

PERSPECTIVE

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Rising Influence of Ethnic Music in Indonesia: A Closer Look at Javanese Campursari

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The death of a Javanese pop star may offer new ways of interpreting Javanese youths' cultural taste. Didi Kempot, a singer and songwriter, had greatly enhanced their attraction to Campursari, a hybrid of Javanese keroncong (langgam) and dangdut music.
- Indonesia's pop music scene reflects class divisions within the nation—the national pop music (which is strongly influenced by Western elements) largely represents the taste of the middle and upper classes, while the most popular musical genre, dangdut, is embraced by the lower classes.
- After the collapse of the New Order, regional and ethnic music became more influential within Indonesian pop culture. Campursari is part of this trend, particularly among the Javanese, the largest ethnic group in Indonesia.
- The popularity of campursari reflects the search for a Javanese identity among the Javanese youth, even as they undergo social and cultural changes such as the rise of religious orthodoxy.
- Ethnic pop music has also been made more accessible by new media such as YouTube.
- While the political significance is still tentative, politicians who seek to enhance their appeal in the Javanese heartland would be mindful of the ongoing search for cultural authenticity among Javanese youths.

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INTRODUCTION

Javanese pop star Didi Kempot (born: Dionisius Prasetyo) died of a heart attack on May 5, 2020 in Surakarta, Central Java. He was 53 years old and was at the peak of his career, being immensely popular at the time of his death among Javanese communities, both in Indonesia and Suriname, in South America. Didi started his music career in 1986 and had composed around 700 songs. Although he has been around for more than thirty years, he had never experienced success the way he did in the last three years of his life. Indonesian media dubbed his late success the ‘rebirth’ of Didi Kempot.

Didi Kempot was indeed unique in the Indonesian pop music world. His lyrics are mostly in Javanese, and not in the national language Bahasa Indonesia. The success of Javanese pop songs, also known as campursari, in penetrating the national music scene and in being well received also by non-Javanese, is unprecedented. No doubt, some Javanese pop stars have had hits in the past, but none could match Didi’s success.

More importantly, Didi was very popular not only among Javanese youths but Indonesian youths in general. Fan groups sprouted everywhere, often known by their nickname “Sobat Ambyar” (Friends of The Brokenhearted). Didi himself was famously known as “The Godfather of the Brokenhearted”.

Didi’s superstar power was exhibited during the Covid-19 pandemic. On 11 April 2020, Didi and Jakarta-based Kompas TV held a “Charity Concert from Home” to raise funds for the pandemic. During the three-hour long concert, Didi raised IDR 7.6 billion¹ (around US\$500K) from more than 30,000 small donors. This was a fantastic sum by Indonesian standards.

His rise to fame and his widespread popularity signify something larger than just the success story of a campursari musician and songwriter. It holds sociological and political significance. The Javanese are the largest ethnic group in Indonesia, and so far, only one of Indonesia’s seven presidents had been a non-Javanese. That was BJ Habibie,² and he also served the shortest term in office.

This Perspective highlights the cultural significance of Javanese pop culture. Javanese society underwent huge religious and political changes over the last fifty years, and it is therefore cogent to make sense of why a pop-singer whose works were mostly in Javanese was able to become a national icon.

THE NATIONAL-REGIONAL DICHOTOMY IN INDONESIAN POP MUSIC

Scholars tend to position Indonesian pop music in relation to global, national and regional genres. Indonesian pop music is thus seen to be closely related to global (Western) musical genres; a representation of ‘national’ as opposed to ‘regional’ music, and also expresses modernity as determined by its proximity to the metropolitan cultural authority.³ Regional music, on the other hand, is perceived as being close to tradition, catering to local audiences and thus ethnic. It is often regarded as inferior compared to modern national music. The gap unavoidably reflects differences in social class. The national pop music world is always centered in Jakarta, a *gedongan*⁴ metropolis that defines Indonesian tastes and decides what Indonesians consume. It is also the standard bearer of Indonesian morality,⁵ and contrasts

itself from popular music that is especially appealing to the downtrodden, lower classes, and kampungan.⁶

