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# BETAWI MODEREN: SONGS AND FILMS OF BENYAMIN S FROM JAKARTA IN THE 1970S—FURTHER DIMENSIONS OF INDONESIAN POPULAR CULTURE

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A remarkable figure in Indonesian popular culture from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s was the Betawi singer and film comedian, Benyamin S (1939–95). Benyamin S celebrated in his songs and films the lives of the Betawi poor, the Betawi being the ethnic group widely referred to as Jakarta's original inhabitants. In the 1970s, Benyamin S gained fame for his numerous songs and film roles. For his music career, he was known particularly for his adaptation of a traditional Betawi musical form, *Gambang Kromong*, into a modernized form, *Gambang Moderen* (which included some notable improvised duet singing). For his cinematic career, Ben starred in some forty-seven comedy films between 1970 and 1978, quite a few of which he scripted and co-directed, or which were produced by his own production company, PT Jiung Film.

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Ben's importance in Indonesian cinema waned in the 1980s, but his career as a singer continued to grow and, in 1990, Ben founded the Betawi Radio station "Bens Radio." He returned to national preeminence as a charismatic "movie star" when he appeared as a character in the long-running television series *Si Doel Anak Sekolah* (Educated Doel), which also featured the Betawi milieu, and in which, for the first two seasons (before his death in September 1995), Ben played the father of the central character, Doel.

In 2008, there appeared an impressive study of that very television show, *Si Doel Anak Sekolah*.<sup>2</sup> Using a range of theoretical frameworks and methodologies, and copious interviews, Klarijn Loven's comprehensive study explores the "mediatization" of the Betawi in this relatively recent television series. It also explores related adaptations of the original story of Doel, beginning, briefly, with Sjuman Djaya's film adaptations in the 1970s, and, later, providing an extended discussion of the exploitation and deployment of the Doel character in advertising and quiz shows, following the success of the television series in the 1990s. Loven explores the ways in which different characters in the series use the varieties of the Betawi language (Jakarta Malay) and varieties of spoken Indonesian. For example, the book considers Benyamin's use of traditional Urban or Central Jakarta Malay in contrast to the use of Rural Jakarta Malay by some other Betawi characters. The comprehensibility of Jakarta-based Betawi dialect to people from such areas as Central Java and Bali (which have their own regional languages, but where the Indonesian language is commonly used in public situations), and the impact of the TV series on spoken Indonesian generally are examined, using carefully designed testing methods. The author provides a production history and documents the series' reception, including the debates around Betawi language and culture that the show provoked in Indonesia. While *Si Doel Anak Sekolah* continued for nearly another eight years after Ben's death, the program's producer, Rano Karno, affirms that he would not have embarked on the series in the first place if Benyamin had not agreed to appear in it.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to Loven's book, this article explores in some detail Benyamin's work two decades earlier, in the first wave of the popularization of the Betawi experience, an early instance of an Indonesian national star emerging because he communicated a regional experience. Our more limited study aims—through an analysis of some key songs and films—to illustrate the complexity of the perceptions of this popular artist and those of his collaborators. The song format—and particularly improvised songs—allowed for a degree of complex personal expression that is not possible in the more staid and institutionally controlled format of a television series. Moreover, while Ben's numerous, cheaply made B-movies of the 1970s might be criticized for their low production values, Benyamin's rapid, sometimes anarchic, improvisatory style of working, which built on the loose framework provided by the script, gave him, in effect, a degree of control over individual scenes rarely possible in a scripted TV series.

This article explores the significance of Benyamin S within Indonesian popular culture by investigating a number of related issues that appear in his songs and films

<sup>2</sup> Klarijn Loven, *Watching Si Doel: Television, Language, and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

of the 1970s. These issues include his representation of Betawi communities, particularly communities of the poor; his creative use of *bahasa Betawi* as a medium for humor and as a language most expressive of community; and his adaptation of a traditional Betawi musical form, *Gambang Kromong*, into a modernized form, *Gambang Modern*, together with his mixing of a range of Western styles of popular music into his songs. Here we place emphasis particularly on his duets, and question the extent to which they are expressive of Betawi culture, and not simply of Ben's own talent for improvisation.<sup>4</sup> Later in the article, we describe how the Betawi are represented in key films and explore the implicit critique, in some Benjamin S films, of social changes occurring at the time of rapid economic development in Jakarta under Suharto's New Order in the 1970s. We relate Ben's critiques to his vision of the Betawi. Benjamin's films often portray and critique corruption, and, in the process, offer a wider critique of New Order cultural changes, which, in the films, were characterized by new, impersonal management systems for conducting business, linked to forms of bureaucratic regulation that, not surprisingly, favor big business, and which are depicted as having an impact on the lives, the rights, and the personal interactions of the Betawi. We also address at some length, as integral to Ben's work, his ironic engagement with icons of Western popular culture. That engagement occurs occasionally in his songs, but most frequently in his films, which, it will be argued, are semiotically rich, because they often recontextualize genres and characters from Western popular culture into an Indonesian milieu—for example, a Tarzan movie set in Jakarta, as in *Tarsan Kota* (A Tarzan of the City, 1974), with the humor of those movies derived from a recognition of the clash of values that ensues.

Benjamin S, of course, was a New Order artist in the sense that his public career took place almost entirely within the New Order period. Unlike the other major emerging singer of the 1970s, Rhoma Irama, whose songs and films were explored in an article in *Indonesia* by William Frederick in 1982, no study has appeared in English on this most creative period of Benjamin's work.<sup>5</sup> Nor is Benjamin S mentioned by Krishna Sen and David Hill in their broad survey of Indonesian popular music in the context of the politics of the pro-Western, but highly repressive, New Order period.<sup>6</sup> James Siegel has suggested that the early New Order period was also the period in which musical celebrities (pop stars), or celebrities of any kind, first appeared in

<sup>4</sup> The *orang Betawi* have been identified by many scholars as the descendants of those brought to work as free settlers or as slaves in Batavia in the seventeenth century, when the area was a Dutch East India Company settlement. For information regarding the formation and history of the "Betawi" ethnic group, see: Lance Castles, "The Ethnic Profile of Jakarta," *Indonesia* 3 (April 1967): 153–204; Susan Abeyesekere, *Jakarta: A History* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 64–71 and passim; and C. D. Grijns, *Jakarta Malay: A Multi-dimensional Approach to Spatial Variation* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1991). A discussion of whether the Betawi were, in fact, descended from newcomers, and predominantly slaves, is to be found in Ridwan Saidi, "Sejarah Betawi," in *Betawi dalam Perspektif Kontemporer: Perkembangan, Potensi dan Tantangannya*, ed. Yasmine Zaki Shahab (Jakarta: Lembaga Kebudayaan Betawi, 1997), pp. 1–34. For information on Betawi performance traditions and on Betawi communities still supporting these traditions, see: S. M. Ardan, "Perkembangan Kesenian Betawi; Prospek dan Kendalanya dalam Aset Parawisata," in Shahab, *Betawi dalam Perspektif Kontemporer*, pp. 165–84; and Muhadjir, Multamia RMT, Rachmat Alia, and Racmat Ruchiat, *Map of Betawi Cultural Art* (Jakarta: The Cultural Service of DKI Jakarta, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> William Frederick, "Rhoma Irama and the Dangdut Style: Aspects of Indonesian Popular Culture," *Indonesia* 34 (October 1982): 102–30.

<sup>6</sup> Krishna Sen and David T. Hill, "Global Industry, National Politics: Popular Music in 'New Order' Indonesia," in *Refashioning Pop Music in Asia: Cosmopolitan Flows, Political Tempos, and Aesthetic Industries* ed. Allen Chun, Ned Rossiter, and Brian Shoemsmith (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), pp. 74–88.

Indonesia.<sup>7</sup> In our conclusion, we will examine Ben's status and significance as a Betawi pop star identified with his ethnic group by comparing him with the *Dangdut* star Rhoma Irama, whose rise to fame in the 1970s paralleled that of Benyamin. Rhoma Irama is seen as the pop star who did the most to bring *Dangdut* to national prominence. Andrew Weintraub sees Rhoma Irama's particular style of *Dangdut* as influenced by "rock 'n' roll, *orkes Melayu*, and *pop Indonesia*; Indian film music; and hard rock."<sup>8</sup> Born in 1946 in the predominantly Muslim town of Tasikmalaya, in West Java, and growing up in Jakarta from 1950 onwards, Rhoma Irama never attempted to strongly identify himself with a particular ethnic or linguistic group, or regional culture, although from the mid-1970s on he identified himself with Islam, and there are points in his films where he speaks of the cultural difference not of any ethnic group in particular, but of the East in contrast to the West. Rhoma Irama speaks to his audience from the position of a national figure, speaking the national language rather than a local dialect.

Much scholarly writing about cultural aspects of the New Order period has explored ways in which a particular film, cartoon, novel, television program, or popular song exemplified the ethos of the New Order, or has examined how such artistic works expressed New Order ideologies or were compromised by New Order institutional constraints (such as censorship or ministerial intervention), conformed to or exemplified national cultural policy, or accepted state repression via self-censorship. With regard to cinema in the New Order period, Krishna Sen, for example, in an important and pioneering book, has studied at length the policy changes, regulations, political constraints, ideological pressures, and covert and overt censorship (including censorship at the script stage, which determines what will actually be allowed to be shot for the film) imposed on Indonesian filmmakers during the New Order period and the way this affected many films produced during that time.<sup>9</sup> Keith Foulcher, in discussing the construction of an Indonesian national culture, uses a popular movie made in 1988, *Selamat Tinggal Jeanette*, to highlight hegemonic notions that he sees as characteristic of the New Order state.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, Foulcher discusses resistance in the Indonesian arts, as well as hegemony, using the examples of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Rendra, and Saraswati Sunindyo, and resistance is a theme commonly found in academic writings over the last twenty-five years, for example, in writings on resistance in *Ketoprak* theater by Barbara Hatley, and more recently in Andrew Weintraub's book on *Wayang Golek*.<sup>11</sup> Overall, this method of approaching institutional

<sup>7</sup> James T. Siegel, *Solo in the New Order: Language and Hierarchy in an Indonesian City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 212.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew N. Weintraub, *Dangdut Stories: A Social and Musical History of Indonesia's Most Popular Music* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 92. Weintraub's book is reviewed in this issue of *Indonesia*.

<sup>9</sup> Krishna Sen, *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order* (London: Zed Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> For Foulcher, this film, based on a novel by Titie Said, "contributes to hegemonic notions of an Indonesian national culture. 'Modern' Indonesia is cautioned against total identification with the West; its 'traditional' basis emerges as Java, redefined according to the new *priyayi* outlooks." Moreover, these new *priyayi* outlooks in the film are filtered through colonial Dutch notions of propriety. See Keith Foulcher, "The Construction of an Indonesian National Culture: Patterns of Hegemony and Resistance," in *State and Civil Society in Indonesia*, ed. Arief Budiman (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), pp. 308–9.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Hatley, "Theatre as Cultural Resistance in Contemporary Indonesia," in *State and Civil Society in Indonesia*, ed. Budiman, pp. 321–48; and Andrew N. Weintraub, *Power Plays: Wayang Golek Puppet Theater of*

history with its emphasis on ideological critique, but including a discussion of resistance to the state, is an important scholarly tradition, undoubtedly initiated and continued as a response to the substantial reversal of rights and values that the New Order ushered in, the circumstances and conditions of its seizing power (including the annihilation of the Left in Indonesia), and the increasingly widespread ambience of repression and of ideological and information control that characterized the New Order.

This article, to some extent, goes against the grain of much scholarly writing on cultural aspects of the New Order period. We are not so much concerned here either with institutional history or ideological critique, nor do we see the issue of the repressiveness of the New Order, and the involvement of a “New Order artist” within New Order ideology (or even the resistance of artists to it), as the only way in which to discuss and evaluate an artist whose work appeared during the New Order period. Our article addresses other dimensions within Indonesian popular culture and concentrates primarily on the many meanings within the song and film texts and the forms through which they are expressed. We take this approach because, as we shall demonstrate, Ben’s work can be explored in a range of other ways, for instance, by considering the creative potentialities (as he sees it) of his Betawi culture, and his relation to this culture. We also wish to avoid a common tendency in Indonesian studies to maintain always a discursive dominance in relation to Indonesian popular culture in the New Order period, which occurs through an exclusive focus on issues of ideology and the relation of the artist to the state, rather than on issues of expression, which can only be examined by giving substantial attention to the text itself, and its inherent complexity, whether, as in Benyamin’s case, it is a film or a song. While numerous examples can be found in a society like Indonesia’s (particularly from the New Order period) to exemplify the hypothesis that the arts were controlled by a hegemonic state, there are still questions about the actual extent to which the works of artists, even those working in popular culture, are adequately accounted for only via discussions of their relation to the nation-state and to the regime in power. Indeed, while Sen and Hill in their book published two years after the fall of Suharto emphasize that all analyses of media are ultimately political, they also affirm that, since the mid 1990s, it has become important to acknowledge and study not only the ability of the Suharto regime to “control culture and politics through ownership, bans, and censorship in the media, but, rather, what lay outside or escaped these modes of state control.”<sup>12</sup>

Like most of the authors mentioned above, we do discuss, among other topics, artists’ resistance to New Order ideology. While the political and institutional context described in Sen’s *Indonesia Cinema: Framing the New Order* is certainly the environment in which Benyamin worked, we see evidence of intermittent creative resistance to the New Order, and its policies and stereotypes, in Benyamin’s films. This resistance is framed in a uniquely Betawi point of view and frequently expressed allegorically and indirectly, with a certain, partly deliberate, naivety, and as part of popular culture.

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*West Java* (Singapore and Athens, OH: Ohio University Research in International Studies and Singapore University Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Krishna Sen and David T. Hill, *Media, Culture, and Politics in Indonesia* (Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 2.

Benyamin Suaeb was born in the Jakarta suburb of Kemayoran in 1939, into a family from the Betawi ethnic group. As a teenager, he sang American light music, and, early in his career, he performed in a group called “Melody Boys.” His turn to *Gambang Kromong* and his heightened interest in Indonesian musical forms were the result of Sukarno’s denunciation of Western music, and the resultant pressure on musicians during the Guided Democracy period.<sup>13</sup> Although most of Ben’s songs were written during the New Order, and his films engage with the ethos of the early New Order period, his commitment to Betawi music and its development, and ultimately the deliberate cultivation of his Betawi persona, were the direct result of anti-Western policies that came out of the late Sukarno period.

