

# How Not to Act like a Woman: Gender Ideology and Humor in West Java, Indonesia

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*In West Java, Indonesia, hosts of hajjat (life-cycle event celebrations) hire performing arts troupes to provide entertainment. In addition to typical music and dance acts, one troupe—the Rawit Group—presents a comedy skit called lawakan. This article analyzes one such skit from 1999—just after the fall of President Soeharto’s New Order government. The centerpiece of the skit is a parody of two performing traditions that feature professional female entertainers: pop Sunda (diatonic pop songs in Sundanese language) and wayang golek (rod puppet theatre with accompaniment that includes virtuosic female singing). In both traditions, female performers routinely exaggerate their feminine attributes. This female entertainer, however, is portrayed by a man in comically unconvincing drag. Hilarity ensues as the other comedians urge the drag performer to conform to New Order feminine ideals of appearance and behavior, but s/he confounds them at every turn. In the process, the three men reinforce traditional Sundanese understandings of how the illusion of femininity is actively created through visual means (e.g., artifices of dress) and sonic elements (e.g., singing and speaking styles), and conventions of movement. In the process, they challenge New Order gender policies and point the way toward a return to tried and true Sundanese ideologies of gender.*

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Ritual performances in which men interact with professional female performers have been a fixture of Javanese and Sundanese cultures for centuries, and such dancing helped to solidify an orthodox division of labor between the sexes as well as some of the conventional gender roles that have persisted for generations. Performances involving female entertainers, who were customarily associated with the rice goddess, Nyi Pohaci, flourished through the various feudal, colonial, and democratic polities that governed West Java over the millennia and under the sway of various dominant religions, including animism, Hinduism, and Islam. In Java's medieval Hindu kingdoms, the rice goddess acquired an Indic name—Dewi Sri—and the different social classes in the hierarchical kingdoms developed different ritual protocols for honoring her that reflected their different roles in a stratified society. In Islamic communities, such events acquired a bad reputation, yet persisted nevertheless. All such events maintained the same basic format: Men from the community articulated their social standing and their gender ideology by interacting with female performers.

This article examines some of the ways in which the performing arts can interrogate and reinforce gender ideologies. The case study is a performance that was part of an all-day wedding celebration in Soreang (near Bandung, the capital of West Java) in 1999, the centerpiece of which was a comedic parody of Sundanese female performers performed by a man in rather unconvincing drag. While the audience found the drag performance extremely entertaining, it functioned as much more than an idle amusement. As Jeremy Wallach has argued, events such as wedding entertainment provide “an opportunity for reflection on the conditions of contemporary Indonesian cultural life” (Wallach 2008: 183).

The performance in question took place in 1999—not long after the fall of President Soeharto's authoritarian New Order government, which for more than thirty years had sought to impose a particular brand of gender ideology upon Indonesians and to homogenize the nation's many local streams of custom and tradition into a uniform Indonesian culture. New Order cultural policy sought to enforce orthodox cultural values by controlling the content of performances. In my estimation, performances such as the one presented here represented a cautious introduction of a more transgressive post-New Order approach to performance that exposed audiences to alternative world views. In this case, the act encouraged 1999 audiences to question the ideologies of gender that had been promulgated by the Indonesian national government and to consider anew the relevance of their own traditional Sundanese values.

Although the comedy act deconstructed Sundanese ideas of

femininity, as manifest in female performers, in such a way that the contradictions of gender ideology were painfully obvious, it did so in a nonthreatening way—through comedy—thus enabling audiences to affirm hegemonic gender prescriptions despite both glaring internal inconsistencies and threats to the status quo from “modern” society. The comedy act also provided a practical means for the performers and the audience to comprehend a transition from “modern,” government-endorsed presentational types of entertainment to a more “traditional” Sundanese approach that empowers the men in the audience to participate by dancing with professional female performers.

### **Sundanese Weddings and *Hajat***

The legal and religious rites for a Sundanese wedding usually take place in private, in the morning, followed by an all-day public celebration called a *hajat*. The goal of a *hajat* is to ensure a graceful transition from one social state to another, which is accomplished by gathering guests from near and far to focus cosmic power through the sharing of food and a *ramé* (lively) environment, and then to safely redistribute the power as the guests return home (see Wessing 1978: 63). There is usually some form of entertainment throughout the party, which not only increases the *ramé* quotient but also, due to the inherent potency attributed to many Sundanese traditional performing art forms, contributes to the concentration of power. Most guests stay just long enough to acknowledge the honorees, eat some food, and watch a bit of entertainment. They then leave to make room for other guests. Ideally, the *hajat* will be crowded and lively throughout the day. In recent decades it has been common for Sundanese families to hire a performing arts troupe, called a *lingkung seni* (arts circle), to enhance the *ramé* atmosphere by providing a variety of performances for the *hajat* (Spiller 2010; Swindells 2004).<sup>1</sup>

