

Mask, Gender, and Performance in Indonesia: An Interview with Didik Nini Thowok

Laurie Margot Ross

Contemporary mask performer Didik Nini Thowok carries on a venerable tradition of Javanese female impersonation by a male dancer. His study of cross-gender performance throughout Asia and the world fuels his playful, modern performance, presented in solo mask dances that combine mysterious androgyny and comic sexual impersonation.

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Javanese transvestite performer Didik Nini Thowok, whose real name is Didik Hadirpayitno, freely borrows from other cultures in performances that are integrative yet extremely funny. His show may move from the stately grace of the female *gambjong* dance of the Javanese palace tradition to the flowing movements of Chinese opera's female *dan*, to the seductive delusions of a big-lipped female Balinese *topeng* clown. He has performed all over Indonesia, in the United States, Japan, Malaysia, and Canada. His work is nationally and internationally recognized for its comic strength, masterful dancing, and dynamic presence. He appears on television and in live performance regularly and heads an important dance school. Didik is one of the top modern Indonesian performers extending the tradition of masking, both in

terms of literal use of mask and of the metaphorical mask of gender impersonation. He explores and further articulates Javanese traditional practices. He disrupts and interrogates the strict gender differentiation that has increased with Westernization and modernization. Didik is an important voice of contemporary mask and cross-gender performance and calls the categories into question.

His gender-bending work comes initially from Javanese court theatres, where gender of the performer and the character portrayed are not linked. For example, men portrayed females in Javanese *wayang wong*. This palace dance-drama originated in the eighteenth century with males playing females because of Islamic ideas on the impropriety of women mixing with men in the same performance. Gender lines remained amorphous in the twentieth century, as women were allowed into the genre, but women were not confined to female roles—in the Surakarta tradition, for example, since the early twentieth century, women portray refined male characters such as the heroes Arjuna and Panji. *Ludruk* and *ketoprak* are other popular theatres of Java where gender impersonation has prevailed. For Didik Nini Thowok, what is old is new.



FIGURE 1. Since his youth Didik Nini Thowok has specialized in female roles. Here he dances Balinese Legong with Dewi. (Photo: LPKT)

His clowning also comes from traditional roots that may be traced to the traditions of *wayang* puppetry and Cirebonese mask performance, *topeng babakan*, where the clown has a central role. For Didik, the clown is central to his work. His ability to locate humor in places where darkness lingers defines his vision.

His training in mask and dance includes Java (Yogyakarta, Solo, and Malang), Bali, West Java (Cirebon and Sunda), India (*bharata natyam*), Spain (*flamenco*), and Japan (*nihon buyo* and *nō*). Didik runs a dance school for young people in Yogyakarta named LPKT (Lembaga Pendidikan Kejuruan Tari), or Natya Lakshita.

One of five siblings, Didik was born on 13 November 1954 in the small town of Temanggung, the only son of a Chinese father in the leather business and Javanese mother. Didik was raised Christian in an Islamic society. As a half-Chinese Christian male dancing a woman, he occupies a liminal space, yet impresses one as the epitome of refined Javaneseness. I first met Didik during his tenure as the 2004 Doreen B. Townsend Fellow for the Humanities at the University of California–Berkeley, where he was in residence in the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies. There I learned he had studied Cirebonese mask dance in the same village as I had. His teacher was my teacher’s sibling, making us, as Didik pointed out, “sisters,” too.

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Interview

ROSS: What language was spoken in your home?

DIDIK: We spoke Indonesian at home with Javanese mixed in with Chinese.

ROSS: Is that because speaking Chinese was prohibited in Indonesia after the Revolution?

DIDIK: Yes. I had to change my name when I was in elementary school in 1965. [In 1965, as Suharto took over the government, a purge of those sympathetic to the communist party took place. Chinese were particularly targeted and the demonstration of Chinese culture was suppressed.]

ROSS: Concealment is a recurring theme in your work. Is this an important part of why you use masks in the first place?

DIDIK: We have to use many kinds of masks to meet people. My life experience has been one of covering my feelings. There is fear. If

I meet someone tricky, I have to be tricky too. My grandfather taught me, if you meet a thief, you have to be a king of thieves. You have to be smarter than he is.

ROSS: What was your family name before you changed it to Hadiprayitno?

DIDIK: Kwee Cun An. *Cun* means handsome and *an* is related to *selamat* (safe, peaceful).

ROSS: How many generations has the Chinese side of your family lived in Indonesia?

DIDIK: I don't know exactly, but many. We have been integrated in Javanese society for a long time. For instance, my grandfather loved the *wayang kulit* [shadow puppet theatre], *ketoprak* [Javanese popular theatre], and *klenengan* [gamelan music].

