

Dynamics and tensions of LEKRA's modern¹ national theatre, 1959-1965

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Artistic and cultural work by members of Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (LEKRA, Institute of People's Culture) has tended to be ignored or summarily dismissed by scholars of Indonesian culture, and the organization itself has often been vilified as a malicious and destructive group of cultural figures who mainly produced uniform, uninteresting propaganda for the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI, Indonesian Communist Party). Aside from a few pioneering works (Foulcher 1986; Maier 1987; Sen 1985, 1994), serious studies of the actual creative output of LEKRA cultural activists are in short supply. As a result, we really know very little about LEKRA's actual cultural practices, the exact nature of its

1 The term 'modern' may seem contentious in this context because it is usually perceived as the more positive term in an asymmetrical binary 'modern/traditional'. In fact, many 'traditional' types of theatre are still performed in the modern era and continue to evolve and change to suit the current context. They could therefore also be seen as participating in the 'modern'. The LEKRA writers and cultural workers used the term 'drama' to refer to all types of performed narratives that relied on dialogue and interactions between a number of actors portraying different characters to advance the plot – including genres generally perceived to be more strongly shaped by indigenous cultures such as *wayang kulit* and *ketoprak*. In referring to 'western-style' modern drama, LEKRA writers most often used the terms '*drama*', '*senidrama*', '*sandiawara*'. Occasionally they would contrast western-style drama to those considered to be more locally and popularly-rooted with the terms '*drama modern/sandiawara modern*' and '*drama tradisional/sandiawara tradisional*' (See for example 'Laporan tentang seni drama', *Zaman Baru* 3-4 (30 January-10 February 1959):1, 5, 9). D.N. Aidit, in his speech to the Konfernas Sastra dan Seni Revolusioner (KSSR, National Conference on Revolutionary Literature and Art) distinguished between '*drama daerah*' (regional drama) and '*drama nasional*', terms he used alternately with '*drama tradisional*' and '*drama modern*' (see Aidit 1964:34, 43-6). These differences would seem to reflect a sense of regional language performance as being more closely tied to traditional culture, with national language performance being linked to an archipelagic-wide super-culture perceived to be more 'modern'. I use the term here to suggest more recently developed styles of performance, especially dramatic performance, often modeled upon recent western forms, and most often using the national language, Indonesian, and associated with the project of a national modernity.

relationship to the PKI, or the ways in which it balanced its creations between borrowings from foreign sources and a distinctly local cultural and social grounding. Yet those who joined together in LEKRA managed to create a dynamic and varied set of cultural practices. This dynamism and variety were certainly evident in the field of modern national drama and performance, an important field of cultural production across the political spectrum during the Soekarno era.² In what follows I will demonstrate the vibrancy of LEKRA's work in this sphere of cultural activity with a special focus on activities in Jakarta and Central Java.³

In the course of this investigation it will become clear that the dominant view of LEKRA leaves much to be desired, reducing as it has the work of this group of highly patriotic, dynamic, and talented cultural workers to a caricatured image of 'art in uniform' at its very worst. I aim to challenge this dominant stereotype and thereby contribute to a deeper, more nuanced and complex understanding of the culture of Indonesia in the 1950s and early 1960s. LEKRA's dynamism, variety, and complexity can be seen in several ways.

First, in contrast to representations of LEKRA that see it as simply parroting the interests of the PKI in the sphere of arts and culture, I argue that relations between the LEKRA cultural movement and its ally, the PKI, were fluid and complex. These relations were marked both by common commitments to advancing the interests of Indonesia's poor and working class populations, as well as by tensions and conflicts that often flowed beneath the seemingly united surface of pro-Rakyat (the people), pro-Revolusi solidarity. These tensions appear to have peaked in 1964 and 1965 with the PKI's attempt to 'deepen the red' in a number of aligned cultural organizations.

Second, while some commentators have dismissed LEKRA's artistic style as 'socialist realism', I will show how members of LEKRA and its PKI ally argued about the appropriate style and terminology for LEKRA's cultural work, appropriating notions from Soviet and Chinese sources as well as fitting them to the local Indonesian context. Inspiration and borrowings from foreign sources

2 The fact that national language drama and other forms of newer, innovative performance were seen as important by many members of Indonesia's elite and intelligentsia of the 1950-1965 period can be seen in the fact that most cultural groups in many locations devoted considerable time and attention to fostering or reporting on theatrical activities of this sort. For more evidence of this, see Budianta, Chisaan, Hatley, and Plomp in this volume.

3 Elsewhere, I have examined the work of LEKRA's national language theatre workers in North Sumatra, which was perhaps the single most active area for this kind of theatre in all of Indonesia. See Bodden 2010.

show the cosmopolitan nature of this leftist cultural movement at the same time as they raise issues of originality and plagiarism, distinctively modernist issues pondered and debated by members of LEKRA. At the same time, LEKRA theatre workers were interested in the range of popular and elite local theatre forms, both old and new, which existed within Indonesia. Out of all of this emerged an assortment of forms that leftist theatre workers were helping to shape in their attempt to find more effective modes and genres for communicating with various segments of the broader Indonesian population. In contrast to Foulcher (1986), who argued that LEKRA did not really contemplate or conceptualize a new, radical kind of aesthetics in its production of poetry and fiction, I will argue that in modern national language drama and theatrical production, Aidit's KSSR speech of August 1964, the practices of Kusni Sulang, Bambang Sokawati, and Sujud in Central Java, and the turn to '*sendratari*' and dance drama spectacles in the final year of the existence of both LEKRA and the PKI, point to a range of potentially radical aesthetic ideas that were being formulated and developed through practice on a variety of local 'stages'. This search and experimentation with a variety of new forms meant that not only did LEKRA engage with 'socialist realism' and its local variant, 'revolutionary realism', but that its performance modes were multiple and dynamic.

'SOCIALIST REALISM', 'REVOLUTIONARY REALISM', OR 'PRO-RAKYAT' CULTURE?

A charge sometimes levelled at LEKRA fiction and drama is that it promoted 'socialist realism' (Ikranegara 1996:7). Certainly, as we shall see, a number of plays written by LEKRA affiliated playwrights during 1964 and 1965, were clearly designed to take up current themes of campaigns in which the PKI was engaged, and featured a kind of romantic projection of victorious struggle led by party members or other militants.⁴ At the same time, a number of figures, including Pramoedya Ananta Toer and PKI Chairman D.N. Aidit, attempted to formulate ideas of 'socialist realism', or something akin to it, during the early 1960s. Furthermore, in its 'Five combi-

4 Several plays written around 1959 also seem to fit this mould. These plays take up the issue of the Sumatran regional PRRI rebellion. These include Bachtiar Siagian's *Batu merah lembah Merapi* (The red rock of Merapi valley) 1959, Zubir A.A.'s *Lagu subuh* (Dawn song) 1959, and Haznam Rachman's *Sendja di kebun* (Twilight in the fields) 1959.

nations' set of guidelines for progressive cultural workers, LEKRA proposed a combination of 'socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism' as the stylistic ideal for a brief period (c. 1959-early 1960s). Nonetheless, a number of former LEKRA members have asserted that LEKRA never adopted 'socialist realism' as its official style. Furthermore, some argue that what LEKRA did advocate was a combination of 'revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism'. That this latter formulation replaced 'socialist realism' in the thinking of much of LEKRA, especially after D.N. Aidit's speech at the National Conference on Revolutionary Literature and Art (Konfernas Sastra dan Seni Revolusioner, KSSR) in August 1964, seems to me to represent an Indonesian appropriation and reworking of these concepts to fit with local Indonesian understandings of their own conditions.

From the outset, the concept of 'socialist realism' was a fraught one, even among the Left in Soekarno era Indonesia. While left-nationalist writers like Pramoedyana Ananta Toer claimed that Indonesians needed and could construct 'socialist realist' works, and indeed Indonesian literature had a legacy of works that were, step by step, moving in that direction,⁵ others such as Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) Chairman D.N. Aidit argued (in 1964) that since Indonesia was not yet a socialist state, and was not yet engaged in the construction of socialism, the term 'socialist realism' was highly inappropriate for Indonesian conditions.⁶ Instead, he suggested, the term 'revolutionary realism' was more suited to Indonesia's historical situation, and would retain its validity through the construction of socialism and up to the fulfilment of a communist society (Aidit 1964).

5 Pramoedyana Ananta Toer 2003. While Pramoedyana Ananta Toer's experience of China played a significant role in shaping his ideas about literature and the writer's relationship to society, his series of lectures given in Jakarta in November and December 1962, and later collected in book form under the title, *Realisme sosialis dan sastra Indonesia* (2003) indicate that he drew many of the ideas for his theorizing of socialist realism and Indonesian literature from Gorky and Soviet writers.

