hesitation, Nancy chooses her father, and they immediately leave. Dasima is left on stage crying, to be discovered by Mak Buyung. Buyung asks her what is wrong, and as soon as Dasima confesses what has happened, Buyung persuades her that this is now the time to leave, and come with her to live in the kampung. Assured of Mak Buyung's protection, Dasima immediately makes plans to gather her belongings and leave.

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<sup>10</sup> These extracts are part of a complete translation of the transcript of the performance, to be published in Cohen [forthcoming].



These two scenes are interesting, because of the way in which a situation of great melodramatic potential remains so completely unexploited in a dramatic sense. The (apparently) terrible moment when Dasima loses her daughter comes and goes almost perfunctorily, and Dasima's quick recovery from her tears and acceptance of Mak Buyung's arguments is, if anything, even more marked in the recording of the performance than it might appear in the transcribed text. On the one hand, this would seem to be a turning away from one moment in the *Nyai Dasima* story where 'melodrama', as traditional *lenong*'s underlying characteristic, could be brought to the fore. In that sense, it may represent a further abandonment of *lenong*'s traditional core. But it might also be expected that if the direction of this performance was towards the tradition of modern, urban Indonesian theatre, the dramatic potential of the scene and its ability to contribute psychological depth to the character of Dasima and the audience's sympathy for her might have been exploited, rather than passed over so lightly.<sup>11</sup>

But this is clearly not what is happening in this performance. *Nyai Dasima* is nowhere in the play a character of psychological depth, and her scenes in no way engage the audience, in the way that Samiun and Hayati do in extract A. Though the story itself is full of the potential for emotional display and the exploration of psychological and cultural complexities, 'professionalisation' here stops well short of another genre mutation in the direction of 'modern' theatre. The setting has changed, and an all night ritual has become a two hour staged performance. Technical innovations have added to the play as spectacle, and actors with professional skills have made the performance a fast-paced theatrical event. But the interest of performers and audience alike remains in the celebration of community, the shared experience of language and everyday reality enlarged for the stage. The community which this performance speaks to is now of the metropolis, rather than a population in its shadow, but *lenong* is still a 'local' tradition enacted here in a 'national' context.

### *The Catharsis of Comedy*

The survey of the interaction between Jakarta's urban intellectuals and professionals and Betawi *lenong* communities with which I began this paper omits mention of one foreign scholar who was also an observer of *lenong* during the golden age of its revitalisation. This is the late Dutch linguist, Dr C D Grijns, whose 1976 article, 'Lenong in the Environs of Jakarta: A Report' adds significantly to the documentation of *lenong* at this time by Ninuk Kleden-Probonegoro, and whose research materials for his magisterial study of Jakarta Malay (Grijns 1991) are actually the source of the recorded performance of *Nyai Dasima* on which this essay is based.<sup>12</sup> Grijns's primary interest in *lenong* was as a linguist, but his 1976 article concluded with the statement that '[i]n the 1970s [...] lenong had nothing to do with "rites of modernization" or with concrete ambitions to realise new social structures' (1976:

<sup>11</sup> Craig Latrell notes that modern Indonesian theatre has evolved a form of dramatic realism which so highlights the depiction of 'overblown emotions' that it is closer to melodrama than Western conventions of theatrical realism (200: 50-52). The absence of emotional display in the portrayal of Dasima and her plight means that this performance is as removed from the modern Indonesian stage as it is from traditional melodrama.

<sup>12</sup> As this acknowledgement indicates, this paper was made possible by Dr Grijns's scholarship and generosity. It was he who introduced me to *lenong* during my first visit to Indonesia, in January-February 1968, and he later worked with me on the first draft of the English translation of the 1969 *Nyai Dasima* performance. The paper is dedicated to his memory, with respect and affection.

