

LILIS SURYANI'S "GANG KELINCI" AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIAL REALITIES IN INDONESIA (1957–1965)

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Abstract

Music does not live in a vacuum. It is forever growing and mutating, at once reflecting and creating social realities in the culture which birthed it, be they historical developments or contemporary conditions. The song "Gang Kelinci", written by Titiék Puspa and sung by Lilis Suryani, provides an interesting case in point: its lyrics provide a stark portrayal of the suffering of the Indonesian lower class during the Guided Democracy period (1957–1965). This is only emphasised by its whimsical imagery and jaunty music, which was used to avoid censorship during the totalitarian Guided Democracy period.

Key words: Gang Kelinci, Lilis Suryani, Titiék Puspa

Abstract

Musik tidak berada dalam suatu vacuum. Ia selalu berkembang dan berubah, mencerminkan dan menciptakan realitas sosial dalam budaya yang telah melahirkannya, baik perkembangan historis maupun keadaan kontemporer. Lagu "Gang Kelinci", yang ditulis oleh Titiék Puspa dan dinyanyikan Lilis Suryani, menjadi salah satu contoh yang menarik: lirik lagu ini menawarkan gambaran kesengsaraan yang dialami masyarakat kelas bawah Indonesia selama periode Demokrasi Terpimpin (1957–1965). Ini semakin ditekankan dengan pencitraannya yang fantastis dan musik yang gembira, yang digunakan untuk menghindari penyensoran dari pemerintah totaliter demokrasi terpimpin.

Kata kunci: Gang Kelinci, Lilis Suryani, Titiék Puspa

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

A cultural work, be it a painting, song, dance, novel, or film, cannot exist or be understood separate from the socio-political environment in which it was conceived. These cultural works will always reflect (although not necessarily directly) realities in the environments in which they were written, be they mores, political issues, sexual identities and constructs, or even a general idea of aesthetics. This implies that songs, like all forms of popular culture, are audience oriented and, thus, greatly influenced by an audience's expectations and shaped by their experiences.

Such a belief, formulated by György Lukács in his 1937 book *The Historical Novel*, is in this analysis combined with an understanding of songs as popular poems. Although Lukács deals

almost exclusively with novels, his theory of reflection is applicable here. Lukács argues that literature, as part of the superstructure of a class society, is nothing but a passive reflection of the economic structure. This need not be a direct reflection: the use of metaphors, metonymy, and other forms of figurative language is still possible (Makaryk, 1993: 410). As such, after exploring the sociological context in which the song was written and the song itself, this paper will analyse the song “Gang Kelinci” as a reflection of Indonesian society in the mid-1960s. This will be done by drawing parallels between the song and its societal context, keeping in mind the possible use of figurative language to obscure or encode meaning.

Sociological research such as this is not uncommon for English pop songs.¹ However, in Indonesia there has been little scholarly – or, at times, even critical – analysis of individual songs.² Granted, the music industry in Indonesia is much smaller than its American or British counterpart. Indonesian artists need only sell 75,000 copies to be certified platinum by the Recording Industry Association of Indonesia; American artists, meanwhile, need to sell 1,000,000 (“International Certification Award levels.”: 2012).³

This relative lack of a critical look at some of Indonesia’s most famous popular songs is, in a word, startling. Social criticism has long been evident in Indonesian music, to the point that some artists have built their career around such songs. Iwan Fals, for example, rose to prominence – and, within Suharto’s New Order government, notoriety – for his stinging criticisms of that government, once spending two weeks under house arrest for writing a song that could be read as likening the First Lady, Siti Hartinah, to a prostitute (Kurniasari: 2010). He is far from the only one, however; bands such as God Bless, Slank, and Efek Rumah Kaca, as well as singers including Chrisye, Nike Ardilla, and Melly Goeslaw, have all dealt with social issues in their songs.

In this paper, one of the most popular songs of mid-1960s Indonesia, “Gang Kelinci”, will be examined as a reflection of the social realities which dominated Indonesians’ lives during that period, realities which underlined Sukarno’s Guided Democracy phase. The analysis shall be mostly text based, emphasising the strong use of allegory within the song as representative of the

¹ See, for example, Denisoff, R. S, and Levine, M. H.(1971)"The Popular Protest Song: The Case of 'Eve of Destruction'." *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 35.1: 117–122.