### Songs of Benyamin S: *Gambang Moderen*

*Gambang Kromong* is one of Jakarta’s traditional music styles, performed by two closely associated ethnic groups, Peranakan Chinese and Betawi. The actual term refers to two Indonesian musical instruments essential to performing this music: the *gambang*, a wooden xylophone with eighteen keys, and the *kromong*, a set of ten small kettle drums. *Gambang* ensembles were developed to play Chinese music in Batavia as early as the mid-eighteenth century, and these ensembles came to include indigenous female singers known as *cokek*.<sup>14</sup> The *Gambang Kromong* orchestras that we know today emerged in the late nineteenth century. Now the *gambang* and *kromong* are supplemented by a two-stringed violin of Chinese origin, a West Javanese flute, two hanging gongs, some large drums known as *gendeng*, and metallic clackers. An orchestra comprising precisely these instruments can be glimpsed in the closing minutes of *Benyamin, Raja Lenong* (1975). In that final scene, Benyamin sings the song “Bang Jabrik” accompanied by a *Gambang Kromong* orchestra at a contemporary Betawi wedding celebration in Jakarta, and this performance is followed by a short *Lenong* play.<sup>15</sup> Even in the 1930s, the expanded array of instruments for *Gambang Kromong* was frequently supplemented by a variety of Western instruments, including the saxophone and trumpet, resulting in the *lagu sayur*, described by Philip Yampolsky as sounding like a “jazz band playing Indonesian music, or a gamelan playing jazz.” Yampolsky sees *Gambang Kromong* as dominated by melody instruments, and summarizes the *Gambang Kromong* of the 1930s in the following way:

Underneath all this runs what is essentially a Sundanese (West Javanese) percussion group, with intricate and tonally varied drumming straining against and then resolving into an unvarying cycle of gong punctuation ... In short, *Gambang Kromong* has a loosely integrated, highly polyphonic texture, with at

<sup>13</sup> The impact of Sukarno’s prohibition on Ben’s group in 1963 is outlined in the biography of Benyamin S by Ludhy Cahyana and Muhlis Suhaeri, *Benyamin S: Muka Kampung Rezeki Kota* (Jakarta: Yayasan H. Benjamin Sueb, 2005), p. 147.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Yampolsky, “Introduction” to the music CD *Music from the Outskirts of Jakarta: Gambang Kromong*, volume 3 of the series *Music of Indonesia*, Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> *Lenong* is a form of theatrical performance that evolved among the Betawi in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It intermixes *Gambang Kromong* music with theater, and uses *bahasa Betawi* (Jakarta Malay) in its dialogue. See Ninuk Kleden-Probonegoro, *Teater Lenong Betawi: Studi Perbandingan Diakronik* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia dan Yayasan Asosiasi Tradisi Lisan, 1996).

least five melodic or harmonic lines in contrasting timbres and idioms all riding above a largely autonomous rhythm section.<sup>16</sup>

Yampolsky's description also applies to those songs by Benyamin that deploy a substantial number of instruments from the *Gambang Kromong* ensemble, and emulate its characteristic rhythms, songs such as "Bang Jabrik," "Ondel-Ondel," and the duet "Perkukut" (three songs to be discussed below). It is possible to divide Benyamin's oeuvre into quite a number of categories: solo *Gambang Moderen*, duet *Gambang Moderen*, Pop Betawi (characterized by Western pop influence), and songs sung in distinctive Western styles (songs influenced by, for example, R&B or rock-and-roll). Benyamin was a talented mimic, so some of his performances simply mimic Elvis Presley's singing, but there are also songs that mimic or rework Indonesian *Dangdut*, or show a gentle zest in reworking Pop Jawa.<sup>17</sup>

The content of Benyamin's songs, however, contrasts sharply with the *lagu sayur* and *lagu lama* examples of *Gambang Kromong* from the 1930s and earlier, recorded and discussed by Yampolsky. In both *lagu lama* and *lagu sayur*, lyrics are *pantun*, that is, very close to nonsense verse. Benyamin's song lyrics, by contrast, lucidly evoke, with subtlety and precision, characters and situations from the Betawi world, and the emotions generated by those situations. The lyrics are clearly enunciated and projected so that the psychological and social world depicted, and the language used, are an essential part of the experience of hearing the song. Ben's duets also feature subtle character interactions between the two singers.

The most distinctive and consistent features of Benyamin's song lyrics are their use of the Betawi language and its idioms, and the creation of a Betawi milieu that focuses on and dramatizes the everyday life of the poor who live in Jakarta's slums.<sup>18</sup> As we shall see, stories and mini narratives in Benyamin's songs make reference to the plight of the poor, focusing not on their envy of the rich, but on their self-contained and vital culture—droll, mundane, and often on the edge. Benyamin's constant use of Betawi dialect acts as a clear marker of an ethnic group, and the content and focus of the songs present the Betawi as a large but marginalized class. The songs speak to poor people as members of a community with its own culture, and portray poverty in its many dimensions. The subjects of Ben's songs range from the celebration of Betawi cultural traditions, to everyday conversations one might encounter, to the dramatization of traumatic situations that may emerge in life in the slums. "Ondel-Ondel" (Giant Puppets), for example, is a song about the street processions of giant male and female puppets that represent the "guardian spirits," or the ancestors of the Betawi, that have

<sup>16</sup> Yampolsky, "Introduction" to *Music from the Outskirts of Jakarta*, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Entire music CDs have been devoted to Benyamin singing rock, blues, *Dangdut*, and Pop Jawa, in accordance with the demands of the market. But Benyamin's staple works, the works by which he is identified, are the *Gambang Moderen* songs.

<sup>18</sup> While speaking at the commemorative seminar held in Jakarta for Benyamin S, the scriptwriter, archivist, and film director Misbach Yusa Biran (who was the first director to invite Ben to appear in a film) argued that Ben's unique achievement was to appeal to all classes. So, while Ben came from the lower classes (*lantai bawah*), and always remained their representative (his performances were always addressed to members of these lower classes, and he used their language), he nevertheless succeeded at the same time in being accepted by those from the wealthy classes (*orang gedongan*). See transcript of the commemorative seminar, "Bang Ben Dalam Kenangan: Sarasehan Sumbangan Benyamin S Bagi Perkembangan Jakarta," organized by the Dinas Kebudayaan DKI Jakarta and held at Taman Ismail Marzuki on December 4–5, 1995, three months after Ben's death.

been part of ritual celebrations since the eighteenth century. In “Penganten Sunat” (Candidate for Circumcision), Ben sympathetically counsels a boy about to be circumcised, and invokes the various activities surrounding the circumcision ritual. Both of those songs use a traditional *Gambang Kromong* musical idiom. Indeed, the majority of the songs about Betawi communities use *Gambang Kromong* style as their musical starting point. There are songs suggesting the omnipresence of children, as in “Gara-Gara Anak” (Row over the Children), and the closeness of neighbors, as in the local gossip of “Steambath.” In “Gara-Gara Anak,” a duet Benyamin S performs with Ida Royani, a housewife upbraids a male neighbor because the man’s child has struck her child on the head. In “Tukang Kredit” (Loan Shark), also a duet, we have a dialogue between a housewife and a street trader who is trying to sell household wares on credit. “Minta Duit” (Asking for Money) is woven from the cries of a street trader who will do anything to sell his wares, so much so that he sounds more like a beggar. Ben’s songs also frequently refer to street hawkers of food and knickknacks, as in “Tukang Kue” (Cake Vendor), to the omnipresence of *becak* drivers (“Naek Becak,” Traveling by Pedicab), and to distinctive if simple kinds of Betawi food, as in “Sayur Lodeh” (Vegetables in Coconut Soup).<sup>19</sup>

Among the most famous songs are the duets between Benyamin S and Ida Royani, many sung in *Gambang Moderen* style. The duets are not simply romantic songs between lovers. They are humorous, ironic, and good-natured songs that feature many sharply drawn characters and also dramatize situations from the daily lives of Betawi people. Sometimes Ben and Ida are a courting couple, for example, in “Lampu Merah” I and II (Red Light I and II), two songs about a couple in a car approaching a red light, the lyrics of which comically dramatize the young man’s impetuosity and the girl’s understanding of his character. Sometimes they are a married couple, as in “Pendaringan” (The Rice Tub), where a wife upbraids her unemployed husband for lacking motivation, and in “Ngidam Lagi” (Cravings Again), where a husband is woken by his pregnant wife because she has a craving for a particular fruit. Sometimes, as in “Gara-Gara Anak,” they are neighbors, or, in other songs, characters who might meet during the course of a day, such as a housewife and a street trader. Sometimes the singers play themselves, as they do ambiguously in “Aturan Asyik” (Fantastic Arrangement). In this song, he (a famous film star, who, she says, is often away on location) is married to a much sought-after singer (who, he says, usually comes home late at night), with the consequent inconvenience for both of them. This song is sung in a lush quasi *Kroncong* style, though most of the duets are in a more modest, lilting *Gambang Moderen* style. Many of the songs by Benyamin S, including the duets, are really quite bawdy, having two levels of meaning: an everyday meaning, and a less obvious, almost hidden, suggested meaning. Indeed, these songs featuring double-entendres have been written so cleverly that many listeners only hear the more explicit meaning and miss the innuendo. Examples are “Lampu Merah” (I), where the prohibition on *masuk* (entering) is not just about entering an intersection under a red light; “Perkutut” (The Turtle Dove), which is ostensibly about a young man inviting his girlfriend to help him wash his champion bird the night before a competition; and

<sup>19</sup> Many of the Betawi songs were written by Benyamin S himself, but there were important songs written for Benyamin S by his associates—Djoko S wrote “Ondel-Ondel” and the duet “Cari Kutu” (Searching for Fleas), and Saidi S, an older brother of Ben’s, wrote the duets “Item Manis” (Beautiful Black) and “Kecil, Kecil Kunyit” (Still Young, but already a Flirt).

“Disini Aje, Disana Aje! Timbel” (Over here! No over there! The Picnic Lunch), about a couple in a park desperately looking for a private spot where they can “do” something. The strong suggestion is that this couple is searching urgently for somewhere to have sex, but the song concludes innocently enough, with them finding a quiet place to enjoy a picnic lunch.<sup>20</sup>

In commencing our detailed discussion of individual songs, we should point out that we will be primarily concerned with the expressivity that arises from the combination of a song’s lyrics, music, and spoken elements, and how, in some cases, a song relates to Benjamin’s films.<sup>21</sup> Since we are not ethnomusicologists, our detailed discussions of the music will not attempt to answer questions posed by, for example, Yampolsky, about whether Indonesian popular music originating from the regions (for example, Pop Minang or Pop Sunda) ever really retains features of traditional music from those regions, even when it attempts to mimic that traditional music.<sup>22</sup> In what follows, we discuss a selection of songs that illustrate the exceptional creativity of Ben’s work, the range of styles and subjects he mastered and considered, the importance to Ben of the Betawi ethos, and the ways in which elements of Betawi culture, such as reciprocity and interactivity, are expressed in Ben’s songs.

We begin with a discussion of the Giant Puppet song, “Ondel-Ondel.” This is a well-known solo song written for Benjamin S by Djoko S. It is often the first cut on CD anthologies of Ben’s songs because it so conspicuously celebrates the Betawi tradition of street processions involving giant puppets, a tradition with which Ben is identified. The song employs the distinctive tradition of *Gambang Kromong*, with the main melody carried by Ben’s voice and a saxophone, with a strong percussive beat in the background, supplemented by a zither-like instrument, possibly a *kecapi*, creating an intermittently glittering texture to the music. In all but the third and fourth verses, a male chorus echoes a word or a syllable of every second line, using a strong one- or two-syllable cry to do so, and the recorded version includes the cries and cheers of onlookers between verses. The total effect is one of both earthiness and refinement.

#### Ondel-Ondel

Nyok, kita nonton  
 ondel-ondel. (Chorus: Nyok!)  
 Nyok kita ngarak  
 ondel-ondel. (Chorus: Nyok!)  
 Ondel-ondel ada  
 anaknye (Chorus: Oii!)  
 Anaknya ngigel  
 iter-iteran (Chorus: Oii!)

#### The Giant Puppets

Come on, we will go and see  
 the giant puppets  
 Come on, we will carry in a  
 procession  
 the giant puppets.  
 The giant puppets have  
 A baby puppet  
 The small puppet dances  
 Around and around

<sup>20</sup> S. M. Ardan, “Lagu-Lagu Kocak Benjamin,” *Humor*, September 1995, p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> Five of the six songs discussed in detail in this article are to be found on the CD *Benjamin S. In Memoriam 1939–1995*, Gema Record Compact Disc, CDG339, PT Remaco Indonesia, distributed by PT Duta Nada Persada.

<sup>22</sup> This issue is discussed at length in Philip Yampolsky, “Hati Yang Luka, An Indonesian Hit,” *Indonesia* 47 (April 1989): 1–17.

Musically, while the main musical idiom used in “Ondel-Ondel” is *Gambang Kromong*, with a Malay gong structure predominating, there is also an element of Western musical idioms, in that harmonic progressions are implied by the melodic structure and cadences of the song, although no harmonic instrument (guitar, piano, or accordion) is used. The complex rhythmic movements of the verses combined with the music create a sense both of stage-by-stage forward progression along the street, and of swirls of movement (dancing) going on at any point in the progression.

The only verses not accompanied by the chorus in “Ondel-Ondel” are the third and fourth verses, in which the singer relates how the hand of a lone prankster reaches forward and sets alight the hair on the head of the small puppet (*anak ondel-ondel*), which is surrounded by swirling dancers. This allows the narration to concentrate on detail in the crowd, but also marks a break in the general collective sense of *rame*, a term used by Bateson and Mead in *Balinese Culture: A Photographic Analysis* to describe the Balinese enjoyment of close involvement in group events.<sup>23</sup> The fifth verse evokes the feeling of *rame* again, and the chorus returns—as the small puppet jumps about to attract attention to his predicament, and the crowd pours water from a ditch over him. We should note that the language used in all of Benyamin’s songs is Traditional (Urban) Jakarta Malay (with its characteristic word-ending “e” replacing the “a” of Standard Indonesian), which is also the language identified by Loven as spoken by Ben when he played Doel’s father two decades later in the television series *Si Doel Anak Sekolahan*.<sup>24</sup>

Anak ondel-ondel  
jejingkrakan (Chorus: Kraak!)  
Kepaleny nyale  
bekobaran (Chorus: Uiii!)  
Yang ngarak pade

The small giant puppet  
jumps about  
His head blazes up  
with fire  
Those in the procession

<sup>23</sup> Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* (New York, NY: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1942), pp. 64–65. Bateson and Mead’s book studies “Balinese character” using numerous carefully organized photographs to illustrate their conclusions. One outcome of this study, whatever the debates about particular concepts and arguments developed by Bateson and Mead regarding Balinese character, is the tangible demonstration, by visual means, of the uniquely expressive forms of Balinese villagers’ body language. Although examples of Betawi body language are not discussed in detail in our article, one of the assumptions in our study is that the body language of Betawi people has resemblances to the body languages of other closely bonded Indonesian communities, of which the Betawi are but one, and that different body languages produce different expressive forms in the arts of a particular society. For a discussion of body language in Indonesian cinema, see David Hanan, “Film and Cultural Difference: November 1828,” in *Histories and Stories: Cinema in New Order Indonesia*, ed. Krishna Sen (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1988), pp. 25–47.

<sup>24</sup> Loven, *Watching Si Doel*, pp. 107–114. In writing of the general dynamism of languages in Jakarta, and their adoption and transformation by different emerging classes and social groups, Benedict Anderson describes *bahasa Betawi* (Traditional Urban Jakarta Malay) as follows: “It is rough, lower-class urban speech, totally without ‘high’ moral or status pretensions. It is virtually impossible to be pompous in *bahasa Jakarta*, so brutally earthy and humorous is its feel.” See Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 142. The language consistently used by Benyamin in his songs and films of the 1970s, and later in *Si Doel Anak Sekolahan*, differs, of course, from developments in the 1980s, such as the invented slang increasingly spoken by some young people as a private language, *bahasa prokem*, and a development out of this, known as *bahasa gaul*, used by the middle-class “girl gang” in the 2002 teen movie *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta?*, even though these “languages” derive some elements from urban Jakarta Malay. For discussions of these developments, see Henri Chambert-Loir, “Those Who Speak *Prokem*,” *Indonesia* 37 (October 1984): 115; and Debby Sahertian, *Kamus Bahasa Gaul* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1999).

kebingungan (Chorus: Ngung!)  
 Disiram air  
 Comberan. (Chorus: Byuur!)  
 (Chorus: Hore! Hore!)

In confusion  
 hose him down with water  
 from a smelly ditch.  
 (Chorus and spectators: Hurray!)

It is characteristic of the irreverence of Benyamin S, and also reflects his sense of the toughness and arbitrariness of Betawi life, that this song, which celebrates a major Betawi group ritual of long-standing tradition, is interrupted by something unpredictable and anarchic (i.e., a spectator setting a puppet's hair on fire). Other, less-well-known songs by Benyamin about Betawi street performances also develop a story that is droll and ironic in its progression. For example, in "Nonton Cokek" (Watching Cokek), which has a musical texture similar to "Ondel-Ondel," Ben describes how an old man becomes so entranced when watching females dancing in public, accompanied by a *Gambang Kromong* orchestra, that he forgets himself, is drawn into dancing with one of the young women, and attempts to kiss her. The whole episode ends when the old man is overcome with an asthma attack.