The most popular kampungan genre is dangdut, a Indian-Malay musical hybrid which is associated with the poor, the subaltern, and the proletariat. Dangdut is considered morally inferior because of the lewdness of its performers and the chaotic dancing of its audience. Therefore, despite its overwhelming popularity, *dangdut* is never considered part of national pop music.⁷

After the end of the New Order, with ethnic music rising fostered by decentralization, and with the availability of new technology, the gap has actually narrowed. Regional and ethnic music have flourished in the last two decades.⁸ As ethnomusicologist Andrew Weintraub observes, although regional and ethnic pop music have developed, it is not creating a new genre.⁹ He calls this phenomenon a “nationalized regionality” and a “regionalized nationality.”¹⁰

Indonesia’s most popular genre, dangdut, has also been localized. Dangdut with an ethnic twist is thriving everywhere, also among the Javanese. Javanese dangdut has developed with much sophistication when compared to classical *dangdut*, by adding local elements and Javanese musical instruments. Dangdut *koplo*, for example, brings the genre closer to Javanese cultural taste. However, nothing has exerted more influence on the Javanese music industry than campursari, a hybridization of keroncong (langgam Jawa) and dangdut.¹¹

CAMPURSARI, JAVA AND THE NATIONAL STAGE

Though reviled by classical Javanese gamelan musicians,¹² campursari has been warmly welcomed by consumers and it has been shaping the Javanese music industry since the 1990s. No doubt, classical Javanese gamelan musicians continue to castigate campursari as an aberration of tradition.¹³ The national pop industry, meanwhile, sidelines campursari because of the genre’s apparently limited market. Campursari’s fate is thus similar to that suffered by dangdut.

No one is certain when and under what conditions campursari was born. Supanggah (2003) notes that the genre was developed since the early 1960s by musicians working for state-owned radio broadcasting (Radio Republik Indonesia, RRI) in Semarang, the capital of Central Java province. Interestingly, the Army played a role in its birth as well.¹⁴ After the 1965 failed coup attempt, which led to the massacring of leftists in Java and Bali, campursari was used by the Army as a propaganda tool.¹⁵ Whatever the case, the genre went silent in the early 1970s probably because the New Order government wanted to cleanse the national culture of remnant influences from Communist sympathizers.

In the 1990s, campursari re-emerged in a new form. New musical instruments, especially the keyboard synthesizer and the electric guitar, were introduced. This development was tied to a singer-songwriter named Manthous, and his group, Campursari Gunung Kidul (CSGK). The new music took on many elements of keroncong and dangdut, which explains why many understand campursari as keroncong-dangdut (Congdut) music.¹⁶

Campursari is a must at Javanese festivities such as weddings or rite of passage events such as circumcisions or thanksgivings. Even *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet), the Javanese’ most

revered art performance, must now perform campursari. It has become immensely popular among the lower classes and the rural population. However, just like dangdut, campursari has never been acknowledged as serious Javanese music.

YOUTUBE AND THE LOCALIZATION OF INDONESIAN MUSIC

After the collapse of the New Order regime, Indonesian pop culture headed in different directions. While Jakarta still played a central role in defining Indonesian pop culture, the various regions' pop culture was thriving. In addition to that, a variety of indie, underground, and punk music also emerged, especially among young people outside of the country's elite class.¹⁷

The local recording industry also grew despite the limited audiences. Sometimes their products are aimed at a specific community or target group. Local pop musicians would without hesitation take on the Western genre but sing in their vernacular. Thus, we witnessed the emergence of Balinese blues or reggae, Batak's punk rock, or Ambonese hip hop.¹⁸

Nothing drives this burgeoning 'go local' trend better than YouTube. Even recording label companies that saw their sales depleted in the age of YouTube, finally opted to participate, and now use, this medium to generate new income, especially from advertising. Local artists have been empowered by YouTube. Even those who could not land a contract with the big labels can now use YouTube independently to reach out to potential customers.¹⁹

Some local music has managed to go viral at the national level even though the lyrics are unintelligible to most Indonesians. This is not a peculiar phenomenon since there have been many foreign-language songs which had become extremely popular without their lyrics being incomprehensible to most Indonesians.