² Most research papers dealing with Indonesian popular music have been targeted at a certain genre as a whole and not individual songs. See, for example, Jeremy Wallach’s *Modern Noise, Fluid Genres: Popular Music in Indonesia, 1997-2001*. The author has located only one academic work dealing exclusively with an Indonesian song.

³ Figures accurate as of August 2012.

writer Titiek Puspa's view of the misery which surrounded her in early 1965. This will show that she was not only indirectly influenced by the Guided Democracy programme, but directly challenged Sukarno's regime through illustrating its shortcomings when dealing with the people.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Without understanding the Guided Democracy period in Indonesia there is little chance for an understanding of its influence on the audience for "Gang Kelinci", and thus its formation. The Guided Democracy period, under President Sukarno, was rooted in several attempts at rebellion and separation in the mid-1950s; the upcoming change in government was clear by 1957, although Sukarno kept the parliamentary system for another two years. He soon began establishing himself as a puppet master controlling other powerful men, and by 1960 he had most of the nation's political parties following his whims; the army, meanwhile, moved independently and established a six-year period of martial law, becoming deeply entrenched in the nation's political and economic systems. Sukarno later essentially dissolved the parliamentary system and reinstated the Constitution of 1945, which gave him greater power than he had previously held.

As further rebellions surface and the international situation heated, the government seized several foreign-owned interests and began to freeze its international relations. Distribution between islands and to villages began to fall apart. The Dutch shipping company Koninklijke Paketvaart-Maatschappij had been forcibly nationalised in the late 1950s, leading many of its ships to depart Indonesia for the Netherlands; the company itself remained poorly managed. Meanwhile the ethnic Chinese, who had previously been a driving force in the rural distribution of goods, were forced to migrate to the cities through an edict in 1959. Finally, the price of Indonesia's exports plummeted, leaving the country lacking foreign currency reserves.

These situations, although by no means the only ones, contributed to an economic meltdown. Despite drastic efforts to stabilise the economy, inflation averaged 100 per cent annually between 1961 and 1965, quickly devaluing the rupiah. By 1965 inflation had ballooned to over 500 percent. Meanwhile, the country was seeing a rapidly urbanised population, with 14.8 per cent of the country's 94 million people living in a city; more than 60 per cent of the population was on Java, an island which only makes up 7.3 per cent of the country's area. Jakarta, the capital, was the centre of much of this growth.

These factors exacerbated the already present social and economic suffering of the common people, which had been growing steadily worse since independence. Numerous localised famines threatened them. Although news of such famines remained underreported because of increased press censorship, several reports have surfaced, including reports that a million people were in danger of starvation in Central Java in early 1964.⁴ In contrast, the president became well known for his excessive private parties and numerous vices, especially women.

In order to distract the Indonesian populace from the collapsing economy and ongoing domestic and international crises, the government began building grandiose monuments, including Monumen Nasional (Monas) and Istiqlal Mosque. The groundwork for both of these structures, although conceptualised years earlier, was laid in 1961 with the economy continually declining. Neither structure would be completed before Sukarno's ultimate downfall. In other places both governmental and non-governmental groups stifled dissidence. Sukarno's government arrested those who spoke out against it, for instance, while the leftist creative group Lekra put pressure, sometimes in the form of physical force, on rightist writers in an attempt to censor them.

Suffice it to say the Indonesian populace, especially its creative forces, did not accept these conditions idly. Audiences and creative personnel alike searched for forms of protest. Taufik Ismail, now known mostly for his religious works, gave a scathing summary of what he perceived as a godless period of censorship led by the Indonesian Communist Party in "Catatan Tahun 1965"; the following year, his "Kita adalah Pemilik Sah Republik Ini" voiced the populace's growing concern that they had little control over their own political fates. The hedonistic nature of Indonesia's upper class was starkly contrasted with the suffering and, at times, lawlessness of the lower class in "Langit Makin Mendung", a highly controversial 1968 short story published under the pseudonym Kipandjikusmin.

