

Indonesian Women's Line Dancing in the Australian Diaspora

Contesting Representation through Cultural Performance

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Abstract

Dramatic “intercultural” performances in “Asian” diasporas have been defined by hybridity rather than by essence or purity. Drawing on a specific, single performance of an Indonesian (marriage migrant) women’s dance group in their diasporic community of Perth, Western Australia, this paper discusses how their hybrid self(-representations) affects individual and community experiences in maintaining ties with homeland, culture, traditions and language while partaking in what they see as diaspora cultural diplomacy. The main discussion will centre on a specific ethnographic account of an Indonesian women’s Poco Poco (similar to the internationally popular country music style of line dancing), introduced as a performance and popularised by the Indonesian military, at one particular event, at the Fremantle Kulcha Multicultural Arts Centre, a “world music” venue in Perth. Through this specific focus on a single event, the essay seeks to analyse how ideals of femininity are negotiated in a diasporic context.

By participating as an anthropologist, doing fieldwork for a year—dancing, practising, performing and socialising with a group of a dozen Indonesian women in their “amateur” housewife hobby dance group for my doctorate dissertation—I was able to both experience what it is like to be a member of the group and observe their interactions with their audiences, and vice versa, in the specific event described in this paper. It is in the very space of disjuncture between performance and audience reactions that I observed that the Indonesian migrant women found new hybrid interpretations of gender ideals and how to represent who they are and their position in their diasporic community (often in a marginalised capacity). This position reflects both the subversive potential and normative gender identity that shapes diasporic Indonesian-Australian forms of femininity. These forms are grounded in the diasporic context of Perth, Western Australia, yet influenced by the geopolitical situation and diaspora diplomacy agenda of the two countries’ bilateral relationship. As described in this specific Poco Poco performance in this paper, cultural performances as rituals of belonging in the diaspora can also become a means for contesting idealised representations.

Moving Together, Audience Participation and Reception at the End of the Show

There was no reaction from the audience. Even though I was beckoning vigorously with both my arms, no one wanted to join me on stage for the finale—the audience participation “Poco Poco dance” a type of “country music line dancing”. I was not aware that Dean, the Australia-born husband of European descent of the leader of the Indonesian migrant women dance group Santi had introduced our Indonesian performance as a “dance popularised by the Indonesian military”, information he had copied from Wikipedia.^[1] To the audience at the Fremantle Kulcha Multicultural Arts Centre—a “world music” venue known to be popular with the community’s counterculture, anti-military, and “hippy” leanings—it must therefore have been a shock to see me poised at the front of the dance group, wearing the black military style high boots that are good for the Poco Poco dance and which were popular at that time.

This disjuncture or fault line between the dance performance’s introduction and the audience’s taste or expectations is representative of the specific ethnographic stories in this paper of Poco Poco at this one Kulcha Multicultural Arts Centre performance. Poco Poco is sometimes performed at the end of a line-up of four or five different created Indonesian dances (*Tari Kreasi*) by members of an Indonesian women “amateur housewife” hobby dance group in Perth, Western Australia. The women did not learn the Poco Poco dance performance for this Kulcha event specifically, but the three original members of this group of a dozen women dancers first met at an Australian multicultural community event a year before, where they participated in an internationally popularised country line-dancing audience performance accompanied by a local amateur community musician band. After meeting “on the dance floor” they decided to start an Indonesian amateur hobby dance group, in which they could perform their version of various Indonesian dances, including Poco Poco, an Eastern Indonesian version of country-style line dancing. The disjuncture experienced at this specific event at the Kulcha “world music” venue reveals how the Indonesian migrant women dancers, and sometimes their Australian partners, had, as amateur performers, misunderstood how to become legitimate Indonesian cultural representatives in Perth.

At the time, in 2007, I was a Doctorate student of Anthropology doing my one-year fieldwork research in Perth, and among the Indonesian migrant community I had the opportunity to do participant observation of learning, practising, performing and socialising with an Indonesian migrant women’s dance group. After introducing myself as a Doctorate student doing research and meeting the group of a dozen Indonesian women performing several of their versions of Indonesian dances at a community group’s “start of the calendar year welcoming new members event”, the group organiser, leader and dance teacher Santi invited me to their weekly dance practice sessions. With this group of a dozen women, mainly marriage migrants who had come to Australia through spousal visas, I experienced how certain gendered and moral values are imposed on the performers by not only the audience, but also other parties with a vested interest—such as the Indonesian consulate’s official women’s group *Dharma Wanita*—which become the arbiters of legitimacy and aesthetics. These particular women and their performance thus became a contested site of national and cultural representation, which served to reveal the complexities of transnational Indonesian–Australian life.