"Ondel-Ondel" was performed live on stage by Benyamin S at the closing ceremony of the 1985 Indonesian Film Festival, held in Bandung, and some ten years later, at the time of Benyamin's death, the noted Indonesian film director Teguh Karya drew attention to this same performance in a press statement:

Benyamin was a Betawi artist whose perceptions of his world were concentrated and deeply based. What he could draw from this was quite exceptional. I have a small memory of Benyamin. At one of the Indonesian film festivals he sang the song "Ondel-Ondel" (in which the small puppet is set alight), surrounded by dancers in the background. The atmosphere he created there, just through his body movements and his singing, was able to make these dancers—the majority of whom were not Betawi people—unite to become a living embodiment of Betawi people's art.<sup>25</sup>

### The Duets with Ida Royani

Before singing with Ida Royani, Ben had worked with other duet singers, for example, Lilis Suryani, Suhaeri Mufti, Rita Zahara, and Inneke Kusumawati. But, according to S. M. Ardan, when Benyamin S and Ida Royani's singing partnership was formed, his other duet partnerships faded by contrast, for the popularity of this pair was unbeatable. The reason for this, in our opinion, was the pair's capacity for improvisation, which was quite exceptional and went well beyond whatever inventions others might muster. The other reason for this duo's popularity, according to Ardan, was that the manner in which Benyamin's songs touched on situations from the daily lives of the *orang kecil* (the have-nots) made these songs, even the duets, accessible and acutely meaningful to the masses.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> This statement about Benyamin by Teguh Karya, is quoted in J. Eko Setyo Utomo, "Menjadi Cermin Masyarakat Modern," *Gatra*, September 16, 1995, p. 31. It is translated here by us.

<sup>26</sup> S. M. Ardan, facsimile transmission to David Hanan, September 23, 1998. In her address to the commemorative seminar for Benyamin S, Ida Royani related that, in the first years in which she sang duets with Benyamin, she was embarrassed by the accusations of her school friends that to sing Betawi songs with the uneducated Benyamin was in bad taste and was to lower herself (*kampungan* and *kasar*). She also related that, when she and Benyamin first undertook tours to regional areas of Indonesia, the language of

These duets are particularly interesting for the distinctive ways in which the relationship between the male and the female is structured, both by the music and the lyrics. No matter how far apart the couple is driven by disagreement (and usually there is some degree of dissension, for the situations are very realistic), at different points in the song there exists or develops a reciprocity and an emotional closeness between the pair (despite the dissension). That duality of conflict and closeness— maintained through the song's rhythm and tone—is what generates much of the charm and emotional seriousness of the songs. The reciprocity and emotional closeness can always be reasserted by one or the other singer, for the duet form, accentuated by the rhythms and melodies of *Gambang Moderen*, provides a framework for reciprocity, and the accentuations of certain tones can return the couple to that framework and reestablish a kind of harmony. One common pattern, not always followed, is for antagonism to arise in the spoken sections, and for reciprocity and increasing warmth to appear in the sung sections. Here an important question arises: to what extent do the emotional flexibility of the songs and their capacity to encompass dissension and individuality, and reciprocity and goodwill, simultaneously, derive from the Betawi culture, rather than simply from the uniquely creative personalities of Benjamin S and Ida Royani and their collaboration?

There is one duet, "Perkutut" (Turtle Dove), written by Benjamin, in which the exchange between the couple shifts from one to the other almost line by line. This song is quoted in its entirety (see below), because an analysis of the way it develops through a number of modulations is central to our discussion of Ben's art, and to the question of the relationship of Ben's art to the interactive quality of Betawi culture. This song is also remarkable for its brilliantly sustained play on double entendres and sexual innuendo.

**Perkutut**

Ben: [spoken] Ah, Badut, mandi  
ye, entar jumat kliwon ni?

Ben: Yok sini yok! Mau nggak lu  
nulungin?

Ida: Tulung apaan?

Ben: Burung gue pegangin.  
[Spoken:] Mau dimandiin ni

Ida: Dih ogah ah, jangan dong  
ngerepotin.

Ben: Repot apa-an?

**The Turtle Dove**

Ben: [to the bird, spoken] Ah,  
Clown, we'll bathe you now, won't  
we, on this Friday *kliwon*?

Ben: [to Ida] Come here, love.  
You'll help me with this, won't  
you?

Ida: Help you to do what?

Ben: My bird, hold it! [Spoken:] It  
wants to be washed

Ida: It's disgusting. Please don't  
disturb me. I'm busy.

Ben: Busy doing what?

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his songs was frequently not understood by audiences, but such miscommunication began to change over the next few years, as Benjamin, and the Betawi ethos, gained fame, prestige, and acceptance. See Ida Royani, "Kenangan Benjamin S," in the transcript of the commemorative seminar, "Bang Ben Dalam Kenangan: Sarasehan Sumbangan Benjamin S Bagi Perkembangan Jakarta."

Ida: Repot ngejemur dendeng.

Ida: Busy drying dried meat.

Ben: [spoken] Yok, tulungin dong ni berontak melulu ni.

Ben: [spoken] Come on. Give me a hand. The bird is going to escape.

Ida: Bagaimana? repot ni!

Ida: It's difficult!

Ben: Di mandiin ...

Ben: There. He's bathed ...

Ben: Dendeng nggak usah dijemur, kagak dicuci juga gue doyan.

Ben: Dried meat doesn't need to be dried. Even when it's not washed, I still like it.

Ida: Dicuci, kagak dijemur, lame lame entar berjamur.

Ida: If you wash it and don't dry it, it will grow a fungus.

Ben: Jamur juga, jamur terik, enakya kalau disemur.

Ben: Mushrooms—especially firm mushrooms—are tasty if stewed.

Ida: Jamur terik, biar burik, kagak lupa seumur-umur.

Ida: Firm mushrooms—however speckled they are—I won't forget for the whole of my life.

Ben: Yok, nyok, dong, yok, burung gue pegangin!

Ben: Now come on! My bird—hold it!

Ida: Ach, ogah ach, mendingan di lepasin.

Ida: I don't want to. Better to let it go free.

Ben: [spoken] Ya, dilepasin entar die menclok di wuwungan orang.

Ben: [spoken] Yes, if you let him go free for a while he will perch on somebody else's rooftop.

Ida: [spoken] Orang lu pengen tahu die menclok sembarangan, entar gue jepret.

Ida: [spoken] You're the one who wants to see the bird perch just anywhere—if it does, I'll hit it with my slingshot!

Ben: Burung abang burung sakti, perkutut dari Majapahit.

Ben: My bird is a sacred bird, a turtle dove from Majapahit.

Ida: Banyak dikurung entar die mati, lepasin deh sebentar.

Ida: If you cage him too often, in the end he will die. Why don't you let him out for a while?

Ben: Burung dari Majapahit, perkutut yang sangat sakti!

Ben: A bird from Majapahit, a sacred turtle dove!

Ida: Banyak dikurung entar die sakit, lame-lame bisa mati.

Ida: If he is left in a cage for too long, he will get sick and die.

Ben: Yok, nyok, dong nyok,  
burung gue pegangin.

Ben: Come on, dear, hold my bird.

Ida: Ah ogah ah, mendingan  
dilepasin. ...  
[Spoken:] Ah, udah deh potong  
aje, tu burung ah, ngerepotin  
orang aje

Ida: I don't want to. Better to let it  
go free! [Spoken:] Why don't you  
just kill it! That bird only makes  
trouble for people!

Ben: [to the bird, spoken:] Ya lu  
gak menyesel, Badut, nasib lu  
lagi!

Ben: [to the bird, spoken:] Okay, as  
long as you won't regret it. Clown,  
that is your fate!

"Perkutut," with its double meaning, is an unusually bawdy song for an ethnic group in which Islam plays a large role. Nevertheless, Ardan reports it is not uncommon to find bawdy elements in *Topeng Betawi*, though they are less common in *Lenong*. The existence of this song, included in all the major issued collections of Benyamin S's recorded songs, is surely an indication of the earthiness of Jakartans, and of Benyamin's responsiveness to that characteristic. It is, of course, possible to understand the song as simply being about a young man's invitation to his girlfriend to help him bathe his champion bird, but that possibility only confirms Ardan's statement that, in Betawi art, one sometimes finds both a bawdy meaning and an innocent meaning, with the two meanings sealed off from each other.<sup>27</sup> In other words, there are two meanings, running in parallel in the song, but they are completely independent of each other, so that it is possible (even if unlikely) not to see both meanings. The hyperbole in the repartee would quickly lead most to understand that both of them could also be talking about his "cock," rather than simply his champion turtle dove.

"Perkutut" is performed substantially in *Gambang Kromong* style, although additionally a bass guitar, kit drums, and a synthesizer are used. The kit drums are played here in the Malay Sunda *Gambang Kromong* style, rather than in the standard Western pop-rock style, with its characteristic back beat, which means that a Western instrument is adapted to accommodate an indigenous Indonesian style. The introduction and spoken sections of the song contain momentary flutters of Western harmonic progression, but the sung lyrics do not. This creates a dynamic contrast between two different parts of the songs (spoken versus sung), and hence the musical form adds to the delineation of the structure of the text. We note, too, both the earthiness and good humor in which this song is sung—a song in which the exceptional warmth and humor of the Benyamin–Ida duo is exemplified.

We further suggest that this song has qualities comparable with poetry, for it is susceptible to quite complex readings of the kind usually given to poems rather than to songs. For example, it is possible to interpret this song as a meditation on freedom in a number of ways—certainly the freedom of birds and animals, which Ida mentions at the end. But it could also be about *his* sexual freedom and his desire, and *her* sexual freedom in relation to his desire. In the song, in the interaction between Ben and Ida, while there is earthiness created by the second level of meaning of "the bird," there is

<sup>27</sup> Ardan, facsimile transmission, September 23, 1998.

also refinement and gentleness created by what kind of bird is named (a turtle dove, a common emblem of mutual devotion as well as peace). Connotations of devotion and even invulnerability are also evoked by the symbolic and historical properties of the bird—a “sacred” dove, descended from Majapahit, the celebrated East Javanese court of the fourteenth century—dimensions that are emphasized by the swelling, expansive movement of the rhythm, together with the rising tone of delight and mock-heroic self-elevation as Benjamin sings the lines “Burung dari Majapahit, perkutut yang sangat sakti!” At the same time, as the singer invokes these symbolic and historical dimensions that give the bird, among other things, high status within an almost legendary tradition, the interactive quality remains central to the song. This interactive quality is produced not only by the lilting, expressive, and humorous rhythms of the music, but also by the fact that each singer responds to the other line by line, as a constant principle of the song’s structure, thus guaranteeing reciprocity in the conversation. So here we have a sense of a freedom guaranteed by participating in a give-and-take with someone, rather than a freedom experienced by *not* interacting with someone else. Therefore, it is a song that discovers freedom in interaction, even if that interaction is constrained by the refusal of one’s partner to respond to one’s every desire. Indeed, it might be argued that the song is looking for that kind of freedom (freedom dependent on interpersonal interaction), just as it is also finding a way of talking articulately on a number of levels at once. Note that the sexual innuendo, which may not be understood by some listeners, is also developed by references to local food (i.e., dried meat, mushrooms, fungus), references that are suggested first by Ben, and then developed by Ida, as a way of further talking about sexuality and sexual pleasure, even though at this point she is of a mind to refuse his particular desire. The overall success of the song’s performance is undoubtedly achieved by the warmth of the singers towards one another, the two of them maintaining a constant tone of good humor, even when there is conflict, or even when, at a couple of points in a spoken section, there are moments of rapidly expressed exasperation, or comically dramatized “panic.”

Other duets may not be open to quite such complex readings, yet they still have an emotional complexity, not only in the exchanges, but in the richness and variation of tone in the singing. One example is “Gara-Gara Anak,” mentioned earlier, which evokes neighbors’ close proximity, characteristic of *kampung* life, and also the accidents that befall children while playing their games. This song differs from “Perkutut” because it is a duet not between lovers, but between neighbors—a man and a woman who are arguing over a row between their young sons. Both adults claim that the boys’ quarrel, which resulted in Ida’s son being injured, was initiated by the other’s son. Benjamin is figured as both himself, and a Betawi, by being addressed as Abang (older brother) Yamin; in turn, he addresses Ida as Empok (sister). An unusually large portion of this song is given over to dialogue, for it opens with, twice breaks off to, and then closes with an ongoing argument between the man and the woman, which is by no means fully resolved at the end. At the end of the song, there is a brief exchange in which Ida says that Ben can just wait and see what happens when her son’s father comes home, and Ben replies he is only too happy to wait for an encounter with the father. This brief, final exchange was foreshadowed two-thirds of the way into the song in a longer, more vociferous, and angrily spoken section, in which Ben threatens to teach Ida’s husband a lesson, and Ida reciprocates by saying her husband will do the

same to him. But in the meantime, we have the following sung sections, which are repeated:

**Ben:** [sung] Urusan anak  
Jangan di tua-tuain  
Kite masing mareh  
Anak-anak udah pade baek

**Ben:** [sung] Don't let the parents  
prolong this business over the kids  
We are still angry  
But the kids have already made  
up

**Ida:** [sung] Namenye bocah  
Masing pade bau  
kencur  
Eh kite nyang tue  
Biar pade bisa ngatur  
Siapa sich yang  
kaga sayang anak

**Ida:** [sung] Well you know kids,  
They have no experience [lit: They  
still smell of camphor roots]  
We who are older,  
We should know how to do  
things.  
And who is there  
who does not love her child?

The alternate-stanza style of the duet creates a balance between the two antagonists, so that both have a say. Despite the fact that this song is about a fight between neighbors, the lilting movements of the *Gambang Kromong* style create a strongly conciliatory undercurrent, as Benjamin notes the folly of continuing the quarrel when the children have already made up, while Ida declares that it is really her love for her child that puts her into a rage and makes her want to continue the fight. The song, therefore, displays complex feelings that shift in a number of directions at once: Benjamin's sung argument for reasonableness finds a response in Ida's warm but lyrical defense of the stand that she has taken; the song is then broken off by a vociferous quarrel (in the background), but the duet resumes, and then is interrupted yet again.

Here we may raise some questions about the expressive capacities inherent in the *Gambang Moderen* form, as developed by Benjamin S. The reparative or reconciliatory impulse set in the context of frustration, exacerbated social pressures, and conflict that we have located in "Gara-Gara Anak" is also found in the *Gambang Moderen* duet "Tukang Kredit," which features a dialogue—as noted earlier—between a housewife, who has little money, and a street trader, who knows how risky it is for him to sell on credit, particularly when the loan may not be repaid. This song encapsulates, partly through tonal modulation, a complicated sense that there is right on both sides, and that both protagonists are right to pursue their ends by haggling; and yet that—in this little economy of the Betawi milieu—both are also victims of an unalterable social situation. The effect of many duets sung in *Gambang Kromong* mode is to move towards balance or reconciliation between protagonists who continue to spar, as though this is a cultural code of the Betawi, or, to use Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, a capacity that arises out of the Betawi *habitus*.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> "Habitus" is Pierre Bourdieu's term to provide a framework for conceptualizing how an individual internalizes the practices of her or his society or group, as embodied capacities or strategies. Bourdieu defines the *habitus* as "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures." See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 72–73.

If the purpose of the *Gambang Modern* musical mode is to provide a framework in which the protagonists, however antagonistic towards one another they may be at some points in the song, can move in the direction of reconciliation or balance, this is not always the case in the duets, especially if they are not sung in a *Gambang Kromong* mode. To illustrate this, one can take the example, mentioned earlier, of the duet "Pendaringan," which is about an unemployed man being upbraided by his wife for doing nothing about his situation:

Ida: [spoken] Punye laki  
ngedublek di rumah keto  
kedemek!