200). His reference to ‘rites of modernisation’ alludes to the influential 1968 study of that title by James Peacock, which examined the form of popular theatre known as *ludruk*, *lenong*’s counterpart in the urban world of East Java. In Peacock’s analysis, *ludruk* acted as a ritual enactment of the challenges which modernisation posed for its urban kampung audience, holding up to examination the transformation of values which modernisation entailed. By contrast, Grijns argued that *lenong* in Jakarta upheld the traditional values of the Betawi people, such as filial piety, honesty, respectability, kindness and marital fidelity, not the new values which Peacock identified in *ludruk* of the early New Order period. ‘It is the atmosphere of *their* [the Betawi people’s] community which determines the atmosphere of the *lenong*,’ Grijns wrote (1976: 200).

The 1969 performance of *Nyai Dasima* would confirm Grijns’s impression that *lenong* in Jakarta at this time was not about a ‘modernisation’ of value systems. But neither does this performance seem to be about the upholding of ‘traditional’ values. Not even Ninuk Kleden-Probonegoro’s characterisation of *lenong* as melodrama seems entirely appropriate to this performance, because there is really no conflict of good and evil here, only a rather perfunctory punishment of a crime which is required by the basic plot of the story being performed. Much more fundamental to this performance, it seems to me, is the creation of comedy out of the trials and tribulations of everyday life. For at the heart of the performance is an invitation to the audience to laugh at the representation of people and situations which outside of theatrical space might well be the stuff of much more serious and troubling emotions: sons and husbands trying to keep abreast of the demands of mothers and wives, the constant struggle to make money and keep it for oneself in a community that does not acknowledge private property rights, and the attempt to manipulate people and circumstances to one’s own personal advantage. The *Nyai Dasima* story, for all its potential to address concerns of ‘national’ significance and all its ‘dramatic’ possibilities, here serves only as a framing device for the transformation of the banal and everyday and the purging of negative emotions by the magic of theatre and comedy. In other words, in this performance, the difficulties of everyday life are held up to the ‘catharsis of comedy’.<sup>13</sup> This, I would argue, is what brings together the Betawi communities of the city’s environs and Umar Kayam’s young ‘cultural commuters’ as a common audience for this performance. For despite the great differences in the experiences of both communities, the laughter is shared, because the situations which provoke it are familiar to both.

*Lenong* at the Jakarta Arts Centre in 1969 placed the folk art of the city’s marginalised local communities on centre stage inside one of the most visible modernising institutions of the early New Order period. Here, for a brief period in the life of the city, the local met the national in a new community of audience and performers, as *lenong* spoke not only to the Betawi people who claimed it as their own, but also to a new generation of urban Indonesian youth. This new form of community was soon swept away, in the great wave of urbanisation and modernisation that came to substitute ‘community’ with ‘market’ and ‘audience and performers’ with ‘entertainment industry’. In this new urban world, *lenong* was destined to survive only as style and symbol, a marker of the Betawi ethnicity and culture that came to stand for the indigenous origins of the modern metropolis. For

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Dana F. Sutton, writing about ancient Greek comedy: ‘Since it is mimetic, comedy creates an ideal environment for the comically distorted representation of people, things and situations capable of creating bad feelings in the spectator. This is why comedy has the capacity to purge us of such feelings’ (1994: 37).

that brief period, however, *lenong* functioned as a genuinely transitional cultural form, mediating between the old and the new, and bridging the gap between the national and the local, the centre and the region, the metropolis and the periphery.

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## Appendix I

### ***Nyai Dasima: A Lenong Performance at Taman Ismail Marzuki, Jakarta, on 29 September 1969.***

**Scene 1:** Tuan Edward W. discovers Nyai Dasima dreaming about the kampung. He expresses his displeasure. Nancy appears, ready for Dasima to take her to school. **(Plot)**

**Scene 2:** Hayati is in a bad mood after losing at cards. Samiun complains that she doesn't appreciate his efforts to earn money as a carriage driver. **(Relationships, Money, Humour)**

**Scene 3:** Bang Puasa commiserates with Samiun about having a wife like Hayati. He demands a loan. **(Relationships, Money)**

