

Indonesian Television after Soeharto: Discourse and Representation in the “Asep Show”

by

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Toward the end of ex-president Soeharto’s New Order regime (which ended in 1998), and recurring nightly during the fasting month of Ramadhan every year since then, a new program featuring a Sundanese puppet and Indonesian actors and comedians began airing. Introduced during Ramadhan, 1996, “Asep Show” – named after the popular puppeteer Asep Sunandar Sunarya who helped create it -- ran on the national television station TPI (“Indonesian Educational Television” [*Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia*]), Monday through Friday, enlivening people’s mood just before the program announcing the end of that day’s fasting period.¹ In these programs, the actors tell jokes to keep people’s minds off the fast—the jokes fill their stomachs with laughter during the hardest part of the day.

“Asep Show” features the Sundanese puppet character, Cepot (pronounced “Chay-pot”), although the real star of the show is the puppet manipulator, or *dalang*, Asep Sunandar Sunarya. In the all-night puppet theater performances of *wayang golek*, Cepot embodies a boisterous and outspoken country bumpkin whose obscene language and carnivalesque humor challenge elitist social conventions and class hierarchies. Through his style of speaking Sundanese, dancing regional dances, village appearance and demeanor, and direct form of expression, Cepot has long been a site for defining the *jago* (macho) attitude of Sundanese males.

“Asep Show,” broadcast across the entire archipelago, suggests modes of identification with the Indonesian nation. On “Asep Show,” Cepot appears in a multiplicity of made-for-television settings: a *kampung* (village); an upper class Jakarta home; a train station; a beach; a space ship; a shoe store; and a palace, among others. Corruption is everywhere and the problems of Indonesia’s capital city Jakarta take center stage: bank scandals, money laundering scams, narcotics, and crime are the main themes addressed in the programs. Shows are performed in the Indonesian language, with a distinct Sundanese or Jakarta accent, and include a smattering of English phrases. Part regional theater, part sitcom, and part sketch

¹ The name is a play on the word “Asepso,” a popular brand of bath soap. People that I have interviewed sometimes refer to the program as “APEC Show,” after the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, formed in 1989, to promote open trade between the U.S. and 21 “member economies” around the Pacific Rim. It is not clear whether the show was actually renamed.

comedy, the show blends theatrical traditions into a new hybrid comic form to talk about money, power, and corruption in post-Soeharto Indonesia.

How did Cepot, a regional Sundanese clown, become a fixture on national television? What does Cepot mean within the context of television? How does this televisual Cepot articulate with the changing social and cultural terrain of Indonesia during the period 1996-present? In this paper, I analyze shifts in the production, circulation, and meaning of Cepot as a mass-mediated text in discourses of the Indonesian nation. I contend that “Asep Show” has helped to re-imagine the cultural space of the nation, precisely by offering up new ways of thinking about and representing regional or ethnic cultures. My analysis is based on an interpretation of televised programs, as well as newspaper and internet commentaries and interviews with performers and spectators.

Cepot and Sundanese Identity

Who is Cepot? A family of clown servants, or *panakawan*, traditionally appear in performances of Sundanese *wayang golek*: They include Semar and his sons Cepot, Dawala, and Gareng. Semar is an advisor to the *Pandawa*, the five heroic brothers of the Mahabharata, and his sons assist in battle against the 99 *Kurawa*, the antagonistic cousins of the Pandawa. The *panakawan* usually appear sometime between 11 pm and 3 am. The *panakawan* can hold an audience in rapt attention for several hours. People come to wayang golek specifically to watch the clowns, who mediate their interests in the realm of local and national politics.

Cepot contrasts sharply with the refined classes of heroes, royalty and gods. Cepot’s style of speaking Sundanese is rough, direct, and to-the-point. In wayang golek puppet theater, Cepot appears in the middle of the night to dance, tell jokes, and deliver long monologues that critique existing social and political issues in the Sundanese language.