YouTube has also given birth to several local divas and propelled some of them onto the national stage. Javanese stars such as Nella Kharisma or Via Vallen,²⁰ were initially dangdut singers. They moved into campursari or *congdut* once this genre showed signs of becoming popular among the Javanese. They caught national attention at the same time that Didi Kempot, the campursari maestro, rose to prominence.

YouTube also provides opportunities for local artists and singers to publish their works without geographical boundaries, and reach their co-ethnic fans anywhere in the world. This platform facilitates a trans-nationalization of ethnic or regional music. Large numbers of Indonesians, mostly Javanese, work abroad in places such as Hongkong, Taiwan, Singapore and the Middle East. Most are Indonesian labourers from rural areas back home, and it is these who have become the most ardent consumers of campursari. These people have even invited Javanese singers to perform in the places where they are now working.

Didi Kempot's apparently dead-ended career was resurrected through YouTube, too. His songs were covered by various singers including the Javanese divas. As is common in Indonesia, almost none of those who covered his songs and played them on YouTube paid him royalties.²¹ But Didi seemed fine with that and, in fact, it was these singers who helped propel his rebirth.

FINDING JAVANESE THROUGH CAMPURSARI

In his seminal work on dangdut, Weintraub commented on the special place occupied by regional/local or ethnic dangdut. He asserted that regionality “was not imagined as a specific place, but as regionality itself, as in a “national [sense of] regionality.” Dangdut with an ethnic or local nuance is music ‘for everyone’ within the nation.

The recent development of campursari reveals a more complicated picture than Weintraub had suggested. Campursari is a music type targeted specifically at the Javanese audience. It is different from other ethnic pop music that managed to become national hits. For example, the success achieved by Maumere ‘Gemu Fa Mi Re’ or Toba Batak’s Punxgaoran at the national level, is due to their musical genre fitting in well with popular pop genres.

Campursari is not very much in line with national pop music though. It departs from Javanese traditional music through the addition of Western instrument.²² And unlike ethnic dangdut which provides a ‘national [sense of] regionality,’ campursari is more about providing a sense of ‘Javaneseness’ for many Javanese²³ who for various reasons feel alienated from their ethnic identity.

In the last 75 years, the Javanese have experienced profound changes. Despite all the talk about the ‘Javanization’ of Indonesia,²⁴ the reverse is also true. Indonesia has changed Javanese culture and probably far more than Javanese culture had influenced the Indonesian cultural landscape. Intervention by the State has been going on at a massive scale in Javanese society. This is in the form of education, religious orthodoxy, security presence, bureaucratic penetration, and so on.

Observers have noticed that this has happened not only to the Javanese but to other ethnic groups as well. In Java, the strengthening of religious orthodoxy brings about a weakening of nominal Islam or Abangan.²⁵ An Indonesian observer has even asked “Where have all the Abangan gone?”²⁶ The penetration by the State’s religious bureaucracy, especially the Ministry of Religion, has reshaped society’s religious orientation and influenced local cultures.

It should also be noted however that even the rise of religious orthodoxy and the weakening of nominal Muslim groups did not affect Indonesian pop music (Wallach, p. 249). Young composers and songwriters may have become more religious but at the same time they have also been absorbing globalism with the same agility through which they have become more pious and are practicing a more orthodox version of their religion.

The changes affect how young Javanese perceive themselves. The young are no longer speaking refined Javanese (*basa alus*) but the lowly Javanese (*ngoko*) instead. Javanese is a highly hierarchical society, but recently a more egalitarian Javanese is emerging. A more ‘Indonesianized’ version of Javanese is on the rise. At the same time, there are now more non-Javanese Indonesians being exposed to Javanese culture.

Campursari offers a new identity for young Javanese. It provides a middle way because it is not refined (*alus*) music and yet it has traditional elements in it. Many Javanese millennials are strangers to traditional music (gamelan). Campursari, however, includes gamelan along with other Western musical instruments. Supanggah (2003) notes that contestation between gamelan and Western musical instruments will determine what

campursari will become. Cooper (2016), at the same time, asserts that campursari may save traditional music from extinction because of its use of the gamelan.

The latter in fact appears to be the main reason for Javanese youth to adopt campursari—this music continues to offer Javanese identity amidst society’s strengthening of religious orthodoxy. This also explains why Didi Kempot and his music have become so popular again among Javanese youth. Their father's generation loved it, and now the grandchildren are helping in its rebirth.