These roots, of proletarian audiences suffering from malnutrition and poverty while the bourgeois exploit them, are also reflected in "Gang Kelinci".⁵ Written by Titiek Puspa and recorded by Lilis Suryani, the song was released in 1965 on an album of the same name (KS:

⁴ For further information on the famines in Indonesia during this period, see the Pierre van der Eng's conference paper "All Lies? Famines in Sukarno's Indonesia, 1950s-1960s", presented at the 2012 Asian Historical Economics Conference in Tokyo on 15 September 2012.

⁵ In the old spelling, which was in effect when the song was released, the title is "Gang Kelintji".

2009). Suryani, 17 at the time of recording, had entered the country's music industry only three years earlier, first singing for the studio Gita Irama before being signed to Bali Record (now Musica Studio's) and recording several commercial hits for the company (Joko and Sakri: 2007).

The writer, Puspa, had first become active in the Indonesian music industry in the late 1950s. Through later songs, such as "Kupu-Kupu Malam" (1977),⁶ she would show herself to be a keen observer of the issues faced by her audiences and willing to face the harsh censorship imposed by Suharto's New Order (Gitomartoyo: 2009). In "Gang Kelinci" she uses a rabbit-themed analogy, based on the name of an alley in Pasar Baru where Suryani lived at the time (Joko and Sakri: 2007), which will be further explored in the following section. Her lyrics, in Indonesian and English,⁷ are as follows:

Indonesian:

*Jakarta kotaku indah dan megah
Di situlah aku dilahirkan
Rumahku di salah satu gang
Namanya Gang Kelinci
Entah apa sampai namanya kelinci
Mungkin dulu kerajaan kelinci
Karena manusia bertambah banyak
Kasihannya terdesak*

*Sekarang rumahnya berjubel
Oh... padat penghuninya
Anak-anak segudang
Krudak... kruduk...
Kayak kelinci*

*Kami semua hidup rukun dan damai
Hanya satu yang aku herankan
Badanku bulat tak bisa tinggi
Persis kayak anak kelinci*

English:

*Jakarta, my beautiful, majestic city
There I was born
My home was in an alley
It was called Rabbit Alley
I don't know why they called it rabbit
Perhaps it was home to a rabbit empire
Because the people kept coming
The poor, crammed rabbits*

*Now the homes are packed
Oh... how full it is
A warehouse of children
Krudak... kruduk...
Like rabbits*

*We all live in peace and harmony
Only one thing amazes me
My body is round, never tall
Just like a baby rabbit*

"Gang Kelinci" features music by Pantja Nada, under the leadership of Enteng Tanamal (Joko and Sakri: 2007). Stylistically, guitars and drums dominate, holding at midtempo throughout the song. The merging of Suryani's lyrics, performed in a somewhat nasal soprano manner, with the bouncing acoustics gives the song an upbeat tone.

⁶ The song exposed the psychological stresses suffered by prostitutes and questioned the double standards found in the industry, of the sex workers being the guilty parties while the clients were innocent.

⁷ For the purposes of this paper, the translation provided is a literal one which lacks the rhythm and rhyme scheme of the original.

The song has found popular and critical success in Indonesia. It was Suryani's breakthrough, allowing her to enjoy another decade of success, although her songs later gravitated towards patriotic themes (Joko and Sakri: 2007). In 2007 *Rolling Stone Indonesia* listed "Gang Kelinci" as the 66th best Indonesian song of all time (KS: 2009). The song has been covered several times in the past decade, including versions by Gita Gutawa and Meliana Pancarani in the past five years which have emphasised the whimsical music. This suggests that the social situations which "Gang Kelinci" criticises continue to be an issue, almost half a century later, and that its protest still resonates with Indonesian audiences.

"Gang Kelinci" establishes its social critique with the first line, "Jakarta, kotaku indah dan megah" ("Jakarta, my beautiful, majestic city"). The listener is reminded of the extensive development the capital was undergoing when "Gang Kelinci" was released, especially Sukarno's monuments. The artist, however, recognises that the sense of majesty offered is an illusion, meant both to show the Indonesian people that the country's economic situation is fundamentally sound and distract them from their own – fundamentally unsound – financial conditions. By establishing Jakarta (ostensibly) as a city of beauty and luxury, Suryani and Puspa are setting the stage for a complete deconstruction of the listener's view of the city.