Disjunctures between the Indonesian migrant women’s performance and an Australian audience’s taste can be analysed as a cross-cultural misunderstanding; the dancers did not know that for the “hippie counterculture” audience of Fremantle any mention of the military, whether Australian or Indonesian, would likely carry negative connotations that would clash with the audience’s life-style choices. This particular Fremantle audience would

not want to join the dance, as they would not wish to be seen to be supportive of anything to do with military culture. Whatever the Indonesian migrant women's dancers' attitudes to military culture, for them the Poco Poco dance was about a sense of harmony, of moving together in synchronicity, successfully. Poco Poco became, through television, a popular social neighbourhood activity with a fitness element among housewives throughout Indonesia. In the late 1990s and early 2000s it was often danced at celebrations and parties, and gained a popularity similar to that of line dancing internationally. This social aspect was the reason why the Indonesian migrant women's dance group chose Poco Poco as the last performance. It was hoped that by inviting audience members to join them, they would share in a fun party activity and thus enjoy a positive ending to their night of Indonesian cultural experience.

At this performance in Fremantle a misunderstanding occurred in their Poco Poco performance, specifically between the performers and the expectations of the audience. The audience expected cultural performances as symbolic of the idealised image of Australia's multicultural national identity, as bite-sized servings of various cultures that together create a kaleidoscope of colour, for the consumption and entertainment of the majority "white" audience. Moreover, these cultural performances would be steeped in audience expectations of the provision of Oriental exoticism by the colourful "Other"—who are a part of the national population but can be experienced in a controlled manner—either at a safe distance, on stage, or on the peripheries in the surrounding tents, serving the different countries' cuisines.

The Indonesian migrant women dancers, nevertheless, did understand the Australian multicultural audience's taste; the poster they made for this particular Kulcha arts performance had as its headline "Indonesian dance group presents an exotic selection of Indonesian culture". The Poco Poco interactive line dance did not fit the festival dance performance criteria, and this may be partly because the dancers viewed this particular form of line dance as a social interactive dance in Indonesia, as part of party celebrations, which did not match the notion of "Indonesian cultural performance" on stage for an audience. As a multicultural performance it broke the "rules" because it was longer than five minutes, asked for the audience's participation in the performance space, and as a dance it is not entertaining and exotically colourful; moreover, the "Other" could not just be safely consumed, but was perceived as a potential threat symbolising military power.

The sensitivity over the military connection may point to Australia's neo-colonialist imagination of the "yellow peril" and the invading hordes of Asians, an image that is still held ^[2]. In addition, the treatment of Australia's Indigenous population by British colonialists and European settlers, points to its own vulnerability of being colonised by the "hordes of Asians" from the north, which contributes to the "White Australia" policy in 1901 until the change to multiculturalism policy in 1978. Australians' own memory of settler colonialism and the guilt of 'invasion' of Indigenous Aboriginal land—with the acknowledgement of Australia Day on 26 January as "invasion day" by certain Indigenous and other members of the Australian population— may also play a part in the fear of a militarised, potentially invading Indonesian neighbour. In addition, a Lowy Institute poll has been consistent in its findings since 2013 that the majority of the Australian public still perceive Indonesia as a threatening military dictatorship and not as a democratic country.^[3]

The Poco Poco line dance being introduced as a popular military dance had the potential to reinforce negative perceptions of Indonesia as a threatening country with a large army on Australia's doorstep, and could also have brought up the record of human rights abuses by the Indonesian military in East Timor and more recently in Papua. This Fremantle performance could have the feared consequence of portraying the dance group as amateurs trying to be cultural ambassadors, but without the political nous that is needed in cultural diplomacy. Moreover, there was the potential they would portray a dangerous and chaotic image of the nation and thus

pose a threat to the Indonesian state and its diplomatic relations with Australia.^[4]

While occurrences of the exemplified disjuncture—in this case at a community venue celebrating Australian multicultural arts and as experienced with a mainly non-Indonesian audience—are few, the disjuncture comes with consequences. It would have had repercussions on the ability of the dancers to act as Indonesian cultural representatives, enacting diaspora diplomacy and thus their social standing within their migrant community, and additionally it precipitated changes to their performance to make it more “appealing” to the audience. More importantly, it also influenced their understanding of what a valued performance is within the various intersecting cross-cultural discourses of femininity.