Hosting a *hajat* at home requires the cooperation of at least a few immediate neighbors. Usually the area around the host’s house, including the houses and yards of the neighbors, is transformed into a completely different world. Somehow, a fairly large gathering area must be carved out of the street, terraces, and yards, and this may involve temporarily blocking traffic and removing fences, doors, and even windows. There is always a raised stage area, covered with an awning if necessary, for the entertainers. Usually several kitchens are mobilized to prepare and serve the constant supply of food for the guests. For a wedding, one room in the host’s house is completely redecorated—draped with sumptuous cloths and refurnished with grandiose carved furniture—to serve as a receiving room. In urban Bandung, people who can afford to do so rent a hall in which to host their *hajat*. In many

cases, certain ceremonies are still performed at home, in the presence of a select group of guests, before moving the party to the hall, which provides stages, grandiose furniture, catering, and room for hordes of guests.

During the year 1999, I tagged along with a *lingkung seni* called the Rawit Group to their wedding gigs (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The drummer Aep Diana established the Rawit Group in the late 1970s. On rare occasions the Rawit Group performed in Bandung, but mostly they appeared in and around Soreang and Ciwidey (small communities south of Bandung). Aep frequently appeared in Bandung and on television with the famous singer Tati Saleh, which provided the group considerable visibility and status. Although the term *rawit* refers very formally to the art of music, the group's name actually derives from Aep's nickname—*cabé rawit* (a small, very hot chile)—which he earned because of his small stature and energetic performance style (Aep 1999).

Although each wedding was different, the entertainment usually followed the same basic pattern. First was a choreographed performance, called *upacara adat* or *upacara khusus* (traditional or special ceremony; see Figure 2), in which the troupe's dancers escorted the groom's family to the wedding site and entertained the couple. This was followed by *sawer*, in which some of the troupe members sang advice to the couple and guided them through some symbolic rituals, while rice and coins were thrown in their direction. The rest of the



Figure 1. The Rawit Group performs *degung kawih* (*gamelan degung/singing*) at a wedding in Soreang, West Java, 22 March 1999. (Photo: Henry Spiller)

morning was filled with *gamelan degung* music and songs. After the mid-day Islamic call to prayer, the troupe presented a variety of dynamic staged *jaipongan* dances. Then followed the *lawakan*—a stand-up comedy routine performed by three members of the troupe. The afternoon activities ended with a performance of the modern Indonesian popular music called *dangdut*, performed by a glamorous female singer who facilitated social dancing by wedding guests.

Although by 1999 Soeharto had already stepped down from power, and the New Order was technically over, many of the acts in the Rawit Group's weddings conformed to a New Order approach to tradition aimed at creating a national culture and identity for Indonesia. The New Order promoted the creation of new or modified regional



Figure 2. The Rawit Group performs their *upacara adat* (traditional ceremony) at a wedding in Soreang, West Java, 22 March 1999. (Photo: Henry Spiller)

“traditions” that emphasized those elements of local cultures that promoted the New Order’s values—democracy (as opposed to feudalism/aristocracy), empowerment of women in domestic spheres, family planning, and repression of overt sexuality in public—while deemphasizing or eliminating elements that contradicted them (cf. Pemberton 1994; Yampolsky 1995).

The *upacara adat*, for example, imparted a distinctly Sundanese flavor to the proceedings by referencing popular notions of a feudal Sundanese aristocracy that was curiously devoid of explicit citations of class distinctions. The term *upacara adat* is usually taken to mean those ceremonies or customary ritual activities unique to a particular ethnic group (*adat* means “custom” or “tradition”), in this case, Sundanese traditions. For weddings, there exists an increasingly canonical “self-evident framework” of customary rituals that marrying couples endure as a part of their nuptials, promulgated by oral tradition as well as by how-to books (e.g., Bratawidjaja 1990; Soeganda 1982). From the 1990s, in the greater Bandung area at least, the term *upacara adat* has come to refer specifically to a choreographed dance performance at the wedding that dramatizes the welcoming and escorting of the groom, who is regarded as a “king for a day,” and his party into the grounds and house of the bride’s family. The dance with dramatic elements included is accompanied by a combination of *tembang Sunda* (sung poetry accompanied by *kacapi* [zither] and *suling* [bamboo flute]) and *gamelan degung* (small bronze percussion ensemble), both of which can conjure images of nineteenth and early twentieth century Sundanese aristocracy and the *zaman karajaan* (age of Sundanese kingdoms; Entis 1999). The most prominent character in the *upacara adat* dance-drama, however, is the *lengser*—a “wise old man of the village” character who is the adviser to the king in some traditional stories, but who serves here to keep the drama on a firmly egalitarian footing and to add some gentle comedy.

