Dance-floor politics in easternmost Java

Gandrung is a beloved entertainment for ritual celebrations in rural Banyuwangi in easternmost Java. In this genre – a variety of one

Aix-en-Provence: Bernard Arps

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O n the other hand, there are those who find dancing with a gandrung, with her smile and her fantastic attire that contrasts so strikingly with their own, nothing less than addictive. Her charm also lies behind the adoption of ‘the gandrung dancer’ as the official mas- cots of the Regency of Banyuwangi in late 2002. ‘The dancer says welcome to Banyuwangi, as it were’, the head of the Department of Tourism explained. Stat- ues and other images of gandrung dancers adorn public places throughout the region.

Gandrung, as just sketched, may seem a frivolous but basically innocuous enter- tainment designed to give the guys a good time, while providing the audience with an elegant and occasionally irk- some though otherwise inconsequential spectacle. Gandrung, however, is per- meated with and enmeshed in politics – politics with a much broader reach than the immediate setting and duration of a performance. Apart from being objectionable to many Muslims (some- thing not addressed here), the sensuous allure of gandrung is a powerful factor in the management of gender relations, and even in regional patriotism.

The diegesis of gandrung performance

A gandrung performance is participatory: it is not only intended to please spec- tators, but to lure some of them to dance. The participants move, speak, and interact in ways rarely seen in other contexts: the gandrung or gandrungs (usually there are two), their successive male and occasionally female dance partners, and the musicians project per- sonas that differ from the personas they project elsewhere. Though the per- formance is not narrative or dramatic, the participants jointly construct what it would characterize as a diegesis. (This notion, which hails from film theory where it refers to the world depicted in a film, is rarely applied to genres like gandrung though it helps to understand what is happening. See Arps 1996:66.)

A performance consists of two types of alternating segments roughly equal in length (40-10 minutes) but very differ- ent in diegesis. One is called waju, liter- ally ‘coming forward’, which involves four men entering the arena and danc- ing in turn with a gandrung, while the other gandrung sits at the side and sings. The other segment is called repénan, ‘singing’, during which the gandrungs sit and converse among guests, and sing songs by request.

In the maju segments the diegesis is sensual and may verge on the erotic. It is highly corporeal, involving choreo- graphed movements and postures. The male dancer projects bravado and the gandrung dances responsively, some- times defensively, but may also tease and even ridicule him if he does not dance well. While the danced interaction stands central, maju also involves singing, which contributes to the diege- sis; the dance pieces are usually classi- cal compositions whose lyrics express a woman’s infatuation with a man. They are suggestive rather than explicit:

My mum doesn’t like you not does my dad but I won’t give you up

You’ve gone home, leaving me behind if I knew the way, I’d come after you

The singing segments are also interac- tive and the physical presence of the gandrung at the table is important, but here the diegesis is primarily a matter of language. Two kinds of song are prominent. In one, the gandrung sings lyrics given to her by a guest on a piece of paper, commenting critically and humorously on fellow villagers; the other is drawn from local popular music whose lyrics are about male-female rela-tions or the region of Banyuwangi.

In the diegesis of gandrung perform- ance, the type ‘gandrung’ merges with the type ‘woman’. There may be other women on the dance floor and at the tables, but they belong to the type ‘man’. Their dance style is not like the gen- drung’s but like that of her male dance partners. (These women are usually wives or girlfriends of male guests, and sometimes prostitutes.)

Patronage

The subject matter of the songs is quite broad. When the lyrics invoke themes that are not otherwise perceptible in the performance and its immediate sur- roundings, those themes are thereby absorbed into the diegesis. This is one reason why the diegesis of gandrung perfor- mance may bear relevance to affairs outside the performance itself. The other reason is that elements of the diege- sis may have parallels in the world at large. An example is the analogy of the relation gandrung-host dancer with that of woman-man.

As the performance draws people into it physically, or at least psychologically, it impresses its diegesis upon its partici- pants and spectators. It thus comes as no surprise that gandrung has been embraced by various institutions for the promotion of political ends. This is espe- cially evident in the context of patronage. Most songs in the repénan segments are taken from local pop music, a taste of which focuses on the beauty of Banyuwangi’s nature, the heroism of its people and history – songs written under the tutelage of the regional government.

Gandrung outside performance

Gandrung is also used for promotional causes outside performance. The music can be heard on audio cassettes, video CDs, and radio. Stage dances based on gandrung but performed by school girls are a fixed component of official events in Banyuwangi, especially for the wel- coming of visiting dignitaries. Statures and other images of gandrung dancers are usually associated with the govern- ment as well. This is not just a matter of gandrung functioning as an emblem of regional identity; the statues often flank notices of government programmes.

Only certain parts of gandrung diegesis are recreated in these mediated forms. The statues and other images always portray the gandrung in a dance pose, never as a singer, let alone with the microphone she wields in actual per- formances. The precarious, sensitively charged danced interaction with men is usually lacking as well. The gandrung that accompanies promotional activities is not just a decontextualized but a san- itized gandrung.

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The politics of attraction

A critical question concerning language in the world is how it is combined with other forms of representation to win people over. The importance of this issue is not matched by the extent of its study. The discipline of rhetoric is important, but focuses on specific kinds of (mostly western) speech and writing – on convincing – and not other kinds of winning over. If we want to under- stand this use of language and its fre- quent failing, other approaches are needed and other forms of discourse must be studied within their contexts.

Among them should be genres like gandrung. The seductive potential of its music and dance is a source of enjoy- ment, irritation and indignation: the genre is alluring. As it attracts specta- tors to the performance space it creates a choreographic and discursive arena for thematizing cultural concerns that affect life beyond the performance. What is being pulled into the diegesis is ‘experiencing persons’. What is subsequently ejected into the world and into other diegesis is persons who have now ex-}

Reference


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A golden gandrung on one of Banyuwangi’s busiest streets, 2003. ©...