**Scene 4:** Mak Leha berates Samiun for associating with someone like Puasa. She bewails her attempts to bring Samiun up as someone aware of his responsibilities. **(Relationships)**

**Scene 5:** Samiun comes to see Mak Buyung, to check on whether she has followed up on his request for help in relation to Nyai Dasima. She says she has, and wants something for her trouble. **(Plot, Money)**

**Scene 6:** Banter between Mak Buyung and Wak Lihun. Samiun enlists the help of Lihun with his plan to marry Nyai Dasima. Lihun is ready to contribute his skills with the practice of magic, but needs money. Prolonged financial discussions ensue. **(Plot, Money)**

**Scene 7:** Mak Buyung asks Lihun for a share of the money he has negotiated with Samiun. **(Money)**

**Scene 8:** Hayati is annoyed at Samiun's happy mood and suspects he has a girlfriend. She is mollified by some money to shop for some special foods, and demands something for herself as well. **(Relationships, Money, Humour)**

**Scene 9:** Banter and mutual provocation over each other's behaviour and attitudes between the houseboy and maid in Edward and Dasima's house. Mak Buyung appears and a fight ensues between her and the maid over her request to borrow a duster. Nancy appears, looking for her lunch. Nyai Dasima comes to ask for the master's shoes. **(Relationships, Humour)**

**Scene 10:** Edward again berates Dasima for her ingratitude and her desire to go to the kampung. He takes Nancy off by himself. **(Plot)**

**Scene 11:** Nyai Dasima expresses her unhappiness to Mak Buyung. Mak Buyung encourages her desire to go to the kampung, and tells her that the mother of her carriage driver, Samiun, is a Koran teacher in the kampung. She tells Dasima that Samun is sick, and Dasima proposes they go to visit him. She gives Mak Buyung money for Samiun to buy medicine and tells her to go on ahead. **(Plot, Money)**

**Scene 12:** Mak Buyung arrives at Samiun's house with the news that Dasima is coming to visit and has sent money. **(Plot, Money, Humour)**

**Scene 13:** Mak Buyung and Mak Leha meet after a long absence. Buyung tells Leha about Dasima wanting to get to know the kampung people, and that she is coming to visit. They commiserate about Hayati and her gambling habit. **(Plot, Relationships, Money)**

**Scene 14:** Samiun approaches Hayati about Dasima's impending visit. He persuades her to pretend to be his sister with a promise of big financial rewards. **(Relationships, Money, Humour)**

**Scene 15:** Dasima comes to visit. She enquires after Samiun's health. Mak Buyung introduces her to Mak Leha. Everyone is very nervous. Dasima says how much she likes being in the kampung. Hayati is called out to meet her. **(Relationships, Humour)**

**Scene 16:** Dasima makes conversation with Samiun and Hayati. She asks about the trees and plants in the garden, and Samiun tells her what a good girl Hayati is to look after them all. **(Relationships, Humour)**

**Scene 17:** Dasima tells Mak Buyung they should be going. She gives Mak Leha some money and they take their leave. **(Relationships, Money)**

**Scene 18:** Mak Leha is delighted with the money she has received. She tells Samiun that if only he does what she tells him, things will always work to his advantage. **(Relationships, Money)**

**Scene 19:** Hayati accuses Samiun of preferring Dasima to her. She is jealous because Dasima is younger and prettier, but is mollified with some money. **(Relationships, Money, Humour)**

**Scene 20:** Edward again criticises Dasima for going to the kampung. He says she is ruining his reputation and neglecting their daughter. Nancy appears and Edward asks her if she wants to stay with him or with her mother. Nancy chooses to go with her father. **(Plot)**

**Scene 21:** Dasima tells Mak Buyung that Nancy's father has taken her away. Mak Buyung convinces her not to worry, and tells her it is time for them both to leave, and go to the kampung. **(Plot)**