ROSS: Would you say that your biological family felt more Chinese or Javanese?

DIDIK: I think both. My grandfather really liked being Chinese. My grandfather taught me about fasting and other traditions. He taught me that if you feel hungry, you should not follow your feeling, and eat only a little bit. The idea is that if you follow your emotions, it is not good, because you are not in control of your emotions. He died when I was in high school, around 1972.

ROSS: Was your mother also Christian?

DIDIK: My [paternal] grandfather always went to the Chinese temple. But [his wife] my grandmother always attended church. She was Christian. My mother was originally Muslim but converted when I was in high school. I was always raised Christian.

ROSS: What does being Christian mean to you?

DIDIK: I believe prayer is very important. I always liked a church song named "Praying and Working." If we only pray and don't work, nothing happens [*laughter*]. And if we only work but do not pray, we are stressed. Prayer is like meditation.

Although my grandfather always went to the Chinese temple, he also learned the old Javanese tradition we call *kejawen*. Fasting, meditation, and other spiritual things are a big part of *kejawen*, which I practice also. These things make me very close to nature, very close to God. For instance, in the *kejawen* way, if you want to see Loro Kidul [the goddess of the south sea who figures prominently in Javanese lore], you must obey certain rules of fasting.

Older dancers, like Ibu Dasih or Ibu Sudji [female mask dancers of Cirebon *topeng* who were our respective teachers], practiced something similar to *kejawen*. It includes [offerings of] a special kind of incense called *kemenyan* and flowers. It is a very old tradition. You had a similar bathing ceremony [for dance initiation]

with Ibu Dasih, though yours happened before you began studying. Mine came at the end of my studies. [Such ritual initiations are part of the mask dance traditions of the Cirebon region and other areas of Indonesia.]

ROSS: How old were you when you began dancing?

DIDIK: I was in elementary school when I began dancing. I studied dance in the *ketoprak* [Central Javanese popular theatre] style, which is Javanese. My teacher said, “Didik, you are very pretty. It would be good if you dress and dance as a woman.” So I did, and many people liked it, and I became well known in my village. The first time I performed before an audience, I was in secondary school and between thirteen and fifteen years old.

There are some people who I know followed my way [of performing female roles], but I don’t think they were consistent, but perform as males too. For the past thirty years though, I have performed only female roles.

ROSS: Did your parents accept you performing as a woman?

DIDIK: Yes, they accepted it. My grandfather hoped I would become a painter rather than a dancer, because a dancer is considered a



FIGURE 2. Didik studied *topeng babakan* the mask dance of Cirebon with Ibu Sudji, who initiated him at the end of his studies. (Photo: LPKT)

ledek, a female street performer [associated with prostitution]. *Ledek* in Java came from *tayub*. [A social dance popular in East and Central Java].

ROSS: So the taboo was not about transvestite performance, per se, but its connection to prostitution?

DIDIK: People would say things like, “Oh he’s a *banci*.” They always said unkind things. *Banci* refers to a male who is a street prostitute who has male customers. The word “gay” is only known by educated people. In general society people know only *banci* [Indonesian] or *wandu* [Javanese or Sulawesi language]. These words refer to a male who is feminine, who dresses as a woman in daily life, but the term has a negative connotation. But eventually, when I incorporated comedy with the female role and became well known, people finally respected me.

ROSS: In Java, is transvestite performance a gay form by definition?

DIDIK: Not necessarily. Some *ludruk* performers are gay, but many transvestite performers don’t carry that out in their daily life.

ROSS: In the U.S. it [cross-gender impersonation] is almost always self-reflexive or a comment on one’s sexuality, a way of life. Americans tend to sexualize gender.

What is interesting about your background is that you are an outsider: part Chinese, a Christian, and a man performing as a woman. Everything about you is situated outside of mainstream Indonesian society. On the one hand, you are accepted as an artist, but on the other hand you are on the outside looking in. I suspect this contributes to your gift as a performer.

DIDIK: Ah! Maybe yes, maybe not, because when you love culture as I do, you have to open your heart, so everything will come inside. For example, I’m Javanese, from Central Java, but I want to learn Balinese dance. If I still feel I’m Javanese very strongly, then the Balinese feeling cannot enter me. I will not succeed in learning Balinese dance, because I have not opened my heart.

ROSS: Is there a story behind your stage name, Didik Nini Thowok?

