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Balancing Feminine and Masculine Energy

by Arahmaiani

translated by Siobhan Campbell

My latest collaborative work with the Tritura Art Community in Yogyakarta began early last year and explores the issue of balance—both in terms of gender relations and in the sociopolitical and cultural sphere. Led by Sumarwan, Tritura is a community of local artists who have worked with me for about 13 years. In our collaborative works, we usually investigate social, political and cultural issues relevant to the communities of Yogyakarta. We often work with academics and activists, and incorporate their research findings. Our opinions and attitudes are expressed through the works we exhibit in art venues or larger public spaces. Sometimes we also produce collaborative works with communities rather than with other artists, employing different forms of expression such as group or individual demonstrations. These varied forms of expression provide opportunities for anyone interested in exploring fantasy and imagination to express themselves freely, unrestricted by the norms and consensus of mainstream art, which are often shaped by art institutions and the art market.

Our art medium is not restricted to painting, sculpture, installation, photography, graffiti or video. We also employ performance art, text, music or combinations of these, executed individually or in groups. We also emphasise the methodology of balanced dialogue between male and female practitioners. A further important aspect of our approach is the amalgamation of traditional cultural practices and modern-contemporary culture in both the development of the work and the ideas expressed. Modern-contemporary cultural practitioners work alongside the practitioners of traditional art. This is one of the key understandings underlying our interpretation of ‘cultural equality’, for this

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Tritura performing with the youths from Yogyakarta in *Nusantara Flag Project*, 2018. Photos by Arahmaiani.

supports a free and open form of expression, which may even be highly 'experimental' in that it is not based on established and conventional forms of expression. In short, forms of expression are unlimited and open to all possibilities, even those regarded as unachievable.

In academic language, this way of working is often described as 'trans- or multi-disciplinary', because in addition to combining various art mediums, we combine different branches of knowledge and synchronise them. So while our focus may be on a particular topic or theme, in the process of expressing this, our attention may extend to related issues. For instance, if interpreted substantively or symbolically, gender is related to issues common to marginal groups, taking the basic assumption that 'weak' groups are dominated by 'strong'/masculine groups. The culture of violence may also be a relevant part of the subsequent analysis, where violence is not restricted to male violence against women, but to broader understandings, including violence perpetrated by the state or by economic systems, or even to forms of violence perpetrated by commoditised systems of knowledge, in which the positions and roles of institutionalised scientists are exploited for capital or profit.

So while the basic focus of the work is gender equality, my analysis and expression has extended to deal with power relations between the 'strong' and the 'weak', as well as the relational dynamics between binary opposites. This is the result of taking a trans-disciplinary approach, since analysis reveals that the issues have multiple origins. Consequently such an approach is also described as holistic. Other perspectives, such as ancient philosophies (Asian or Eastern still practised by some individuals), also take us in a similar direction. Ancient philosophies do not consider binary opposites in black-and-white terms but demand a more extensive analysis of the interdependencies between various aspects and elements of life. I attempted to express this understanding through the work "Lingga-Yoni", which created great controversy in 1994 and led to Islam hardliners declaring that "to drink my blood was halal". This is also reflected in the Tibet Plateau project, where I tried to go beyond presenting the Tibet and China conflict as a straightforward and competitive issue!

The complex issue of balance between opposing forces can also be expressed in terms of the principle: 'balance between feminine and masculine energy'. What we think of as the truth cannot be seen from the uncomplicated viewpoint of 'wrong or right' or 'loser and winner', but must be seen as a 'sense' of balance with push and pull tendencies. So we can never say that a conclusion is decisive. Instead, it must be continually evaluated and discussed so that in practice, with an awareness of these dynamics, a conclusion is not easily reversed or subject to manipulation or corruption. Evaluating the values of truth is ongoing, by means of critical evaluation (though also by considering

the ethics and morals within a given society). In addition, being open to various scientific disciplines and their latest findings makes it possible to grasp an essential understanding or what we know as truth. In traditional philosophies, this is usually described as understanding the wisdom of life.