Performing a dance that is associated with the military—through the wearing of military-style boots—may be a portrayal of the very antithesis of the ideal of Indonesian women’s femininity, which is embodied in the Indonesian consulate’s official women’s group or Dharma Wanita. Dharma Wanita, though it opens its memberships to Indonesian migrant women in Perth, is very hierarchical, with the Consul General’s wife as the official leader, the Vice Consul’s wife as the second in command, and so forth, according to their spouse’s role in the consulate. Unlike the Indonesian migrant women dance group, Dharma Wanita are considered official cultural ambassadors with their own bamboo rattling orchestra, Angklung, as well as a Xylophone orchestra, Gamelan, both of which are reasonably sedate activities that do not have a high potential for creating controversy.

In comparison to Dharma Wanita, women who perform in either the Angklung or Gamelan orchestra usually wear a Javanese style feminine attire called *Kebaya* with the same or similar matching colours. In contrast, the Poco Poco dance performance at Freemantle’s Kulcha venue, with black high military boots and the introduction of it as a dance popularised by the Indonesian military, becomes the antithesis of this feminine Dharma Wanita image. The Suharto New Order government created Dharma Wanita to domesticate and depoliticise women after his succession through the decimation of the Indonesian communist party and those sympathetically aligned in 1965, including the female communist group Gerwani. Images of militarised Indonesian women are part of propaganda films and historical school textbooks and equated with the Gerwani women of the armed communist party, who dismembered the kidnapped Indonesian General and were part of the start of the Suharto military take-over and the ousting of the supposedly communist sympathetic first president Sukarno. Indonesia’s first and only female president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, the daughter of the first President Sukarno ousted in the 1960s Suharto military take-over, was said to have been close to the Indonesian military during her time as President in 2004–2008, in order to gain and maintain support. Nevertheless, to counter the association with her father’s past she still had to rely heavily by adhering to the ideal feminine value of motherhood and to portray herself foremost as the mother of the nation.^[5]

The Indonesian migrant women dancers wish to emulate the ideal as mothers of the nation and as ideal Indonesian cultural citizen overseas performing diaspora diplomacy. Diasporic diplomacy, or a state’s policy of engaging with its diasporic community overseas, is, in its basic sense, understood as “capacity building policies aimed at discursively producing a state-centric transnational national society by developing corresponding state institutions, extending rights to and extracting obligations from the diaspora”.^[6] However, it has also been acknowledged that the diasporic population serves as an important intermediary between the country of origin and the host country through their influence on the politics and foreign affairs of both countries.^[7] In more pronounced cases, such as the Filipino diaspora in the United States, the diaspora can shape the dynamics of a country, whereby non-state actors prevail over dominant decision-making and cause state actors to positively consider popular demands.^[8] In addition, class and influence status of a minority are to be considered: where these Indonesian migrant women, who are mainly nouveau-riche through being married to Australian men who

worked in the mining industry during the mining boom, have economic capital, their very status as the wife of mainly Anglo-Australian men created the disjuncture with their lack of cultural and social capital. They try to gain these capitals by acting as cultural ambassadors, akin to being “flexible citizens who are new migrants narrating cosmopolitan citizenship”, as most of these women remain Indonesian citizens but are permanent residents of Australia.^[9]

Nevertheless, as flexible citizens, Indonesian women are still considered to be bearers and representatives of Indonesian cultural and moral values in Australia. This puts them in an impossible situation. When they try to become good cultural citizens and promote Indonesian culture, they are denigrated, as amateur housewives with a “deviant” marriage status, who the cultural attaché sector and committee members of the official women’s group Dharma Wanita especially fear will publicly embarrass the nation.^[10] Moreover, they are further denigrated as morally handicapped (*tuna susila*) and suspected of having a dubious past because they are or were married to “white” Australian men, whom, it is assumed, they must have met while working as a bar girl or under similar questionable circumstances. As a gender analysis of women’s mobility, being a marriage migrant settled permanently abroad particularly creates questions of loyalty to the Indonesian nation, while their class politics plays itself out across borders.