In addition to that, many young songwriters have emerged and produced many Javanese hits.²⁷ Pop music in Indonesia, however, is moving away from campursari and adopting more Western-influenced music. This has led to an astounding diversity in Western genres of Javanese music. There is now Javanese hip hop (Jogja Hip Hop Foundation); Javanese blues; campursari bossanova, or Javanese rock group (Endank Soekamti), and so on. All these constitute the process of “vernacularization globalization” in which young Javanese (and perhaps also other youngsters in other ethnic groups) are adopting global music into their cultural domain. Thus, contrary to what Weintraub has said, ethnic music is being created and consumed, not within the national framework, but by and for the local and the ethnic.

The political ramifications of this development have yet to be understood. However, according to the exit poll, 65% of ethnic Javanese in the 2019 presidential election who voted for President Joko Widodo claimed of the president’s appeal that he was the ‘most Javanese’ (*yang paling Jawani*) politician running for president since President Soeharto.²⁸ Politicians are thus watching this phenomenon closely. It is no surprise that Anies Baswedan, the current Jakarta governor and front runner for the 2024 presidential election, recently said publicly that he is a Javanese, despite his Arab descent.²⁹

¹ <https://www.kompas.tv/article/78005/donasi-rp-7-6-miliar-konser-amal-dari-rumah-didi-kempot-sudah-disalurkan>

² Even BJ Habibie cannot be counted as fully a non-Javanese. His father came from the Pohala’a clan in Gorontalo, Sulawesi, while his mother was a Javanese aristocrat (*priyayi*) from Yogyakarta.

³ See, Baulch, 2018.

⁴ *Gedongan* is a luxurious brick house in contradistinction to a bamboo house (*rumah gedeg*). *Gedongan* symbolizes upper middle class status in Indonesian society. It is also supposed to signify high moral standards.

⁵ In 1988, the New Order government condemned and banned the song "Hati yang Luka" (The Wounded Heart), a song about the despair over domestic violence experienced by a woman. It was very popular and was repeatedly played on national television. The lyrics of this song are actually no different from typical lyrics of dangdut songs. The ban was most likely due to it committing moral transgression into the pop music area. The government deemed that it was “weakening the spirit of the nation.” See Yampolski (1989).

⁶ *Kampung* is the opposite of *gedongan*. It represents lewdness and bad moral standards as perceived by the middle and upper classes.

⁷ See, Wallach, 2008.

⁸ The ethnicization of various musical genres has been taking place since the collapse of the New Order. Decentralization, which fosters regions to uphold their cultures, has been partly responsible for this development. Songs were composed locally in the ethnic language but following Western musical standards. In Java, for example, in the last two decades, there has been a growing number of hip-hop, jazz, reggae, blues, or bossanova sung in Javanese, catering to the Javanese audience. I

have identified at least 40 groups or musicians who specialize in creating Javanese music from various genres. These musicians clearly target the Javanese as their consumers.

⁹ Some music with an ethnic touch can gain popularity at the national level even if the lyrics are unintelligible to most Indonesians. “Gemu Fa Mi Re” is the prime example. The song is sung in the Maumere language which is incomprehensible even for people in Flores island where the city of Maumere is located. It became immensely popular because the bureaucrats, military and police use it for their aerobic sessions. Although the song uses an ethnic musical instrument (*gong maning*), it is Western music adapted to local taste.

¹⁰ See Weintraub (2008), pp. 222-3.

¹¹ Perlman (1999) notes that *campursari*, which literally means ‘mixture of essences,’ got its name from its instrumentation. It has “the standard band forces centered on a synthesizer and drum set, combined with traditional gamelan instruments, perhaps just a saron barung or demung and kendhang ciblon—and lately just the kendhang.” He concludes that *campursari* is simply a *keroncong* (langgam Jawa), but with a dangdut beat.

¹² See Cooper, 2015; Perlman, 1999.

¹³ Benamou (2010) laments that “there is something about *campursari* that seems particularly disturbing: almost everything that makes traditional gamelan music distinctively beautiful ... seems to be missing from *campursari*. (p. 15).