Some of the Rawit Group’s acts explicitly conformed to New Order values. The troupe hijacked one of the conventional rituals in the *sawer* section of a Sundanese wedding, for example—stepping on an egg to symbolize fertility—to promote Indonesian governmental guidelines on family planning. The main purpose of sealing the egg in a plastic bag before the groom steps on it is to minimize the mess, but the MC takes the opportunity to make jokes about using condoms to limit one’s family to two children (see Figure 3).

The *jaipongan* dances that follow the *sawer* also are consistent with the long-standing Sundanese custom of featuring female singers and dancers prominently, but in a way that seeks to eliminate interaction between male audience members and the female performers and transform the Sundanese tradition of participatory dancing into a stage



Figure 3. *Sawer* with the Rawit Group at a wedding in Soreang, West Java, 22 March 1999. (Photo: Henry Spiller)

act. The dancers wear a special costume and perform choreographed dances, with carefully planned drum accompaniments that accentuate each of the dancers' predetermined movements (see Figure 4). It was not unheard of, especially in rural areas, for men to mount the stage, pay the drummer and the dancer, and dance along during the Rawit Group's *jaipongan* performances. However, most men were more accustomed to having the drumming follow their movements, so these choreographed dances discouraged any participation. For the most part, audiences respected the boundary between them and the stage and were content merely to watch the the flashy dances, which combine moves from traditional martial arts (*pencak silat*), couple social dance (*ketuk tilu*), and modern choreography.

Thus, these entertainments conformed to and promoted the nationalist cultural policies of the Soeharto government. The *lawakan* comedy act, however, appeared to expose some of the awkward seams in the *hajat* entertainment's otherwise orthodox endorsement of New Order values.

### The *Lawakan* Act

The Rawit Group was unusual among *lingkung seni* in that they provided, upon request, a comedy routine in the middle of their performance, and most people who hired the Rawit Group asked for it.



Figure 4. The Rawit Group performs *jaipongan* at a wedding in Soreang, West Java, 22 March 1999. (Photo: Henry Spiller)



Three members of the Rawit Group performed in the *lawakan* act in 1999: Oman (who also acted as the master of ceremonies [MC] for the group), Caca (who danced the part of *lengser* in the *upacara adat*), and Aep (the drummer and leader). All three members wore a bit of costuming for the *lawakan*. Oman put on some loud pants and an *ikat kepala* (traditional Sundanese headcloth). Caca also wore a headcloth, but tied differently. Aep made the most startling transformation—he dressed as a female performer.

Flamboyant female performers are prominent in many forms of Southeast Asian performing arts, and reams of scholarship, some of which I will discuss below, have been devoted to unpacking their significance. In Sundanese areas of West Java, Indonesia, the earliest manifestations of female performers appear to be related to rituals associated with agricultural fertility, in which they represented the awesome power to reproduce, which was conceived to be feminine and was personified by a rice goddess named Nyi Pohaci (Gandamihardja 1978–1979). Female performers were (and are) empowered to enact a host of characteristics that were associated with femininity—greed, lust, sensuousness—that ignited men’s passion and represented a genuine threat to men’s exercise of power, and that ordinary women were encouraged to suppress. On stage, female performers’ hyperfemininity brought the imagined oppositions of masculine and feminine into sharp relief and provided a safe place for people to explore and ultimately buy in to conventional gender ideology (see Spiller 2010).

After Indonesian independence in 1945, under the nation’s first president, Sukarno, a rise in the status of Sundanese female performers in *wayang golek* (rod puppet theatre) came to be seen as a threat to the power of the male *dalang* (puppet master) and indeed to the “cultural order of the Indonesian state” (Weintraub 2004: 70). During President Soeharto’s New Order regime, which gained power following a coup in 1965 and lasted until his fall in 1998, the government took an active role in advocating women’s proper roles as wives and mothers (Hughes-Freeland 2008: 140). Their campaign included attempts to “upgrade” the performing arts to eliminate undesirable female role models that transgressed officially sanctioned images of women. In post-Soeharto Indonesia, female performers continue to be a site of contention, and a recent “anti-porno” law (RUU APP) that regulates female performance has stirred up considerable controversy (Allen 2007; Mulligan 2005; Weintraub 2008; Zanten 2007).