Cepot is more life-like than other puppets in his iconography, movement, and speech. He is dressed in common village attire (black clothes with a scarf) as opposed to the elaborate court attire of the majority of characters in a play (with the exception of the ogres). Although Cepot is not the only clown/servant, most *dalangs* have used him more extensively than other puppets during at least the last 50 years. A *dalang*’s puppet chest often contains several Cepot puppets. In one modern version, Cepot can move his head up and down (as well as from side to side) and often has articulated hands. In another manifestation, he has a leg which is used in

comedic dance scenes.² In addition, *dalang* often place a lit cigarette in his mouth, which seems to indicate his almost human quality. Cepot moves freely without the prescribed stylized movements of other characters (excluding ogres). In addition, he performs the popular dance style *jaipongan* and the movements of *penca silat*, which links him to the people. [VIDEO—CEPOTLEG.mov] Cepot moves among the people, royalty, and gods in wayang theater with unparalleled ease. He represents the values of the people, yet does not share the people's restricted social mobility. Sundanese language, the primary marker of Sundanese identity, operates through several different language levels, depending upon the status of the person one is addressing.³ One way of reinforcing class status is through these language levels. Cepot is able to break through social barriers to communicate the way things really are by speaking a particular register of Sundanese to everyone including royalty and gods. He is not confined by the conventions of language (or movement) and he uses language that is sometimes obscene, but characteristically Sundanese. He is not only able to indicate the leveling of specific hierarchies, but he is also able to communicate a non-elite message of affirmation, claiming "authenticity" for all Sundanese experience, even the most common ones.

Wayang Golek on Television

The early years of television in Indonesia were dominated by the national broadcast network TVRI (Televisi Republik Indonesia). TVRI did not compete with other stations until 1989, when private television stations were granted broadcast licenses. TVRI productions of wayang golek of the 1980s had few redeeming qualities as either television or puppet theater. But televising wayang had not yet become something else, as it would later with "Asep Show." The practice of televising wayang had significant effects on the genre, but Sundanese spectators were generally unsatisfied with its production value (Weintraub 1997).

Private television stations began to broadcast wayang golek performances with better results during the early 1990s. In contrast to TVRI, the private stations created interesting and innovative ways to attract audiences by introducing painted backdrops, special effects, and multiple camera angles to view the productions. Private stations even began broadcasting all-night performances and

² No other puppets have legs. The addition of a leg may have been inspired by one of the puppets in *wayang cepak*, the West Javanese rod-puppet theater used to present Islamic tales.

³ For a general description of Sundanese language levels, see Uhlenbeck 1964 and Wessing 1978.

shooting on location. They also developed new kinds of telewayang, wayang made for television (Mrazek 2001). It is within this new space of cultural production that Asep Show is located.

Asep Sunandar Sunarya

Who is the Asep in “Asep Show”? Born in 1955, Asep Sunandar Sunarya was the seventh child of A. Sunarya, a popular post-Independence dalang who spawned what many have called a “dynasty of dalangs.” Among Sunarya’s four sons to become dalangs, Asep Sunandar has received the most recognition. In the early 1980s Asep Sunandar developed a particularly innovative style inspired partly by the music, film, and television popular at that time. The slow-motion martial arts movements were derived from Hong Kong action films, and the slapstick comedy owed something to Disney cartoons. Beginning in the mid-1980s, his performances also featured puppets that could vomit noodles and spit blood and milk. [VIDEO--VOMIT1.mov]

“Asep Show”

“Asep Show” was not the first program to incorporate Cepot and human actors. Asep Sunandar’s older brother, Ade Kosasih, had performed wayang golek in a 1988 television show that combined puppets and live musicians who accompanied the drama with rock music. Dalang Asep Taruna combined Cepot and live actors, including well-known artists Sujiwo Tejo and Dewi Gita, on television in 1992-3 in Jakarta.⁴ Taruna also brought Cepot into the realm of music television in collaboration with pop star Farid Harja for his video “Ini Rindu.” Cepot also appeared in advertisements for flu medicines and in commercials urging people to pay taxes..⁵

When TPI introduced its program in 1996, most of the Ramadhan programs had a strictly religious orientation, although program formats differed (talk shows or proselytizing [dakwah] were common). In order to compete with those programs, Asep Show introduced a comic orientation, manifested through Sundanese regional performing arts, and performed by Asep Sunandar, a dalang with a national reputation. Producers felt that the “Asep Show” would be competitive with strictly religious shows because of its

⁴ The show ran for one year (5 episodes) and was not renewed the following year.

