

INTERVIEW

Divining The Diva: an interview with Nyi Tjondroloekito

by Nancy I. Cooper

“There are all kinds of flowers in the world, and a beautiful flower can grow from bird droppings.”

Nyai Riyo Mardowolaras

Nyi Tjondroloekito¹ was undoubtedly Java’s most popular pesindhen. After a long and varied life centered on music and family, this amazing woman passed away in 1997. For decades, cassette recordings featuring her voice and periodicals with her face on the covers have dominated the gamelan section of local music stores. Her version of the perennial singer’s piece Jineman Kuthut Manggung is often imitated in wayang kulit performances all over Central Java and her distinctive voice (broadcast from radios or cassettes) still graces the night air in cities like Yogyakarta.

Bu Tjondro [from the honorific title Ibu, meaning mother] was also a teacher of singers, devoting much of the latter part of her life to rural women who aspired to singing careers, but who did not have the opportunities or resources to pursue their talents. She also tried to instill in her students the courage and strength to resist the temptations of fame, wealth and attention which could easily overwhelm a young innocent embarking on an exciting public career.

Although greatly respected, and in contrast to the tremendous outpouring of affection for her by the listening public, Bu Tjondro was not considered a musician’s singer by Java’s musical elite, whose aesthetics do not easily accommodate idiosyncratic styles. In a way she was a folk singer in a classical genre, and a crossover such as this is not always fully appreciated or understood by one’s peers.

Bu Tjondro was an innovator, but, unlike other notables such as K.R.T. Wasitodiningrat and the late great Ki Nartosabdho, she did not have the gender or pedigree, whether by birth or formal musical training, nor the personal connections that might further have legitimized her innovation. The relatively recent inclusion of women singers within karawitan about 100 years ago derived from the centuries-old singer-dancer genres of questionable repute — it would be naive to



The author (right) with Nyi Tjondroloekito. *think that this association had no effect on Bu Tjondro’s reputation. Additionally, the musical styles associated with Yogyakarta have declined in favor of developments in Surakarta.*

I first interviewed² Bu Tjondro at her home in Jakarta on August 16, 1990 during a break from my fieldwork on women singers in a rural area near Yogyakarta in the cultural heartland of Java. Although officially retired at that time, she was still occasionally performing and giving lessons. When I visited her again five years later she was fully retired and her husband, R.M. Tjondroloekito, had passed away in the interim. Still mentally alert in her mid-seventies, her voice was not as strong as I remembered it and she had some difficulty remembering parts of the numerous texts she had memorized and composed over the years.

Nevertheless, her comments were punctuated with lapses into song and laughter, much as they had been before. Although smaller in stature and slightly frail, Bu Tjondro epitomized to me the positive features of longevity.

When she looked back upon her life experiences as a farm girl, a young singer in the Palace, a wife, a produce seller, a mother, a grandmother of 29, a great grandmother, as well as a recording star, she betrayed not a trace of regret, resentment, or arrogance. What was apparent instead was an abiding spirituality and philosophical acceptance of the good and the bad of a life fully lived and shared with family, friends, colleagues, and the public. Bu Tjondro said that "a society without artistic expression (kesenian) would be cold and lifeless" and, in spite of the reservations some musicians had about her liberal musical style, everyone I asked praised her kindness, generosity and great humanity. As a kind and talented person, she will be missed. But thanks to the rows of her cassettes that now share space with those of recent trends such as Campur Sari, her voice lives on.

Cooper: What was your life like when you were growing up?

Tjondro: My parents were poor so we lived in a house made of bamboo walls (*gedheg*), earthen floors, and a tiled roof in the dhusun Pogung, Sleman, Yogyakarta. Our source of water was a well about 15 meters deep. We used a lever with a bamboo dipper suspended on one end (*senggot*) to fetch the water. In the evenings we hung a kerosene lamp on the wall.

Cooper: How did you first learn to sing?

Tjondro: When my parents were working in the fields, I would tend to my younger siblings by singing songs (*kidung*) my father had taught me. When they cried, my singing would soothe them.

Cooper: How did you eventually become a professional singer?

Tjondro: One day when I was singing in Kinanthi verse, in order to calm down one of my brothers or sisters, the singing master of the Palace, Bapak Lurah Sumbogo, happened to be hunting nearby. When he heard the singing he stopped hunting and followed the sound of my voice. He introduced himself to my parents and me. My name was Turah at the time, and he commented on the quality of my voice, saying it would be a shame if I did not develop it properly. My father said that he was willing to send me anywhere training was available, but that he could not afford it.

The very next day my father was invited to escort me to the residence of K.R.T. Joyodipuro on the east side of the Palace wall. All the traditional arts were taught there including Javanese gamelan music (*karawitan*), voice (*sindhèn*), dance, painting, drawing, etc. For three consecutive days we rehearsed, after which I was taken to sing for Kangjeng Patih Danurejo. Since this was in the time of Sultan Hamengkubuwono VIII, the position of Patih (chief minister) still existed. His wife was related to the Sultan and I sang for them both. None of this was really difficult for me. I was 12 years old³.