### Drag and Gender

Performances involving cross-dressing and/or androgynous performers have been characteristic of Javanese rituals and entertainments

for centuries. *Dalang topeng* (mask dancers) from the Cirebon region of Java's north coast, for example, whether they are male or female, wear the same costume and perform the same dances (Ross 2009: 353 n. 938). Central Javanese court *wayang wong* dance-dramas generally used single-sex casts (sometimes all men, sometimes all women; Thowok and Ross 2005: 225). The central performers in East Javanese *ludruk* (a populist theatre genre) are men dressed as women (Peacock 1968: 76). Tom Boellstorff reminds us that these "'ethnolocalized homosexual and transvestite professional' subject positions" (Boellstorff 2005: 45) constitute professions, not identities, and do not necessarily correlate to any particular sexual preference or orientation.

Scholars have linked traditional forms of transvestite performance to a long-standing Javanese concept of androgyny—which collapses the concepts of male and female—as a representation of cosmic power (Errington 1990; Kartomi 1976; Sutton 1993; Wolbers 1989, 1993). James Peacock similarly argues that the power of transvestite performance in Java stems from the reversals and contradictions of ordinary patterns that ultimately validate (rather than subvert) conventional categories, thus confirming an "underlying unity" that lies at the philosophical heart of Javanese philosophy (Peacock 1978: 218).

The politics and meanings of cross-dressing in Java are exceedingly complex in their details, however, and vary from place to place and time to time, as Christina Sunardi's account of shifting attitudes among three generations of cross-dressing dancers in Malang, East Java, demonstrates (Sunardi 2009). There is, however, one consistent quality of male-to-female transvestism in performance in Java: Cross-dressing performers are considered successful when they look and act like "real" women.

The Rawit Group's particular approach to drag performance, however, is a new innovation and departs in some ways from traditional transvestite performances. Aep Diana told me that the troupe began including a *lawakan* act as early as 1985. Aep's background in *sandiwara* (semi-improvised drama performances) doubtlessly contributed to the act's success. He hastened to add, however, that he injected the drag element only in the late 1990s. He got the idea by watching British television shows with comedians in crude drag; he carefully observed the ways in which these comedians portrayed women. He did not warn his fellow performers about the change the first time he appeared in drag, and the effect was so successful that they incorporated it into the act from that point on (Aep 1999). His cartoonish, Benny Hill-inspired drag is meant to be unconvincing, in stark contrast to most traditional transvestite performances in Java. The meanings conveyed by drag performances depend on many factors. Judith

Butler has commented that drag “effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (Butler 1990: 137)—in other words, according to Butler, drag simultaneously endorses both the notion that gender is contingent and performed, and the belief that gender identities are essential—two utterly contradictory ideologies. Fiona Moore suggests that the power of drag performance lies precisely in this ambiguity. Focusing on a variety of forms of drag performance in North America, she challenges commonly held notions that drag is “either an act of misogyny or of heroic gender-bending” (Moore 2005: 103), concluding that “drag is . . . not so much a site of gender-bending or ritualised denigration of women, as a site of defining masculinity symbolically” (Moore 2005: 117), and its power depends in part upon the different interpretations that performers and consumers can create.

### Transition

All of the Rawit Group’s *lawakan* acts that I observed followed the same basic outline and for the most part included the same jokes each time. The dialogue, however, was not fixed in advance, but is improvised anew each time, responding to the *sikon* (situation and conditions) of the particular event. The performance opened with one of the comedians providing a smooth transition from the movement-oriented *jaipongan* dances that has just ended into a more verbal mode (cf. Spiller 1999). This opening joke also served to “unsanitize” the image of the costumed, choreographed female *jaipongan* dancers who preceded him by inserting a little naughtiness into the atmosphere.