6 LEKRA figures like Joebaar Ajoeb (1990:36), LEKRA's Secretary General from 1958-1965, and Kusni Sulang, denied that LEKRA ever adopted 'socialist realism' (Kusni 2007:17-8, 168) while Oei Hae Djoen (personal conversation, Jakarta 2-7-2007) claimed that 'socialist realism was something for the future'. These statements appear to contradict Foulcher's argument (1986:110-1) that 'socialist realism' was included in the 'Five combinations' guidelines for creative work formulated by LEKRA around 1959-1960. They are also at odds with Aidit's own claim in his KSSR speech that he wished to replace 'socialist realism', which he states had been used prior to 1964, with 'revolutionary realism' (Aidit 1964:59-60). It seems that Joebaar Ajoeb, Kusni Sulang, and others took LEKRA's later position, influenced by Aidit's speech, that a combination of 'revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism' was most suitable for Indonesia, as LEKRA's definitive formulation of a guiding style.

In 1964, Aidit, generally in agreement with discussions then occurring within the PKI and LEKRA,⁷ also made a number of recommendations for the form this 'revolutionary realism' should take in the modern national language theatre: plays should be realist in style, revolutionary, of high artistic quality, and, Aidit himself added, they should follow the 'class' (read 'Party') line. Furthermore, he insisted that they should take as their theme the everyday struggles of ordinary people (especially the peasants and the workers, but also, soldiers), that they should be 'popular, simple, and easily understood by the people', that they should not require expensive and cumbersome sets and props, and that they should be performed on stages in the open so as to be more accessible to greater numbers of people (Aidit 1964:32-4, 42). Aidit's vision for 'modern' 'national' theatre, at this point, was for it to be accessible, realistic, and about everyday struggles of ordinary people. There is no sense of the construction of socialism as an immediate task.

Yet both Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Aidit confirmed that whatever the term for the literature Indonesian leftists should ideally create, it was a form closely linked to the 'socialist realism' of the Soviet Union and China from which the Indonesian communists and their left-nationalist allies were drawing some of their concepts. Much like A.A. Zhdanov and Zhou Yang, authoritative figures in the defining of 'socialist realism' in the Soviet Union and China (Clark 1985; Fokkema 1965), both Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Aidit characterized this literature as combining everyday reality with the most heroic prospects – that is with a projection of the underlying dialectic of history that would suggest the coming victory of socialism. Still, both of these writers imagined their project as necessarily nationalist for the foreseeable future. Pramoedya argued that 'patriotic romanticism' was an integral part of 'socialist realism' (Pramoedya Ananta Toer 2003:69-71), and Aidit's preference for the term, 'revolutionary realism' suggests that his imaginary, too, was carefully calibrated to Indonesian circumstances, since, according to his view, 'socialist realism' would be more likely to provoke negative reactions (Aidit 1964:70-1). Furthermore, one of Aidit's key slogans (1964:25-7) for cultural work was the need to create a culture with Indonesian character (*berkepribadian dalam*

7 See for example the following articles in *Harian Rakjat*: Malmar 1964; Sabri Djamal 1964; and Didiek Sudarsono 1964. These writers make various and overlapping recommendations for modern dramas for peasants such as: they should be in local languages since knowledge of Indonesian is still limited in villages; they should be about actual problems facing farmers today; they should be able to be cheaply and easily staged on stages or in open fields and at meetings, discussions, and conferences; they should be short (20-30 minutes); and they should show the people's strength, be optimistic and so increase the peasants' morale to struggle.

kebudajaan). This notion became particularly clear in the last year before the destruction of the PKI and LEKRA, when the PKI, with Aidit's blessing one presumes, appropriated and developed further for its own purposes a newly created performance genre, the *sendratari* or artistic dance drama.

This nationalist side to LEKRA's efforts was also apparent in the memories of other LEKRA figures. For example, Joebaar Ajoeb (1990:5) maintained that the movement remained open to all styles and forms as long as the work was not anti-*rakyat*, or opposed to the August 1945 Revolution. J.J. Kusni (2007:16-7, 99-100, 104, 134-5, 139, 155, 156, 200-4) further argues that LEKRA was hardly monolithic, and that the chief element that united all its members was the idea that literature and art should serve the people and the nation. In this sense, Kusni strongly defends the notion that whatever else LEKRA might have been, its central principle was that it was a nationalist and '*kerakjatan*' (people-oriented) organization.

'REVOLUTIONARY REALIST' DRAMAS IN PRACTICE

How were these ideas realized in actual dramatic practice? I will now look at two plays written in the last years of the Soekarno era (1964-1965) and use them to illustrate the way in which a kind of 'revolutionary realism' began to take shape in dramatic texts intended to promote and reinforce several campaigns undertaken by the Indonesian Communist Party. Then I will move on to discuss how this kind of practice began to grate against the party's own line, which the party tried its best to enforce upon its most committed and loyal cultural workers as part of tactical and strategic considerations for increasing its political power and position.

Whether LEKRA and PKI theorists felt that LEKRA cultural workers should strive to create 'socialist realism', 'revolutionary realism', or simply '*kerakjatan*' works, within the realm of modern national drama, a practice that corresponded quite closely to 'revolutionary realism' was taking shape. As Kusni Sulang (J.J. Kusni) has written, one of the key problems facing LEKRA's modern national language drama and 'Music and Dance' ensembles was a shortage of repertoire (Kusni 2007:205-16). As early as the mid-1950s, LEKRA-affiliated playwrights had begun to produce modern dramas, and in 1959-1960, writers like Bachtiar Siagian, Zubir A.A., and Haznam Rachman had even responded to the regional rebellions then threatening Indonesia's unity with anti-rebellion campaign plays, some of which featured heroic communist characters.

However, the greatest increase in plays designed to meet LEKRA's need for modern dramatic repertoire and at the same time, to take up themes of specific PKI campaigns, occurred in 1964-1965. These plays,⁸ which comprise a significant percentage of all the extant modern dramas written by LEKRA writers and others sympathetic to LEKRA can usefully be analysed to ascertain what an Indonesian variant of 'revolutionary realism' had begun to look like on LEKRA's modern drama stages.

I will discuss one of these plays as more or less typical of its kind, P.H. Muid's land reform play, *Hari-hari terachir* (The last days, 1964). *Hari-hari terachir* displays several key features that are present in many of the other dramatic works of this period about land ownership and land reform. I will then provide a synopsis of another play about the land reform *aksi sepihak* (unilateral actions),⁹ Kusni Sulang's *Api di pematang* (Fire in the rice paddies, 1964), and look at the way in which the playwright and party officials came into conflict over its content. What is most interesting to investigate is the extent to which these plays converge with or depart from notions of 'revolutionary realism' then circulating, their suitability to meet Aidit's suggestions for popularizing modern drama, and the ways in which they may have been affected by growing attempts by the party to control cultural production.

P.H. Muid's¹⁰ *Hari-hari terachir* is a skillfully written 'campaign' play that pits poor peasants against a rich landlord and his accom-

8 The plays concerned in this discussion are as follows: Plays in support of land reform; P.H. Muid's *Prajurit pulang* (A soldier comes home, 1964), *Hari-hari terachir* (The last days, 1964), and *Saat-saat yang dinanti* (Long-awaited moments, 1964); K. Sunaryo's *Bebas gadai* (Free of debt, 1964) and *Sersan Suparman* (Sergeant Suparman, 1965); Utuy Tatang Sontani's *Si Kampung* (1964); and Bachtiar Siagian's *Runtuhnya sebuah desa raja* (The collapse of a feudal village, 1965); Plays attacking capitalist bureaucrats: Sugiarti Siswadi's *Tuan Hasim* (1965); P.H. Muid's *Keluarga Murbanto* (The Murbanto family, 1965); S.W. Kuntjahjo's *Terjunukirnya seorang kabir* (A capitalist-bureaucrat is overthrown, 1965); and Putu Shanti's (also often written as Shanty) *Banting stir* (Turn the wheel hard to the left!, 1965). We could also include here several scripts that I have not been able to locate: P.H. Muid's *Jalan hanya satu* (The only road) also titled *Traktor*, and about land ownership disputes and most likely written in the same period or slightly earlier, and *Lonceng kebangkitan* (Call to struggle), an anti-imperialist play in which plantation workers seize control of an British-owned plantation; Kusni Sulang's *Api di pematang* (Land reform, 1964); Albar Djumbak's *Topan di Kaltara* (Hurricane in North Kalimantan, most likely about the Konfrontasi (confrontation) with Malaysia, 1965) and possibly several others.

9 The *aksi sepihak* were 'unilateral actions' undertaken by communist and leftist farmers' groups to implement land reform laws on the books but not enforced by local government.