This deconstruction starts simply enough, with the statement that Suryani was born in Rabbit Alley, whimsically suggesting that it was once home to an empire of rabbits, belonging to rabbits. These "rabbits", in an early example of the song's analogy, are the people of Rabbit Alley, who during the liberal democracy period would have felt that they had a voice in running the country, no matter how insignificant it actually was. In such a kingdom, the leadership would have been noble and, in Javanese belief, emphasised the people's needs over their own; as such, the inhabitants of this rabbit empire would have lived lives of plenty. However, this kingdom has crumbled, stripping the "rabbits" of all their self-determination and power. With a "President for Life" like Sukarno, they can no longer choose their leaders and can only try to survive, as now the number of homes only increases.

This task of survival, the topic of most of the song, is increasingly difficult. The population of the former kingdom of Rabbit Alley is forever growing, reflecting the increased urbanisation and booming population of Jakarta in the 1960s. These "rabbits" are living in terribly close quarters, "crammed" in their homes. Children do not live and play freely, but are instead jammed together as if in warehouses, things to be stored and not lives to be

supported. They are rendered as mere objects, unimportant to those outside who manage the warehouses, to the politicians and rich landowners who control the city.

By connecting rabbits with booming population growth, Suryani and Puspa build on the common depiction of rabbits as extremely fertile animals. Rabbits can reproduce every month and have ten kits per litter; an average rabbit reproduces at a lower rate, producing perhaps fifty offspring a year. As a result, rabbits have long been symbols of fertility in both the East and West, including the Netherlands and China (Davis and DeMello: 2003). Although we have been unable to identify traditional Indonesian folk tales involving rabbits, foreign tales, including the Chinese story of the Moon Rabbit and Aesop's story of The Tortoise and the Hare, have become part of Indonesian culture.

These "rabbits" in Gang Kelinci have, implicitly, been applying their considerable reproductive forces despite the desperate economic situation in which they live; to continue the metaphor, the "rabbits" are having their "kits" in the middle of a dreadful "vegetable" shortage, and thus adding to their own economic burden by birthing more dependents. This "vegetable" shortage, which in the preceding sentence refers to the lack of economic mobility of the populace in Gang Kelinci, coupled with the overpopulation problems, implies that there is a more literal "vegetable" shortage – a lack of food. These "warehouses" of children, together with their parents must be fed, yet the populace is unable to procure enough supplies to do so. Instead, they must share a dwindling share of "vegetables", what little economic capabilities they have, with no end in sight.

Their seemingly simple task of survival may be impossible, and the "rabbits" in the alley have already begun to fail. This failure becomes evident in the lyrics "Badanku bulat tak bisa tinggi" ("My body is round, never tall"), which carries the allegory of the populace as a number of rabbits to a further, more physical and empiric, level. In "Gang Kelinci", not only is the populace suffering from overcrowding owing to their rabbit-like uncontrolled surge in population, but the individuals within society are physically changing and becoming more rabbit-like: large stomachs, small frames, and short bodies held close to the ground. The visual of a round and stunted person, "just like a baby rabbit", is reflective, although admittedly hyperbolically so, of the realities of malnourishment.

Nourishment, it is generally agreed, is highly influential on a child's growth. Those who are malnourished suffer from stunted growth, or a low height-to-age ratio; research following the

famine in China from 1959 until 1961 saw surviving children ultimately reach an average height of up to two centimetres under the expected level (Gorgens, Meng, Vaithianathan: 2007). Meanwhile, children lacking in protein develop kwashiorkor, a disease which includes a protruding stomach and swollen legs among its symptoms (Sizer, Piché, and Whitney: 2012). As such, the physically round and stunted “rabbits” in Gang Kelinci, whimsically described as “hanya satu yang aku herankan” (“[the] only thing that amazes [the singer]”), are in fact the malnourished children living in the “warehouses”.

These children, suffering from malnutrition owing to overpopulation and famine, and their parents are the victims of the economic collapse and the Guided Democracy government’s policies. This reflection of reality, obfuscated behind an extended metaphor of rabbits living in an alley, begs for an unspoken solution to solve these problems. The poor people in Rabbit Alley: they are in need of subsidies to buy food which they cannot afford on their own, in need of space to grow and develop which they cannot find in the city, in need of funds diverted from the building of a “majestic” city and used for the good of the people. In short, they are in need of help which the government is not providing.