The comedian entered the stage performing a few *jaipongan* dance movements of his own, in the style of a *bajidor* (improvising male dancer), and then stopped to comment on the bird-like nature of *jaipongan* dance gestures. The name of the bird that the movements mimicked, he reported, was *manuk kuntul* (a kind of egret). However, he said, if it is pronounced with a Jakarta accent, which uses lots of *e* sounds, the word would be *kentel*. What about with a central Javanese accent, with its *o* sounds, he asked. With gestures, he led the audience in a rhythmic chant of the different pronunciations, but instead of the expected transformation of the word into *kontol*, he substituted the word *belekok* (another word for egret) instead. This garnered a big laugh because *kontol* is a vulgar Sundanese word for penis. The fact that the word *belekok* did not fit into the rhythmic scheme set up by the chanting exaggerated the humorous avoidance of the naughty word. By suggesting the vulgar term, through movement and rhythm, and then avoiding it in his actual utterance, Oman brought the audience firmly into the realm of the verbal but maintained a tie to the suggestive potential

of hidden meanings in movement. He also effectively reminded the audience that despite recent attempts to valorize *jaipongan* as “classical” Sundanese dance, its origins lay in the realm of traditional female performers who were often associated with fertility rites. Suggestive humor, I was told, is frequently a part of Sundanese weddings because it reminds the bridal couple of their sexuality (Tati 1999).

### Men Instructing Women

The next skit involved Oman and Caca giving tips on womanly tasks to the bride. Oman first announced that he was going to teach women how to bathe a baby; Caca asserted that women naturally know how to do that, so he was going to follow in the footsteps of the PKK,<sup>3</sup> a New Order government program that provided instruction to village women, and show them how to make *comro* (a snack made with cassava and tempeh). As seen in the following translation, the two explanations overlap in hilarious ways.

oman: Neng<sup>4</sup> Ani [the bride], if someday you are blessed with a child, I have some tips for you on how to take care of your baby! Actually this is for all mothers, mothers-to-be, or anyone who has a baby or even if you don't . . . I have tips on how to take care of your baby well. In short it guarantees your baby to be healthy.

caca: Hello Mang<sup>5</sup> Oman!

oman: I can hear you perfectly! Shut up, don't bother me, I'm giving tips to Neng Ani, the bride.

caca: What tips?

oman: How to take care of babies.

caca: You're not very bright are you? Don't you know that women know that better than you do?

oman: But, surely my tips are better . . .

caca: Look, I have tips too; here, this is for the PKK ladies so they can be better cooks. I have this tip on how to make *comro*. Listen!

oman: Oh dear! Here's how to bathe your baby. First prepare a tub of lukewarm water. When it's ready, carry the baby over to where the water is. Remember, don't plunge the baby into the water. Slowly wash the baby with the water and clean the ears. When you finish give the baby . . .

caca: . . . *cassava*. You're making *comro*, so you need cassava; a couple of pounds is about enough, yes. You need to peel the cassava for *comro*, after that you . . .

oman: . . . put some soap ladies, use baby soap, but Lux should be fine if you don't have baby soap. Don't scrub the baby or you'll hurt it. Slowly rub well all over the baby. Rinse the baby carefully then . . .

caca: . . . grate it, ladies! Grate the cassava finely for *comro*, that's right, after you grate the cassava . . .

oman: . . . dry it with a towel, ladies. Use a small one, remember, don't rub the baby or you'll give the baby rashes, like this, slowly just so the baby is dry. When you finish toweling off the baby give it . . .

caca: *Sambel oncom* [a kind of spicy condiment]! The *sambel oncom* has to be spicy, with basil, shallots, that's for the *comro* filling. The spicier, the better. After you fill the *comro* with *sambel oncom* then . . .

oman: . . . powder it! Use talcum powder, or if you don't have any just use face powder. Make sure you put some in the armpits, don't forget the neck and the groin to prevent rashes, after powdering you should get it . . .

caca: Shaped into balls . . .

oman: Oh dear!

caca: Yes, roll it into balls, they should have similar size so they look good. Roll the cassava dough, then after that . . .

oman: Put on a diaper. A singlet if you have one. Do it slowly, after putting clothes on the baby, then . . .

caca: Fry it!

oman: Aaaarrgh!

caca: That's it from me, ladies . . . how to make . . .

oman: . . . a baby?!<sup>6</sup>

The images of a fried baby and a diapered cassava leave the distinct impression that men are not to be trusted with either babies or with cooking. While this reinforces at least some New Order values—that men should stay away from domestic activities, for example (see Brenner 1995)—the interchange also wryly suggested two hidden meanings: (1) that the government program's efforts were misplaced and perhaps did more harm than good, because women “naturally” know how to be women, and (2) it is men's responsibility to control women's domestic activities and regulate their powers, even (to a certain extent) their reproductive powers.