⁵ In 1997, a dramatic comedy called “Cepot & Copet Kepepet” (“Cepot & the Thief are Trapped”) aired; but I do not have data on that show, for example, whether Cepot was played by a human actor, etc.

ability to deliver messages which were non-dogmatic, and the fact that it dealt with down-to-earth everyday concerns.⁶

“Asep Show” is just one of several shows televised during the fasting month of Ramadhan, leading one critic to call Ramadhan “a month full of laughter on television.”⁷ These programs melded television with the daily rhythm of Ramadhan; a ticking clock in the upper right hand corner of the screen indicates the countdown to the end of the day’s fast. During the year 2000, the private station RCTI broadcast “Ronda-Ronda” (“Making the Rounds”) and SCTV had “Sahur Kita” (“Our Daybreak Meal”). Reportedly, the ratings of these shows were not able to compete with “Asep Show,” which enjoyed a rating of 12 (compared to Sahur Kita, with a rating of 8).⁸ In 2001, “Asep Show’s” ratings fell slightly, according to reports, with a rating of 10, compared with Indosiar’s “Doa Membawa Berkah” (“Prayer Brings Blessings” with a rating of 12), RCTI’s “PadaMu Kubersimpuh” (“To You, I fall down on my knees” with a rating of 10); ratings are unavailable for SCTV’s competing sinetron “Maha Pengasih” (“The Great Beloved One”).⁹ The “Asep Shows” were profitable, yielding approximately 10-12 million rupiah (approximately \$1,000-1,200) per 30 second commercial.¹⁰

The main actors in “Asep Show” are Cepot, entertainers (film and television actors), and comedians (pelawak) from various genres including Betawi *lenong*, Javanese *Ketoprak*, and Sundanese *topeng banjet*, among others. In 2001, the “guest artists” also included politicians, cultural critics, and other public personalities.

“Asep Show” was created for a national audience, not a regional audience, but has a regional specificity, as the following video clips indicate. It is full of Sundanese cultural signifiers: Cepot begins each program by dancing jaipongan or performing martial

⁶ “Ada pesan-pesan yang disampaikan tidak bersifat dogmatis, namun lebih menyentil pada persoalan keseharian. Ini yang menjadi ciri khas tayangan Asep Show,” kata Emil. (“The messages are communicated in a non-dogmatic way, yet they more effectively touch on everyday matters. This is the special quality of the Asep Show broadcast,” said Emil [the Operational Director of TPI]. “Asep Show” Tetap Tegar Selama 5 Tahun” (“Asep Show” Still Persists After 5 Years”) <http://www.kompas.com/wartakota/0111/13/07.htm> (November 13, 2001)

⁷ “Setahun Sekali Mengalap Berkah” (“Once a Year Receive a Blessing”), n.d. <http://www.tempointeraktif.com/majalah/free/arsip/thn04/edisi41/hib-1.html>

⁸ “Setahun Sekali Mengalap Berkah” (“Once a Year Receive a Blessing”), n.d. <http://www.tempointeraktif.com/majalah/free/arsip/thn04/edisi41/hib-1.html>

⁹ “Setahun Sekali Mengalap Berkah” (“Once a Year Receive a Blessing”), n.d. <http://www.tempointeraktif.com/majalah/free/arsip/thn04/edisi41/hib-1.html>. See also “‘Asep Show,’ Cepot Tak Ingin Dilupakan” (“‘Asep Show’, Cepot Does not want to be Forgotten”) <http://www.kompas.com/ehntertainment/news/0112/09/1785.htm> (December 9, 2001).