10 P.H. Muid was originally from Bangka. He joined LEKRA's Film Institute in Jakarta, and was in the People's Republic of China with Basuki Resobowo editing a filmed version of *Djajalah partai dan negeri* (Party and nation victorious) when the events of 30 September and 1 October 1965 occurred. He has since lived outside Indonesia. I am grateful to Sulardjo for this information. Muid was possibly LEKRA's most prolific playwright, having written at least seven plays between 1962 and 1965.

plice, the Village Chief. The play centres on the resolution of an incident in which a peasant youth, Simin, has attacked a wealthy landlord, Ndoro Singo, hitting him with his *golok* (machete) blade. As the play develops, more information is revealed and we discover that Ndoro Singo had angrily assaulted another villager, Tarban, who had begun to cultivate land he had pawned to Ndoro Singo over eight years before. Ndoro Singo strikes Tarban, claiming the field is still his, as Tarban has not paid the necessary price to redeem it. Simin tries to intercede and is in turn attacked by Ndoro Singo. It is in this altercation that Simin's blade touches Ndoro Singo briefly and harmlessly, though Ndoro Singo is quite alarmed. The local Neighbourhood Leader and Ndoro Singo threaten Simin with arrest unless Simin will apologize, a suggestion Simin resists, insisting he is in the right. Moreover, the leader of the village branch of Barisan Tani Indonesia (BTI, Indonesian Peasants' Front), Djoko, is organizing the peasants to oppose Ndoro Singo and to unilaterally implement the land reform laws, which Ndoro Singo, with the help of the Village Chief, has been resisting. Djoko supports Simin and Tarban against Ndoro Singo. The land reform law includes provision for returning all pawned lands to their owners after seven years, meaning that Ndoro Singo's claim over Tarban's land has already expired. In the end, Djoko, the police, and the land reform official arrest Ndoro Singo and the village chief for impeding the implementation of Land Reform.

Hari-hari terachir can be read on at least three levels. On the first level the story is built through several kinds of tension: curiosity about what really happened in the dispute between Ndoro Singo and Simin; tension within Simin's family, with Simin supported by his mother and criticized angrily by his father, who feels Simin and the BTI leader, Djoko, are making trouble for the village and not respecting the traditional social order; the possibility of a confrontation between Ndoro Singo's hired thugs and the peasant youth; the gradual revelation of the provisions of the land reform laws and the ways Ndoro Singo and the Village Chief have ignored them; and the eventual legal resolution of the dispute through the agency of the local police and Land-Reform Committee. The key theme at this level is the unilateral implementation of the land reform laws by the local peasants in the face of resistance by a landlord in collusion with the local Village Chief.

Djoko, Simin and the BTI peasants are branded as communists by those opposed to land reform, and they do not reject this association. Certainly, PKI slogans, tactics, and visions of the future do seem to be a strong part of the play's content. For example, we see Tarban unilaterally deciding to begin cultivating the land he had

pawned to Ngoro Singo eight years before, as he would be entitled to do after seven years according to the land reform law.¹¹ In support of Tarban's actions, and likely those of others in the months to come, Djoko, the BTI leader, is trying to convince the peasants of the need to act jointly in opposition to the wicked landlords (one of the *tujuh setan desa* or 'seven village devils' according to the PKI's analysis). A serious issue for the PKI and BTI during the course of the *aksi sepihak* throughout 1964 was retaining disciplined control of the unilateral peasant actions, a goal that cadres did not always achieve (Törnquist 1984:194-200). Muid's play presents the BTI leader, Djoko, as someone who is concerned to stay within the boundaries of the law and to restrain the anger of local peasants in order to avoid bloodshed at all costs. Thus the play presents the party and its progressive sympathizers as law-abiding citizens who are merely trying to look out for the interests of the rural poor and disenfranchised. Similarly, in criticizing Singo for never working in the *sawah* but merely exploiting those peasants who do, Simin also hints at the PKI/BTI slogan of 'land only for those who work it' (Mortimer 1974:288).

The play also presents Djoko's efforts to convince all the villagers to join the campaign for implementing the land reform laws, a goal the play was constructed to support in real life. Yet the piece shows an unresolved tension on this very point. Djoko and his supporters wonder why there are some in the village who still support the old feudal, hierarchical system. A key example of those who believe in the rightness of the old 'feudal' patron-client relationships is Simin's father, Tardjan. *Hari-hari terachir* is itself clearly designed to convince peasants that landlords are exploiters who oppress ordinary peasants, and yet, at the play's end, although Tardjan seems to see that he has been wrong about Singo, Muid's final stage direction is that Tardjan 'remains nervous/anxious' (*tetap gelisah*). Tardjan's nervous demeanour as the play closes suggests that he is still not certain that the new dispensation is correct, or that he worries about his own fate. In either case, the play ends without having fully resolved the core of doubt it set out to remove.

On a second level the play revolves around the notion of justice, with its adjunct ideas of truth and being 'in the right'. Justice must be gained through struggle against the exploitative, oppressive practices of the 'feudal' Ngoro Singo. At the same time, this justice is also given form in the legal code attached to the modern Indonesian state. I have already mentioned that the play represents Djoko

11 Törnquist 1984:189. The play itself actually states that the length of time pawned land may be held by the lender is eight years.

as respectful of the law and anxious to avoid provocation (and possible legal culpability) at the hands of Singo's hired thugs. He has been organizing the peasants to '*membasmi*' (eradicate) landlords like Singo, yet in this case, as we discover in the play's denouement, *membasmi* means surrendering Singo to the established legal system and prosecuting him in accordance with existing laws. Singo's refusal to conform to the provisions of land reform laws, his exploitation of poor peasants – as evidenced in the fact that he has, and can apparently support, three wives – his use of hired thugs to provoke violence, and his attempts to bribe the police, all clearly mark him as a criminal. On the other hand, Djoko seems on very friendly terms with the local police and land reform bureaucracy, and he is not concerned by Singo's threat to report Simin's attack to the police. *Hari-hari terachir* represents the local bureaucracy as supporting land reform, allowing Djoko and, eventually, Simin to feel calm in the certainty that they are in 'the right'. Since in actuality, local officials frequently sided heavily with landlords (Mortimer 1974:319), this element of the drama rather than providing a realistic portrayal appears rather to constitute a projection of the play's desire, its 'revolutionary romanticist' 'heroic prospects' for such institutional supports of the land reform law to assist in the law's implementation.¹²

On a third level, *Hari-hari terachir* combines traditional *halus-kasar* (refined-crude) codes for identifying good and bad characters with elements of modern realism and a kind of legal drama. For example, Djoko is always calm and speaks politely to his interlocutors, even when they treat him crudely, as in the scene where Tardjan confronts him about Simin's behaviour. In contrast, the Bekel, Ngoro Singo, and to a lesser extent, Tardjan, are quick to anger and behave in crude (*kasar*), and occasionally, violent fashion. This polarized human landscape suggests, as in a number of other LEKRA plays, a pattern of characterization that, though it may also be quite common in much melodrama and many Hollywood films, is in this case firmly rooted in local cultural forms such as the *hikayat* and *wayang*. It also suggests the centrality of elements of melodrama to the project of 'revolutionary realism' as it was constructed in Indonesia.

12 A counterpart to the formal legal system appears in Simin and his friends' agitated and spontaneous desire to arm and defend themselves against the provocations of Singo's goons. Here, it is crucial that Djoko calms Simin and urges him to stand firmly but non-violently against Singo. Thus, Muid's play, in advocating the PKI's call for discipline in carrying out *aksi sepihak*, has a young initiate learning from a mentor (Djoko) and developing from a reactive pawn of his own spontaneous anger and fear into a calmer, more assured, disciplined actor who is certain of his convictions. Perhaps inadvertently, this scenario parallels in such a manner the development of the 'positive hero' in many Soviet works of 'socialist realism' (Clark 1985:9-10).

Similarly, the elements of 'revolutionary realism' present indicate the ways in which Muid was attempting to work out such a form in response to discussions then occurring within LEKRA and the PKI (and months before Aidit detailed his views in the KSSR speech). First, the play is about a pressing contemporary issue, presenting it in a 'realist', straightforward style. It attempts to present much of the party's line at the time, including the need for disciplined control of the *aksi sepihak*. Furthermore, the heroes are able to emerge victorious and the support of the police and bureaucracy correspond to the projection of perceived current dialectical trends within society leading to the eventual victory of socialism. A review of a performance of the play by the local *Consentrasi Gerakan Mahasiswa Indonesia* (CGMI, Indonesian Student Movement Concentration) branch in Semarang published in *Harian Rakjat* further noted with approval that the play did not need an extensive set or props and would thus be easy to perform for peasants anywhere (Isnandar P. 1964:2).

Hari-hari terakhir is representative of the kind of 'revolutionary realist' plays then being written on the issues of land reform and land ownership rights.¹³ These plays frequently mobilize older patterns of characterizing good and bad characters; show the village chiefs (*lurah*) as in collusion with unscrupulous landlords; feature peasants (usually under the leadership of PKI cadres or cadres of aligned organizations such as the BTI) undertaking defence of their land or unilateral land reform actions; have heroes who are steadfast in their convictions; argue for the rule of law and are radically egalitarian; and sometimes bring soldiers into the scenario of revolutionary change. Yet there is no talk of socialism here. This play and others like it, are much more concerned with the struggle for justice in a radical nationalist context. Thus, they take up more

13 It should be noted that anti-capitalist-bureaucrat plays follow a somewhat different pattern than, for reasons of time and space, I cannot go into in this article. Suffice it to say that the focus is as often as not on the capitalist-bureaucrat villain and his household/private affairs. This leads several of these plays, especially Sugiarti Siswadi's *Tuan Hasim* and P.H. Muid's *Keluarga Murbanto* (The Murbanto family) to introduce the theme of 'the desire to be modern run amok' that results in domestic confusion, unhappiness, and/or comedy within the household of the capitalist bureaucrat villain. Similarly, both have servant or in-law figures who contribute to the comic aspects of the plays. This suggests that Siswadi and Muid may, to varying extents, have drawn on elements of *ludruk* in their creation of modern, 'revolutionary realist' dramas. Both plays do eventually feature the heroic masses who apprehend the culprits who are highly corrupt and behave 'treacherously' towards the Indonesian state, seeking to foment a coup, being involved with shady business deals, and consorting with foreign agents. This pattern is also true, to a lesser extent, for S.W. Kuntjahjo's *Terjungkirnya seorang kabir* (A capitalist bureaucrat is overthrown). In the first two plays, however, the domestic chaos is almost as central a plot element as the villainous economic and political activities of the *kabir*.

immediate, concrete issues than the construction of socialism, and in this sense they do seem to correspond to Aidit's preference for the term 'revolutionary realism' rather than 'socialist realism'.

