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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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