**Scene 22:** Hayati is out of money, and pleads for a cut from Bek Saerun's winnings. Puasa demands money with menace from Samiun, and threatens him and Hayati. **(Money)**

**Scene 23:** Hayati tells Samiun to go and wake up Puasa. Samiun does so reluctantly, and is nearly attacked by Puasa. Puasa demands money, saying he cannot return home to his wife empty-handed. **(Humour, Money)**

**Scene 24:** Mak Leha berates Samiun for his continued association with Bang Puasa, and warns him it will lead to no good. Samiun confesses his plan to take Dasima as a second wife, and asks Mak Leha for her support. She is appalled by Samiun's irresponsibility and the prospect of his trying to manage two wives, but is pacified by the news that Dasima has separated from Edward. **(Plot, Relationships)**

**Scene 25:** Dasima is now living in Mak Buyung's house, doing household work like a daughter in the kampung. **(Plot)**

**Scene 26:** Mak Buyung tells Wak Lihun that Dasima is there in the kampung, and their efforts are producing results. They bemoan the lack of financial rewards. **(Plot, Money)**

**Scene 27:** Mak Buyung tells Samiun that Dasima is there in the kampung with her, and asks for money to buy food for her. **(Money)**

**Scene 28:** Mak Leha frightens Hayati by telling her that the police are after Samiun because of his bad debts. She says Dasima is the only one who can help them, and that Samiun wants to marry her. **(Plot, Money)**

**Scene 29:** Mak Buyung and Samiun bring Dasima to Mak Leha's house and tell her she has a new daughter. Hayati is furious, and attacks Mak Buyung. **(Plot, Humour)**

**Scene 30:** Hayati is in a rage. She demands that Samiun divorce her, but is pacified by news of a card game getting underway. **(Humour, Relationships, Money)**

**Scene 31:** Hayati scolds Dasima over her housekeeping. She discovers that Dasima is keeping an hierloom necklace, and steals it. (**Relationships, Plot**)

**Scene 32:** Dasima tells Mak Leha about Hayati's theft of the necklace. She says she wants to go back to her own kampung and report the theft to the police. (**Relationships, Plot**)

**Scene 33:** Mak Leha tells Samiun what has happened and begs him to get the necklace back before Dasima goes to the police. (**Relationships, Plot**)

**Scene 34:** Samiun coaxes Hayati to return the necklace. He persuades her to give him the necklace with a promise that he will divorce Dasima. (**Relationships, Plot**)

**Scene 35:** Samiun tells Dasima he has the necklace and she shouldn't worry. He has found a new house, and they will move the following day. (**Plot**)

**Scene 36:** Mak Buyung complains to Wak Lihun about being out of money. Samiun appears, and tells them about the problem he has with fights between his two wives. Lihun tells Samiun he is out of pocket and wants money for his expenses. Samiun says he has money but it is with Bang Puasa and tells Lihun to go and ask for it. Lihun tells Mak Buyung he doesn't dare go asking Puasa for money. Samiun asks her about Puasa's whereabouts. (**Relationships, Money, Humour**)

**Scene 37:** Puasa appears, and Mak Buyung leaves Samiun to talk to him. Samiun complains about the problem of managing his wives and his worries about his mother. He tells Puasa about the necklace. Puasa asks to see the necklace, and takes it from Samiun, saying he will 'fix' everything. (**Relationships, Plot**)

**Scene 38:** Samiun tells Dasima he is moving her to another house the next day, but he first has to attend a religious celebration that night. Dasima asks to be allowed to go with him. While she waits for Samiun to get ready, she hears her own voice, and that of Mak Buyung, making the plan for her to go and live in the kampung. She is afraid as she leaves the house, following Samiun in the dark. (**Plot**)

**Scene 39:** Two fishermen meet at night on the river bank, scared by the eerie atmosphere. Samiun and Dasima are making their way along the river bank, and the fishermen witness the blood in the river, when she is murdered. (**Humour, Plot**)