Yet Muid's *Hari-hari terachir*, although in many ways closely approximating Aidit's prescriptions for 'revolutionary realism', does not follow the Party's line in as detailed a fashion as some party leaders might have hoped. The way the play ends – with Tardjan's anxiety featuring prominently – is one example of this. For Muid, there is little information to tell us whether this resulted in any tensions with PKI officials or cadres. However, conflict between LEKRA cultural workers and PKI cadres and officials clearly arose in the case of one other play about land reform issues. That play was Kusni Sulang's *Api di pematang*. The story of its creation and the way it was eventually brought to the stage suggests that LEKRA members, though sympathetic to the PKI's goals and campaigns, were not uniformly willing to have their cultural work strictly controlled by the PKI.

Kusni Sulang, also known as J.J. Kusni (and by several other pen-names), is a fascinating figure in the history of LEKRA's modern drama and performance efforts. Though originally of Dayak ancestry and having grown up in Central Kalimantan, Kusni Sulang made a considerable contribution to LEKRA in Yogyakarta and the province of Central Java. Coming to Yogyakarta as a student, while still in his twenties he was made head of the Yogyakarta LEKRA branch in the early 1960s (1961 or 1962 – see Kusni 2007:62, 217-8). Along with his colleagues, Daulat Simangonsong, Z. Afif, Timbul Darminto, Saptoprio and Putu Oka Sukanta,¹⁴ Kusni Sulang was incredibly active in the Yogyakarta branch of LEKRA's formal theatre group, Lembaga Seni Drama (LESDBA or Institute of Dramatic Art¹⁵), as well as in the formation of a number of mobile 'Music and Dance' troupes that represent one of several performance formats and genres with which LEKRA experimented during the Soekarno era (and which Rhoma Dwi Aria Yuliantri discusses in her contribution to this volume). The achievements of Kusni Sulang and his collaborators need to be put into perspective. Central Java, as the

14 Here it is of interest to note that the majority of this group involved in modern theatre and performance activities in Yogyakarta's LEKRA branch were non-Javanese. Daulat Simangonsong was of Batak background, Z. Afif hailed from Aceh, and Putu Oka Sukanta was Balinese. This may explain why, based in Yogyakarta, they were more interested in national language theatre and performance than making use of more tradition-based Javanese language genres to promote progressive, left-oriented change.

15 LESDBA was both the name for LEKRA's Institute of Dramatic Art which had branches in various locales, as well as the name of groups associated with those institute branches and engaged in performing the newer style drama.

heartland of Javanese culture, possessed a plethora of lively and still extremely popular performance traditions. A number of these, such as *wayang* and *ketoprak*, attracted much more concerted attention from LEKRA and the PKI because they were able to reach large numbers of ordinary peasants and urban dwellers. Given this, the constant demand for newer, modern-style performance and theatre engagements suggested by Kusni Sulang's two autobiographical works focusing on the early 1960s seems truly remarkable.¹⁶ This is especially so since many of the requests for performances came from villages as well as various city constituencies (Kusni 2007:41).

As noted above, Kusni Sulang and his collaborators were among the mainstays of the formal LESDRA theatre group. This group practiced regularly using the Santulredjo *sanggar* (studio) of the local left artists' group, Pelukis Rakyat, or the *sanggar* of the Seniman Indonesia Muda artists' group near the *alun-alun* field on the south side of the *kraton* (Sultan's palace).¹⁷ LESDRA received frequent requests for performances. Often, these performances were carried out on makeshift stages or stages erected by local residents just for that performance. Performances were typically at night and lighting was often minimal.¹⁸ The group mounted productions of plays by prominent LEKRA writers Utuy Tatang Sontani, Bachtiar Siagian, P.H. Muid, and Pramoedya Ananta Toer (Afif 1963a:3, 1963b:2; Kusni 2007:89), as well as work by their own members, Z. Afif and Putu Oka Sukanta. However, it also performed a work by Motinggo Boesje, a writer more closely associated with the Lembaga Kebudayaan Nasional (LKN, Institute of National Culture), affiliated with the Partai Nasional Indonesia (PNI, Indonesian National Party).¹⁹ These plays were performed not only in Yogyakarta, but also in surrounding areas such as Purwokerto, Klaten,

16 Those works are *Di tengah pergolakan* (In the midst of upheaval, authored under the pen name 'Helmi', 1981) and *Aku dikutuk jadi laut* (I was cursed to become the sea, under the name J.J. Kusni, 2007).

17 Kusni 2007:41, 87, 106. The association of LESDRA and the Pelukis Rakyat was confirmed in a conversation with Putu Oka Sukanta, one of the other key members of the Yogyakarta LESDRA theatre group for a few years during this period (Personal conversation with Putu Oka Sukanta, Jakarta 3-7-2007).

18 Personal conversation with Putu Oka Sukanta, Jakarta 3-7-2007.

19 A list of the plays performed by the Yogyakarta LESDRA group includes: Bakri Siregar's adaptation of Dostoyevski's *Crime and punishment*; Z. Afif's adaptation of a collection of short stories by LEKRA writers, *Api '26* (Fire of '26); Bachtiar Siagian's *Batu merah lembah Merapi* (The red rock of Merapi Valley) and *Sangkar madu* (Gilded cage); Zubir A.A.'s *Lagu subuh* (Dawn song); Dahlia's adaptation of a Pramoedya Ananta Toer novel, *Orang-orang baru dari Banten* (The newcomers from Banten); Utuy Tatang Sontani's *Si Kabayan* and *Bunga Rumah Makan* (Flower of the restaurant); Putu Oka Sukanta's *Warna merah langit cerah* (Clear red sky); Motinggo Boesje's *Barabah*; P.H. Muid's *Kemarau* (Drought) and *'Traktor' / Jalan hanya satu*; ('Tractor' / Only one road); and Tan Sin Hwat's *Galangan kapal 26* (Dockyard 26) (Afif 1963a, 1963b; Kusni 2007:89).

and Salatiga (Afif 1963a:3). Yogyakarta's LESDRA was also responsible for organizing a drama festival in which LESDRA, Teater Muslim, and Rendra's Studi Grup Teater Yogya all participated. This festival highlighted the widespread interest in modern national language theatre among differing cultural and political groupings.²⁰

Kusni Sulang seems to have been a pivotal figure in performance activities, for not only was he involved in the LESDRA theatre group, but he was also central in the development of several mobile 'music and dance' ensembles including Merah Kesumba, the Lembah Merapi ensemble in Klaten consisting of young peasants, and Bhinneka, which was composed chiefly of Chinese-Indonesian youth. Though there were itinerant troupes performing *wayang*, *sandiwara*, and possibly other forms during the Japanese Occupation and the 1945-1949 Revolution/War of Independence in Indonesia,²¹ and though LEKRA groups in Medan, Jakarta, and elsewhere developed large Ansambel Tari-Nyanyi (Music and Dance Ensembles), LEKRA Yogyakarta's mobile music and dance ensembles were still something relatively new,²² and certainly different to any other LEKRA performance undertakings. These 'mobile' ensembles were designed to be able to move quickly and to put on several variety show-style performances in one night in different locations for peasants and urban slum dwellers. Such ensembles would not only perform dances, music, and songs, but might declaim poetry or perform dramas, dance dramas (*sendratari*), and comedy routines (Kusni 2007:27-8). The central strategic

20 Kusni 2007:42-4. Sulang does not give a date for this festival. Nonetheless, given that Teater Muslim's founding dates to its first production, *Iblis* (Devil) on 25 September 1961 (Mohammad Diponegoro 1983:60), and the fact that Rendra left for study in the United States in 1964, it is most likely this festival took place sometime between late 1961 and late 1963. From late 1963 on, tensions among the various cultural groups began to increase.

21 For use of *wayang* in the Independence struggle years, see Brandon 1967:286-8. North Sumatra seems to have been an active area for the use of *sandiwara* starting in the Japanese Occupation period at the very latest, with touring groups, organized by nationalists in conjunction with the Japanese Occupation administration, who performed *sandiwara* and other kinds of acts (Bachtiar Siagian n.d.; Mohammad Said 1973:158). In the immediate post-war years, a number of *sandiwara* troupes were formed in the area, including Ahmad C.B.'s troupe, Asmara Dana, many of them engaging in anti-Dutch theatre (Tan Sooi-Beng 1993:166-70; see also Plomp in this volume).

