Humour in Indonesian Politics
A Case Study of the Political Marketing of Gus Dur

By Arndt Graf

B
e low is an example of the special character of these tales/jokes told during the programme.

Wahid: ‘The finest one is from the PR China. Once … not in my times … there was a military delegation lead by America. It was led by the Joint Chief of Staff. Okay, they come. He talks very long, that Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Very looong. … But it is translated just in one very short sentence, and everybody is laughing. … So he asks … You are an amazing translator, my looong speech you could translate in only one short sentence, and everybody laughed … what is your secret? … The answer is: well, it’s easy. I just said that this person was telling a joke, so please everybody laugh’ (translation: AG).

What makes the joke so funny for Indonesian audiences is that it plays on and reconfirms two stereotypes in one. The first is the stereotype of the military and self-important American, illustrated by the evocation of military might (a Chief-of-Staff, or head of a delegation) and by emphasis on the very long speech, an indication of a self-aggrandizing aspect. The other Indonesian stereotype reinforce in this joke is that of the witty Chinese who knows how to save himself by not giving a long translation, and therefore treating a joke like any other economic activity. Does this mean that Abdurrahman Wahid, then acting President of Indonesia, is relentlessly reaffirming ethno-national stereotypes? Initial impression of the joke might suggest such a reading.

Interestingly, there is also a printed version of the above humorous tale published in one of the many compilations of Gus Dur’s jokes. Here, national stereotypes apparent in the televised joke are reversed. In the printed version the main figure is not a big-mouthed American general, but rather Gus Dur himself. The witty translator is not Chinese, but Arab; the scene now taking place in Qatar rather than China.¹ My research departs from a close textual analysis of this and other of Gus Dur’s jokes in the above mentioned television show, as well as in the printed joke collections. One observation from the variety show is that Gus Dur concentrates his jokes into the first third of the interview. It seems that, in rhetorical terms, his joking has an introductory function, bridging the social gap with the interviewer, while serving to ease possible tensions and gain public sympathy. In classical Latin rhetoric, one would call this strategy the caput helenoventiae (getting the goodwill of the audience). In the interview, it is also reminiscent of a communicative strategy often employed in Indonesia and Malaysia in which the speaker humbles themselves in the introductory sentences by saying how unimportant their own contributions are, or by making fun of themselves. The interlocutor should, of course, not misunderstand these humorous passages as a sign of weakness: the opposite is the case.

For my research, these observations serve as a starting point for a deeper, culturally oriented reading of Gus Dur’s special kind of humour. A central notion in this is the popular Java schol- ar’s interpretation of the humorous president as Semar, the clown-servant and half-god from the world of the Javanese shadow-theatre, wayang kulit. Apparently, the image and importance of Semar has shifted in Javanese and Sundanese society since the beginning of the New Order. This populist character did not just replace Gatotkaca – popular during Sukarno’s presidency – as the main hero of the shadow-theatre. The servant Semar, according to some reports, now even sometimes exerts functions of power.² The climax of the wayang is the gara-gara scene, where the earth undergoes geopolitical, social, cultural, and cosmological turmoil. It is here that Semar, the joking clown-god-servant, usually appears in a central role. In these circumstances, Semar serves as a wise orientation figure whose joking will help to bring the audience safety through all kinds of dangers.

During Indonesia’s early Reformasi era, with all its economic and political problems, many Javanese may have been reminded of the gara-gara in the wayang. Given his physical appearance and his continuous joking, as well as his high social and religious rank, Gus Dur appeared, for many, to be very similar to Semar. Seen in this perspective, the humorous performance of the Indonesian President in a variety show probably made sense to many viewers. In addition to the growing popularity of this image in popular culture, the notion of Gus Dur as Semar was also popularized by certain intellectuals who might have had their own agenda regarding the Javanese belief system, kijauan.³ However, Gus Dur’s heightened public use of humour can also be explained in Islamic terms. Historically, humour has played an important role in Islam: probably a much more central role than it has played in the spreading and teaching of Christianity. This is especially true for the Sufi versions of Islam that strongly influenced Indonesia during the early period of Islamization in the archipelago. Even today, many religious leaders (kyai) in Gus Dur’s home region of East Java are notorious for their use of humour in spreading Islamic messages. There seems to be even a special genre of pesantren humour, named after the religious boarding schools of the kyai. From this perspective, Gus Dur’s humorous performance in a TV variety show is again not as unusual as it may seem in the first place.

Having said this, it is important to note that the clowning performances were also criticized by voices from other traditions within Indonesian Islam. Apparently, the understanding and perception of blending humour, Islam, and politics is a point of contestation and debate amongst, on the one side, reformist Islam and on the other, more traditional Islam. This is in line with the findings of Peacock, who discovered something similar in the way in which the Islamic currents of Indonesia regarding their particular sense of humour.

Finally, one should perhaps also take into account the marketing character and function of Gus Dur’s humorous performance. There is some reported evidence that he was advised by his assistants (pin doctors)⁴ to emphasize the notion of a humorous president. This may have been part of a strategy to present him as an unconventional politician who would be the right representative of the people (the rakyat) in the partly chaotic turmoil of the early Reformasi era.⁵

Notes:

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