But why use such a roundabout method of criticising the government’s policies? This, once again, can be understood through the societal context. As stated above, under the Sukarno government, authors of explicit anti-government works, or works which were thought to stir up the populace, would find themselves political prisoners; such were the experiences of Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Mochtar Lubis, as well as numerous politicians, soldiers, and creative artists. They could be held for years at a time, never knowing when (or if) they would be released. Puspa and Suryani were likely unwilling to accept such imprisonment over “Gang Kelinci”: both were enjoying booming careers, and understood that prison would have cut these careers short. They knew that the government would have never allowed an explicit protest song to receive wide airplay, and as such the message behind “Gang Kelinci” would have not been received by as many people. As such, the allegory and upbeat rhythm which masks the social criticism in “Gang Kelinci” were born of necessity, out of both personal and commercial interests.

This roundabout approach to criticism, using allegory and an upbeat rhythm in contrast to the dark implications of the lyrics as a way to avoid censorship, likely contributed to the song’s popularity. Those living under Sukarno’s rule would not have wanted to be faced with an explicit reminder of their own economic suffering; they would not want lyrics which explicitly said

“anak-anak kelaparan / perut buncit kembang“ (“the children are starving / stomachs bloated, protruding”) any more than they would have wanted lyrics about baby rabbits in warehouses sung to a funeral march.

Popular art, at its most basic, is one used for relaxation, entertainment, and escape from the misery and tedium of day-to-day life. As such, had “Gang Kelinci” been more explicit or given a more somber tone, listeners would have little escape from their own poverty-ridden lives; although they would have still empathised with the critique within, this would have ultimately depressing and, as a result, the song would perform poorly. Only through the whimsical analogy of people as rabbits, written in part to avoid censorship, could listeners enjoy the song while still voicing their complaints about contemporary Indonesian society.

These social conditions, although somewhat alleviated, continue to plague Indonesia. Java, only 7 per cent of Indonesia’s land mass, continues to hold 60 per cent of the nation’s population. Meanwhile, children continue to suffer from stunting; UNICEF estimates 42 per cent of Indonesian children are stunted, slightly below the regional average of 44 per cent (“Stunting in children under age 5”: 2000). Thus, it is not surprising that the song has seen several covers over the past five years.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The Indonesian pop song has often been a vehicle for poignant social criticism; this has perhaps been best recognised in the works of Iwan Fals, although numerous other recordings can be considered (and have been received) as having political messages. One such work is Titiek Puspa and Lilis Suryani’s “Gang Kelinci”, a popular success released amidst the imploding Indonesian economy, soaring population growth, and increasing dichotomy between the upper and lower classes; as such, this song cannot be truly understood without knowing its historical context.

The song, regarding a large number of “rabbits” living in the appropriately named Gang Kelinci, gives a stark contrast between the magnificence of President Sukarno’s building projects and the day-to-day lives of the suffering general populace. Through the extended allegory of rabbits, based in Western and Chinese understandings of the critters’ fertility and a whimsical treatment of the lyrics, they push the listener to recognise the injustices surrounding them and cry out for the government to better handle the needs of the general populace while softening the

criticism with a light beat and whimsical lyrics; these choices ensured the song's popularity by avoiding censorship and providing an escape for the audience. This protest remains pertinent in today's Indonesia, where overcrowding and malnourishment remain hot issues. The need for further social criticism appears to have been recognised by the current entertainment industry, as several covers of "Gang Kelinci" have been released in the past five years. As long as overpopulation and malnutrition run rampant through Indonesia, "Gang Kelinci" will continue to hold a social relevancy for the Indonesian people.

This is not to suggest that "Gang Kelinci" is the only song which can be analysed using Lukács theory of reflection, placed in a popular context. This need not be limited to the protest song, several examples of which have been mentioned above. All genres of music, including pop, rock, and *dangdut*, can be seen as reflecting of social needs, changes, and issues, such as a change in the expected age of marriage ("Anak Sekolah"; Chrisye), the need for unity amidst ethnic conflict ("Dangdut is the Music of My Country"; Project Pop), or the hypocritical nature of human interactions ("Panggung Sandiwara"; God Bless).

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