Ben: [spoken] Habis mau  
bagaimana lagi dong

Ida: Bang jangan diem aje  
Beras udeh gak punye  
No liat pendaringan  
Udeh kosong glondangan

Ben: Kan elu udeh tahu, gue udeh  
berenti kerje

Ida: [spoken] habis korupsi sih lu

Ida: [spoken] Having a  
husband who just sits  
around at home ...

Ben: [spoken] What else  
can I do?

Ida: Bang, don't just be silent  
We don't have any rice left  
Just look at the rice tub  
It's so empty it echoes

Ben: Don't you know,  
I'm out of a job

Ida: [spoken] You know the  
reason. You're so corrupt!

This casual duet, sung in an off-hand Pop Betawi style, includes a combination of spoken and sung lines, and presents two sides of a picture, as do "Gara-Gara Anak" and "Perkutut." But it does not offer a sense of reciprocity, nor is there a sense that the couple is contained by one rhythm that holds them together despite those elements that drive them apart (as occurs in "Perkutut," "Tukang Kredit," and "Gara-Gara Anak"). While the song is sung in a Pop Betawi style and the language is Betawi dialect, there is little retained of the Betawi *Gambang Modern* musical style. For example, no xylophone is used, and the characteristic *Gambang Modern* rhythms do not get set up. Throughout the song as a whole, the couple is held together in some ways: she is persistent, if gentle, in her admonitions, while he is earthy, humorous, realistic, and ultimately evasive, and it is the evasiveness that occasions the need for a reply from her, which is usually done in a good-humored way. Nevertheless, the song explores the need for persistence from the woman in the face of the man's excuses, and in the face of a fundamental disagreement between them (whether he's trying hard enough to find work). It would be worthwhile to explore whether the majority of songs sung by Benyamin in the *Gambang Modern* style create a rhythmic and tonal balance between two protagonists, as though they are intermittently held in one rhythm of deeper mutual understanding, while duets sung by Benyamin in the *Pop Betawi* style are inclined to frame a very different and more divisive sort of interaction.

Generally, Benyamin's duets do not use elements of R&B and rock, but there are some songs about the Betawi experience that do. "Kompur Meleduk" (The Stove Explodes), sung as a highly agitated rhythm-and-blues number, and with no *Gambang Kromong* idioms at all, but with elements of rock introduced in moments of rhythmic development, dramatizes, in Betawi dialect, the urgent cries and laments of a citizen whose stove explodes and sets his house on fire, at the same time as a fierce storm

floods his *kampung*. In a number of songs, Benyamin deploys the soulful R&B musical idiom specifically to emphasize, in a solo song, however humorously, the more extreme and urgent difficulties of life for a slum-dwelling Betawi citizen. “Kompur Meleduk” is an absurdist song, dealing with a moment of existential crisis, and, inevitably, has moments of desperate humor and sardonic irony.

In this section we explored a number of key songs sung in Benyamin’s *Gambang Moderen* style, both solo songs and duets. In doing so, we have emphasized the importance of the Betawi milieu created in the songs, with its sense of both community and the toughness and arbitrariness of Betawi life. In examining the duets, we emphasized the sense of reciprocity between the singers, suggesting that this reciprocity did not simply arise from the exceptional capacity of Benyamin (and his partner in the duets, Ida Royani) for improvisation, but was cultural, and arose out of the lilting rhythms of the more traditional *Gambang Moderen* musical idiom, in contrast to the more casual style of Pop Betawi.

### A Wider View: Indonesia in an International Context

An examination of another two songs, neither of them duets, will significantly widen the view of Benyamin’s work, and lead into a discussion of his films. The first song, “Badminton,” perceives Indonesia in regional terms, but at the same time in a national and international context. The second, “Superman,” looks at an icon of international popular culture in an Indonesian context. Neither song uses the Betawi language, and neither uses any Betawi musical idiom. Both offer a vision of the Indonesian poor, showing that Ben’s vision of poverty in Indonesia was not confined to the Betawi ethos and to ideas of Betawi community and culture. Ben’s songs communicated the unavoidable impact of pervasive poverty in urban Jakarta and elsewhere; that message was part of his art, including his songs.

The first song, “Badminton,” is a song written neither by Ben nor by any member of his circle. It was written in the early 1950s by Mang Koko, a well-known West Javanese musician in Bandung who worked in both traditional and popular music. In the brief, spoken, and “dramatized” introduction in the recorded version, Benyamin draws attention to the song’s origins in Bandung:

**(Ben:** [spoken] Hai Bang  
Manshur.  
Urang maen badminton? Mang  
Koko,  
urang maen badminton?  
Abdi di Jakarta, Mang Koko di  
Bandung)

**Ben:** Badminton dimana-mana  
**(Chorus:** Badminton  
dimana-mana)  
**Ben:** Di kampung jeung, di kota

**(Ben:** [spoken] Hi Bang Manshur!  
Do you want a game of  
badminton? Mang Koko, how  
about a game of badminton? I’m in  
Jakarta, Mang Koko is in Bandung)

**Ben:** Badminton everywhere!  
**(Chorus** [overlapping in this  
verse]: Badminton everywhere!)  
**Ben:** In villages as well as in the  
cities.

<b>(Chorus:</b> Di kampung jeung, di kota)	<b>(Chorus:</b> In villages and in cities.)
<b>Ben:</b> Badminton keur suka-suka	<b>Ben:</b> Badminton for enjoyment
<b>(Chorus:</b> Badminton keur suka-suka)	<b>(Chorus:</b> Badminton for enjoyment)
<b>Ben:</b> Ngalipur manah sungkawa	<b>Ben:</b> To console a sad heart
<b>(Chorus:</b> Ngalipur manah sungkawa)	<b>(Chorus:</b> To console a sad heart)
<b>Ben:</b> Dilop	<b>Ben:</b> [The shuttlecock] Is lobbed
<b>(Chorus:</b> Apung-apungan)	<b>(Chorus:</b> Floating in the air)
<b>Ben:</b> Dicop	<b>Ben:</b> Is chopped
<b>(Chorus:</b> Kana net nyangsang)	<b>(Chorus:</b> Hits the net and sticks there)
<b>Ben:</b> Di smes	<b>Ben:</b> Is smashed
<b>(Chorus:</b> Kabeulah kenca)	<b>(Chorus:</b> To the left)
<b>Ben:</b> Bekhen	<b>Ben:</b> A backhand
<b>(Chorus:</b> Tisoledat)	<b>(Chorus:</b> In the wrong direction)

“Badminton” is sung in a light and easy pop style, wherein Ben’s vocal line is backed by a guitar, a saxophone, and percussion, and by a chorus (representing needy badminton players), initially overlapping and echoing him, and then, continuing in this caller–response mode, serving back to him the conditions under which they play (the net/fraying at the edges; the racket/a mattress-beater; etc.). The second stanza goes on to describe the game, with the rhythms and onomatopoeia of the words (lop, chop, smes, bekhen, forehan, second hand), enacting the movement of the shuttlecock and the repetitious and systematic but random—haphazard—interaction of the players. That effect is initially imitated by some light play on the drums in the opening of the song, a drum part that, in fact, has elements reminiscent of British rock of the early sixties (specifically the Beatles’s *Sgt. Pepper* album). Most of the words throughout the song are Sundanese (e.g., *keur, jeung, kabulak kenca*), as well as Indonesian and (Indonesianized) English. There are no Betawi words in the song, but, by using the Sundanese word for I, *abdi*, Ben locates himself in Jakarta, in contrast to (but in identification with) Mang Koko, who is in Bandung, and connects this fact with the song’s opening statement, “Badminton everywhere.” The opening, spoken section of this interactive song even creates—by connotation—the poetic illusion that Benyamin and Mang Koko are playing a game of badminton, with Ben in Jakarta and Mang Koko in Bandung (and that Ben, using the first person Sundanese pronoun for himself, and Sundanese language throughout, can imagine himself in West Javanese terms). In the third stanza, the song goes on to describe the condition of the needy players:

<b>Ben:</b> Kokna	<b>Ben:</b> The shuttlecock
<b>(Chorus:</b> Ku bulu entok)	<b>(Chorus:</b> Made of duck feathers)
<b>Ben:</b> Netna	<b>Ben:</b> The net
<b>(Chorus:</b> Sampingna butut)	<b>(Chorus:</b> Its edges fraying)
<b>Ben:</b> Reketne	<b>Ben:</b> The racket

**(Chorus: Panggebuk kasur)**

**Ben:** Tempatna, tempatna  
di kebon awi

**(Chorus: A mattress-beater)**

**Ben:** The place for the game, the  
place is in the bamboo plantation

Today, some see this song in connection with Indonesia's first international success at badminton in the 1958 Thomas Cup tournament, but the song was written before then, and it reflects a national enthusiasm that existed long before that 1958 victory. The words of the song focus not on international success, but on badminton commonly played for many years by poor Indonesians everywhere, using a minimum of resources—badminton played “for enjoyment and to console a saddened heart,” whether in the villages or in the cities.<sup>29</sup> In this game of badminton, the racket may be simply a mattress-beater, the net may be fraying at the edges, and the venue might be a bamboo plantation.

The partially ironic use of Indonesianized (or Sundanized) English can be interpreted as an expression of the ironic relation that a nondominant linguistic area can have to a dominant linguistic area, both in needing to appropriate or use the internationally used English words, and, at the same time, in giving them their own inflection. So we find that double meanings are generated by alternative spellings, even at the risk of forcing a new meaning on to the English original, as in these lines from the concluding verse:

**Ben and chorus:**  
Urang nu bekhen  
Abdi nu por-hen  
Abdi seken hen

**Ben and Chorus:**  
You play backhand  
I play forehand  
I also play second hand

In that example, “second hand” is wordplay on the tennis terms backhand and forehand, but perhaps only applies to badminton in so far as the racket or the net are second hand. The use or misuse of English commonly functions as a source of humor in many of Benyamin S's films of the 1970s, and also in the song “Superman,” analyzed below. While the address to Manshur in Jakarta, at the opening of the song “Badminton,” identifies the experience of playing badminton as that of a (quite possibly Islamic) Jakartan, and this experience can therefore be generalized to include many Islamic Indonesians, at the same time the persistence in the use of the original Sundanese (not fully understood by all Indonesians or even by all Jakartans) celebrates

<sup>29</sup> Ben once commented on the role of sadness in his songs, as we see from this statement quoted in the recent biography: “Dengan humor kita justru bisa memotret kesedihan dan mengungkapkannya tanpa membuat orang lain ikut-ikutan sedih” (With humor we can genuinely portray sadness, and express it, without making other people follow in becoming sad). See Ludhy Cahyana et al., *Benyamin S: Muka Kampung Rezeki Kota*, p. 157. Benedict Anderson, in discussing the effectiveness of General Sudirman as a leader of the army during the struggles for independence, has written that the most striking quality of a radio broadcast Sudirman made to his troops in April 1946 (quoted in its entirety in Anderson's book), was not its references to military glory (of which there were none), but “the pervasive sadness,” and that this was one reason among a number as to why Sudirman could speak to his troops in terms of a culture he shared with them, and that in Sudirman, for a variety of reasons, “a deeply rooted tradition found an authentic voice.” See Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 376–78. As one can see from a reading of Sudirman's speech, sadness arose not only from the bitterness of the struggle, but due to the way Sudirman spoke of the privations his troops experienced, and of their inability to protect their families from these same privations.

the linguistic difference of West Java. Hence, this song employs a national mode of address, and, unlike the Betawi songs discussed above, in some sense “celebrates the nation”; at the same time, it is surely an example of a national song in which regional difference and regional variety are also celebrated. Furthermore, if this song ever expressed, in some sense, a desire to be part of the international community through playing an international game and using its terminology, it also expresses equally strongly, through its sense of sadness at the degree of dilapidation, the differences in standard of living felt by the majority of the population in developing countries. In this very playful and interactive song, the sport of badminton is evoked through international, Indonesian national, and Indonesian regional terms, but the Indonesian nation is also identified as a third-world nation.<sup>30</sup>

This interest in linguistic difference as a means of providing comedy, but also of expressing a wider and more varied sense of community, is also found in the song “Superman,” but here the language is not Sundanese but English. More importantly, this song introduces us to an element more characteristic of many of Benjamin S’s films, rather than his songs, a delight in engaging with the icons of contemporary international popular culture, icons that are often—although not always—of American origin. Some of the films replay and rework, in an Indonesian context, Western heroes and characters such as the American cowboy, Zorro, Tarzan, and even the British secret agent James Bond. In the best of these films, the element of parody communicates an implied critique of the many assumptions on which the original genre is based, often from a “common sense,” third-world Indonesian perspective, and with numerous Indonesian allusions, as shall be demonstrated in our discussion of the film *Benyamin, Kobi Ngungsi* (Benyamin, Refugee Cowboy, 1975) in the second part of this article. This dimension to Benjamin’s work is vividly demonstrated in his song about Superman, where the Superman figure is recontextualized from the perspective of Jakarta children, who regularly see him on television, and by Superman’s being perceived as a shadowy figure by older Jakarta children who might identify with him.

**Hap! Hap! Run Away! (x 2)**

You know who’m I  
I am the Superman, Baby!  
I don’t like *capcai*.  
But I like *permen* only —  
Flying to the sky  
Looking for the *layangan putus*.

When I fall into *comberan*,  
My face *roti* and *blepotan* —  
*Kaos ane nyangsang*  
*di tiang jemuran*.

**Hap! Hap! Run Away! (x 2)**

Do you know who am I?  
I am the Superman, Baby  
I don’t like chop suey  
But I like lollipops only —  
Flying to the sky  
Looking for kites, loose and  
floating away

When I fall into a smelly ditch,  
My face is like bread covered  
with dirt  
My T-shirt caught  
on the clothesline

<sup>30</sup> The significance of the game of badminton for Indonesians, wherein successes at badminton created for Indonesians national prestige in an international context, has been discussed at length in Colin Brown, “Playing the Game: Ethnicity and Politics in Indonesian Badminton,” *Indonesia* 81 (April 2006): 71–93. Brown emphasizes the fact that many of the internationally successful Indonesian players were, in fact, ethnic Chinese, and that the game had almost certainly been introduced to Indonesia in the 1920s by Chinese from Malaya and Singapore.

Never mind because  
I can *glantungan*.  
Ye! Ye! Ye!

When I flyed to all over the world  
I met Flash Gordon and  
Gatotkaca.  
But when I looked  
down to the earth  
I saw many  
*tukang becak*,  
Kring! Kring! Kring

Now I'm going to fly  
Go home to my *losmen*  
Gang Bugis 99E

Never mind because  
I can hang on the line  
Ye! Ye! Ye!

When I flew all over the world  
I met Flash Gordon and  
Gatotkaca.  
But when I looked  
down to the earth  
I saw many  
*tukang becak* [pedicab drivers],  
Kring! Kring! Kring!

Now I'm going to fly  
Go home to my *losmen* [lodging]  
Bugis Lane, Number 99E

In this song, Ben assumes the role of the international media icon (from comics, radio serials, films, and television) "Superman," whose name in itself expresses the fantasy of omnipotence of the (American) strong man, which is a major feature in the representation of the hero in much of Western popular culture. To give it resonance, Ben links the Superman image with the strong man's language of condescension towards women, with the Superman talking to himself, but also briefly and intermittently addressing (rhetorically) an imagined addressee as "baby." The musical backing, and the sonorous tones of the singer, are at times reminiscent of Elvis Presley ("Ye, Ye, Ye").