¹⁴ See also Laronga, 2008.

¹⁵ Laronga, (*ibid.*) traces the history of this Javanese music genre and shows that the role the Army and RRI played is very large in the formation of *campursari*.

¹⁶ Pearlman (1999, p. 5)

¹⁷ See Emma Baulch (2007) and Wallach (2002) on Indie and Underground music in Indonesia.

¹⁸ One example of this is Joni Agung who composed reggae songs with Balinese lyrics (see, Baulch 2007). In Pematang Siantar, North Sumatra province, there is a popular band called Punxgaoran which is a punk rock group that sang mostly in Toba Batak language.

¹⁹ Local artists and singers that I interviewed said that they use YouTube as a promotional tool. Their business is live entertainment at family events. They believe that higher YouTube views will increase their chance to be hired and the YouTube popularity will make their fees higher. These were phone interviews done with singers and *campursari* artists from Wonogiri and Sragen (Central Java) and Blitar, Tulungagung in March-June 2020.

²⁰ Via Vallen later became famous after she sang at the opening of the 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta. Via Vallen’s channel has 2.6 million subscribers on Youtube, while Nella Kharisma has almost 1 million subscribers. The official channel of Didi Kempot has 1.7 million subscribers. These Javanese divas mostly cover songs composed by not very well-known songwriters or musical groups. Some local music observers have called this a ‘predatory practice’ because the divas and their producers bought the songs cheaply but never shared the profit with the songwriters after gaining popularity on Youtube.

²¹ See his interview here: <https://www.warningmagz.com/didi-kempot-maestro-campursari-yang-tak-pernah-menua/> Accessed 19 July, 2020.

²² There is the assertion though that *campursari* betrays the traditional Javanese tuning system and *campursari* musicians prefer to use Western tunes. See Cooper, 2015.

²³ The Javanese are the largest ethnic group in Indonesia. According to the 2010 Population Census, they around 95 million people, which is equal to 42% of Indonesia’s population (Ananta, 2015). Javanese is Indonesia’s ethnic dominant, and its culture has influenced Indonesia in many ways. The Javanese are concentrated mostly in Java especially in Central Java (97.72% of the population), Yogyakarta (96.53%), and East Java (79.72%) provinces. However, migration (spontaneous or government-sponsored) has scattered the Javanese to the outer islands, where in some cases the Javanese have become the largest ethnic group, for example in North Sumatra (33.40%); Lampung (64.06%); DKI Jakarta (36.14%) and East Kalimantan (30.24%).

The Javanese are also very dominant politically. For example, 53% of President Jokowi’s cabinet are Javanese. This ethnic group is also overly represented in the bureaucracy and other state apparatuses. They have been important in electoral politics as a significant voting bloc. An exit poll

done after the 2019 presidential election revealed that President Joko Widodo won 70% of the Javanese votes, and that became a significant factor in his ascendancy to power.

²⁴ See for example, Mulder, 2005, esp. Chapter 3.

²⁵ Abangan is a term popularized by Geertz (1959) in his study of the Javanese religion. Geertz links the religious affiliations of the Javanese with their socio-economic well-being and their ideological affiliation. A study by Rickles (2006 & 2012), a historian, reveals that this term only appeared in the second half of the 19th century, and was in response to the term putihan, that is, the orthodox people.

²⁶ Hefner, 2011

²⁷ Denny Caknan, for example, is the most recent songwriter and singer of this kind to rise to fame. One of his hits, *Kartonyono Medot Janji* has drawn 157 million viewers on Youtube. Another hit, *Sugeng Dalu*, has been viewed 84 million times. According to Social Blade, the Youtube statistic meter, Denny Caknan has 2.3 million subscribers and his videos have been viewed by 461 million times (Accessed on August 5, 2020).

²⁸ Based on fieldwork interview in Lampung and South Sumatra province in March and April 2019.

²⁹ <https://www.wartaekonomi.co.id/read295090/anies-baswedan-bantah-orang-arab-saya-jawa-tulen-yogyakarta> Accessed August 2, 2020. For the record, Mr. Anies Baswedan is the grandson of AR Baswedan, the founder of the Indonesian Arab Party.

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