

continued from page 25 >

Postmodernism (London: Sage Publications, 1991) for instance, Mike Featherstone writes about shopping as a symbolic and self-validating experience – where the pleasure of shopping is often far greater than the pleasure derived from the commodity that is purchased. This argument may be extended further: that is to say, in the act of buying an artisan craft commodity, the Western consumer is at once buying the experience of authenticity and traditionalism in a way that symbolically connects the commodity to the producer. The direct experience of buying from the producer, as in a tourist encounter, or through a fair trade shop (like OXFAM shops or catalogues) where the details of the craft and the producers themselves are provided, surely reinforces this experience. In a

hyper-real world of mass, packaged consumption, global telecommunications, and virtual relationships, the purchase of an artisanal craft may act to temporarily anchor the consumer in a real world of labour production.

The third significant theme concerns the relationship of artisan and craft production to the current phase of accelerated globalization. With the advent of a global economy, coupled with post-modern consumer sentiments, crafts represent a traditional (or homely) form of consumer goods, which, at least for some buyers, imbues these goods with immense appeal. In other words, the consumption of crafts allows for a reconnection back to earlier and earthier forms and designs in a fragmented, fractured, and technological world. Ironically, the decline of artisans may in fact be occurring as the demand

for intricate, hand-made, “traditional” goods increases. <

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Media, State & NGOs And the Imagining of the Mentawaian Community

Research >
Southeast Asia

On the one hand proposing to look at the complex nature of contemporary cultural identities and investigating the role of globalization of information and communication technologies in the (re)construction of these identities on the other, the ASSR/IIAS/WOTRO programme “Transnational Society, Media, and Citizenship” is characterized by a dual focus. The main question does not dwell on global and local flows of information and communication technologies, but on how the global and the local find expression in specific contexts in Indonesia, India, Iran and the Gulf countries of the Middle East. Within this programme my own research, “Media, State, NGOs, and the Imagining of the Mentawaian Community” focuses on the autochthonous inhabitants of the Mentawai archipelago (West Sumatra), the Mentawaians.

By Myrna Eindhoven

Due to a number of interconnected developments on the national level and in the international context, local NGOs (non-governmental organizations) recently seem to mushroom in Indonesia. For a number of ethnic groups this marks a new phase in their recent history, as they have never been involved in these kinds of activities before. Among these relatively new voices the Mentawaians’ can be found. Under the influence of current processes of democratization in Indonesia, of renewed international interest in issues concerning human rights, indigenous peoples rights, and environmentalism, of higher levels of education and last, but definitely not least, of the significantly increased access to modern means of communication, the Mentawaians now express their identity more self-consciously than ever before.

Politics of Identity

In the course of time a critical elite of mainly young Mentawaians has come into being in Padang, West Sumatra’s capital. It is especially this group that has become consciously concerned with the preservation of “its culture” and has formed numerous local organizations intended to pursue its cultural and political interests. The emergence of this critical elite and its activities in helping to empower the Mentawaian community in its negotiations with the state and their quest for acknowledgement by greater society owed, and still owes, much to the support of the international community. At the moment at least seventeen local NGOs are active in the Mentawaian context, most of them sponsored or even created by an overseas partner. As a result local NGOs have become part of a potential powerful international network containing major Indonesian and international NGOs. Through strongly mediated, international networking local NGOs might be able to persuade powerful donor agencies, such as the World Bank, to put pressure on the Indonesian government to improve its policy in issues as human rights and environmental protection by making such an improvement a condition for financial assistance.

As a result of mediated international networking, which is mainly beyond national regulation, the Indonesian state finds it increasingly difficult to maintain its carefully constructed national identity and sovereignty. The Indonesian state can no longer domesticate and de-politicise utterances of ethnic identity - which it perceives as a potential threat to the unity of the national unity - without drawing immediate

negative attention from the international community. The nation state as an institute definitely has to rethink its position in order to come to terms with these alternative voices now present within the public realm. Theoretically the cultural and political recognition of the Mentawaians now seems secured, but there still is no guarantee that they will also be invited to participate actively in the current restructuring of the Indonesian state and nation. Therefore the recent issue of regional autonomy in Indonesia and whether it will go ahead in any real sense is of huge importance. The real test will be the strength of local democracy. How quickly and to what extent can local communities ensure that they take a full part in decision-making? At the local level it is the local NGOs that play a crucial role.