### Nining the Pop Singer

By this time, Aep Diana had had enough time to complete his transformation into the singer Nining. He entered, providing the gross outlines of a feminine appearance without much attention to detail. He wore a bad wig fashioned into a *sanggul* (conventional feminine hairstyle in which the hair is pulled back from the forehead into a large bun in the back). He created a bust by wearing a brassiere stuffed with balloons, over which he donned a lady's *kabaya* (blouse; see Figure 5). He bolstered his backside with an enormous pillow, over which he care-



Figure 5. The Rawit Group's *lawakan* trio (left to right: Oman, Aep, Caca). (Photo: Henry Spiller)

lessly wrapped a *kain batik* (length of batik cloth that can be wrapped around the lower body). He accessorized with men's black dress shoes and socks and a crude layer of face makeup. The other two comedians at first assumed she was Nining Meida, a well-known *pop Sunda* superstar, but they soon realize that any resemblance ended at the barely feminine costume. Undeterred, the comedians proceeded to coach Nining on how to be a proper woman.

Sundanese female entertainers exaggerate femininity in several sensory modes. For the eye, they accentuate their feminine attributes through extraordinary dress and grooming. For the ears, their voices incite desire through the heightened vocal arts of melody and poetry. Movement, too, is a vital part of their act: They interact with men by dancing in close proximity to—even touching—them. As objects of desire in multiple dimensions, female performers force men in the audience either to indulge their desires or to transcend them. Both choices, in some way, contribute to the men's formation of coherent masculine selves (see Spiller 2010). In this performance, the other two comedians addressed Aep/Nining's appearance, her voice, and her movements, touching upon all three of the sensory modes in which female performers exaggerate their femininity

First they commented on her appearance. Caca and Oman

observed Nining as she adjusted her prominent balloon breasts. “Stop touching them!” they admonished her, while simultaneously ogling her. “Oh, boy, she’s touching them,” they whispered to each other, exposing the double standard with which men both control and desire the visual symbols of women’s sexual attractiveness.

Next they addressed her voice and the subtle art of sounding like a proper woman. “Women should speak softly,” they told her after she responded to their questions too directly and loudly. They coached her in the art of feminine speaking, how to use a soft voice and how to pepper it with polite particles, such as *kah*. She appeared to catch on, but she appended a horrible shriek of laughter to her otherwise soft, polite discourse. “You sound like a *wig-wig* (a ghost)!” they scolded her.

Oman and Caca convinced Nining that the wedding couple had requested her to sing a song, but first she should say a few words. She obliged them by mentioning several men in the audience and winking, which the comedians condemned as being too coquettish. After some buffoonery regarding the musical accompaniment, the song finally began, and Nining began to dance, setting the comedians up to address the movement elements of feminine behavior.

After watching, appalled, as Nining ran all around the stage during her dance, the comedians ordered her to stay in one place. They also criticized the lack of gracefulness in her gestures. Slowly but surely they restricted the kinds of dance movements she was “allowed” to perform in her role as a female entertainer.

A similar process accompanied her attempts to sing Sundanese singer-songwriter Doel Sumbang’s hit song “Jol” (You Come Again), the lament of a young woman who is distraught because her lover repeatedly leaves her, then returns, only to leave again. First, the male comedians didn’t like the way she gasped audibly before singing and exhaled loudly at the end of each phrase.

The refrain of “Jol” repeats the phrase “*ku kuring ditutup ku anjeun dibuka*” (what I close, you open) several times, establishing the metaphor of a door for the relationship between the song’s (female) protagonist and her (male) interlocutor. In his original lyrics, Doel Sumbang pushes the metaphor with phrases such as “until we lose the key” and “until we break the knob,” finally concluding with “until we broke our promises.” Nining, however, continued the metaphor with the phrase “*tanpa calana*” (without any pants), suggesting an image of the lover answering the door in his underwear (if that), a kind of sexual intimacy that would be inappropriate for an unmarried couple.

As she mangled the song’s lyrics, the music stopped and her wig fell to the ground. She quickly put it back on—sideways, generating a big laugh. The male comedians remarked that she must be a stupid

woman to have no feeling, and told her how to reattach the wig correctly. Although men typically do not tell women how to dress, they do feel empowered to judge a woman's appearance.

### Nining the *Pasinden*

Convinced that she was hopeless as a pop singer, the comedians observed that she was wearing clothes appropriate for *pasinden* (the solo female singers for *wayang golek* [rod puppet theatre] performances), so they shifted gears and tried again to mold her into a proper female performer. Once again, she confounded them with her incompetence in all three sensory realms. Her balloon breasts once again provide fodder for criticizing her appearance. "Just leave them alone," the men tell her as she adjusted them and complained, "they're in the wrong place." The men turned their attention to movement and tried to teach her to sit properly on the floor. She proved herself incapable not only of sitting, but of staying immobilized one place, as *pasinden* (and women in general) are supposed to do, as well.