**Scene 40:** The Superintendent of Police sets out for Puasa's house, sending Bek Saerun on ahead of him. (**Plot**)

**Scene 41:** Bek Saerun finds Puasa at home, and tells him he is there to arrest him. They fight, and the Superintendent arrives with a policeman. Puasa is arrested. (**Plot**)

**Scene 42:** At the police station, Lihun is brought in to confront Bek Saerun. His deranged talk makes it clear he has received money from Samiun. Samiun is brought in, and confesses to having given money to Lihun. He is taken away, with Puasa and Lihun. Before they go, Mak Leha is allowed to see her son. She bemoans his fate, and says that what has happened is God's punishment on them all. (**Plot, Relationships**)

**Total number of scenes: 42**

**Plot scenes: 25**

**Relationships: 20**

**Money: 20**

**Humour: 13**

**Appendix II****Two extracts of the performance transcript, in English translation.****Extract A:**

## SCENE XIV

HAYATI: What's up, all of a sudden?  
SAMIUN: "What's up?" Whenever I want to have a talk with you, you always carry on like this. "What's up? What's up?"  
HAYATI: Talk? Talk? What have you got to talk about? Why now? What's going on?  
SAMIUN: Look, Ti, I just want to ask you something. Just a couple of words. But don't you go jumping the gun on me.  
HAYATI: What do you want to ask me? What have you got to talk to me about? Come on! Get to the point! Stop beating around the bush!  
SAMIUN: Ti, why do you always pull that face when you're talking to me?  
HAYATI: Well what are you getting at, anyway? Ah, I just can't work you out, Miun.  
SAMIUN: Look, I haven't even finished talking and here you are, getting cranky already.  
HAYATI: That's enough! Get to the point. I'm listening to you. I'm listening.  
SAMIUN: Well, Ti, listen. I'm going to make a deal with you.  
HAYATI: All right then. If you want a deal, get on with it!  
SAMIUN: Look, it's like this. I just want to let you know that in a little while we're going to have a visitor.  
HAYATI: A visitor?  
SAMIUN: That's it, a visitor!  
HAYATI: Who, bang?  
SAMIUN: Nyai Dasima.  
HAYATI: Nyai Dasima?  
SAMIUN: Yes. The lady whose daughter I take to school every morning. You know, little Nancy.  
HAYATI: Oh, the lady at Pejambon?  
SAMIUN: That's the one!  
HAYATI: She's coming here? What for, bang?  
SAMIUN: She said she wanted to call in to meet mother, and meet you.  
HAYATI: What's she like, eh? Who's better looking, Hayati or Nyai Dasima? Look at that! I ask you a question like that and you look the other way! Just what's going on between you and her?  
SAMIUN: Look, Ti. There's nothing at all going on.  
HAYATI: What about her age? Who's younger, Nyai Dasima or me?  
SAMIUN: Well, if you ask me, ... Younger? Yes, it'd be you. Better-looking? ... Yes, you for sure.  
HAYATI: Ah, you mean it, bang?