Later I learned how to do the Golek dance. Ibu Riyo Larasati gave me guidance and encouraged me to study at Kapatihan (the minister's residence and offices) where we would perform together, pieces such as in Langen Mandra Wanara. Bu Riyo would play Tri Jatha and I would be Sinta. Kangjeng Patih gave me the name "Penilaras" which he explained meant "good pitch" (*laras bagus*). This was a happy and humbling experience for me. After I had participated at Kapatihan for four years, Kangjeng Patih passed away and at his wife's request I was given a letter stating that I should become a performer at the Palace. When I had done that for three months, I was given the name Padha Sih by the Sultan.

Cooper: How did you meet your husband?

Tjondro: Although Pak Tjondro's mother was a commoner, his paternal lineage was royal and for this reason he studied dance under the tutelage of Prince Tejakusuma. Once during a performance, when Pak Tjondro was dancing and I was singing, our eyes met. At that time I was young and rather pretty and he was handsome.

After we were married, we had 12 children, one after another. As Nyi Tjondroloekito, I lived with my family near my parent's home and performed outside of the Palace. But my husband forbade me to continue singing, so for years I sold produce in the market. But with so many children times were rough. I finally said to my husband, "I am a human, not a beast of burden (lit. water buffalo: *saya manusia, bukan kerbau*), and I must help support my family." Eventually he relented.

I started singing again, for *uyon-uyon*, wayang kulit and so forth, for family and village commemorative events. In 1955 I joined my husband in Jakarta where he had been given a position. Straightaway I started singing for RRI

Jakarta, the national radio station.

Cooper: It is well known in karawitan circles that your singing style is unique. How did you develop this style?

Tjondro: From the very beginning, when I was memorizing a piece, I had an urge to create my own melodic patterns (*cengkok*). So I asked Nyai Riyo Mardowolaras, "Do you think it would be permissible for me to sing my own creations? (*Bu,...apa sekiranya diizinkan kalau saya mengeluarkan...getaran jiwaku sendiri*)? She answered, "Why not? What could be the harm in that? There are all kinds of flowers in the world, and a beautiful flower can grow from bird droppings."

This made me feel better about my innovations but I asked one more person, just to be certain. That was Kangjeng Madu Kusumo who was an advisor in the Palace. "Kangjeng, if for instance, I used *cengkok* of my own creation, is that forbidden?" "Of course not", he replied, "who told you such a thing?" Finally I felt that I was free to follow the God-given vibrations of my spirit rather than only repeating what already existed.

After I retired from RRI, I started to write verses in the poetic forms *Wangsalan* and the various kinds of *Macapat*. I wrote down whatever flowed from my heart. In my heart of hearts, whenever I sang I hoped it would make people happy. In other words, when I sing, I do so not from my thoughts, but from my feelings. And I do it not just for myself, but for others. That is what guides me.

Cooper: Which type of performance do you prefer to participate in?

Tjondro: I like *uyon-uyon* [music performed by itself] the best and then *wayang kulit* [shadow puppet theater]. There is more freedom for the singer in an *uyon-uyon*.

Cooper: When you teach singing, is there a particular aspect which is most difficult for your students?

Tjondro: On average, the *irama*, or changes in time, poses the most problems. When faced with the full ensemble, many singers become confused.

Cooper: We have all heard stories questioning the moral character of singers. What are your thoughts on this issue?

Tjondro: In times past if a woman had a good voice and could dance, she became a *teledhek*, which was a lowly occupation. When I started singing my father said to me, "You may become a singer as long

as you have only one husband. You may not conduct yourself like the others." So this became the standard by which I guided myself. And when I teach young women, such as those from Gunung Kidul [a rural part of Yogyakarta known for its singers], I always offer moral guidance as well.

Through the organization Widya Lestari Budaya, at least 20 some women from rural areas were funded to come to Jakarta and study with me for approximately two years each. I told them that learning the music itself, how to dress, and how to behave on stage only constitutes half of what they need to know. They are in danger if they do not learn to cultivate right thinking. I tell them they must be careful not to fall because if they do, they may never get up again. This is how it is, Nak Nancy, many of them are not strong and can be easily shattered. Who are these women? They are the women who sit in the center of the gamelan, many first rate singers, who may not be aware of the dangers of glancing to the side.

Cooper: What sources do you use for these lessons?

Tjondro: I do not teach from existing texts. Rather I talk to them about a debt of honor towards their parents who are unique in the world. No one can replace them. I impart this kind of knowledge to my students: devotion to parents, submission to God, and love of humanity. And we must also be generous towards our country.

Cooper: What is the place of gamelan and karawitan in Javanese society?

Tjondro: I think of gamelan as a sacred heirloom (*pusaka*) which should be respected. I never like it if the gamelan is placed below rather than raised up. Music surpasses language—one must understand the precise meaning of words, but music appeals to feelings which are more universal. ▮

ENDNOTES

¹ I have used this spelling over "Condrolukito" because it was the spelling used on her personal name card.

² I have translated pertinent sections of much longer interviews which were conducted in Indonesian with some Javanisms mixed in. My method of interpretation and translation is to capture the intended meaning of the speaker and communicate it in English as faithfully as possible.

³ Based on her birth date in the 1920s, this would have taken place in the 1930s.