22 According to Hui Yew-Foong (2008 and forthcoming), there were similar agit-prop groups developed between 1947 and 1953 among ethnic Chinese communities living in West Kalimantan. It is not clear whether Kusni Sulang, originally from Central Kalimantan, or his colleagues would have been aware of this. Given his willing admission of the influences on the formation of his group's ideas for the mobile 'Music and Dance' ensembles, the most likely conclusion is that this was a phenomenon isolated mainly in the ethnic Chinese communities of West Kalimantan. Thus, for the young LEKRA activists, and in real terms, this form was still relatively uncommon and new for Indonesia.

goals of creating such ensembles were to build and strengthen cultural networks among the lower levels of society, as well as, in turn, to make cultural workers aware of the people's desire for art (Kusni 2007:31-2).

Though different factors may have played a role in choosing the size and composition of *Lembah Merapi* and *Bhinneka* (40-50 members each), in the case of the *Merah Kesumba* ensemble, the selection of group members was based upon an extremely rigorous set of criteria. Kusni Sulang recalls that out of more than 300 applicants, only six were chosen. Group members had to be able to possess the stamina necessary for great mobility, to have the highest technical abilities in singing, dancing, acting, and to be able to play several instruments. They also had to have a strong understanding of politics and ideology. In addition, members of *Merah Kesumba* were also chosen to represent a variety of ethnic groups so as to symbolize the diverse ethnic composition of Indonesia itself (Kusni 2007:73-4). This in itself was an innovative strategy for the relatively homogenous, ethnically Javanese villages of Central Java.

Inspiration for this kind of performing ensemble came from several sources. Kusni Sulang and friends were greatly impressed by two Japanese touring groups, the *Zen Zhin Zha Kabuki* troupe, and a music and dance ensemble called *Shinseisaku-za* that toured Java in the early 1960s. The latter, in particular, made a strong impression on the young LEKRA activists for its energy, technical ability in creating performance decor, and ability to structure a versatile performance full of variety, mobility, and aptitude for taking up the actual problems of everyday life in its performances (Kusni 2007:28-9). The form of *Merah Kesumba*, as a smaller, mobile ensemble, was also greatly inspired by an article LEKRA members had read about a Chinese mobile performance troupe, *Ulan Uchi*, operating in Mongolia, which was composed of only a small number of performers who were skilled in various arts and extremely mobile (Kusni 2007:77).

Kusni Sulang argues that *Merah Kesumba* was well received wherever it performed because it was perceptive of local needs and conditions. The group wore all black uniforms with red scarves or handkerchiefs tied about their throats. They would usually open a performance by introducing their members to the audience as a way of suggesting the Indonesian quality of '*bhinneka*' (diversity). They would then follow the audience's appreciative applause by singing a part of their signature poem, Njoto's *Merah kesumba*,²³ before proceeding to the rest of the program. This might even

23 For the words for this poem, see Rhoma Dwi Aria Yuliantri in this volume.

include the performance of a short play by P.H. Muid or another LEKRA writer. Often, the group had few props and on some occasions even had to use charcoal for makeup and decoration. Kusni Sulang relates that a key revelation drawn from the group's experiences was that ordinary Indonesians were not '*bodoh*' (stupid) and were highly intelligent, perceptive, and able to enjoy quality art (Kusni 2007:73-7).

Merah Kesumba, as mobile agit-prop variety show, was successful enough that Kusni Sulang and his colleagues planned to form several more such groups. The mobile Ansambel Tari-Nyanyi had seemed to find a formula enabling it to convey a highly artistic form of agit-prop to the lower levels of Javanese society, most remarkably, using, at least in part, the Indonesian language rather than Javanese. Yet the outbreak of the events of 30 September and 1 October 1965, and the national tragedy that followed, prevented the founding of other such groups.

It was a very different kind of production, however, that caused friction between Kusni Sulang and PKI cadres, including members of the Central Committee. Assigned by the party to create a play about land reform and farmers' issues that would be performed by farmers, Kusni Sulang was briefed by D.N. Aidit himself, as well as other cadres, before returning to Central Java to begin work. Here, the PKI and LEKRA activists came up with a radical and innovative form for the actual creation of a performance: to base the production on the experiences of actual peasants, with a select group of peasants themselves performing most of the roles.

Having written a draft script based upon his observations during extensive *turba* (*turun ke bawah* or 'going down' to the masses) experiences, and having subsequently received criticism and suggestions from party leaders in Semarang, Kusni Sulang then went to Klaten where, working with the local party leader, he identified a group of potential peasant-actors (Helmi 1981:70-3). After rehearsals, two trial runs of the play were performed in Klaten. At the first, for party cadres and organization activists, Kusni Sulang and his actors received more suggestions for changes. Following these revisions, the second trial run was staged before an audience of over 600 peasants involved in *aksi sepihak*. The play was then taken to the Central Java provincial capital of Semarang where it was again performed twice, once for cadres and then for the general public. Finally, it was taken to Jakarta and performed at the Pasar Minggu performance hall as part of the KSSR conference in August 1964 after first being performed several times for LEKRA and PKI leaders (Helmi 1981:70-5; Kusni 2007:196). This rigorous set of performances seemed designed both to provide feedback from cadres

and to test the work's ability to communicate its messages to ordinary villagers. In this way, it can be seen as an attempt to meet the suggestion of Aidit and others that the work be simple and accessible to the masses.

Briefly, *Api di pematang* tells the story of a young Javanese peasant woman whose family is in debt to a landlord and must sell him their land. The young woman must also work for this landlord as a servant and she is forced to endure several hardships, including the landlord's attempt to rape her. When the land reform laws are passed, the young woman sees an opportunity to get her family's land back and joins the local farmers' organization. There she falls in love with the young man who leads the farmer's group. They struggle to surmount a number of obstacles thrown in their path by the landlord and the State itself. With the strong support of the other farmers under the leadership of the organization, they eventually win her land back (Helmi 1981:69-70).

From this brief description, it is evident that this play shares a number of features in common with Muid's *Hari-hari terachir* and other land reform dramas: scheming evil landlords; heroes who belong to Left or communist-affiliated organizations; the triumph of peasant forces in the end. What is most interesting is that Kusni Sulang's account of the criticisms received, and his reactions to them, show both a belief that party cadres' criticism and discussions helped in some ways to produce a better play, but also, that several criticisms made by party members seemed, according to what he had observed in his *turba* exercises, to contradict the realities of village life. Kusni Sulang felt that these criticisms, and the changes forced upon him so as to make the play match cadres' understanding of the party's line at the time, caused the play to give a distorted and false representation of the existing situation. Before *Api di pematang* had even been staged, for example, cadres told him that the work's representation of the state and landlords as exploitative and oppressive towards the peasants would have to be changed. Their reasoning: the party's theoretical line maintained that the struggle for state power was between the pro-*rakyat* and anti-*rakyat* forces, and that there were accordingly both pro-*rakyat* and anti-*rakyat* landlords as well as similar divisions within the state bureaucracy. Such a line may have well accorded with the PKI's desire to maintain its alliance with the PNI (Indonesian National Party) and NU (Nahdlatul Ulama – a traditionalist Muslim party), whose supporters included many landlords, but in Kusni Sulang's experience, and those of the peasants with whom he had lived and worked, the treatment of peasants by landlords was uniformly exploitative regardless of party affiliation (Mortimer 1974:312-22; Helmi 1981:70-2).

At first, Kusni Sulang wanted to withdraw as writer of the script if the Party insisted on such changes. The provincial party leaders refused to allow this, reaffirming that he had been assigned this task and accusingly asking him if he wanted to deviate from the Party's line. Feeling vulnerable and unprepared to challenge the Party's theory, Kusni Sulang eventually submitted (Helmi 1981:72-3). Furthermore, following the KSSR performance in Jakarta, Kusni Sulang was accused by Sudisman (a member of the PKI's Politburo) of being a 'revisionist', based on Sudisman's analysis of even the revised *Api di pematang*. Kusni Sulang was so angry he refused to have his picture taken with Sudisman and Aidit (Kusni 2007:196-7). A similar process of criticism, to which Kusni Sulang objected, was repeated with his next play, *Tanah Ketaon* (Land at Ketaon). Originally to be performed with the same group of peasant actors from Klaten, the work was later given to one of the 'Music and Dance' ensembles, the Chinese-Indonesian group, Bhinneka, but never performed because of the events of September/October 1965. Again, Kusni Sulang felt humiliated by the experience and regretted the fact that he did not have a strong enough grasp of theory or enough belief in his own principles to resist the PKI's pressure (Helmi 1981:76-8).