SAMIUN: Of course I mean it.  
HAYATI: Don't you go lying to me, now.  
SAMIUN: Now what would I want to lie for, Ti? Why should I lie to you? Now, if, *if* she comes - if she doesn't there's nothing to worry about - in *case* she comes here, we have to be nice and friendly to her.  
HAYATI: Yes, well, of course, when you have visitors you have to be nice to them. So what do you want me to do?  
SAMIUN: Just listen for a minute, and I'll tell you.  
HAYATI: There you go! I've been listening to you all the time, haven't I?  
SAMIUN: Supposing she comes here - just supposing - the first thing to say is, "Oh, nyai, welcome, nyai!" Like that.  
HAYATI: So I have to put on a little act?  
SAMIUN: Don't look so sour. Just keep your cool. And don't embarrass me in front of her.  
HAYATI: Well, don't I say that sort of the thing every time we have a visitor? "Oh, a visitor! Come in! Come in!" That's what I always do. What's the big deal?  
SAMIUN: I'm just telling you, Ti. I'm telling you what to do. We're making a deal here. A deal!  
HAYATI: Well, once I've been nice to her and told her to come in, what else am I supposed to do?  
SAMIUN: Right! Now let me tell you, Ti, if she comes ... oh boy!  
HAYATI: What, bang?  
SAMIUN: Wow!  
HAYATI: What're you getting at, bang?  
SAMIUN: She's loaded, Ti.  
HAYATI: Loaded, is she?  
SAMIUN: Lord, yes.  
HAYATI: You mean it, bang?  
SAMIUN: She gave me some when I stopped off to put away her carriage.  
HAYATI: Gave you some money? Let me see. Ooh, that's a lot, bang!  
SAMIUN: Mm.  
HAYATI: Come on, give us a bit, eh, bang?  
SAMIUN: Just listen a minute.  
HAYATI: Yes?  
SAMIUN: Every time I make a bit of money, sure as eggs it's gonna end up with you.  
HAYATI: Well who else are you going to give your money to?  
SAMIUN: Look, Ti, there's something I've got to tell you.  
HAYATI: Tell me what?  
SAMIUN: Ah, come here.  
HAYATI: What's up?  
SAMIUN: It's just that I told a bit of a fib over there just now.  
HAYATI: Who to?  
SAMIUN: Dasima.  
HAYATI: What sort of fib?

SAMIUN: Well, she said, "Miun, may I come to the kampung?", and I told her, "Of course, nyai." She says, "Is it far from here, Miun?". "Yes, a fair way, nyai." That's what I told her. Only, I told a fib.

HAYATI: What fib?

SAMIUN: I said I had a sister.

HAYATI: A sister? Who, bang?

SAMIUN: Hayati.

HAYATI: But I haven't got any brothers!

SAMIUN: I told a fib. I said, "Nyai, I have a little sister." "What's her name?" she asks. "Hayati." That's all.

HAYATI: You're off your head! What do you mean, you said Hayati's your sister? I'm your wife, you fool!

SAMIUN: Off you go again! Losing your temper when someone's just trying to make a deal with you! Look, Ti, I told you. It was a fib.

HAYATI: Just a fib?

SAMIUN: Yes, a fib. Now, if she comes - just supposing she comes - and she says, "Ah Miun, where's your little sister?", well, I'll say, "Here she is, nyai, Hayati." Then you say, "How do you do, nyai?", and you'll get some money.

HAYATI: Get some money?

SAMIUN: That's it! Money for you.

HAYATI: Just for telling a fib?

SAMIUN: Yes.

HAYATI: OK, bang. I'll be in on it.

SAMIUN: This is from her too. (*Giving her money*)

HAYATI: Right, then!

SAMIUN: Here you are. Only, remember. We made a deal, right?

HAYATI: Yes, bang.

SAMIUN: You can go and play cards for two whole days and nights with that, eh?

HAYATI: Yes, bang.

SAMIUN: Play for all you're worth, eh?

HAYATI: Don't come looking for me, eh, bang?

SAMIUN: All right.

HAYATI: I'll go and find a game somewhere, eh, bang?

SAMIUN: Just don't forget, later on, if she comes here.

HAYATI: I'll be nice to her, bang.

SAMIUN: Yes. Be nice to her.

HAYATI: "I'm Samiun's little sister, nyai."

SAMIUN: That's the way.

HAYATI: Is that right?

SAMIUN: Yes, that's it.

HAYATI: Right, then.

SAMIUN: Off you go, now.

When she gets a look at money, boy oh boy! It's the same every time.