In the realm of sound, she shrieked when she sang, and she subverted the words to the well-known songs she performed. For example, in "Cankurileung" (Sparrow), she sang of a sparrow that sits not on a branch (as in the conventional lyrics) but on top of another sparrow instead. Her parody of the lyrics to the popular song "Pemuda Idaman" (Ideal Young Man), in which she states that "*pemuda idaman euweuh endogan*" (the ideal young man has no balls), was especially transgressive—both in its mention of "unmentionable" body parts and its implied preference for an emasculated man.

The climax of the act came when the comedian who acted as the *dalang* narrated that Gatotkaca—the "puppet" played by the second comedian—was aroused by the female singer. The comedian in the role of Gatotkaca looked a little startled at the thought, but proceeded to chase the Aep-in-drag around the stage and make a grab for her despite her atrocious performance of femininity. As he accosted her, all of her feminine characteristics were revealed to be fake: her wig once again toppled off, her balloon breasts fell to the stage, and her ample derriere was revealed to be a pillow. The humiliated Aep-in-drag ran off stage as the audience laughed and cheered.

### Drag and the Ideology of Gender

What kinds of meanings might Sundanese audiences take from the drag performance in this *lawakan* act? One possible interpretation of the Rawit Group's comedy drag routine is that it exposes gender roles and identities as constructed and performed, and thus threatens a status quo that relies on a belief in an essential feminine nature. The



comedians indeed reveal that femininity is a complex construction that involves artifices in several dimensions of feminine behavior.

I should note that the audiences included men, women, boys, and girls, and that the children were especially attentive and appreciative of the goings-on. All those with whom I discussed the act were enthusiastic about the humor of Aep's feminine attributes falling away to reveal a man, but none of them offered any kind of analytical explanation, and they responded with blank looks if I suggested that categories of male and female were anything but essentialized. Even Aep himself justified the finale simply as a "funny climax" and dismissed my probing for any deeper explanations (Aep 1999).

In other words, nobody in the audience is likely to come away from the act with any new understandings of gender as a performative, rather than as an essential, category. For one thing, the context of a comic performance predisposes the audience to find humor, rather than offense or transgression (Palmer 1994: 25). A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren postulate that all humor threatens the audience's sense of how the world operates, but becomes funny when the threat is revealed to be ultimately benign. What makes something funny, they conclude, is the presentation of two simultaneous interpretations of a single event (McGraw and Warren 2010)—a conclusion that is remarkably synergistic with Judith Butler's ideas about drag.

Thomas Turino uses Gregory Bateson's concept of "frames" and Charles Peirce's semiotic terminology to assert that propositions made within a "joking" frame are not meant to be taken literally, but rather to be interpreted as *rhemes*—"signs of imaginative possibility" (Turino 1999: 237). The anthropologist Susan Seizer echoes all these theories of humor when she acknowledges that jokes arise from the disruption of conventional categories, but paradoxically "serve to reinscribe the very conventions they blatantly taunt" (Seizer 1997: 631). The Rawit Group's *lawakan* act employs several different modalities of humor—verbal (such as wordplay and parodies of accents), visual, and physical—to expose, challenge, and ultimately reify the kinds of sounds, appearances, and movements that are regarded as feminine. The act employs both wordplay and musical jokes to foreground the audience's awareness of the manipulations of a real female performer's verbal and vocal arts. Aep-in-drag's cartoonish hair, breasts, and buttocks probe the limits of the assumed attractiveness of these features, which the conventional costume of female performers is designed to accentuate. And, finally, Aep's outrageous dancing, sitting, and manic running around capture the audience's attention—just as a genuine female performer's sexy mien arouses a male audiences desire. In fact, "real" Sundanese female performers are already transgressive and artificial.

Ultimately, by exaggerating everything that Sundanese men find both attractive and frightening about women, real female performers and Aep-in-drag alike affirm, rather than challenge, conventional gender ideology. Audiences—men and women alike—are well aware that “real” performers are not that different from Aep-in-drag in the way they manipulate their costumes to emphasize their busts and backsides. They recognize that part of the fun of “real” female entertainers lies in the provocative words that, on their surface, challenge men’s sense of masculinity. They interpret the dance gestures of “real” female performers as out of control, indexing a kind of deep-seated sensuality that they know is simmering deep within even the best-behaved women. And they know that they, like the comedian playing the puppet Gatotkaca, are manipulated into finding female performers to be attractive, whether they like it or not.