TENSIONS BETWEEN LEKRA AND THE PKI

Kusni Sulang's experiences were but one piece of a larger fabric of tension then arising between the PKI and LEKRA. In 1964, according to a number of accounts, the PKI sought to convince many sympathetic and affiliated organizations to declare themselves 'communist' organizations. LEKRA was not the only organization subjected to this appeal. As Wieringa (2002:192-212) recounts, the women's organization, Gerakan Wanita Indonesia (Gerwani, Indonesian Women's Movement) came under much the same pressure at this time, as may also have been the case for the student organization, CGMI, and other organizations.²⁴

LEKRA rejected this step. Oei Hae Djoen,²⁵ a member of PKI at the time and one of eleven LEKRA Central Secretariat members, recalls that although the majority of members of LEKRA's Central Secretariat were also members of the Communist Party, LEKRA's

24 Personal conversation with Oei Hae Djoen, Jakarta, 2-7-2007.

25 Variant spellings of his name include Oey Hae Djoen, Oey Hai Djoen, Oey Hay Djoen and Oei Hai Djoen.

Secretariat repeatedly refused to officially become a communist organization. As Oei recalled:

And there was resistance to this. As in LEKRA, for example, where I was involved, LEKRA had a Central Secretariat. It consisted of eleven people, you know [...] The Chair was Joebaar Ajoeb, the Vice-Chairs were Henk Ngantung and Sudharnoto. The rest were members of the Secretariat. Including myself. Now, of these eleven people, the majority were communists. But not all of them. The majority were PKI, including Njoto, you see. Now, we were invited repeatedly to discuss by the party, by the PKI, whether we would change LEKRA to become *pronounced onderbouw*. We refused. The majority of us refused. I was among those who refused. Indeed, I felt that you can't do that, command artists like that. So we refused.²⁶

LEKRA's former Secretary General, Joebaar Ajoeb, has also stressed this point, even arguing that Njoto, himself then a member of the PKI's Central Committee, had voted with the majority of the Secretariat in rejecting the PKI's initiative (Joebaar Ajoeb 1990:5-6). Martin Aleida maintains that Hr. Bandaharo (Banda Harahap), a LEKRA and PKI member and PKI Central Committee member in charge of cultural matters, also did not agree that LEKRA should be officially 'red'.²⁷

The reason for LEKRA's refusal²⁸ most likely followed Oei Hae Djoen's line of thought. Many LEKRA members, sympathetic as they were to some of the key issues taken up by the PKI, strongly resisted the idea that writers and artists should be subordinated to direct command by the party. Their comments suggest they viewed artists and artistic creation as something inherently outside the realm of direct political control, sympathetic as particular artists might be to particular parties or causes. Kusni Sulang, for instance,

26 Dan ini terjadi perlawanan. Seperti di Lekra saja, di mana saya ada, Lekra itu ada Sekretariat Pusat. Itu kan terdiri dari sebelas orang [...] Ketuanya, Joebaar Ajoeb, Wakil Ketuanya Henk Ngantung dan Sudharnoto. Kemudian yang lainnya anggota Sekretariat. Termasuk saya. Nah, di antara sebelas orang ini, sejumlah besar itu memang PKI. Tapi ndak semua PKI. Bagian besar PKI, termasuk Njoto yang begitu, iya. Nah, kita berkali-kali memang diajak diskusi oleh Partai, oleh PKI, untuk mengubah Lekra itu menjadi *pronounced onderbouw*. Kami menolak. Bagian besar dari kami menolak. Saya juga termasuk yang menolak. Saya memang berpendapat, tidak bisa, seniman itu direger begitu. Jadi kita menolak. Personal conversation with Oei Hae Djoen, Jakarta, 2-7-2007.

27 Personal conversation with Martin Aleida, Jakarta 23-7-2007.

28 In separate conversations, former LEKRA members Putu Oka Sukanta, Martin Aleida, and Amaran Ismail Hamid, have all affirmed this account. Personal conversation with Putu Oka Sukanta, Jakarta, 3-7-2007; Martin Aleida, Jakarta, 23-7-2007; Amaran Ismail Hamid, Jakarta, 3-7-2007.

has related that he and many members of Yogyakarta's LESDRA had an extreme dislike of '*main perintah*' (order giving) and '*komandoisme*' (having to create on command) in the arts. Kusni Sulang himself had even written an article published in a Semarang daily newspaper stating as much, an act for which he was strongly criticized as 'liberal' (Kusni 2007:99-100, 197). Similarly, Amarzan Ismail Hamid stated that:

And as far as I was concerned, if the Party started interfering directly in LEKRA's organization, then it would no longer be of any interest to me [...]. Why? It meant that in my analysis it would be rather authoritarian, you see. Rather different than the character of arts workers.²⁹

The KSSR conference, held from 27 August-2 September 1964, seemed an attempt to pressure LEKRA to accept PKI leadership in the arts, or failing that, to create a basis for the PKI to build an organization more amenable to Party direction. It was at this conference that Aidit gave his speech on literature and the arts, and prominent LEKRA figures such as Hr. Bandaharo (Banda Harahap)³⁰ and Bachtiar Siagian³¹ gave speeches of welcome. Many other LEKRA members attended and participated in KSSR sponsored competitions to write plays, short stories, criticism, and poetry in the following months.

A number of LEKRA activists were also convinced that the PKI had groomed S.W. Kuntjahjo, a poet and playwright who had long been writing about workers' culture, to replace Joebaar Ajoeb as Secretary General of LEKRA in the event that LEKRA did declare itself a communist organization.³² This suspicion was most likely fostered by the fact that Kuntjahjo was Chair of the KSSR. Fears about the possible consequences of direct party control were further heightened by the proceedings of the first anniversary of the KSSR in August 1965. Oei Hae Djoen asserted that one part of the anniversary celebrations held in the SBKA building near Manggarai Station included an '*apel seniman*' (artists' roll call/muster).³³

29 Dan buat saya, kalau Partai campur tangan langsung ke organisasi Lekra, itu sudah bukan hal yang menarik lagi[...]. Kenapa, artinya dalam rumusan saya agak otoriter, iya. Agak berbeda dengan karakter pekerja seni. Personal conversation with Amrazan Ismail Hamid, Jakarta, 3-7-2007.

30 'KSSR dibuka di Istana Negara', *Harian Rakjat*, 28-9-1964.

31 'Sedikit tjabatatan dari K.S.S.R.', *Harian Rakjat*, 6-10-1964.

32 Personal conversation with Amrazan Ismail Hamid, Jakarta, 3-7-2007; Putu Oka Sukanta, Jakarta, 3-7-2007.

33 Personal conversation with Oei Hae Djoen, Jakarta, 2-7-2007; Martin Aleida, Jakarta, 23-7-2007.

Such an event, if indeed it occurred, struck some LEKRA members as demeaning to arts workers in its suggestion of an almost military regimentation. Amrazan Ismail Hamid contends that the Central Secretariat of LEKRA was even preparing to dissolve LEKRA if the PKI attempted to force LEKRA to declare itself a communist organization.³⁴

Still, the participation of many LEKRA members in KSSR and its activities suggests that among LEKRA members, there was significant support for KSSR. That LEKRA's Central Secretariat refused to officially declare LEKRA a communist organization would appear to indicate, however, that LEKRA's central leadership preferred to keep LEKRA aligned but separate, while also supporting the PKI's own efforts at building a second, overlapping cultural organization based upon the KSSR.

SENDRATARI AND THE PKI'S DJAJALAH PARTAI DAN NEGERI (PARTY AND NATION VICTORIOUS)

Sendratari, or Seni-Drama-Tari (artistic dance drama) in the form of the 'Ramayana Ballet' was first created and performed at Prambanan in Java in the early 1960s, with the form receiving rapid development in Bali after 1961 (DeBoer 1989:181, 1996). What was new about this form was the fact that the narrative was told completely through dance and music, with no dialogue. Later Balinese versions added a *jurur tandak* (singer) who, sitting with the *gamelan* orchestra, vocalized bits of dialogue and literary quotations that reinforced and partially explained the pantomime of the dancers (DeBoer 1996:160). The interest of the PKI and LEKRA in *sendratari* as a form for conveying socialist and leftist messages seems to have mushroomed in late 1963 and 1964, culminating in May, 1965 in the spectacular dance drama relating the history of the Indonesian Communist Party, *Djajalah partai dan negeri*.

Though LEKRA and the PKI began to take an interest in *sendratari* in 1963-1964, the ground for this interest appears to have been fertilized well before the *sendratari* form was itself created. According to Hersri Setiawan, one of the main reasons cultural workers of the Left began to pursue the development of this new dance drama form for their own purposes may have been the popular success of the Central Javanese choreographer, Sujud, with his dance drama *Blandjo wurung* (Can't make ends meet) which was created and per-

34 Personal conversation with Amrazan Ismail Hamid, Jakarta, 3-7-2007.

formed circa 1955-1956. This dance drama, taking as its theme the spiraling prices of goods, perceived as resulting from the incompetence and malfeasance of government officials who were in league with foreign capitalists, began to take shape around a song composed by Sujud (possibly in collaboration with his wife), *Blandjo wurung*. Dance was added to make the piece visually communicative, and since the song included elements of dialogue, a minimal, fragmentary libretto was also constructed for the piece. The song lyrics and the dialogue were in Javanese, and gamelan accompaniment provided the music.³⁵ This fitted with both LEKRA's and the PKI's interest in building a 'national culture' based on what it considered to be 'good'³⁶ traditions and the revolutionary present, as well as the idea of some leftist drama observers that theatre should be in local languages so as to more easily connect with larger audiences.