Although this paper did not focus on the stories of the husbands of the dancers, they are important in determining the women’s status in the migrant community. The women are regarded as economically well-off, yet they remain socially marginalised in the Indonesian community. The local Indonesian community regards those men who are involved in their wives’ performances and are interested in understanding Indonesian culture positively, and they have also helped to ameliorate cross-cultural tensions. At the Fremantle Kulcha arts performance, though some “white” or Anglo audience members eventually joined in the Poco Poco line dancing, they were mainly Australian spouses of the dancers who felt the need to support their wives. In a way the active participation in Indonesian cultural activities and support of their wives of the Anglo Australian male spouses increases their transnational masculinity in the eyes of the Indonesian migrant women dance group community.^[11] The Poco Poco dance becomes a “family performance” with the men, as members of the audience, joining in at the end, and illustrates the intimate Australian-Indonesian relationship and counters the negative stereotype of their marriage as “deviant”.

Nevertheless, for Dean to introduce the dance as having been popularised by the Indonesian military showed a lack of understanding of both the recent social history of the portside community of Fremantle, particularly the people who moved there in the 1970s and 1980s at the height of hippie counterculture, and also the context in which the venue of Kulcha Multicultural Arts centre operates, fostering world (multicultural) performances. The reason may be that Dean, who has an Eastern European background, grew up and at the time of the performance lived with his Indonesian dancer wife, Santi, in the hills on the eastern side of Perth, an area of farming and migrant land holdings, food cultivators and growers. Neither Dean, nor any of the Indonesian migrant women dance group members and their families had lived in the Fremantle area, and therefore they may not have been attuned to the sensitivities of Fremantle audience, which would have had a very different lifestyle and presumably different associated values. In terms of the disjuncture in the Poco Poco ethnography, this can be analysed as similar lack of understanding the nuances of the “white” Australian multicultural audience and residents of Perth, like the spouses who are also of a mixed background.

The women’s transnational life being a marriage migrant to “white” Australian men can also be analysed according to the disjuncture between the female dancers’ performances and the expectations of the Indonesian migrant community or the consulate. The Indonesian migrant community and the consulate as audience played an

important role as the migrant women dancers strove for acceptance and accolades. Indonesian women migrants in Perth struggled to live up to idealised images of femininity from within their community. In a new migration setting they had the opportunity to recreate themselves, and because they wanted to achieve a higher status within the Indonesian expatriate community, they firstly strove to gain status as an amateur dancer beyond that of housewife. Therefore, through performing Indonesian dances like the Poco Poco at a venue like Kulcha Multicultural Arts in Freemantle, the Indonesian women inadvertently disrupted the racialised stereotype of the subservient lower-class domesticated Asian female spouse through a public performance which did not align with idealised Oriental femininity as identified in Neo-Orientalist discourse.^[12] As Rachmi Diyah Larasati argued in her book *The Dance that Makes You Vanish* (2013), there is a political economy of embodiment at the heart of Indonesian dances performed internationally that points to the limits and potential of women's agency to subvert the national discourse of idealised femininity.^[13]

The Indonesian community's expectations on the other hand, are that a respectable married woman (particularly if they are of the Islamic faith) should not dance and perform in front of men and strangers who are not their relatives; instead she should be a mother figure who might teach Indonesian culture and values in a "decent" manner. However, the women responded to this gender stereotype by continuing to dance at different multicultural and community events, their versions of femininity and of themselves, with the hope of eventually gaining the acceptance of the consulate and its migrant community. They sought to eventually gain higher status and more cultural and social capital, but at the same time they inadvertently had to negotiate the discourse of idealised femininity that was imposed on them. While other literature on Indonesian female dancers has described their particular performances as political,^[14] the performances of these migrant women in Perth are different because they did not set out to take a deliberate feminist political stand with an agenda to change women's position in society. The contribution of this paper is therefore to provide an additional perspective to the literature—that assumes all dance are political or a form of liberation of women^[15]—though it is often a classic approach to feminism focusing on the domestic and public form of female participation as signifier of political movement, these Indonesian female dancers are also participating in a capitalist endeavour of acquiring status within the Indonesian diaspora community in Perth, Western Australia.