The song, which is not written in the *Gambang Kromong* style, but is some kind of pastiche of rock, opens with an exhilarating experience of takeoff, accompanied by a drum roll, which is simultaneously undercut verbally as escapism ("Hap! Hap! Run Away" x 2). This Superman is something of a child, often infantile in his outlook, and perhaps even a bully. He foregrounds foods that he doesn't like (*capcai*, or chop suey), but he likes lollipops and, from verses not quoted here, fresh pickles. The sky over Jakarta is not the action-arena for heroism and rescue, but a place where children's kites, their lines severed by the lines of other children's kites, float away. Here, it is Superman, not the poor children, who races after the loose kites, to acquire them for himself. Superman's T-shirt, like the T-shirts of others, can be hung to dry on a clothesline should he fall face down in the mud, and Superman—as a two-dimensional icon—can hang himself on the clothesline, too, if necessary. The bravado of being Superman ("You know who I am, Baby") enables him to meet other super heroes, not only Flash Gordon, but Gatotkaca (one of the heroes of the *Mahabharata*, so popular among Indonesian *Wayang Kulit* shadow puppet characters, seen momentarily as a precursor of Superman), and, in stanza three, to meet his friend, Shintaro, the Japanese master swordsman, a popular television hero in the 1960s. But, in contrast to these moments of finding his equals, this Superman then looks down and sees the numerous, extremely poor, and often unemployed Indonesian *becak* drivers, the little bells on their *becaks* plaintively testifying to their situation. After this fantasy in the sky, Superman decides to return home, no longer a two-dimensional cartoon figure, as the

address of his lodging marks his origins, one of numerous small lanes in the *kampung* of Jakarta, Gang Bugis, a lane with an ethnic marker attached to it (the Bugis being the sea traders from South Sulawesi).<sup>31</sup>

The use of English in this song, and the macro, aerial view of Jakarta provided by Superman (in contrast to the micro, street-level view so characteristic of the *Gambang Modern* songs using the Betawi language), are replaced and scaled down by the reference to Gang Bugis at the song's end, the place to which this would-be Indonesian Superman returns. As we shall see in the second part of this article, this kind of engagement with and downsizing of major icons of Western popular culture (Tarzan, Zorro, James Bond) is a notable feature of many of the films made by Benjamin in the 1970s, as is the idea of the superhero as both an escapist experience for his viewers and, as the narrative characteristically develops, himself needing to escape ("Hap! Hap! Run Away!"). The semiotic implications of this we shall explore in depth in our discussion of *Benyamin Koboï Ngungsi* (Refugee Cowboy).<sup>32</sup>

### The Betawi Milieu and Social Change in 1970s Jakarta as Depicted in Films Starring Benjamin S.

Apart from the three films Benjamin S made with Sjuman Djaya, most of the fifty or so films in which Ben starred are what we would regard as B-movies, films made very rapidly and on minimal budgets. Ben's B-movies were designed to speak and appeal to mass audiences, particularly the poor in Jakarta, including poor Betawi. In *Benyamin Raja Lenong* (1975), Benjamin plays a laundryman, "Ben," who moonlights as a *Lenong* performer on Saturday nights. The film concludes with a *Lenong* performance to celebrate a wedding, in which Ben, accompanied by a *Gambang Kromong* orchestra, sings a song, "Bang Jabrik," about a mythical Betawi trickster hero with magical powers, and then Ben performs in a *Lenong* play, *Raja dari Negeri Antah Berantah* (The King from the Kingdom of Nowhere). But in the rest of the film, Ben's position is very different. He is unmarried, lives with his mother, who is a laundress, and helps her with the washing she takes in. Ben's position is not as a patriarch, but as a sort of unintentional anarchist, constantly in trouble, and supported by an economic structure set up by his mother. Comic incidents are developed around scenes in which Ben chases laundry that is floating away down a river lined with bamboo platforms, conveniences constructed to facilitate the river's use as a public toilet. These comic scenes are engendered within environments and contexts that were the daily

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin at one stage had a Gang Bugis address.

<sup>32</sup> Barkin has recently argued that much of contemporary Indonesian television, through its discourses and characters' perspectives, positions Indonesian audiences as foreign to Indonesian regional cultures and Indonesian content generally, and identified with global cosmopolitanism. Gareth Barkin, "The Foreignizing Gaze: Producers, Audiences, and Symbols of the 'Traditional,'" *Asian Journal of Communication* 16,4 (2006): 352–70. As our analyses of the songs "Badminton" and "Superman" demonstrate (and also our subsequent analysis of a scene from the film *Benyamin Koboï Ngungsi*), the opposite is the case in the songs and films of Benjamin in the 1970s, where international icons of the time are contextualized against an Indonesian reality, and the distinct character of Indonesia is emphasized. While some may see the 1970s' work of Benjamin S as foreshadowing later developments in Indonesian media (culminating in his appearance in the television series *Si Doel Anak Sekolah*), his early songs and films often represent a form of cultural resistance to international narratives, styles, and conventions, as does the later television series, to a lesser extent.

experience of Jakarta's poor of the 1960s and 1970s, contexts still found in the 1990s in the poorest areas. These scenes appear to have been written to exploit a sense of familiarity that audiences have with their own environments, which are so poor and so under-resourced that this in itself can become a source of absurdist comedy.

Benyamin made three high-quality, artistic, feature comedy films with the Moscow-trained Sjuman Djaya; these were produced by Sjuman Djaya's own company, Matari Film. Those films, combined with Ben's own B-movies, contribute to discourses in the 1970s about Jakarta Betawi, even while the two groups of films are very different from each other.<sup>33</sup> Both of the two *Si Doel* films that Sjuman Djaya made in the 1970s have been discussed by Loven. *Si Doel Anak Betawi* (*Si Doel Betawi Lad*, 1973), based on the 1930s novel by Aman Datuk Madjiondo, is Sjuman Djaya's stirring tribute to the children of Jakarta. The longstanding popularity of this 1970s film contributed to the success of the 1990s television series *Si Doel Anak Sekolahan*, based as it is on the central character of the film; the TV show even recycled the song from the film's opening credits. The prize-winning *Si Doel Anak Modernen* (*Si Doel Child of Modernity*, 1976), in a rather grotesque if energetic way, represents social change in Jakarta in the 1970s, and the development of pretentious new slang and life styles.

The third and least well-known of Sjuman Djaya's Betawi films, *Pinangan* (*The Proposal*, 1977), derives its plot line from Anton Chekhov's one-act play, *The Proposal*. This film contains the most extended and exploratory attempt to represent a traditional, but still contemporary, Betawi milieu. In *Pinangan*, Benyamin S plays Icing bin Japrit, a pretentious and wealthy Betawi, enamored of the daughter of a neighboring Javanese landowner. The film deliberately develops its scenes in ways that depict the communality of the Betawi, contrasts their lifestyles and boisterous body language with that of the more controlled *Priyayi* Javanese, and emphasizes the connections between the Betawi and the poor Indonesian Chinese (often found living alongside one another), particularly their shared love of *Gambang Kromong* music. This film includes a scene depicting Betawi-style celebrations at a Peranakan Chinese wedding, celebrations prefaced by having a Tanjidor orchestra march through the streets.<sup>34</sup> There is even one interconnected scene of about fifteen minutes, set largely in a *warung* and its environs, and largely taken up with people hanging out (*nongkrong*) and having conversations of a kind one might find among *orang Betawi* in a *warung*. This episode also includes a scene between Icing bin Japrit and another Betawi, Chandra, who has just been released from prison. Both characters attempt—with great verbal energy—to speak Chinese to each other, thus showing the influence that their multi-ethnic milieu, with its various languages, has had on them. In this unusually lengthy scene in the *warung*, with its conversations about business deals, marriages, smuggling, and more, the local, partially employed Betawi are shown to be highly social, having a vigorous—if time-consuming—oral culture, in which conversations do not simply function to secure business deals or other arrangements, nor even simply to

<sup>33</sup> Studying on a scholarship in the early 1960s at Moscow's All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (Vsesoyuzni Gosudarstvenni Institut Kinematografi, VGIK), Sjuman Djaya returned to Jakarta to become one of the most progressive and innovative directors of the New Order period. In addition to his films about the Betawi, he made landmark films protesting against corruption (for example, *Si Mamad*, 1973), literary adaptations (*Atheis*, 1975), and historical films (*Raden Ajeng Kartini*, 1983).

<sup>34</sup> For a description of this kind of milieu, see Yampolsky, "Introduction" to *Music from the Outskirts of Jakarta*.

pass the time of day, but as a way of maintaining interaction and discourse, which are seen as valuable in themselves, and ways of maintaining or strengthening relations with others and confirming the existence of mutually shared values. It is as though the film's director, Sjuman Djaya, set out here to sacrifice narrative pace and narrative development for protracted observation of Betawi interaction, an unusual experiment in the highly competitive Indonesian film industry. The bonding among the characters in the *warung* is almost satirized as much as it is celebrated in the film, especially in those moments showing the excessive curiosity and interest with which the partially employed *warung* characters survey new arrivals on the scene, and the hungry vigor with which they greet new arrivals whom they recognize.

Some of Benyamin S's B-movies not only show a Betawi community, but effectively critique social changes taking place in Jakarta at the time. The period in which Benyamin's films are set—the 1970s—was the period that first saw economic growth resulting from the opening up of Indonesia to international capital after Sukarno's fall and the introduction of New Order economic policies. Richard Robison broadly describes the period as one in which, initially, New Order economic policies were influenced by *laissez-faire* economic philosophies aimed at maximizing economic growth, and which relied on international corporate capital to do so.<sup>35</sup> Despite the belief of some economists that such policies would result in a trickle-down effect that would assist domestic producers, by the mid-1970s the New Order policies were provoking discontent and coming under increasing criticism, and that dissatisfaction led to the Malari riots of 1974. While earlier criticism had been directed at corruption, by 1973 and 1974 criticism began to focus on New Order policies themselves, particularly the way they favored foreign investors and local Chinese. Robison describes how that increasing criticism and dissatisfaction resulted in changes in government policy, which after 1974 led to a period of resurgent economic nationalism. More specifically, as a result of the dissension, the Suharto government began to realize it had to protect domestic capital to some extent, and did so by creating a national industrial sector based on major resource projects funded through increased oil revenues.

Benyamin S films from the period do not focus directly on government policy, but increasingly satirize the "get rich quick" ethos of the 1970s. They do so from the perspective of the *wong cilik* (little people), who see corruption as a way of life among the wealthier classes, and view international influences as both providing a space for corruption and producing absurd cultural changes that infringe upon established cultural codes. In general, the changes ushered in by the New Order were difficult for the *wong cilik*, and particularly the Betawi, to comprehend.

The concern about economic and cultural change that cannot be negotiated is most obvious in *Benyamin Jatuh Cinta* (Benyamin Falls in Love, 1976) and *Raja Copet* (King of Pickpockets, 1977). In these films, Betawi culture (i.e., a culture of the poor and of close community) is used as a point of reference to measure that social change. In *Benyamin Jatuh Cinta*, Benyamin is a socially upwardly mobile Betawi who, once again, is helped by women. But the main thematic interest of this comedy is its critique of the changing values of Jakarta and the threats posed to the Betawi milieu by that change.

<sup>35</sup> See Richard Robison, *Indonesia: The Rise of Capital* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin and ASAA, 1986), chapter 5.

In *Benyamin Jatuh Cinta*, Ben is “Sabeni,” a small-scale Betawi portrait artist who lives outside of Jakarta at Puncak, on the road to Bandung. He changes a flat tire for two stranded middle-class women, one of whom is a singer (Grace Simon) and becomes Sabeni’s love interest. Sabeni has lived at Puncak since the death of his father, but the film locates him on the outskirts of Jakarta when the story opens so that he can be shocked by his return to the big city, a reaction that makes it possible for the film itself to register social criticism. When Sabeni first meets Grace and her companion, the women note that he is someone who is *pantas dialek Betawi banget* (someone who is distinctive for his eloquence at speaking Betawi dialect), and they quickly agree to call him Bung, rather than Bang, for it is *lebih akrab* (closer, more natural, and more friendly), establishing through linguistic codes a whole repertoire of closer ways of relating to him. Sabeni eventually goes to Jakarta to find Grace and, with Grace’s help, he succeeds in becoming a successful pop singer himself, noted for his ability to sing like Elvis Presley (in particular, through his performance of the song *Can you Cry, Cry, Cry?*, Benyamin’s clever pastiche of the Elvis Presley style). By the end of the film, Sabeni is accepted by Grace’s wealthy family (although one of the plot complications is the attempt by Grace’s father to marry Grace off to a *nouveau riche* entrepreneur and philanderer—played by Manshur Sah—who describes himself as “busy lining up official permission to export wood to Japan”).

At the center of this film is a series of fast-paced scenes that show just how alienated are the Betawi from the modernizing Jakarta of the 1970s, as Sabeni goes to Jakarta in search of Grace, but becomes disoriented and nearly overwhelmed by the rapidly changing city. As a Betawi, Sabeni is arrested for being a street trader when he is simply trying to buy something from a street trader, and shortly after this he is mistaken for a pickpocket. Sabeni is also thrown out of a brand-new, multi-story office building, which he had entered in search of his Betawi friend, Bagio, whose last-known address matched that of this new office building. In this scene, the film satirizes the new world of big business and its coldness and impersonality. Believing that Bagio’s home is somewhere in this new office building, and expecting to find Bagio immediately (and thereby obtain Bagio’s help in finding Grace), Sabeni is instead waylaid by a visitor’s form he must fill out, by an inquisitive porter, and by numerous receptionists who try to block his entry. Ultimately Sabeni receives a singularly unfriendly reception from a managing director before being thrown out by security men summoned by a bell. Parts of the comedy are generated by the indifferently attired Sabeni, whose appearance creates a crude and jarring spectacle in this pristine business environment. More important, though, is the way the scene in the managing director’s office is played. Here there is a sense of one mode of interaction being blocked by another, which comes as a surprise to and is a moral shock for Sabeni, in a way that conveys to the viewer that his values are deeply affronted.

Some reference to the writings of Jurgen Habermas can help us clarify what changes the film is identifying. Writing about the development of advanced capitalism in Europe, Habermas argues that, in the process of transition from a traditional society to a modern society, we find that systems—and subsystems—of purposive rational action increasingly become the criteria of value, with a number of consequences: inter-subjectively shared ordinary language is replaced by context-free language; social norms as indicators of values are replaced by technical rules; role internalization is replaced by the learning of skills and the obtaining of qualifications; and reciprocal

expectations about behavior are replaced by “conditional predictions and conditional imperatives.”<sup>36</sup> This is done in the interest of maximizing efficiency, so that capitalism, which becomes the only legitimating value, can work as efficiently as possible. Habermas’s very general statements undoubtedly could be found to apply to a range of different societies, but only in subtly different ways. The application to Jakarta in the 1970s of this theoretical account of changes in Western societies as a consequence of modernity is appropriate, inasmuch as what Benyamin is responding to in this film are social changes occurring as a result of Jakarta’s Western-influenced modernization during the early Suharto New Order period.

These Benyamin S films illustrate the loss of an inter-subjective culture as directly as any other example in world cinema. Some of the films of Jacques Tati explore similar issues regarding modernity, particularly at the level of architecture and gadgetry (for example, *Playtime*, 1967). However, the Monsieur Hulot figure in the Tati films has already largely given up on attempting communication, while Benyamin’s film characters still attempt it. And Charlie Chaplin, in *Modern Times* (1936), is depicted from the beginning as an alienated individual, lost in a mass society, rather than as a member of a group culture that prides itself on its identity. In *Benyamin Jatuh Cinta*, we have a satirical portrait of a society undergoing (unwelcome) social change. What we see portrayed in these Betawi films is a highly interactive culture of “ordinary people” in which reciprocity, not so much in terms of gift-giving, but in terms of personal recognition, is important. The films suggest that people in such interactive, inter-subjective, and mutually supportive group cultures are unable to comprehend the impersonal “new” rules that were ushered in with the growth of the business world in Jakarta in the 1970s. For Sabeni, these changes mean that his personal world view and moral compass are under attack.