Following Sujud's groundbreaking work of the mid-1950s, then, the new *sendratari* form further encouraged LEKRA choreographers to create more dance dramas in the *sendratari* style relying on dance movement and music without dialogue: Drs. Sunardi created a dance drama (without song), titled *Aksi enampat* (Action '64), on the theme of the unilateral actions by peasant groups to implement the government's land reform laws. This particular work featured Sunardi himself as the demon, Rahwana, personified in a landlord, while Bambang Sokawati danced the role of the politically conscious peasant. The piece was taken on tour to Vietnam, China, and North Korea.³⁷ The KSSR conference of August 1964 also featured a *sendratari* titled *Saidjah dan Adinda*, based on Bakri Siregar's adaptation of a fragment from Multatuli's *Max Havelaar*. This piece was choreographed by Bambang Sokawati, with musical accompaniment by another Yogyakarta LEKRA member, Djoni Trisno. According to a review of the work appearing in *Harian Rakjat*, the lead dancers displayed some ability to base their dance movements in classical Javanese dance, while the reviewer found it difficult to say which, if any, regional dance tradition many of the others drew upon, noting only that there seemed to be some elements of Melayu dance style visible (Afif 1964:3). Here, we find LEKRA activists searching for the appropriate regional traditions upon which

35 Personal conversation with Setiawan, Jakarta, 27-6-2007; and email communication, 1-3-2010.

36 Though never explicitly defined, Aidit's KSSR address suggests that progressive values include anti-feudalism, anti-imperialism, and pro-people stances. The same criteria would likely also apply to separating out 'good' traditions from those that needed to be changed or replaced.

37 Personal conversation with Setiawan, Jakarta, 27-6-2007.

to build dynamic modern dance dramas. This was another indication of the 'critical nativism', or selective search for an indigenous cultural basis for modern Indonesian culture undertaken within LEKRA, as well as by other cultural groups of the era. However, the fact that this *sendratari* was presented at the KSSR, the PKI's attempt to force LEKRA into a more subordinate organizational alliance, hinted at the PKI's interest in this form as well, and foreshadowed its colossal *sendratari* production of 1965, *Djajalah partai dan negeri*.³⁸

Dance drama was possibly so alluring to the PKI and some members of LEKRA because it seemed to fit with Aidit's idea of creating simple, accessible works, since dance movements allowing for direct visual expression of actions and themes could make a less complex text possible. This would in turn be combined with music and song, media capable of significantly heightening a work's emotional content, to produce stronger pathos and heroic effects. An additional stimulus for the creation of *Djajalah partai dan negeri* may have come from the knowledge many leftists would have had of the Chinese dance drama spectacle, *Dongfang Hong* (The East is red, 1964), which represented the history of the Chinese Communist Party in larger than life, heroic style.

Djajalah partai dan negeri was performed for three consecutive nights from 26-28 May 1965, as part of the celebrations of the PKI's 45th anniversary. The play was performed in the Istora Stadium in Senayan and drew crowds numbering in the thousands for each night. The production was said to involve over 150 dancer/actors, 400 singers, 30 musicians, and a stage crew of 50.³⁹ Briefly, this *sendratari* claimed to be a representation of the history of the Indonesian Communist Party from its inception in 1920 to May of 1965. Slide projectors were used to project images and settings onto a huge backdrop behind the stage (Banda Harahap 1965b:2) and the musical score was anchored in a number of patriotic and commu-

38 Comments made by Banda Harahap in relation to *Djajalah partai dan negeri* confirm this impression. According to Harahap, 'Work on modern *sendratari* with themes of the revolutionary present, in this field, in this case, is serious Party work and not merely for serving up entertainment'. ('Kerdja sendratari modern dengan tema kekinian jang revolusioner, dibidang ini, dalam hal ini, adalah kerdja Partai jang serius, bukan sekedar untuk menghidangkan hiburan.'). See 'Tingkatkan dan kembangkan "Djajalah Partai dan Negeri"', *Harian Rakjat*, 6-6-1965.

39 See 'Pers ibukota tentang "Djajalah Partai dan Negeri"', *Harian Rakjat*, 13-6-1965. The large numbers of people involved came from a variety of leftist organizations including LEKRA, CGMI, IPPI (Ikatan Persatuan Pelajar Indonesia, League of Indonesian Youth and Students), Pemuda Rakjat (the PKI's youth wing), Gerwani, and two large choral ensembles, Maju Tak Gentar from Medan and Gembira from Jakarta. In addition, a number of the dancers were members of the PPI (Permusyawaratan Pemuda Indonesia, Indonesian Youth Deliberation, the youth wing of the Chinese-Indonesian organization, BAPERKI (*Harian Rakjat*, 30-5-1965; and personal conversation with Hersri Setiawan, Jakarta, 27-6-2007).

nist songs such as the national anthem (*Indonesia Raya*), *Fajar menyingsing* (The dawn is breaking), the *Internasionale, Nasakom bersatu* (Nasakom Unite) and Sundanese popular songs.⁴⁰ Folk dances like the Madurese *Tari nelayan* (Fishermen's dance) were incorporated into the choreography, as were several new creations by the choreographic team of Sujud, Basuki Resobowo, and Atjoen, namely the *Tari buruh* (Workers' dance), *Tari tani* (Farmers' dance), *Tari bambu runcing* (The sharpened bamboo pike dance), and *Tari bendera* (Flag dance).⁴¹ Each of the performance's four acts contained three scenes, with each scene ending in a tableau. However, unlike many *sendratari*, *Djajalah partai dan negeri* did contain a verbal component: Introductions preceded each of the four acts in order to give a brief synopsis of the historical events which the dancers would present in that section of the performance.⁴²

The plot of the performance follows the rather linear trajectory of Indonesian nationalism, highlighting at every possible point the contributions of the PKI. Beginning with the founding of the party, the first act culminates in the rebellions of 1926 and their harsh suppression by the Dutch colonial government. Act two relates the anti-colonial actions of 'Ship Seven' in 1933 and portrays the PKI as central in organizing an anti-fascist front from 1935 on, and in carrying out underground resistance to the Japanese. Act three concerns the heroic independence struggle against the Dutch and laments the Round Table Agreement of November 1949 as an unfavourable agreement for Indonesia that was masterminded by the United States. It suggests that the PKI led opposition to the agreement, an opposition that later became the backbone of Indonesian anti-imperialism. The final act focuses on the 'new path' taken by the PKI under the Aidit group, though interestingly, only Aidit himself is named. It depicts the PKI's startling success in the 1955 general elections, features the Party's efforts in 'defeating' the 'anti-unity, anti-democracy, and anti-Communist' Masjumi-PSI coalition in that poll, and promises that the PKI will work to carry to completion the demands of the 1945 revolution. The performance ends with a short piece of poetry written by Aidit, including the line, *Djajalah partai dan negeri*, from which the title of the piece is derived.

40 'Pers ibukota tentang "Djajalah Partai dan Negeri"', *Harian Rakjat*, 13-6-1965.

41 Banda Harahap 1965a:4. On this point see also 'Pers ibukota tentang "Djajalah Partai dan Negeri"', *Harian Rakjat*, 13-6-1965.

42 The synopses of each act are printed in 'Djajalah partai, djajalah negeri', *Harian Rakjat*, 30-5-1965. The use of the introductions to preface and explain what will happen in each act is noted in the *Bintang Timur* review reprinted in 'Pers Ibukota tentang "Djajalah partai dan negeri"', *Harian Rakjat*, 13-6-1965.

There was a fair amount of commentary on the performance in the PKI's own news daily, *Harian Rakjat*, as well as in several other Jakarta dailies, some of which were also reprinted in *Harian Rakjat* on 13 June. In the 6 June edition, Banda Harahap (Hr. Bandaharo), the Party Central Committee's Head of Cultural Affairs commented that *Djajalah partai dan negeri* was only an initial effort and that it would pave the way for the production of bigger and better quality works in the future. He affirmed that the party was very serious about developing the *sendratari* form, and not simply for the purpose of entertainment. Harahap saw *sendratari* as a 'tool of our struggle' ('*alat perjuangan kita*', Banda Harahap 1965a:1, 4).

Sympathetic media, such as *Bintang Timur* (aligned with the leftist party, PARTINDO) and *Pantjawarda* heaped lavish praise on the production. Both papers stressed that the work was a strong contribution to building a Indonesian culture with its own character ('*berkepribadian dalam kebudayaan*').⁴³ Of the reviews reprinted in *Harian Rakjat*, only that from *Angkatan Bersendjata* gave a negative review, stressing that the dance drama did not possess much emotional force, and turning from aesthetics to content, that it did not present an accurate portrayal of the proclamation of independence.⁴⁴

In mid-July, Banda Harahap wrote a reply to the *Angkatan Bersendjata* in which he stressed that the scene of the proclamation did not include a reading of the entire document, but was only intended to symbolically represent the act of the proclamation (Banda Harahap 1965b:2). Harahap then discussed the weaknesses of the production and called for a more careful consideration of which local dance and movement traditions would be most appropriate for future *sendratari*. For *Djajalah partai dan negeri*, he suggested that Balinese and Malay dance movements would work best as they expressed dynamism and joy respectively (Banda Harahap 1965b). Two things were important in Harahap's response. First, that the issue of the representation of the proclamation had become a point of contention, and second, that PKI and LEKRA cultural workers were seriously discussing how best to create an authentic postcolonial culture using traditional and folk forms already available within Indonesia.⁴⁵

These issues also appeared in the comments of some individual LEKRA members over 40 years later. Hersri Setiawan described with

43 'Pers ibukota tentang "Djajalah Partai dan Negeri"', *Harian Rakjat*, 13-6-1965.