Thus, Aep-in-drag is not really that different from a “real” performer; the element of drag merely invites the audience to widen their frame of interpretation. Aep-in-drag affirms for Sundanese audiences the importance of exaggerated representations of femininity on stage in the maintenance of Sundanese gender ideology—even in the early days of the post-New Order era, in which such representations of sexualized femininity remained contrary to official government arts policy. The *lawakan* act’s drag performance, then, provides an antidote or corrective for the sanitized, New Order-sanctioned female entertainers, such as the *jaipongan* dancers, who had appeared up to this point in the *hajat*.

In this light, then, the *lawakan* act’s trajectory—from *jaipongan*, to *pop Sunda*, to *wayang golek*—also has significance. In effect, the Rawit Group is gently coaxing its audience further and further away from New Order ways of thinking. Staged *jaipongan*, which has clear roots in the ritual dancing of men with female entertainers, but which separates the roles of the female singer and female dancer, minimizes or eliminates participation by men and refocuses attention on the abstract aesthetic value of the female performers’ costumes and movements, represents an attempt to sanitize Sundanese culture and make it compatible with New Order values. The next genre the group engages is *pop Sunda*—songs in the Sundanese language cast in a universal (i.e., diatonic) idiom. Yampolsky identifies such regional pop idioms as part of a New Order project to “upgrade” regional culture as well as to homogenize its musical style into a national idiom (Yampolsky 1995: 714). Finally, then, the comedians move to *wayang golek*—which, because of its sophisticated use of the Sundanese language and its use of three-dimensional rod puppets (rare in other parts of Indonesia), makes it an iconic marker of a distinctly Sundanese identity. What begins as a set

of entertainments firmly grounded in New Order ideology gradually transforms into a site for reclaiming a uniquely Sundanese approach to culture, which reaches its full expression when the next part of the *hajat* entertainment—the men’s dancing to *dangdut* music (see Figure 6)—begins.

What is truly transgressive about the *lawakan* act, I believe, is not the drag performer’s inept performance of femininity, but rather the explicit way in which the male comedians actively regulate the behavior of the feminine performer. They tell her what to do with her breasts and hair, how to speak, and how to move. Genuine female entertainers fulfill their function by appearing to act outside of ordinary conventions, free of masculine control; in contrast, this drag performer is told explicitly what to do by men who make it a practice to tell women how to behave.

I would like to suggest that this overt representation of the power of men over women further contributes to the endorsement of traditional Sundanese values over national New Order Indonesian values. In effect, the male comedians are parodying the actions of New Order policy makers by telling female performers how to dress and act. Despite all the instruction, however, Aep-in-drag continues to defy their commands, reminding audiences that female entertainers cannot and perhaps should not be entirely domesticated—controlled by men—despite New Order ideologies that try to do so. I think this is



Figure 6. The Rawit Group performs *dangdut* at a wedding in Margahayu, 7 August 1999. (Photo: Henry Spiller)

why the act ends with an ambiguous twist: despite the obvious ineptitude of the performance of femininity, one of the male comedians acts as if he is aroused by Aep-in-drag, precisely *because* of (rather than in spite of) the drag performer's citation of conventional feminine transgressiveness.

Weddings are by their very nature conservative events. The *lawakan* act prepares the audience for the final event of the *hajat*—social dancing to *dangdut* music—by calling into question the values imposed by New Order ideology and reminding them of the time-honored function of female entertainers in Sundanese society to create a space for men to explore their masculine identities. Although *dangdut* music is a relatively recent innovation, and despite the *dangdut* singer's modern dress, the men in the audience respond to her in a traditionally Sundanese way—they mount the stage and dance with her. In doing so, they embrace a variety of what might be called “traditional” Sundanese values—even those that are at odds with modern national Indonesian values.

## NOTES

1. *Lingkung seni* (often abbreviated LS) is a Sundanese translation of the Dutch term *kunstkring* (arts circle). As the hosts of Sundanese *hajat* started to request a variety of entertainments for their guests in the 1960s, arts entrepreneurs began to serve as musical agents or brokers, making and maintaining the connections required to provide a variety of performances for their clients. The typical manager of a *lingkung seni* is a charismatic, business-savvy person, who often is a well-known artist in his or her own right (cf. Williams 1998: 722). A *lingkung seni* usually owns musical instruments and costumes and has a stable of performers on call for the various performance genres they provide.

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3. Pemberdayaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga, “Family Welfare Movement.”

4. A term of respect for a younger woman.

5. A term of respect for an older companion.

6. I thank Tati Haryatin for her transcription and translation of the Rawit Group's *lawakan* act I recorded on April 29, 1999, near Soreang, West Java, Indonesia.

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