So once we arrive at an understanding at this level, what we know as truth becomes relative. It could be considered absolute, on the one hand, and relative, on the other. This is due to an awareness of the dynamics of opposing forces. In the same way, an understanding of context influences our conclusions. For example, a woman wearing the hijab (Islamic dress to cover intimate parts of the body) may be regarded as ‘wrong’ if it is done due to pressure from others, but if she herself has made the decision to wear that type of clothing, it should be regarded as doing the ‘right’ thing—if it has been done through her own mindfulness. And this is regarded as one of her rights. Looking only at the physical aspect, all women who dress this way would seem to lack independence and freedom. Yet in reality, once this issue has been examined in more detail, it is evident that it is far more complex than such a simple conclusion—unless our analysis is based on prejudice or judgements.

All of the dancers in this collaborative work wear the headscarf (jilbab) in their daily lives. But when they dance, they wear costumes based on traditional Javanese attire with headdresses and take off the headscarves to perform. Is this wrong? Those with unyielding attitudes, who take a dogmatic approach to religion, would say so. But those who use their intellect would not reach such an easy conclusion! The same applies to the thin blouses with short sleeves that reveal supposedly intimate parts of the body. It is not easy to reach conclusions on this issue or by way of a dogmatic conviction. The most important issue here is the fundamental question of whether our approach to understanding truth and judging character can be based on the physical evidence before our eyes. It seems far too simple and limited to conduct our evaluation in that way.

In the performance of *wayang klitih* (flat wooden shadow puppets) presenting stories from the epic Ramayana (part of our Hindu-Buddhist cultural heritage), the figure of Sinta is usually depicted as a victim of suffering. But in this collaboration, based on my work “I Don’t Want to be a Part of Your Legend”, Sinta questions her situation and her unjust and unequal treatment. In this work, Sinta is a key figure who not only questions her ‘marginalised’ position but also has independent ideas and opinions (the work is titled “Sinta Protests”). In traditional versions of the epic, Sinta never has her own opinions, but is treated like an object to be fought over between two strong males. In our version, Sinta bears witness to the truth and has the courage to express

her opinions about Rahwana's behaviour and even defends him! She is more 'developed' and mature. She not only defends her own rights but the rights of others and even men!

Here the issue of gender balance is subtly reread and reinterpreted through an artwork, in ways not easily expressed if it were to be retold in a black-and-white format. Symbolic understandings and approaches are often more easily expressed in art or literature, because the inexpressible can be communicated in ways that are not possible in rational or logical approaches. This is regarded as an intuitive approach—one that is not easy to describe but with distinct power. The 'marginal' position of women in this work is also a symbol of their marginal position in the social-political area. In our country, this is the experience of non-Muslim or non-conformist Muslim women, those who are labelled as being in the wrong and non-believers in the course of political manipulations and scape-goating! The work "Proyek Bendera Nusantara" [Archipelago Flag Project] was produced in response to this. The flags, containing key phrases taken from different cultural groups and beliefs, are displayed as both a performance piece and installation.

This work emphasises the value of pluralism, a value that we should all honour. Every culture can make valuable contributions to peaceful communal living. Valuing difference and supporting equality make for a bright and sustainable future. So in this way, difference is a positive. This is critically analysed in the work and will continue to be developed, given the number of customary communities at risk. Not just because they are non-Muslim, but because profit-orientated modernisation and development have destroyed, and even eradicated, their livelihoods. Our nation has the second largest area of tropical rainforest in the world. Yet our concept of development has led to resource mining and palm oil plantations, resulting in the worst forest fires this century. Ecological balance in the region, and globally, has diminished, and a number of sociopolitical issues require immediate attention, as they impact on the lives of many people (and other creatures are threatened with extinction!).