This does not mean that in Ben’s films there are no rules or there is no sense of economic fair play among the Betawi. Shortly after being ejected from the multi-story office block, Sabeni finds Bagio walking along the highway. It turns out that Bagio’s little house is in the *kampung* behind the office block. The scenes with Bagio and his wife in their poky *kampung* residence are played like scenes in a traditional *Lenong* play, with the overweight wife (played by Ratmi B-29), who was initially quite hospitable, repeatedly haranguing both Sabeni and Bagio as Sabeni’s stay extends into weeks.<sup>37</sup> The wife nags at both of them when she comes to believe Sabeni does not *tahu diri* (know how to behave himself), meaning, in this context, that he appears to be throwing himself on their charity rather than getting a job, and he does not in any way contribute his share to the hosts or household, hence violating an important cultural code.

The film *Raja Copet*, made one year later, also pokes fun at the business world, but in this case the satire is not directed at the new, impersonal, international style of doing business, but, rather, at the way this new style of doing business has affected the world of petty criminals in Jakarta. In *Raja Copet*, Ben plays “Beniman,” the leader of a group of pickpockets. In the opening scene of the film, he leads a team of pickpockets into a

<sup>36</sup> Jurgen Habermas, “Technology and Science as ‘Ideology,’” in *Toward a Rational Society*, ed. Jurgen Habermas (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980), p. 93.

<sup>37</sup> See the lengthy example of banter in a *Lenong* play, in Basoeki Koesasi, *Lenong and Si Pitung*, Working Paper 73 (Melbourne: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1992), pp. 18–26.

five-star hotel, where they will target all those attending a fashion show. Here he is seen as the leader of a team of street-wise, petty criminals moving into the big time, and off the street, if possible. Early in the film there are scenes depicting pickpockets at work in the streets, but soon we are made to realize that this sort of petty thievery has come to be old-fashioned. Beniman becomes “Big Boss Copet” and forms a company. He eventually holds a meeting of this company’s so-called directors, and what we are presented with is not so much a gang of pickpockets planning a raid, but a formal board meeting of company directors, with Big Boss Copet at the head of the table. Later, at his suggestion, his company organizes a congress at a five-star hotel, and this congress is welcomed by the hotel management with the same paraphernalia that would have been used for any of the business conferences that were becoming so popular in Jakarta in the 1970s. The conference is entitled “Kongres Pencopetan” and has the slogan *Peningkatan Penghasilan Pencopetan* (Lifting the Rewards of Pickpocketing) emblazoned on a banner suspended above the dais in the hotel auditorium. The satire cuts both ways: the petty thieves have started to behave like businessmen, and, equally, businessmen are no better than petty thieves. At the end of the film, when Beniman is finally arrested (after his organization has been infiltrated by a policeman), Beniman announces directly to the audience that this is most appropriate, for “*Apalagi ini adalah zaman tertib hukum*” (After all, this is an era in which one observes the law), a reference to New Order slogans. Ben’s mocking lines at the end of *Raja Copet* allude to the fact that *tertib* (orderly) is a term in current use, and one that signifies the spirit of the times.<sup>38</sup>

The four films discussed here clearly display four main aspects, or characteristics, of the Betawi world. Sjuman Djaya’s *Pinangan* deliberately shows both the highly interactive aspects of Betawi social life, and the use of Betawi performance traditions as a source of often spontaneous, carnivalesque enjoyment in the public life of the people. *Raja Lenong*, where Ben plays a washerman, uses as a source of droll and absurdist comedy the exigencies of the daily life of the poor, but, at the end, the film presents Betawi performance traditions (*Gambang Kromong* and *Lenong*) as a way of giving structure, meaning, and value to Ben’s life and to his community. *Benyamin Jatuh Cinta* shows Betawi community life being squeezed out by unrestrained development and by the increasingly pervasive values of a new, impersonal business world, which destroy community. *Raja Copet* shows the new business world as corrupt and, in part, criminal, and even briefly suggests that this is connected to the ethos of the New Order and its hypocrisy.

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<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of the importance of *ketertiban* under the New Order, see Michael van Langenberg, “The New Order State: Language, Ideology, Hegemony,” in *State and Civil Society in Indonesia*, ed. Budiman, pp. 121–50. Van Langenberg reminds us that the hegemony of the New Order state system had been built on its role as the restorer of order, not only after the attempted coup of September 30, 1965, but in the shadow of the mass killings that followed, which the New Order leaders themselves had initiated. Hence, the ideological importance of “notions of the essential need for order (*ketertiban*), stability (*stabilitas*), security (*keamanan*), and economic development (*pembangunan*)” (p. 126). In an earlier article, van Langenberg glosses both the terms *ketertiban* and *hukum*, and provides an explication of their role and history in the New Order state (see Michael van Langenberg “Analysing Indonesia’s New Order State: A Keywords Approach,” *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 20 (1986): 1–47.

### Ben's Films and Icons of International Popular Culture: *Koboi Ngungsi*

Ben's B-movies are usually haphazard in construction and of varying quality and social relevance. But it is not simply their critiques of both the international and the local business world, but the way in which they engage with the icons of international, Western popular culture, emanating primarily from the United States, that mark them as substantially different from much other Indonesian popular-culture productions at the time. The remainder of this article will be devoted to this issue. Among the international icons that appear in Benyamin's films are Tarzan, Zorro, a "glamorous" secret agent in the style of James Bond, and a cowboy.<sup>39</sup> When these icons from the international media (both from film and from television) appear in Ben's films, they are always in an Indonesian context, and they are both mocked and provide a vehicle of escape from this Indonesian context. While the invocation of the figure from international popular culture in the films allows the Indonesian audience to briefly share the fantasy, milieu, and charisma of this figure, there are multiple ironies around how unrealistic all this is. Ultimately the films return to the local Indonesian context, in a way that is structurally similar to the stratagems of the song "Superman," where, at the end, Superman looks down and sees the pedicab pushers, and returns to his own tiny lodging house in Gang Bugis. Sometimes there is even a religious context implicitly framing the international icon, as in *Koboi Insyaf* (Repentent Cowboy, 1988), which offers a contrast between the primarily secular dimensions of the American western, and the particular religious ethos of Indonesian Islam. The film *Zorro Kemayoran*, set in the old Betawi area of Kemayoran (the suburb of Ben's birth), and starring Ben as an Indonesian Zorro, and Ida Royani as the woman who discovers Zorro's hidden identity and becomes his girlfriend, is famous for its advertisement showing a picture of the couple together, accompanied by the caption (which is also a line from the film), declaring that "Selain kita berdua, biarlah tak ada yang tahu siapa Zorro Kemayoran itu sebenarnya, kecuali Tuhan" (apart from us two, there is no one who knows who this Zorro of Kemayoran is, in truth, except for God), a romantic affirmation with a slight allusion to religion.<sup>40</sup>

A good example of the ironic play to which international media icons are subjected is the pre-credit sequence from *Benyamin Koboi Ngungsi* (Benyamin Refugee Cowboy, 1975). This sequence lasts only six minutes, so we will describe it and quote the dialogue in full, for the ironies are directed both at the corruption in Jakarta, and at certain codes associated with "the cowboy." As the film opens, Ben, as the cowboy Billy Ball, emerges from his small ranch house and walks along the verandah toward the barn. He is wearing spurs that are too big and rub on his legs as he walks, thus

<sup>39</sup> Brandon notes in his study of Southeast Asian theater that you will sometimes find adaptations from foreign sources, ranging from an Oscar Wilde play to a play from Communist China to *Tarzan*, adapted to Javanese *ketoprak* drama or to West Javanese *sandiwara*. See James R. Brandon, *Theater in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 112–13. Brandon also notes that it is rare to find these contemporary foreign works adapted to the more traditional forms of drama, such as *wayang kulit* or *wayang orang*. So it is possible that the reworking of American genres in Ben's films received some inspiration from practices in Javanese theater. But it is also likely that the formula of combining a figure from international popular culture with a cinematic star such as Benyamin S was already a sure way of making the film a commercial success, and that this opened the way for Ben's imagination (and that of his collaborators) to work on such material.

<sup>40</sup> J. B. Kristanto, *Katalog Film Indonesia 1926–2005* (Jakarta: Penerbit Nalar bekerjasama dengan Fakultas Film dan Televisi, Institut Kesenian Jakarta, Sinematek Indonesia, 2005), p. 144.

causing him some pain. At the barn, Billy Ball milks a cow, and while doing so he notices that some surveyors are surveying his ranch with a theodolite. Armed with a gun and accompanied by his sidekick, Charles, who is suffering from a severe case of fever, he goes to ask the surveyors what they are doing there. He discovers that the surveyors are accompanied by the sheriff (the sheriff's official title, "Syarif," which is also an Arabic proper name sometimes used in Indonesia, is emblazoned on his sheriff's star).

The scene's dialogue is reproduced below. Notice, in the left-hand column, that at least three languages are spoken: *bahasa Betawi*, English, and Javanese. (The English translation is in the right-hand column.) As well as occasionally speaking entire sentences in English, both Billy Ball and the sheriff use *bahasa Betawi* in a way that occasionally incorporates English personal pronouns. Instead of using "gue" and "lu," these actors use "I" and "you" in sentences that are predominantly in *bahasa Betawi*, particularly in possessive constructions ("I punya ranch" for "my ranch," instead of "ranch saye"), but also as subject and object ("I brondong you," translated as "I'll open fire").

**Pre-credit Sequence from *Benyamin Kobo Ngungsi*<sup>41</sup>**

<p><b>Bill:</b> Aduh! Kaki gatel lagi nih! Kena kutu air barangkali. Bikin kaget gue aja lu pantat gue lu sontok. Take it easy, take it easy, boy!</p>	<p>[Bill walks along the homestead verandah wearing spurs] <b>Bill:</b> Oh dear! My foot's itching again. Maybe I've got tinea. [To his spurs:] What a shock for me that you prickle my behind. [To his horse:] Take it easy, take it easy, boy!</p>
<p>Gurih!</p>	<p>[While milking a cow:] Yummy!</p>
<p>Gue peres susu lu habis-habisan</p>	<p>[To the cow:] I'll squeeze your milk till there's no more.</p>
<p><b>Tukang ukur:</b> Ya, terus. Sebelah sana tu ... Ya, stop! Kanan sedikit! Kebanyakan. Kiri-kiri, ya? Okay!</p>	<p><b>Surveyor:</b> Yes, continue. On that side, right? Yes, stop. A little to the right. Too far! Go a little to the left, yes? Okay.</p>
<p><b>Sheriff:</b> Okay boys! Okay!</p>	<p><b>Sheriff:</b> Okay boys! Okay!</p>
<p><b>Bill:</b> Ah ada apa ni ah? What's happening? Charles! Charles! Hey, all of you! Pada ngapain lu?</p>	<p><b>Bill:</b> What's happening? Charles! Charles! Hey, all of you! What are you all doing?</p>
	<p>[Charles emerges from the homestead wearing a blanket:]</p>

<sup>41</sup> The dialogue here has been transcribed from the film *Benyamin Kobo Ngungsi*, directed by Nawi Ismail for PT Jiung Film, from a script by Syamsul Fuad and Benyamin S, 1975.

**Charles:** [in Javanese]  
Ono opo sih, Bill?

**Bill:** Kenape?

**Charles:** Meriang.

**Bill:** Ah, gue kata juga apa lu.  
Kebanyakan minum cuka sih. Ayo  
kite liat noh tu orang pada  
ngapain noh.

**Charles:** Die pada ngapain, Bill?

**Bill:** Makanye gue tanya lu. Ayo  
kite liat ... aduh nyengkut lagi!

**Tukang Ukur:** Waduh, take care  
of you boys! Dia mau ngamuk  
'kali ni!

**Bill:** Hey, all of you!  
Siapa kasih izin die  
kekar-kekar I punya ranch? Ayo  
pergi, kalau tidak, I brondong you.

**Charles:** Kalem, Bill, kalem!  
Jangan cepat  
-cepat mata gelap! Istigfar!

**Tukang ukur:** Pak Sharif  
kasih dong keterangan!

**Sheriff:** Take it easy, Billy!  
Masukin dulu, dong! Soalnya ada  
peraturan baru.

**Bill:** Nah, ada peraturan apa sih?

**Tukang ukur:** Nih lu liat dulu!

**Bill:** Peraturan melulu!

**Sheriff:** Ini ranch you ada di  
dalam daerah sini, you see! Dan  
ini pabrik-pabrik kita mau joint  
venture! Dan you punya ranch ada

**Charles:**  
What's going on, Bill?

**Bill:** What's wrong?

**Charles:** I've got a fever.

**Bill:** What did I tell you? You  
drink too much vinegar. Come  
on, let's see what those people  
are doing!

**Charles:** What are they doing,  
Bill?

**Bill:** That's what I asked *you*.  
Come on, we'll have a look!  
Ouch! It's caught again.

**Surveyor:** Watch out, take care  
of you boys! Maybe he'll run  
amok!

[Billy has a gun with him]

**Bill:** Hey, all of you! Who gave  
him permission to go looking  
through binoculars on my  
ranch? Go on, off with you! If  
not, I'll open fire!

**Charles:** Calm, Bill, calm! Don't  
go off the deep end! Beg their  
forgiveness from God!

**Surveyor:** Pak Sheriff,  
give him an explanation.

**Sheriff:** Take it easy, Billy! Put it  
[the gun] away! The fact is,  
there's a new regulation.

**Bill:** Then what is this  
regulation?

**Surveyor:** Here, you can see.

**Bill:** Just another regulation.

**Sheriff:** This is your ranch in this  
area here, you see. And we aim  
to build these factories in a joint  
venture. And you have a ranch

didalam jalur hijau - terpaksa kita bongkar!

**Bill:** Ah, dibongkar?

**Sheriff:** Tapi you nggak usah kuatir, masih ada satu meter lagi!

**Bill:** Ah you udah gile, itukan punya WC. Masak you suruh I tidur di WC. Ah! You pikir I kecoak. Itu baru dibangun.

**Sheriff:** Dibangun soal dibangun, tapi you musti digusur!

**Bill:** Ah kalau begini, I tarik lagi I punya istigafar!

**Sheriff:** Ada peraturan. Mana peraturannya? Masukin dulu tu pestol! Masukin! Dengar ni saya bacakan peraturannya, ya surat keputusan Marshall nomer 007 strip miring, nomer 13 -, bulan delapan -, tahun 1980 -/.

**Bill:** Ah you yang pada miring, setrap-setrip, you yang setrip, ini kan tanah tuhan, ah gue kokang lagi nih!

**Sheriff:** Eh! Jangan main gila, Bill!

**Bill:** I keberatan kalau digusur!

**Sheriff:** Lu belum kenal gue siapa! Kalau you tidak mau terima, you boleh menghadap Marshall di Bodong City! I hanya perintakan supaya you bongkar you punya ranch atas biaya sendiri!

in the green belt—so, we are forced to demolish it!

**Bill:** To demolish it?

**Sheriff:** But you needn't worry! You still have one square meter left!

**Bill:** Oh, you're crazy! That's my toilet! Do you really want me to sleep in the toilet? Do you think I'm just a cockroach? It's only recently been built.

**Sheriff:** Recently built or not, the point is you're going to be evicted!

**Bill:** If it's like that, I withdraw my request for forgiveness from God!

**Sheriff:** There's a regulation. Where is that regulation? Put away your gun. Put it away! Listen while I read the regulation. Yes: "Letter of decision of the Marshall Number 007 dash stroke 13 dash stroke August 1980."

**Bill:** Maybe it's you who is crazy, with your dashes and strokes! This is God's land, and I'm going to shoot you!

**Sheriff:** Hey! Don't be crazy, Billy!

**Bill:** I object to being evicted!

**Sheriff:** You don't yet seem to know who I am. If you won't accept my ultimatum, you can confront the marshal in Bodong City! I'm only carrying out my orders that you demolish your ranch at your own cost.