¹⁰ “‘Asep Show,’ Cepot Tak Ingin Dilupakan” (“‘Asep Show’, Cepot Does not want to be Forgotten”) <http://www.kompas.com/ehntertainment/news/0112/09/1785.htm> (December 9, 2001).

arts movements; gamelan accompanies the entrances and exits of characters and provides sound effects; and the Sundanese characters speak Indonesian with heavily inflected, and somewhat exaggerated, Sundanese accents. The shows are marked by the collision of Sundanese and Javanese, Balinese, and Sumatran cultural signifiers. It is not so much *what* is said, but *how* it is said, or, in Benedict Anderson's terms, the style in which a community is imagined.

On Asep Show, Cepot appears in a different role in each program. In a program broadcast on November 17, 2001, titled "Menunggu Glodok," ("Waiting for Glodok"¹¹), Cepot's message, similar to the messages he delivers in the long monologues of wayang golek theater, urges youth to stay away from drugs, which will distract them from the important role they can play in rebuilding the nation after Soeharto. The comedy arises out of an encounter between Cepot (an undercover cop playing a newspaper vendor) and a Javanese candy seller. They talk about going home to various places on the island of Java for Lebaran, and comment on the pronunciation and different ways of saying certain words. They overemphasize their regional accents (Sundanese and Javanese). The Javanese man is shouting "pantat merah, pantat hijau" ("red butts, green butts), a play on the word "Fanta," the soft drink that comes in cherry and lime flavors. These parodies on regional vernaculars and places form the collisions of culture, only available through humor.

Program themes deal critically and rather transparently with social political topics, which was not uncommon for wayang golek, but only recently acceptable on national television. Among the 11 programs I viewed during 2001, three dealt with selling illegal products (drugs, firecrackers, and stolen jeans), two were about selfish and corrupt leaders, two were about investments embezzled by company executives, two were anti-Development, and one was about the formation of a new political party, formed by an escaped mental hospital patient.

Global news events made their way into the program seamlessly. In the program titled "Memburu Harta Karun" ("Finding Hidden Treasure," November 11, 2001), a group of beings from another planet travels to earth to find treasure. They destroy a large rock with a large gun, and a mythical Balinese-looking beast emerges. The only defense against this dancing beast is to yell

¹¹ This may be a reference to "Waiting for Godot"; "Glodok" is also a district in Jakarta with many Chinese shops.

“Anthrax, Anthrax,” and the beast is chased away. As Cepot notes, if anthrax scared people in the United States, then it might work here as well.

A third video, titled “Wow Seram” (“A Hair-Raising Experience,” November 24, 2001), is based on an anti-development theme. Cepot has retired and is living in a quiet rustic village in the countryside. Two men representing a development company of some kind, offer to buy his house for a huge sum of money. Cepot refuses. His wife, however, urges Cepot to take the money so that she can move to the city, buy things, and lead a modern lifestyle. Suddenly a ghost appears, scaring the villagers, who decide to call a paranormal. Of course, the ghost is a ruse by the two men to scare the villagers.

Cepot on Indonesian television

Who is this Indonesianized version of Cepot? Cepot’s character in Asep Show has generated a great deal of commentary, which has become part of the circulation of texts about the meaning of the show. Commentators have remarked that Cepot is no longer Cepot, the son of Semar, the clown servant of the five Pandawa brothers in the Mahabharata, and the voice of the people. He is a dislocated Cepot, an entertainer or mediator among guest artists, who is no longer connected to the people he represents and the family, heroes, and land/nation he serves.