Parts of the work explore voice and musical instruments (modern and traditional), in which women and men interact on an equal footing. Both contribute their expertise and explore the possibilities of creating new songs or music to convey messages of equality, pluralism and a culture of non-violence. They perform in public spaces and involve local youth. This was developed as a long-term project to be performed in 14 subdistricts around Yogyakarta (to date it has been performed in 3 subdistricts). In each venue, groups of local youths are involved in organising, planning and performing the work. During this process, new ideas and thoughts continue to flow, which are accommodated and further developed. The same goes for the membership of

Upacara Kebo Ketan, 2016. Photos by Agus Supertramp

Mbah Kodok Rabi Peri, 2015. Photo by Agus Supertramp

the group: as new members join, we try to adapt our strategies and methods to accommodate the number of artists.

Another collaborative work, which began in 2014, explores gender equality with the Keraton Ngiyom community in Ngawi, East Java. Like the latest collaboration in Yogyakarta, which started off exploring gender equality, this project has since taken on different ideas and issues as it developed. Here the environment and community empowerment has come to the fore. In addition to the revitalisation of traditional cultures by reinterpreting the meanings of traditional customs in line with contemporary practice, this community, led by Bramantyo Priyosusilo, routinely holds large annual 'new-style' festivals in the village of Sekaralas, Ngawi. Initially local communities and visiting artists were involved, but they have grown to involve the local government, which now supports these initiatives. Every year, more and more communities take part, not just from East Java or Java itself, but from Sulawesi and Bali too.

This event begins with the performance of a ceremony titled *Mbah Kodok Rabi Peri Setyowati* [The Marriage of Mbah Kodok and Peri Setyowati]. This is based on a traditional Javanese story and a ceremony performed by agricultural communities in East Java. Peri Setyowati is a symbol of the 'feminine' and 'agent' of the spiritual world, partnered with the 'masculine' and earthly Mbah Kodok. In the performance of this ceremony, the concept of 'balance' is revived in a modern context. A 'marriage' takes place between traditional and modern cultures, which promotes valuing equality and the principle of balance. And life is not only considered in terms of the material and physical world, but also in the spiritual, non-physical realm. The term 'peri' refers to a

being that lives in an invisible 'other realm'. In this kind of worldview, individuals do not regard themselves as rulers of nature with the right to treat nature as an object to be exploited; rather individuals are part of nature and must care for and work in partnership with it.

After their marriage, two children are born, named Jaga Samudra (Prince of the Ocean) and Sri Parwati (Goddess of the Earth), names that symbolise care for the environment and the principle of balance. These values are expressed in traditional Javanese culture through the sea and the mountain, values emphasising the centrality of water and earth for life. The pair take up residence at the village water source, regarded as the foremost source of life. Consequently, various ceremonies are held at this water source. These ceremonies also provide a creative outlet for the community. This community has begun to experiment with organic rice farming and to implement a system of organic agriculture in the village. Even though neighbouring villages and the local government have responded positively to this, it will be a long struggle. Changing long-held agricultural practices associated with the 'Green Revolution', which is reliant on pesticides and chemical fertilisers, will naturally take time.

To change farming practices that endanger the environment and cause illnesses such as cancer, the Keraton Ngayom community has implemented an education programme through art and creative exploration. They also 'embrace' Muslim religious leaders, given that the majority of the Indonesian population is Muslim. Muslim communities with educational facilities and schools (*pesantren*) have not implemented any major education programmes relating to organic farming or the environment. I know of only a few *pesantren* that have done so. One of them is Amumarta, the oldest *pesantren* in Yogyakarta, led by Kyai Jawis Masruri. After the massive earthquake of 2006, we worked together to teach the students about environmental issues. It is not easy to implement projects like this, due to the skills required to impart new forms of knowledge and change behaviours. However, to date the school has developed environmental friendly products, including batik made with natural dyes, bio-fuel and oil pressed from the fruit of the *nyamplung* (tamanu/laurel) plant.