**Charles:** Pak Syarif, I sedang meriang ni, apa gak bisa ditangguhkan dulu?

**Sheriff:** Tidak bisa! Kalau I ambil traktor, you bisa runyam.

**Bill:** I keberatan kalau begini, I mau protes sama Marshall.

**Sheriff:** Itu terserah!  
Yang penting ... bongkar!  
Percuma I jadi syarif!

**Bill:** Okay Charles! Kita obral ini semua! Mari kita ngungsi!

**Charles:** Pak Sheriff, I've got a fever. Can't we postpone this for the moment?

**Sheriff:** It can't be done. Once I get the tractor, it'll be pretty difficult for you.

**Bill:** I object to that. I'm going to protest to the marshal!

**Sheriff:** It's up to you. What's important is "Demolish!" What's the point of my being a sheriff if I can't tell you what to do?

**Bill:** Okay, Charles! Let's have a bargain sale. So now, let's get away from here!

While the political and social implications of this pre-credit sequence are strong and refer to true-to-life events (i.e., that many small landowners in the Jakarta slums and elsewhere were being forced off their land at the behest of big business that was supported by government authorities), these political implications are not strongly developed in the remainder of the film, even though Billy Ball sets out on a quest to find an authority to whom he can protest. While a number of these films spotlight political and social issues to varying degrees, they are more engaged in making conceptual havoc of the foreign genres that they mimic.

To find anything comparable to the sheer mayhem of the Billy Ball film, one has to go not to spaghetti westerns, but to *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), a film made collectively by a group associated with the artist Andy Warhol. *Lonesome Cowboys* highlights and interrogates aspects of American popular culture by concentrating on the macho images characteristic of the genre of the western, and by bringing out the combination of homophobia and latent homosexuality found in the genre, together with its ritualistic and stereotyped constructions of women—in effect, a form of deconstruction undertaken by the text's interrogation of the genre it is using. *Benyamin Kobo Ngungsi* does not investigate gender in the same terms, but its particular translation of the western into an Indonesian context, and the way it highlights and plays with some of the codes specific to the western in this context, serve to deconstruct the genre in a way that recalls Warhol's film. In addition, the satire is being used as a two-edged sword; not only does the film satirize the western, but this story from the "Wild West" is being used to raise questions about the Indonesian context of the film. *Kobo Ngungsi* pays scant attention to narrative development, or to a consistency of locale, character, or theme. The manner in which the film plays with the generic codes of the western (and its various sign systems), reworked in an Indonesian context, with Indonesian references, is the primary interest. In one scene from the film, a ranch where some of the characters live has an RT number (i.e., *Rukun Tetangga* number, which is used throughout Indonesia like a postal code, and indicates the smallest *kampung*

administrative unit), and one character in the film (an East Javanese *waria*, i.e., transexual or transvestite) rides in on a *Kuda Lumping* (hobby horse made of leather, and used in East Javanese trance dances).

How does this semiotic playfulness come to be so important in this film? It is partly based on the vitality of Benyamin's personality, but it also derives from the vitality of the film's engagement with codes and with signs, based on the audience's rapid perception that different sign systems are being used, symbols other than those that are regularly deployed in the construction of the Hollywood western. The other systems operating are: the cultural differences of Indonesia relative to the United States; the possibility of nonconflict rather than conflict as an underlying motivator; the perception of the Hollywood western as a sort of childish space for male fantasy, and therefore the western as a system of pretence; the way in which other forms of pretence, role playing, and domination may be integrated into the western; the notion of the western as an hermetically sealed, timeless mythic and epic space unrelated to contemporary issues or conflicts; and the role of the western in addressing contemporary issues and problems in Jakarta, such as the dispossession of those who are already among the poorest and most oppressed. Benyamin, who scripted many of his own scenes and often improvised the dialogue during the shoot, clearly believed that his audience would understand these alternative frames of reference.

For example, in the pre-credit sequence outlined above, Billy Ball begins by milking a cow. That is a shift from the way that Western westerns typically represent cattle. In very simple terms, in most American westerns, "real men" like their cattle to be producers of red meat, not producers of milk. This priority is pointed up early in Howard Hawk's *Red River* (1948), in the contrast between the "boy with the cow" (Montgomery Clift) and the "man with the bull" (John Wayne). But in *Refugee Cowboy*, when, in the first scene after the credits, Ben visits a neighboring ranch, we find that this ranch, too, is producing milk, and the women run out of the house calling out "Daddy! Daddy! Come and drink your milk!" as though milk is an extremely vital and desirable substance of central importance to any ranch. Thus, the more obvious jokes about Billy Ball being pricked by his own spurs, spurs he wears out of concern for fashion, is only part of a wider set of jokes about the arbitrary accumulation of male totems centered around the American western. In fact, milk is not commonly consumed in Indonesia, but, in 1969, a joint-venture milk company was set up, "Indomilk," which developed and promoted milk as a healthful drink. It is characteristic of Benyamin S films that they simultaneously latch on to a current topical reference, particularly the introduction of something new, and exploit it in another way (e.g., drinking milk recontextualized within the macho environment of the American western). Other examples of the purposeful subverting of "the cowboy" and his machismo through exaggeration and mockery are found in the lines "Maybe I've got tinea" and "This is God's land, and I'm going to shoot you."

As the pre-credit scene progresses, the political implications are generated.<sup>42</sup> The ranch is being surveyed on behalf of land speculators, and the cowboy's dispossession

<sup>42</sup> Hatley has discussed ways in which Javanese *Ketoprak* theater and other forms of Javanese theatrical performance, at different times and in different ways, reflect or reflect upon dominant political ideologies, and can sometimes allude critically to contemporary political situations, even during the New Order. But *Ketoprak*, for the most part, is a form of popular melodrama usually set in Javanese courts in feudal times

is being enforced by the sheriff and by the marshal. This scene obviously highlights what is happening to poor *kampung* people in Jakarta, as their land is taken over by developers with the backing of the government and the complicity of the police and army. Initially, this dispossession is vigorously resisted by Billy Ball, who threatens to *brondong* his opponents, that is, to shoot them. But he meets with a characteristic Javanese attempt at conflict reduction, one which is so protracted that it, too, appears to be the object of the satire (and not just a way of resolving the scene), and is so transparently hypocritical that it may well be reflecting the political styles of the New Order integralist state.<sup>43</sup> The non-violent conflict resolution begins when Billy Ball's sidekick, Charles, tells him to *istigfar*, that is, to beg forgiveness from God. This advice is followed by exhortations from the sheriff for Billy to "take it easy, boy!," and to "put it [the pistol] away!," followed by a lengthy scene during which an initially excited and antagonistic Billy Ball approaches and joins the group, and the group—as a group—collectively tries to calm him down. In other words, the point of the scene when the pistol is drawn is not to lead to an explosion of violence and an exchange of shots, but to go through a process of demonstrative conflict reduction, in which the pistol is, indeed, put away, and the individual (Billy) responds to the group's persuasive exhortation to cease resisting. At the same time as this appears to be the natural and reasonable solution, government involvement in, or support for, corrupt schemes of land acquisition is indicated by the new regulation announced by the marshal in Bodong City. Here, following upon a demonstration of conflict reduction, we have a satire on bureaucratic language, where high government officials issue policy decisions, or *surat keputusan* (an official letter that should then immediately take effect), which here are clearly presented as corrupt, and that these decisions are then legitimized by an elaborate insignia of registration, such as file numbers, dates, and so forth, as portrayed in the film's script: "Surat Keputusan Marshall Nomer 007-/13-/8th Month-/Year 1980." It is significant, as well, that the language plays with international corporate jargon ("joint venture"), and that Billy's bad luck is that, strangely, his ranch

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and using the Javanese language. The difference, then, between allusions in *Ketoprak* and the satiric political allusions in some of the films of Benyamin S is that, as a Betawi, Ben shows no interest in the Javanese feudal past or Javanese notions of hierarchy, and the Betawi language does not include status distinctions. In this sense, Ben's zany comedy films do not use feudal situations as allegories of the present, but directly represent the modern world in a democratic spirit. See Hatley, "Theatre as Cultural Resistance," in *State and Civil Society in Indonesia*, ed. Budiman, pp. 321–48; and, for more recent developments, Barbara Hatley, *Javanese Performances on an Indonesian Stage: Contesting Culture, Embracing Change* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008). A related discussion of this kind of allusion is to be found in Weintraub, *Power Plays: Wayang Golek Puppet Theater*.

<sup>43</sup> The importance of reducing conflict by maintaining harmonious social relationships (*rukun*) in Javanese society, and also the importance of patience and self control (*sabar*), particularly among *priyayi* Javanese, have been discussed in the writings of both Hildred and Clifford Geertz, and in the writings of Selo Soemardjan. Indeed, those cultural notions are so much part of common discourse that they are regularly reiterated in travelers' guide books about Java. See Hildred Geertz, *The Javanese Family: A Study of Kinship and Socialization* (London: Collier-Macmillan, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), pp. 246–50; Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 241; and Selo Soemardjan, *Social Change in Jogjakarta* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 191. The establishment of a hegemonic *kejawen* political culture under the New Order is discussed in van Langenberg, "The New Order State: Language, Ideology, Hegemony," p. 134; and the concept of the integralist state is explored in Darwam Rahardjo, "Transformation of the State in the Context of Transnationalization," *Prisma* 34 (1984): 13–32. All of these interpretative frameworks can be applied to the scene under discussion, which, in effect, represents and satirizes a moment when Indonesia was undergoing transnationalization during the early New Order period.

lies along what is described as a *jalur hijau*, a green corridor, which seems to guarantee that it will be taken over to become a factory site, after it has been demolished at his expense.<sup>44</sup>

In theorizing the process of acculturation in music, Manuel argues that the process of syncretism between two musical cultures is clearly related to broad factors mediating between the cultures involved, particularly the compatibility of their musical systems:

Musical syncretism is frequently a consequence of cultural contact. Its occurrence is clearly related to a host of broader factors pertaining to the relationship between the two or more cultures involved. On the purely musical level, scholars have observed that the degree of stylistic compatibility between the musical systems in contact also appears to be an important factor.<sup>45</sup>

Transferring these remarks to the world of film and film genres, we note that some cultures and societies, when they rework American film genres, reproduce the original Hollywood-esque genre in ways that do not radically question its assumptions. This is largely true of spaghetti westerns, which, while usually shot in Spain, are set in North America, and, while they often question the traditional Hollywood view of the American cowboy as invariably good (or even a hero), tend to intensify his macho characteristics. This is particularly true of the sophisticated spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone, with their flamboyant, but morally ambiguous, central characters, and with their black humor, sense of irony, and intensified realism in the staging of scenes.<sup>46</sup> By contrast, the small number of “unsophisticated” Indonesian “*gado-gado* westerns,” made since the 1950s, and invariably set in Indonesia, are almost all light

<sup>44</sup> The anthropologist Karl Heider, in his book on Indonesian cinema, argues that among the key patterns of “Indonesian national culture” found in its cinema are an emphasis on social embeddedness, group interaction, and the family group, rather than on the Western values of individual autonomy. Additionally, according to Heider, in Indonesian national culture, there is a related emphasis on social disorder, or disruption of group harmony, as a negative quality, rather than on evil as a negative quality. See Karl Heider, *Indonesian Cinema: National Culture on Screen* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), pp. 28–38. Heider’s view of “Indonesian national culture” (his term), as found in its cinema in the 1970s and 1980s, corresponds quite closely to the Geertz’s earlier views on Javanese *priyayi* culture (see C. Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, pp. 227–60). Note that in this scene from *Benyamin Kobo Ngungsi*, these values of “Indonesian national culture” are satirized, as Ben, depicting a Betawi individual, initially resists the cultural principle of conformity to group norms and interests, but then has group interests imposed on him and submits. What Heider means by Indonesian national culture might also be seen, in some contexts, as state ideology. In his book, Heider, in effect, allows for no distinction between culture and ideology, and hence does not make distinctions between culture and state (and hence national) ideologies and their strategic and selective deployment of certain longstanding regional cultural values.

<sup>45</sup> Manuel, *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World*, p. 20.

<sup>46</sup> Leone’s spaghetti westerns, which were set in North America but filmed in Spain, do not share the same degree of cultural contrast (i.e., the disjunction between the genre and the film’s location) as do Ben’s “westerns,” shot and set in Indonesia. Critics writing on Leone tend to see his westerns as intensifying the genre, almost to the point where audiences become conscious of the film’s exaggerated conventions. Martin writes that “In Leone’s hands, the classic genres become not only Pop Art friezes of iconographic signs and indices, but also a ritual procession of dramatic or ‘scenographic’ highpoints: ‘clutches,’ charged looks and gestures, moments of recognition.” De Fornari writes: “Leone does not try to tone down the more sophisticated or vulgar elements, but rather intensifies them: there are farce-like lines that stand next to those of an almost hermetic refinement ... Umberto Eco compared Leone’s ‘godless nostalgia’ for the West to that of Ariosto’s for the Middle Ages.” See A. Martin, *Once Upon a Time in America* (London: BFI Classics, 1998), p. 13; and O. De Fornari, *Sergio Leone: The Great Italian Dream of Legendary America* (Rome: Gremese International, 1997), p. 7.

comedies, and, as we have seen in the case of *Koboi Ngungsi*, radically question the assumptions and codes of Hollywood westerns, including the macho elements, as also seen in the title of Nya Abbas Akup's 1974 film, *Bing Slamet Koboi Cengeng* (Bing Slamet Cry-Baby Cowboy).

Finally, let's examine the comedic elements of these films. For all the humor about the hypocrisy of the grab for land in *Koboi Ngungsi*, the cowboy's solution is to flee, and he remains a refugee for the rest of the film: Billy Ball never regains his ranch from the developers. At points later in its development, *Koboi Ngungsi* cultivates an infantile dimension, with the western now seen as an ideal space for playing out children's games. Bill and Charles—on their journey as refugees—encounter characters from a TV western: a family with folksy children, a white-bearded grandfather, and spirited country women all living together on an American-style ranch with an Indonesian RT address. Having engaged in a gun battle with the family (conducted like a children's game until the children surrender by waving aloft a pair of discarded trousers to signal defeat), Bill resolves the situation by rushing in and making friends with these people, rather like becoming friends with the stars of your favorite TV sit-com. That evening they all join in a country-music sing-along.

In *Tarsan Kota*, Tarsan swings from the trees together with Ida Royani; they are like two children swinging on swings, and instead of Tarsan trumpeting his famous jungle cry, they both call for their parents, with Tarsan calling for his mother and Ida calling for her father. Hence, many of these films are contradictory texts: even when they raise political issues, foreground representation by sliding between realistic representation and genre pastiche, and deconstruct and reconstruct generic conventions, they often end up avoiding the issues they initially raised. While in *Raja Copet* the film ends on a hint of political hypocrisy, in many of the films, conflict avoidance, reworking or recontextualization of generic elements, and opting out become the major ways for resolving recognized and acknowledged problems. Of course, overt political criticism was rarely found in films during the New Order, for the regime discouraged it and censorship prevented it.