DIDIK: At the dance academy, then called ASTI [Akademi Seni Tari Indonesia, Indonesian Academy of Dance] in Yogyakarta in 1970, my teacher, Mbak Tuti [Bekti Budi Hastuti] was the creator of a contemporary dance, *Nini Thowok*, which is based on a very old children’s game of the same name. Nini Thowok was a puppet representing a beautiful goddess. [In the choreography] one man carries her as a puppet. I played a female *dukun* [shaman] who prays for the spirit of the goddess to enter the puppet. [Didik also assumed the role of the puppet.] In the beginning, Nini Thowok only comes to life once she is put down on the ground. Her move-

ments are quite humorous. For instance, sometimes, I [as the character of Nini Thowok] take off my wig and [Didik runs his fingers through his hair] . . . , so the audience laughs when they see I am a man.

Well, when I graduated in 1974 the name Didik Nini Thowok stuck. Since many people saw this performance, I received many invitations to perform for weddings, circumcisions, farewell parties, welcome parties, *Idul Fitri* [the end of the Islamic fasting month], hotel openings, or openings for a new office.

ROSS: When I studied in West Java in the 1970s it was very auspicious to have a *dalang topeng* [mask dancer] perform at rites of passage. Is this still true?

DIDIK: In West Java there is a very strong relationship between the *dalang topeng* and the ceremony. In Java people make a distinction between ceremony and entertainment. If the family is wealthy, they will have separate events: a sacred ceremony at home followed by a party at a building.

[As his performance career developed Didik began to study with a variety of traditional masters in Java, Bali, and beyond, moving from the formal training of the academy to the more personalized method. When one enters into study with a traditional master, one assumes a special social relationship with the teacher and all who study in that lineage. One of the *guru* who affected him deeply was Ibu Sudji, the descendant of Dalang Koncar, a celebrated master of *Topeng* mask performance in West Java and the sibling of Ibu Dasih. He studied with Ibu Sudji in Palimanan Village, Cirebon, West Java in 1979.]

DIDIK: You were Ibu Dasih's student. She was the older sister of my teacher, Ibu Sudji, which makes us sisters. (*Laughs.*) We are one family.

When I studied *nō* in Japan, I trained in one school, with one family. Every school is different and if you study in one family, you belong to that group. My experience of *kabuki* was different; the rules were too strong and I could not enter. We were so lucky in our *topeng* training.

ROSS: Yes, it would not have been possible for us to study *topeng* prior to Indonesia's independence. Before then, it was transmitted only within families. Timing is everything!

DIDIK: When I studied in Cirebon I wanted to be adopted by the Cirebonese people: to learn about the food they enjoy, about their way of life, about their respect for teachers. [See Plate 1.] This kind of learning process is special. When I open my heart I forget my identity, I am nothing. I am just zero.

When I went to Cirebon, I let things enter me through the process of nature. And when I studied in Bali [with I. G. A. Ngurah Supartha], I became zero again. I learned Balinese tradition, I ate Balinese food. This is so important, but not everybody is willing to do this. Many people are afraid of opening themselves to another religion. They think, “Oh, I’m Christian” or “I’m Muslim” or “I’m Buddhist” and believe following another religion comes too close to the heart. But if we don’t open our heart we are not able to receive.

This is the key to understanding, I always tell my students this. I received this wisdom from my grandfather, “If you want to study with a teacher, you have to be a foolish person and then your teacher will love you and share everything with you.”

For example, when I studied Japanese dance in Japan, nobody knew me there. I had to be “zero” again. Also, when I studied *beskalan putri Malang* [female dance of the Malang area] in East Java in 2001, I was “zero” again. I was very happy to be zero.

When I speak of “zero,” I am speaking of emptiness. If we are empty, we have a place for expression. We are accustomed to using the mind, but when we *feel*, we are open to receive.

ROSS: You often choreograph pieces that involve multiple masks. Can you discuss some of these works?



FIGURE 3. Bedhaya Hagoromo combines aspects of Japanese *nō* and Javanese *bedhaya*. (Photo: LKTJ)

DIDIK: The first choreography I did with two faces. I used a beautiful Balinese mask and a funny, ugly face. It was called *Dwi Muka* [Two faces]. I was presenting two types of human beings: the beautiful and the ugly, or the good and the bad, these two energies. The beautiful mask was worn on the back of my head. Working backwards, of course, restricts movement. I could take only a few steps at a time. This is symbolic. You cannot trust appearance alone. If you see someone beautiful, maybe she is not also beautiful inside. Then there is also the opposite. My mask may be very ugly, yet I move well because I am working from the front of my body. With the ugly visage you are more aware of form, but you do not know what is going on inside. We cannot trust what is visible.

I have created two other choreographies with multiple masks. I had been invited to Japan eleven times, and wanted to express my feelings for my Japanese friends and Japanese culture. In Japan there is an association called Jepang Indonesia, so from these two names, I created the piece *Jepindo* and used two faces: Indonesia and Japan.