This project continues to run without government support. And this in itself is a serious issue for us: the central government has failed to treat environmental issues seriously. Apart from the loss of vast areas of tropical forest and increasingly evident environmental pollution, our nation is frequently subject to floods and landslides. In addition to addressing equally pressing problems like the socio-economic divide, we must deal with the environmental damage caused by the 'Green Revolution', which in essence benefitted only wealthy

Garbage dumping site in Tibet, 2014. Photo by Feri Latief

farmers and the state apparatus. Intense urbanisation followed this, because notions of development did not take into account friendly and sustainable environmental practices, but continued to follow the 'development' policies of the New Order regime under the dictator Soeharto. This began with the Bimas community guidance programmes of the 1970s, which were supposed to bring about food self-reliance, but in fact resulted in many of the complex problems mentioned above.

In their upcoming programmes, the Keraton Ngiyom community will address the issue of diversity, which is currently a challenging issue requiring serious attention. The hardline Islamic movements gaining increasing support and assistance from corrupt politicians, dubious intellectuals and wealthy business people, threaten the national principle '*Bhineka Tunggal Ika*' or Unity in Diversity. This is in danger of being replaced by the new principle '*Khilafah Islamiyah*', which sanctions all forms of violence against those considered to hold different views. It can even be described as the return of the 'New Order Regime'. In response to this, the Keraton Ngiyom community is supporting and performing the Nusantara Flag Project. Keraton Ngiyom plans to develop new ideas to clarify the direction and commitment of those involved in this initiative. In short, to respond to the following question: will we get involved in the political maneuverings of the elite whose only interests are power, money and their own group interests? Or will we remain an independent group

Monk praying for tree in the Lab Monastery area, 2014. Photo by Feri Latief

committed to maintaining rational and virtuous principles, as an exemplary model to all of clear-sightedness and observing moral and ethical values?

Another important collaboration exploring gender equality is my work with a community of Tibetan monks in Khamp, on the Qinghai Plateau. Running since 2010, it has resulted in artworks and practical fieldwork relating to environmental issues. The Tibetan Plateau is one of the largest areas of ice on the planet, also known as the 'Third Pole' and 'The Water Tower of Asia', with major rivers that fill river basins providing water to more than two billion people, including the Yangtze, Mekong, Yellow, Ganges, Indus, Brahmaputra and Salween. Global warming is degrading the ice (glaciers) and even the permafrost, resulting in methane gas. The Asian continent has seen a rise in floods, landslides and temperatures, and naturally the temperature of the earth is rising too. This collaboration, which began after a massive earthquake in 2010, attempts to deal with environmental issues by working with monks of the Gelugpa order in the Lab monastery, located in the remote village of Lab. During the first 5 years, with support from head monk Kadheng Rinpoche, lamas, monks and villages, we implemented 5 different projects with communities from 16 villages: waste management, replanting of trees, revitalisation of traditional organic farming, revitalisation of nomadic lifestyles, and modifying river water for everyday use and as an alternative energy source. Since 2015 the government has endorsed and supported these programmes.

Nomad area in Lab Village, 2014. Photo by Feri Latief

Lama conducting a tree-planting ritual, 2014. Photo by Feri Latief

BIOGRAPHY

Arahmaiani (born Bandung, 1961) is a leading figure in the contemporary art scene in Indonesia, working in performance, painting, drawing, installation, video, poetry, dance and music. She was one of the artists in the Indonesia National Pavilion at the 50th Venice Biennale. Her work has grappled with contemporary politics, violence, critique of capital, the female body, and in recent years, her own identity, which although Muslim, mediates between Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and animist beliefs. She often uses her public presence to attract attention to violence in general, and violence against women or female discrimination in Indonesia's Islamic society, in particular. Since September 11, she has combined her critical attitude toward Islam with a fight against its general stigmatisation. She has also been working since 2010 with Tibetan monks in the Tibet Plateau on environmental issues.