The most prevalent commentaries were written during 1998-99 right around the time of Soeharto’s ouster from power, when a series of articles came out: “When Cepot Appears on TV” (January 9, 1998); “Cepot Loses His Stamina” (June 29, 1999); “Wayang Golek Follows the Taste of its Audiences” (1999). In these articles, Cepot embodies all the qualities that the leaders of the late New Order and early Reformasi lack: Cepot is honest, direct, earthy, uncomplicated. In an article published in the on-line news magazine *Kompas* in January, 1998, Cepot’s simple lifestyle and brutally honest disposition are contrasted with the excessive wealth and material consumption associated with the nepotistic and collusive practices of Indonesian politics and business. Although close to the sources of power, the author states, Cepot “never asks for bribes for projects, which he then sells for profit without expending any effort.”¹²

¹² “Meski dekat dengan pusat kekuasaan ia tidak kemaruk, apalagi sampai meminta jatah proyek lalu ‘menjualnya’ lagi dengan mengambil keuntungan tanpa harus bekerja.” “Ketika Cepot Nongol di ‘Tivi’” (“When Cepot Performs on TV”): <http://www.kompas.com/9801/09/HIBURAN/keti.html> (January 9, 1998).

Further, “the term commission does not exist in Cepot’s vocabulary.”¹³

Cepot takes on a heroic dimension in narratives of the nation. In contrast to “most of the people close to power, who live in his country,” Cepot actually cares about the future of the nation (bangsa).¹⁴ Cepot’s character within a discourse of the nation emerges clearly in the following quote:

In the country of the white elephant [Thailand], the slogan “Thailand for Thais” reverberates as far as our own archipelago... even the people go along with the government’s urging to cash in their American dollars for Baht. In South Korea, women strip themselves of their gold to sell for the gold reserves of the nation. Cepot marvels that in one day, ten tons of gold valuing 100 million U.S. dollars was compiled. And what about Indonesia? If Cepot even has time to go to a mall, he will see the women with their expensive clothes complete with gold and diamond jewelry compete for the most expensive items to be found...My God, as the value of the dollar climbs to close to 10,000 Rp., can’t they recognize the simplicity and honesty of Cepot?¹⁵

If only those rich women who frequented the malls were a little more like Cepot, perhaps the rupiah’s value would stop falling. The Indonesianization of Cepot represents a way of nationalizing his populist social criticism. Cepot, who has been bluntly criticizing the corrupt practices of individuals all along, translates to the mass media, where the lines of acceptable criticism have been redefined on the national level.

“Asep Show” represents a re-evaluation of the New Order categories local, ethnic, national, and global. Here is a TV program on the national television network, in the national language, concerning national problems, and targeted to a national audience. But the regional ethnic codes through which this narrative is delivered – language, music, dance, and visual imagery – are not the codes of the New Order national cultural model. Unlike the New

¹³ “Tidak ada istilah komisi dalam kamus hidup Cepot” “Ketika Cepot Nongol di ‘Tivi’” (“When Cepot Performs on TV”): <http://www.kompas.com/9801/09/HIBURAN/keti.html> (January 9, 1998).

¹⁴ “Cepot bukan tipe seperti kebanyakan orang-orang yang dekat dengan kekuasaan di negeri tempat ia tinggal...Cepot justru peduli dengan nasib bangsa ini. Sangat peduli.” “Ketika Cepot Nongol di ‘Tivi’” (“When Cepot Performs on TV”): <http://www.kompas.com/9801/09/HIBURAN/keti.html> (January 9, 1998).

¹⁵ “Ketika Cepot Nongol di ‘Tivi’” (“When Cepot Performs on TV”): <http://www.kompas.com/9801/09/HIBURAN/keti.html> (January 9, 1998).

Order compartmental discourse of culture, this narrative style brings these codes together. In New Order cultural discourse, local content was subsumed under the regulatory power of the nation-state. In “Asep Show,” local characters use local accents to comment on national events. Its commentaries articulate with narratives of transnational or global political economy (Korea, Thailand, the U.S.) “Asep Show,” as a site of cultural production, flips the New Order model on its head, revealing a schism between New Order cultural discourse and post-Soeharto trends in the production of culture.