While the Poco Poco dance ethnography focuses on the disjuncture that can occur between performers and audience and what it reveals about discourses that are valued when it comes to representing a migrant community, it also shows the myriad ways in which the dancers react to these community receptions, how they understood their performances and continue to have a lot of fun doing what they love. There is a lot of humour in the dancers' interactions with each other, at times challenging the very gendered stereotypes associated with who they are. It is this joy that encapsulates Bakhtin's statement, that those who seek to make meaningful lives for themselves on the margins of structures of domination embody resistance and mischief as playful and pleasurable.^[16]

Conclusion

This essay contributes to understanding how a specific form of diasporic Indonesian Australian "feminine", is marginalised by the patriarchal and symbolic order. I provide a comparative account of femininity, in the context of diaspora in a cross-cultural setting, as a clash and a battle for prominence among contradictory discourses. Some discourses, such as the Indonesian discourses on femininity are transformed in the context of migration and mix with an "Orientalist" discourse existing in Australia, both affecting how the audience understands migrant women's performances.

The disjuncture between dance performance and audience is experienced when the migrant women are understood to be representing a diasporic community's sense of identity, its discourse of authenticity, which hinges on projections of acceptable forms of femininity. It is about whether the audience will accept a performance by these migrant women who occupy a marginal position, or whether they will find it abhorrent because the performer or the performance is deemed to be not an appropriate or acceptable representation of the community's Indonesian-ness or its gendered ideals. Who you are and your lived experience influences both your legitimacy in being a representative of a community and also, therefore, whether you will be accepted as an "authentic" performer, dancing particular genres with their inherent gendered values.

To end, I will quote a comment by an elderly Dutch Australian man who reacted to his participation in the Poco Poco line dancing at the Kulcha Australian multicultural event by making a funny remark: "this music is never-ending". In the spirit of Sherry Ortner, the Indonesian migrant women dancers laughed along, enjoying the humour and continuing to dance. Though the dances performed by the Indonesian migrant women may not be understood or match the expectations of their multicultural Australian audiences, the women keep dancing and keep performing their version of femininity in subsequent events. As for the dancers, they hope that this opportunity to perform Indonesian dance in a venue around Perth such as the one described in this ethnography, just like the music that accompanies the last Poco Poco dance, does not end too quickly for them.

Footnotes

1. All names in this paper are changed to ensure anonymity.
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5. Van Wichelen, Sonja. "Contesting Megawati: the Mediation of Islam and Nation in Times of Political Transition". *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*. Vol 3. No. 2. pp. 41-59.
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8. Gonzalez, Joaquin Jay. *Diaspora Diplomacy: Philippine Migration and its Soft Power Influences*. Minneapolis, MN: Mill City Press. 2012.
9. Ong, Aiawha. "On the Edge of Empires: Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora", *Positions*, Vol. 1. No. 3. p. 747.
10. Personal communication with author, 2007.

11. Winarnita, Monika. "Australia Indonesia Intimate Relationships: Intercultural Couples, Masculinity and Cultural Fluency". In *Linking People: Connections and Encounters between Australians and Indonesians*. Eds. A. Missbach, A. and J. Purdey. Berlin: Regiospectra, 2015. pp. 231-248.
12. Broinowski, *op. cit.*
13. Larasati, Rachmi Diyah. *The Dance that Makes You Vanish: Cultural Reconstruction in Post-Genocide Indonesia*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2013.
14. Hatley, Barbara. *Javanese Performances on an Indonesian Stage*, Singapore: NUS Press. 2008; Palermo, Carmencita. 2009. "Anak Mula Keto 'It Was Always Thus': Women Making Progress, Encountering Limits in Characterizing The Masks in Balinese Masked Dance-Drama". *Intersections*. No. 19. 2009. Available at <http://Intersections.Anu.Edu.Au/Issue19/Palermo.Htm> (accessed 2010-09-10.)
15. *Ibid.*
16. Quoted in Ortner, Sherry B. *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting Subject*, Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press. 2006. p. 114.