

Living the world of dangdut

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For my Master's thesis in Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University, I researched the world of Indonesian dangdut singers. These mostly female Indonesian folk singers lead a controversial existence in a contemporary Indonesia that is currently subject to processes of Islamization and Arabisation (Sakai & Fauzia 2014: 56). Controversial, because most of these dangdut singers are known for their femininity, which is translated into sensuous clothing, sexually tinted and taboo-breaking lyrics and an interesting love life. In my research I tried to sketch a picture of which factors influence their life choices and their performances by observing and participating in the professional and personal lives of the singers. I tried to understand the data I gathered through the dramaturgy of Goffman (1990), by looking at the different stratifications of 'the backstage' explained by Goffman and how different forms of frontstage performances can be identified, depending on the medium which the dangdut singers use for their performances; in my case I focused on television, live-performances and Instagram.

My research was mostly conducted at Indonesia's most popular television stations. During one of my observations at a



The author with one of Indonesia's most famous dangdut singers

dangdut TV show I got to talk with a staff member of the *tim kreatif*^f. She wanted to know what a foreigner (*bule*) like me was doing at the recordings of a dangdut television show. After I had explained my position as a master student doing his research, she was so touched by it that she asked me if I would like to be interviewed by one of the presenters live on stage the next day. At that time, I figured that they would probably ask me what dangdut songs I knew, what the purpose of my research was and if I wanted to sing one of these songs along with them. I felt honoured and accepted this request. The next day I got a message that I should be back in the studio at eleven o'clock in the morning, this while the show itself would start at nine o'clock in the evening. Unsuspecting, I went to the TV studio at eleven o'clock as requested. I was instructed to take part in the regular auditions with the other candidates, which in my opinion was very strange. But all my doubts were brushed aside as they said that this was the usual way of things before entering the show as a guest. In the evening, half an hour before the recordings, I had once again made it clear to the *tim kreatif* that I did not intend to sing on my own and that I only wanted to join the television show if I could tell about my passion for dangdut and my study. One of the members of the *tim kreatif* assured me that she had already informed the members of the jury and the presenters and that they would take this into account. However, in practice they took me out of the tribunes during the first segment of the television show to do the singing test and I was totally perplexed. Obviously this was a huge catastrophe because I do not have any dangdut singing talent. I made it clear to the presenters that I was not here to sing, but the jury nevertheless used me to cut me off and insult me without having even

asked for the purpose of my participation in the program. The harsh criticism of the jury was responded by the audience with big enthusiasm.

After the first segment was finished and I went off stage, I was immediately awaited by the *tim kreatif*. To my great surprise, they were also deeply disappointed in the members of the jury and the presenters because, despite the briefing and the scenario, they still chose to take me down and ridicule me on live television. When I asked the program makers why this had happened to me one answered: "Our sincere apologies, we did not think they would do this to you. The judges have chosen to go out of the scenario and humiliate you on television."

Initially I faced this experience as a big disappointment. I was deeply disappointed in the members of the jury, and especially in one specific singer that already knew me and was aware of my anthropological research in Indonesia. I honestly admit that I was very angry at everything and everyone that night, I felt humiliated: "Why didn't they approach me as a master student doing his research here? Why did they only treat me as an ordinary *bule* that only needs some attention on Indonesian television?" After a night's sleep I was able to temper my emotions and changed the questions I asked, from self-centered questions to questions about how the jury members, and certainly the singer who knew me, saw the need to humiliate me on stage? Which structures ensure that they choose to take a position on stage and how is this so different from the people they are behind the scenes?

This not so pleasant experience has partly compelled me to see the world of dangdut artists on Indonesian television differently. This event forced me to ask other questions that

eventually led to a more abstract level where I could analyze my respondents and the way they perform. I became aware of the structure of popularity to which the singers are subjected, and how this is directly linked to more profit and a higher income. Partly due to this incident, I conclude that the role of television as a setting for the popularization of Indonesian dangdut music is a result of the Orde Baru policy under Suharto. It appears that the Indonesian television stations and the world of dangdut music relate to each other in a kind of love-hate relationship, that they need each other to achieve fans, popularity, and high ratings. But nevertheless, the dangdut music is also subjected to a third structure, the Indonesian government, who still imposes norms and rules on the material that is shown on the Indonesian television stations.

References

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Notes

¹ The creative team; these are the people who make the scenario and bring in the creative ideas for the program.