44 'Pers ibukota tentang "Djajalah Partai dan Negeri"', *Harian Rakjat*, 13-6-1965.

45 The centrality of this issue was confirmed by Bambang S.D. (Most likely Bambang Sokawati D.) (1965) in a later article, 'Sedikit tentang "Djajalah partai dan negeri": Choreografi jang berkepribadian sebagai aspek penting', *Harian Rakjat*, 13 June 1965.

great interest the differences in movement styles between a later Jakarta performance (in which many of the dancers were of Indonesian-Chinese background and used dance movements reminiscent of Chinese acrobatics) and later performances held in Central Java.⁴⁶ Less positively, and more in line with Harahap's comments, Amarzan Ismail Hamid criticized the basis for dance movements in the dance drama. He felt Indonesia had no national ballet or dance company with a solid foundation in local dance movement, making the movements of the dancers a *gado-gado* (hotchpotch).⁴⁷

The presentation of the proclamation also raised doubts and criticism among individual LEKRA members. Martin Aleida argued that in the proclamation of independence scene the *sendratari* left out Mohammad Hatta's name as one of the co-proclaimers of independence, mentioning only President Soekarno. For Aleida, this was *konyol* (ill-mannered, stupid, crazy), something that shouldn't have been done and that served no good purpose.⁴⁸ Oei Hae Djoen, himself a member of the Communist Party, characterized this omission as a 'communist distortion'.⁴⁹

But LEKRA members also had other reservations about the production. Amarzan Ismail Hamid had been in China in 1964 and seen a performance of the colossal dance drama, *Dongfang Hong*. For him, *Djajalah partai dan negeri*, first performed in May 1965, seemed objectionable as a clear imitation.⁵⁰ Similarly, Sulardjo, a member of the stage crew of Medan's LESDRA theatre group, was surprised and disappointed that *Djajalah partai dan negeri* appeared to be in large part a copy (*jiplakan*) of *Dongfang Hong*, a film of which he had seen.⁵¹ Here, 'originality' proved an important component in the artistic ideology and critical assessments of some LEKRA members. This is in line with Foulcher's general argument that many cultural workers within LEKRA, and the LEKRA movement itself, shared many aspects of aesthetic ideology with their non-Left and anti-communist cultural rivals.

But these criticisms, some of which appear to have been voiced at the time of the preparations for and performance of *Djajalah*

46 Personal conversation with Setiawan, Jakarta, 27-6-2007.

47 Personal conversation with A.I. Hamid, Jakarta, 3-7-2007.

48 Personal conversation with Aleida, Jakarta, 23-7-2007.

49 Personal conversation with Oei, Jakarta, 2-7-2007.

50 Amarzan Ismail Hamid felt the same way about Aidit's KSSR speech of August 1964, much of which he felt was simply an imitation of Mao's Yanan Forum talks. Oei Hae Djoen also felt Aidit's KSSR talk was an imitation. The word used was the derogatory '*jiplakan*'. Personal conversation with A.I. Hamid, Jakarta, 3-7-2007.

51 Personal conversation with Chalik Hamid and Sulardjo, Duivendrecht, Netherlands, 24-2-2007.

partai dan negeri, did not prevent even some of these more critical LEKRA members from admiring the impressive scale and grand spectacle of the event. Nor did it keep the event from attracting attention and inspiring more experimentation. As noted, thousands of people watched the *sendratari* over its three night run in Jakarta, and many media reviews were highly positive. Furthermore, a very similar kind of *sendratari* was performed in Medan two nights later, on May 30th. Created by theatre actor and director Sy. Andjasmara and dancer Asmaralda, this production, *Mekarlah partai di mana-mana* (The party blossoms everywhere), also portrayed the history of the Communist Party in Indonesia and involved a similarly large number of dancers and choral singers.⁵² *Djajalah partai dan negeri* itself was restaged at least twice after the May performances. According to Hersri Setiawan, the production was performed in Semarang with a cast of dancers from Java and was thus strongly influenced by Javanese dance movement styles, and again at the anniversary of the KSSR in late August 1965 in Jakarta.⁵³ Finally, on 3 September 1965, the PPI included two *sendratari* in its Malam Kesenian Tavip (Year of living dangerously Arts Night), both of which were performed by the Medan branch of PPI. These dance dramas, *Butet* and *Membangun dunia baru* (Building a new world) presented respectively the 'patriotic struggle of people of the Sumatran region of Tapanuli', and a satirical commentary on the United Nations, from which Indonesia had withdrawn, as tool of the United States.⁵⁴ But time was running out for experimentation. Within little over a month of the KSSR anniversary and the PPI *sendratari*, LEKRA, the PKI, PPI, and other leftist organizations were overtaken by the events of 30 September and 1 October, their achievements largely erased from history, living on only in the spectral form of a frightening cultural bogeyman.

CONCLUSION

LEKRA's modern national language theatre practices were a crucible for testing the fit for Indonesia of different ideologies and types of performance. Not only did Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Aidit, and others argue over 'socialist realism' and 'revolutionary realism', but playwrights such as P.H. Muid and Kusni Sulang actually set out to

52 'Sendratari "Mekarlah Partai di-mana-mana" sukses di Medan', *Harian Rakjat*, 20-6-1965.

53 Personal conversation with Hersi Setiawan, Jakarta, 27-6-2007.

54 See 'Sendratari "Butet" dan "Membangun dunia baru"', *Harian Rakjat*, 5-10-1965.

create dramatic works conforming in many respects to a 'revolutionary realist' aesthetic vision. All of these notions and forms were inspired by precursors and contemporaries in the Soviet Union and China, but achieved uniquely Indonesian emphases in the hands of LEKRA and PKI cultural workers and thinkers. Furthermore, LEKRA cultural workers like Kusni Sulang, Sujud, Sunardi, and Bambang Sokawati in Central Java marked LEKRA's contribution to the development of several new performance practices in Indonesia. Sulang was instrumental in both the creation of mobile 'Music and Dance Ensembles', and in the first effort to create drama based upon peasant experiences and performed chiefly by peasants themselves. Sujud, Sunardi, and Bambang Sokawati endeavoured to develop the new *sendratari* dance drama into a form that could clearly convey revolutionary content to large audiences of ordinary Indonesians. Nationalism and the creation of a 'culture with national character' were central features in these forms, sharing centre stage with glorification of the Communist Party.

Nonetheless, many members of LEKRA were critical of their ally, the PKI, in so far as it attempted to control their cultural movement. LEKRA seems to have been deeply divided over this, as can be seen in both Kusni Sulang's handling of party criticism of *Api di pematang*, and LEKRA and its members' split reactions to the KSSR. The production of the colossal *sendratari Djajalah partai dan negeri*, an attempt to duplicate the Chinese dance drama *Dongfang Hong*, also showed this ambivalent reaction. *Dongfang Hong* may well have helped further stimulate the PKI's and LEKRA's interest in developing *sendratari*, and many LEKRA members participated in mounting *Djajalah partai dan negeri*. Yet other LEKRA activists derided the colossal Indonesian *sendratari* as a 'jiplakan', a plagiarism or copy of the earlier Chinese spectacle. In this way, *Djajalah partai dan negeri* also demonstrated the way in which ideas from outside Indonesia could elicit both creative and highly critical responses.

The tragic events that began on 30 September and 1 October 1965 and continued on into 1966, saw most Indonesian leftist organizations destroyed, their members slaughtered, imprisoned, or trapped in foreign exile. One tragedy had become the excuse for a much larger human cataclysm.⁵⁵ It is impossible to know where the experiments undertaken by LEKRA or the PKI in the realm of theatre and performance may eventually have led, given more time, or whether the tensions between LEKRA's cultural movement and the Communist Party might have grown into an open rift. Still, the modern national theatre of LEKRA and the PKI in the

55 See Roosa (2007) for an extensive discussion of this point.

first half of the 1960s in Central Java, as well as in other locations such as North Sumatra, was highly dynamic and varied. Through debates about the best forms for conveying revolutionary messages, and experiments with an array of performance genres and styles, this theatre challenges many previous accounts of LEKRA's cultural work during this period as uninteresting, stylistically separate from, or unremittingly antagonistic to other cultural groups of different ideological persuasions. It also shows the robust internationalism of the LEKRA movement, the complex relations LEKRA developed with other cultural groups and the Indonesian Communist Party, and the enormous creativity of LEKRA theatre workers.⁵⁶

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