The international network of NGOs, however, does not seem to be able to put its potential to full use at the local level. Under the influence of their overseas partners local NGOs become entangled within a seemingly inescapable paradox of contemporary identity politics. While distancing themselves - physically as well as mentally - from their area of origin, they are still strongly oriented towards the Mentawai archipelago in their search for roots and “authentic culture”. Most local NGOs seem to lack clear goals and vision, uncritically copying (Western) international discourses on issues as human rights, indigenous peoples rights, and the environment. In their exaggerated image of the Mentawaians, they paint them as having been encapsulated in their own timeless, archaic world, until logging and governmental interference began. Very appealing to the Western audience, this image proved an excellent way to entice (foreign) donor organizations to support their local organizations financially. The founding of a local NGO thus proved itself to be an easy way to make money, leading to local NGOs with little or no reflection on their own situation, position and role within society. In turn this is leading to dubious or even conflicting relations with their grassroots. <

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Coping, Adapting, Thriving: What role for the Theatre in Contemporary Southeast Asia?

“Performance”, designating both the performing arts (theatre, music, and dance) and a performative or “dramatistic” approach to human action and interaction, has been more thoroughly documented and theorized about with regard to Southeast Asia than for most parts of the world. Geertz’s (in)famous theatre state and cockfight merely constitutes the top of the iceberg. The literature on performance and shamanism; philological, anthropological, linguistic, and historical accounts of Wayang Kulit in Indonesia and Malaysia; intricately detailed studies of choreology and “organology” for both mainland and insular Southeast Asia: the field is rich, historically deep, and constantly developing.

Report >
Southeast Asia
Panel Report from
EUROSEAS

By Matthew Isaac Cohen

Regrettably, the EUROSEAS conference only provides a mediocre index of Southeast Asian performance scholarship, represented by a solitary panel convened by Catherine Diamond of Soochow University (Taipei) and with individual papers scattered through other panels (Another planned performance panel, organized by Felicia Hughes-Freeland and focusing on the performer, was cancelled). The single panel devoted entirely to performance focused on the theme of theatre in contemporary Southeast Asia. Presenters were: Matthew Isaac Cohen (University of Glasgow), Solehah Ishak (UKM, Malaysia), Kittisak Kerdarunsuksri (University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, Bangkok), and Diamond herself (Soochow University).

The contributors followed a liberal interpretation of “Contemporary”: while some of the papers looked primarily at the most recent theatrical developments in Thailand and Malaysia, others discussed theatres of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Much common ground was found, though, across all the papers. The relatively modest numbers in attendance at the panel and its tight focus contributed to lively dialogue.

Kittisak Kerdarunsuksri presented on a new form of Thai Khon (masked dance-drama) created in 1997 by Phatravadi Mejudhon, and combining dance with shadow puppetry. Based on his description and a video, panellists and others found obvious similarities to contemporary Indonesian forms, such as Wayang Ukur; it came out in discussion that Phatravadi Mejudhon had participated in ASEAN theatre workshops and performances prior to her 1997 “invention”. Diamond’s paper on English language and Malay theatre since 1969, closely related in theme to Solehah Ishak’s contribution on “traditional” bases of contemporary Malay theatre, generated a charged discussion concerning invented Malay heritage and its stifling effects on theatrical production.

Cohen’s paper on the Eurasian Auguste Mahieu and the Komedi Stamboel, while grounded in century-old archival material from the Netherlands Indies, provoked thought about nationalist historiography and identity politics in today’s Indonesia and Malaysia.

The large number of participants at the international conference held in Leiden in 2000 on audiences, patrons and performers in Asian performing arts had already then demonstrated that there is a definite European interest in East, South, and Southeast Asian performance. Other scholars also noted the conference’s strong orientation on the political and economic at the expense of anthropological and humanistic matters. It is to be hoped that future EUROSEAS conferences will feature more panels centred on performance and interpretation studies. <

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Editors’ note >

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