Here it may be useful to cite some arguments put forward with regard to Japanese comedy. In the view of the Japanese critic Tadao Sato, the comic artist typically "destroys either himself or his environment."<sup>47</sup> Sato makes a distinction between masochistic and sadistic comedy, much preferring the destructiveness of sadistic comedy over the self-effacing masochistic kind, "because sadistic comedy expresses the vitality of the common people and could serve as a springboard for social criticism."<sup>48</sup> In Ben's work, such a simple distinction is not quite possible, but insofar as destruction does play a role in the films of Benyamin S, one would probably find more masochistic elements than sadistic elements, at least in the behavior of the central protagonist, despite the satire and the implied critical views of what has been going on. For both the refugee cowboy and Tarsan are outsiders, and they remain outsiders. How does this contradiction—between active, if implicit, criticism of a political-social milieu and a passive, masochistic resolution of its conflicts and injustices—arise? It is

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<sup>47</sup> See Gregory Barrett, "Comic Targets and Comic Styles: An Introduction to Japanese Film Comedy," in *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History*, ed. David Desser and Arthur Noletti (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 216.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

not possible to fully resolve this issue here. However, we should remember that the ethos of these films is based not only on comedy (masochistic or sadistic), but on the evocation and appreciation of a familiar world—i.e., Betawi society. It may have to do with the fact that the Betawi are an increasingly marginalized group, and that, historically, they always have been marginalized and politically disenfranchised. As a group, they have not had any tradition for realizing political aims (either during colonialism or after it), so Betawi culture, or rather its art and humor, works through celebrating the strength of its community, namely, its camaraderie, realism, earthy humor (as we see in its songs), and rituals and traditions, rather than in confrontation or in political opposition, organized or otherwise. In the case of Benyamin S, we also find an ability to sum up and mimic outside influences, influences which, as we see in the song *Superman*, seem both attractive and absurd when viewed from the perspective of the marginalized Betawi.

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In conclusion, we wish to summarize the arguments developed above regarding this multi-talented artist who, although clearly in many ways very sophisticated, cultivated naïveté as part of his persona. We will focus on the question of discourses about the relation of Benyamin's work to Betawi culture, particularly the idea that Betawi culture is egalitarian and democratic, a common discourse found in tributes to him at the time of his death. And there is a further question. How does Benyamin's persona and identity, as a figure in Indonesian popular culture, differ from that of the *Dangdut* singer Rhoma Irama as a result of Benyamin's personal, public identification with the Betawi ethnic group? A comparison with Rhoma Irama, the spectacular mass-media-generated phenomenon who emerged as a superstar in Indonesian popular culture at about the same time as Benyamin came to fame, makes it possible to more clearly discern precisely what Benyamin achieved in his own songs and films.

At the time of Benyamin's death in 1995, there was much comment, in the press and in the seminars that followed, on his contribution to the reinvigoration—through his art—of Betawi culture. The weekly magazine *Gatra*, in the introduction to its series of articles on Benyamin at the time of his death, argued that Betawi culture was important to Indonesia because that culture was democratic, despite being increasingly marginalized by the growth of modern Jakarta: "Bang Ben telah berjasa mengangkat budaya Betawi yang egaliter ke tingkat nasional" (Bang Ben did us the service of lifting Betawi culture, which is egalitarian, into a national focus).<sup>49</sup> One author, Fachry Ali, paying tribute to Benyamin, argued that Betawi culture was not a complete culture, but a partially realized culture, without ever having had any center of power or tradition of court arts, yet made up of incomplete elements or principles from a range of other, more complete cultures (unsur Arab yang bukan Arab, unsur Sunda yang bukan Sunda, unsur Cina, yang bukan Cina, unsur Jawa yang bukan Jawa, serta unsur Barat yang bukan Barat). As a result, Ali argues, this was a culture that was not dominated or inflected by a court culture, was not organized hierarchically, and was always in a state of dynamic striving.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Yudhistira A. N. M. Massardi, "Si Babe," *Gatra*, September 16, 1995, p. 21.

<sup>50</sup> Fachri Ali, "Benyamin," *Gatra*, September 16, 1995, p. 33. Loven summarizes discourses among the

While Loven reports that some of her interviewees went so far as to dispute that Betawi was a distinct ethnic group, and that some prefer to see it as a way of life (*gaya hidup*) rather than a culture,<sup>51</sup> at the time of Benyamin's death there was no dispute, among those writing about Benyamin in the press, about the claim that he was a representative of (and gave definition to) a culture that was democratic and egalitarian. A principal aim of our article has been to attempt to define more specifically how democratic and egalitarian elements are portrayed and expressed in Benyamin's songs and films, and in what sense they are Betawi. For while there has been considerable unanimity in the discourses about Benyamin and his relation to Betawi culture, there was no attempt to relate these claims back to the detail in Benyamin's songs and films.

Our conclusions can be summarized in the following way. The songs display a strong sense of community, as portrayed in, first, the celebration of a distinctive and shared dialect, one that is capable of great humor; and, second, as displayed in the songs' relatively precise delineation of a social world and a community (as exemplified in *Ondel-Ondel*, the song about the Giant Puppets). In our discussion of *Ondel-Ondel*, in our reference to Bateson and Mead's work on Bali (to their discussion of *rame*—a delight in crowdedness and close physical interaction), we further suggested that this sense of community contains features found in other descriptions of closely bonded Indonesian communities, which are different in their body language from what one finds in the West. More specifically, as one moves in closer to interpersonal interaction, as in the duets between Benyamin and Ida Royani, which are not always duets about love but quite often portray interactions between male and female Betawi people not in romantic relationships (the singers may be portraying neighbors), one finds an unusual reciprocity. Nor is this reciprocity a component simply of male–female relationships.

We illustrated such concern about reciprocity by referencing the comedy *Benyamin Jatuh Cinta*, in which Ben plays Sabeni, a minor artist (a painter), and in which there are numerous scenes depicting a Betawi's expectation of reciprocity in all relationships, not only with women but with his male friends, too. But it is the loss of that reciprocity that is ultimately dramatized in the film. As the story unfolds, Sabeni, after having lived outside of Jakarta for some years, returns in the mid 1970s to find it changed, with reciprocity in relations having been replaced by an impersonal public sphere in which systems of purposive rational action replace face-to-face interaction, where Betawi families have been displaced from their homes, and where Betawi communities are difficult to find. Systems—and subsystems—of purposive rational action (based on utilitarian values) replacing face-to-face interaction are terms proposed by Habermas to describe broad social changes in Europe and the United States from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, as a means by which capitalism and the capitalist ethos find ways of maximizing efficiency of production. Habermas sees this process of rationalization as increasingly characteristic of all modern mass societies in the West.

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Betawi about what constitutes their culture (*Watching Si Doel*, pp. 211–15), concluding by emphasizing their humor and resilience—their ability to turn bitter experiences into a joke. This is further confirmed in the biography of Benyamin, which reports the views of the Betawi poet and broadcaster, Nadjib Abu Yasser, who speaks of the Betawi's boisterousness and sarcasm, and attributes their cheerfulness and resilience to shared values and a community spirit that arose as one generation after another confronted years of marginalization in Batavia under colonialism. See Ludhy Cahyana et al., *Benyamin S: Muka Kampung Rezeki Kota*, pp. 150–51.

<sup>51</sup> Loven, *Watching Si Doel*, pp. 211–212.

While the way in which this process of rationalization occurs will be different in each society, we suggest that the changes occurring in Jakarta in the 1970s, with the priority given to foreign corporations and foreign investment, are a catalyst for the comic critique found in Benyamin's film.

Modern societies regard themselves as democratic according to the ways they organize their political systems, through elections, and as increasingly egalitarian in the ways that some attempt is made to provide opportunities for all. But, as Habermas has argued, however notionally democratic they may be, modern societies still function according to systems of purposive rational action, and increasingly impose those systems on their populations, systems wherein individuals are treated as functional units within an overall plan. *Benyamin Jatuh Cinta*, even though simply a B-movie, explores explicitly the problem of the numerous impacts of Western modernization, particularly its impersonal ways of doing business and of regulating populations in Jakarta during the early years of the Suharto regime. This modernization is shown in the films as having an impact on community, particularly reciprocity and face-to-face interaction, for the sense of what egalitarianism should be is very different for a Betawi. Egalitarianism for a Betawi is not simply a demand for equality in wealth or opportunity, but a demand for mutual recognition, and regard, for individuals within a community.

Nevertheless, in general there is a difference between the songs and the films dealing with this issue. In his Betawi songs, Benyamin presents an insider's view of a very reciprocal, if sometimes disrupted, Betawi society. By comparison, in Ben's comedy films, the Betawi anti-hero is presented as a Betawi outsider seeking reciprocity in a changing and increasingly aloof modernizing Jakarta society.

In the songs and films of Rhoma Irama, it is as though this process of atomization felt by individuals in a mass society had already occurred and been accepted as a fact. Rhoma Irama's career as singer and film star, like that of Benyamin, emerged at a point early in New Order Indonesia when films and popular music were produced in Jakarta in an increasingly competitive commercial and international environment. Rhoma Irama's response to this challenge, posed by modern audio-visual media, was to construct himself as a deliberately simplified, cartoon-like international superstar, who deployed much of the technology and iconography found among Western pop stars, but who created a sufficiently culturally syncretic Indonesian image (albeit non-regional) to contest the ground of popular culture in Indonesia with an intensity commensurate with that of his Western "rivals." On stage, and in song numbers in his films, Rhoma was resplendent either in extravagant Western rock-star costume or in white Islamic robes. At the same time, in many of his film narratives, which are interspersed with lavishly staged songs, he plays himself, presenting himself as an accessible superstar, simple in his tastes and sympathetic to the poor, who likes to mix with his fans, and occasionally is even romantically involved with one of them.

Let us examine in more detail the components of the media image that Rhoma Irama created. Rhoma's work was not regionally specific, but pan-Indonesian, and he spoke from the metropolitan center to all Indonesians as an Indonesian national, not strongly identified with any ethnic group, yet who also wished to further increase the relevance of Islam to their lives. He used the Indonesian national language without strong or persistent ethnic inflections, together with some very conspicuous Arabic.

Yet Rhoma's work might be seen as Indonesian precisely because it was syncretic—syncretic in that he produced a fusion of Portugese/Malay, Indian, and Middle Eastern music, combined with Western rock, as discussed in Frederick's article.<sup>52</sup> In producing this syncretism, he continued the tradition of syncretic combinations of Hindu–Buddhist and Islamic elements, noted by many as characteristic of large areas of Indonesian culture,<sup>53</sup> and at the same time musically fused them to recent Western styles and idioms. Yet even as he incorporated Western styles and idioms, cultural difference remained an important discourse within Rhoma Irama's work, as can be seen, for example, in his declaration—presented in an early scene in the film *Darah Muda* (Young Blood, 1978), with the cadences of a religious prophet—of the difference between his music, a “music of the East,” and the music of the West.<sup>54</sup>

If Rhoma Irama's image is syncretic, and in this regard generically Indonesian, Rhoma is also an individual. But the image he projects, whether as a character in a film or on stage, is a powerful and simplified image of an individual, and in this sense he also emulates the celebrity image that Western pop stars had begun to fill in popular culture elsewhere. Rhoma Irama provided an alternative point of identification—other than Western rock stars—for Indonesian people, and one that says it is Indonesian, and as such is different and yet also strong.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Rhoma is more a phenomenon of change in the mass media than is Benjamin.<sup>56</sup> Relative to Benjamin's work, Rhoma's

<sup>52</sup> Frederick, “Rhoma Irama and the Dangdut Style,” pp. 105–112.

<sup>53</sup> J. D. Legge, *Indonesia* (Sydney: Prentice Hall of Australia, 1977), pp. 25–26 and 55–61.

<sup>54</sup> In the film *Darah Muda* (Young Blood, 1978), Rhoma Irama speaks about his musical aims to a group of musicians who are sitting together on the grass and playing a version of *Dangdut*. Here's our translation of that scene:

Rhoma: Good! Very good! I feel there is a difference about your music. I feel closer to it.  
And its rhythm is quite touching.

Singer: Don't say those things, Bang. We're just the most ordinary people [*kampung*]  
and this is just Dangdut!

Rhoma: No! Your music is music of the East! And truly I—all of us—can be closer to  
one another. And we can have more soul! I am fed up with them. Truly, they  
bore me. They are too Westernized [*ke barat-baratan*]. Of course, we can imitate  
the West. But only the best parts of its music and the various kinds of genuine  
knowledge that the West offers should we imitate. But especially not those  
drunken elements and the lack of morality. This is the challenge facing us. ...  
Oh yes! I have an idea! I want to form a musical group—a Dangdut group, of  
course. I intend to prove to them that, in truth, this music is pure [*suci*]. This  
music is not the work of the devil [*maksiat*]. By means of Dangdut I will  
propagate the prevention of all things forbidden by Allah. ... How about it? Do  
you agree?

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of mechanisms of identification and the role of ego ideals in cinema, see Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16,3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18; and Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982). For a discussion of the phenomenon of celebrity in cinema and the mass media, see two books by Richard Dyer: *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1998) and *Heavenly Bodies: Films Stars and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> A discussion of the tendency to simplification in the modern mass media is to be found in an article by Ravi Vasudevan. Writing of the post-independence Bombay cinema, Vasudevan concludes: “...it performs a symbolic remapping of identity and suppresses other more complicated traditions of gender, of Hinduism and of other forms of culture. It is through this process of standardization that the cinema constitutes an enlarged transcendent identity for its spectator.” See Ravi S. Vasudevan, “Addressing the Spectator of a ‘Third World’ National Cinema: the Bombay Social Film of the 1940s and 1950s,” *Screen* 36:4 (Winter 1995): 305–324, p. 324.

songs and films do not represent so much a folk culture (a culture connected with a region, a particular place, and a community with its own communicative styles) as a culture in a space created by the mass media, even if a mass culture for the poor.<sup>57</sup> And in this sense he is a powerful individual, combining both the modern media and tradition, because, as a prophet—or at least a man of faith—speaking to people, to the *rakyat*, he is also a “unique individual,” leading the masses by means of his own exceptional charisma, its *gravitas* accentuated by an association with religion.

In these regards, Rhoma Irama’s image may be contrasted with the image that Benyamin S created for himself. Benyamin is often regarded as an actor who always played himself in whatever role he took on, but, in fact, he commonly took on character roles that were not at all like the person he was. These characters were very often identified with one particular ethnic group, the Betawi, but they were never superior or dominant individuals, but rather marginalized people living by their wits. In the films, he also engaged with the issue of being (or not) an international superstar. But he remained outside that image, having a dual relationship to it. He could play the part, but he remained himself. If he took over this image, it was reworked, and it existed in a playful relation with his other self. If he became some kind of Indonesian superstar himself, he did not project that image of himself in his films. So his relationship with the icons always retained an alternative to them: not simply to bolster his ego, for he himself was the debunker or re-worker of icons. Additionally, because he was never identified with any icon, for he never amplified the idea of any individual as a superstar, he was one of “the people,” the “people” usually being the ethnically and culturally specific Betawi. To him, whether his music was a “music of the East” was unimportant, for he had an identifiable ethnic language and musical tradition. Nor did he require a pan-Indonesian mode of address (except in a very few songs, where it was treated ironically). The identities he projects are much more fluid, multiple, and varied, and, instead of being simply points of identification, they invite the notion of identity as play, and they engage in non-authoritarian relationships or relationships not based on charisma. Moreover, the idea of relationship itself, rather than identification, also becomes important, as we have demonstrated in the songs. When he places himself within (what is represented as) an egalitarian ethnic group, his role is to discover the possibilities of interaction in dialogue, and interaction in role playing. It is for this reason that what is envisaged in his songs and films is the very model of a folk culture, rather than a mass movement headed by a unique individual. Is it fair to say, then, that Benyamin S preserves the idea of a folk culture, but Rhoma Irama provides an Eastern alternative—with the individual, paradoxically, both leader and submerged in the people—to a Western contemporary mass culture led by superstar individuals?

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<sup>57</sup> *Dangdut* was originally seen as a low-class phenomenon. A detailed discussion of the acceptance of *Dangdut* in the 1980s by the Indonesian middle classes, and its subsequent appropriation as a political instrument by elites, is to be found in Andrew N. Weintraub, “Dangdut Soul: Who are ‘the People’ in Indonesian Popular Music?,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 16,4 (2006): 411–31. Weintraub’s article also explores ways in which discourses around the mass-mediated *Dangdut* and its audiences have been instrumental in constructing notions of “the people” in modern Indonesia, but concludes with some pertinent reflections on what *Dangdut* meant and still means for many disenfranchised and marginalized young people in Indonesia. See also Andrew Weintraub, *Dangdut Stories*.