**Extract B:**

## SCENE XX

EDWARD W.: Maid!  
 MAID: Yes, sir.  
 EDWARD W.: Is my wife home yet?  
 MAID: No, sir, not yet.  
 EDWARD W.: She isn't?  
 MAID: No.  
 EDWARD W.: Here, take this inside.  
 NYAI DASIMA: Sarimah!  
 EDWARD W.: Ah, Dasima! Did you enjoy your day with the kampung people?  
 NYAI DASIMA: Oh, yes, sir.  
 EDWARD W.: Dasima!  
 NYAI DASIMA: Sir?  
 EDWARD W.: You mustn't forget what I told you. I took you from Kuripan, and I changed you from a servant into a lady. You used to live in a little hut, and now you're living in this fine house. Isn't that enough for you? Aren't you satisfied with what I've given you?  
 NYAI DASIMA: Sir, why do you speak that way? I feel that going to the kampung and spending time with the kampung people is good for me, sir.  
 EDWARD W.: Good for you, but not for me. It will ruin my reputation, and it'll have a bad influence on your own standing as well. Don't you forget ... all the time we've been together, I've never overlooked anything you wanted. Jewellery, gold ... everything. If you go and spend all your time with the kampung people, Nancy won't have a mother to bring her up properly. And what would that mean for her, growing up without a mother?  
 NYAI DASIMA: Sir, please. Could you forgive me, if I were to spend more time with the kampung people? I think it would be good for me, sir.  
 EDWARD W.: I've already told you. It may be good for you, but it's no good for me. It would ruin my reputation.  
 NANCY: (*entering*) Mama! You're home.  
 EDWARD W.: Yes, Nancy. Mama's home now.  
 NANCY: Where have you been, ma?  
 NYAI DASIMA: I've been out, dear.  
 EDWARD W.: Nancy!  
 NANCY: Yes, papa?  
 EDWARD W.: Papa has something to ask you. Do you want to stay with your mama, or with me?  
 NANCY: With you, papa.  
 EDWARD W.: Yes, you stay here with your papa.  
 NYAI DASIMA: Come with mama, Nancy. Nancy! Nancy!  
 EDWARD W.: Papa's little girl! (*Exeunt Edward W. and Nancy*)

NYAI DASIMA: Nancy! Ah, ah! (*Crying*)  
(*Enter Mak Buyung*)

## SCENE XXI

MAK BUYUNG: Nyai! Don't cry, nyai. Why are you crying?  
NYAI DASIMA: It's nothing mak. It's just ... Oh, mak, Nancy's father has taken her away.  
MAK BUYUNG: Ooh, so that's it! Never you mind, now. She's with her father now, and it's no good worrying yourself to pieces about it. Isn't this the proof of what I was telling you the other day? Have you forgotten what I told you?  
NYAI DASIMA: It's true, mak. This is humiliating for me. If this is how it's going to be, then I really must leave this house. If the master is going to humiliate me this way, and insult me, then I shouldn't concern myself any more with this place.  
MAK BUYUNG: Of course it's humiliating! And you've got to think, a lovely big house like this, you can't take it with you when you die. Anyway, if you've really set your heart on being in the kampung, why should you stay around here? Look, if he couldn't care less about you after a little problem like this, how will it be later on, eh, when you're an old lady?  
NYAI DASIMA: Mak, it's just ... I feel unsure about who will look after me. Who will help me out if I go to the kampung?  
MAK BUYUNG: Now, nyai! Why should you worry about that! So help me God, as long as I'm alive, you will be my own daughter. I'll look after you, from this world to the next.  
NYAI DASIMA: Thank you, mak. If you really will look on me as your own daughter, and I can go with you, then well and good. It would be better to leave this house and not worry about anything here any more. I do so want to go with you to the kampung, mak.  
MAK BUYUNG: Don't you worry! As long as I'm alive, I'll take you with me. To the top of the mountain, even to the end of the sky, I'll be there with you.  
NYAI DASIMA: Good, mak. If that is so, let us gather up my things now.  
MAK BUYUNG: Yes, let's. We'll get all your things together and go. Make sure you don't leave anything behind. No matter how heavy it is, everything's got to go with us.