ROSS: Your choice of mask, movement, and costume of the Japanese character in *Jepindo* is reminiscent of *nō* performance.

DIDIK: In the third [multimask choreography], *Panca Muka*, there are five different characters: Indonesia, Japan, India, China, and comedy. All of these cultures influenced Indonesia.

ROSS: I'm struck that you include "comedy" as one of the five "cultures" influencing Indonesia.

What initially drew you to mask performance?

DIDIK: I have been involved with masks ever since studying with Ibu Sudji in Cirebon. After I finished studying with her, she did my initiation ceremony for me, and said something I have never forgotten: "In the future, the mask will move to Yogyakarta."

At that time, I did not understand, but now I know she meant that the Cirebon mask would move to Yogyakarta [Didik's hometown] with me, and I would spread out to other mask forms. My mask studies began with Cirebon masks. I rarely perform Cirebon *topeng* anymore, but I am still using masks, so the meaning [of Ibu Suji's statement] is symbolic.

In Cirebon masks are taken very seriously. There is a story about someone who once stole a mask from Ibu Sawitri's *topeng* box (*kotak*) [Ibu Sawitri was a master dancer from Losari, Cirebon, with whom Didik studied.] Eventually the thief returned the mask to the box because it made a scary noise. There is a strong belief in the mask's power.

But even though the *dalang topeng* has important powers and

responsibilities in the community, comedy also plays a part. All of my teachers sometimes began to act silly after I became their student, even those who were very serious or great masters. Do you remember those big funny sunglasses I used in my performance? I have a photograph of Ibu Sawitri wearing those big sunglasses.

My teachers, over time, became silly like me. If someone is a great master, humor is important. I have to be careful. A long time ago, when I began doing comedy, some of the senior dancers said I had broken with tradition, that I broke with the classical rules. They felt comedy was not good for the classical style so, yes, in the beginning they did not understand my concept. But finally they understood and accepted it. [See Plate 2.]

This is why I enjoy doing comedy. It is full of meaning. Ibu Sawitri was such a serious person, and a great dancer, but she did very silly things sometimes. We need humor. With humor, we are like equals standing before the same God. This is what I try to bring to my work.

ROSS: Don't sunglasses also act as a kind of a mask in some Cirebon-area performances?

DIDIK: *Sintrin* [a female trance form in Cirebon that can also be performed by a transvestite male, in which case it is called *warilais*]



FIGURE 4. Ibu Sawitri, a noted mask dancer of Losari in the late twentieth century, taught Didik mask dance. Here she wears large sunglasses he uses for comedy in his performances. (Photo: Didik Nini Thowok)

uses sunglasses and also white socks. In the late 1970s, Soedarsono [a major Javanese scholar] said sunglasses [which appear in Cirebon area performances] represented an urbane person. Like the sunglasses, the socks symbolize a sophisticated person.

Ibu Sudji and Pak Jana [top Cirebon mask dancers] wore sunglasses and white socks for the first, unmasked part of Tumeng-gung [the strong prime minister dance of *topeng babakan*], and the sunglasses were removed right before the mask was put on.

ROSS: There is an interesting relationship between the sunglasses that conceal the most revealing part of the human body—the eyes—and the mask. But in your use of sunglasses you have flipped it around and infused it with humor.

DIDIK: There is an interesting gender transformation in *warilais*, where a young man is tied up and seated in a chicken cage. On his knees is a woman's dance costume. A *dukun*, shaman, reciting a mantra invites the spirit to come to the cage. When the *dukun* hears a sound, a sign the spirit has arrived, the cage shakes and the shaman lifts the top of the cage. The dancer is still tied up but transformed into a woman and begins dancing wearing sunglasses. By this time, the dancer is in trance.



FIGURE 5. Cross-gender performance and comedy are found in Didik's work as in the work of *dalang topeng* such as Ibu Sawitri, who is pictured here. (Photo: LKTJ)

This gender-crossing dance had a dual function: ritual and entertainment, though now it is more entertainment. Women did not participate in this because it was not considered respectable for a woman to be dancing in a public place.

ROSS: Can you discuss other examples of cross-gender performance?

DIDIK: There is *langendriyan* that tells the story of how the hero Damar Wulan defeats Menak Jingga. The difference between the *langendriyan* in Yogyakarta and Surakarta court styles is that in Yogyakarta all of the dancers are male but in Surakarta all are female. Beside *langendriyan*, in Yogyakarta there is *langen mandra wanara* [a *Ramayana* dance-opera]. Here, all the dancers are male.

Then there is the cross-gender *golek* dance that I just performed. My inspiration came from Gusti Brongtodiningrat [an important aristocratic Javanese master dancer]. He performed the *Golek Lambangsari* [a courtly female dance done by a male dancer at the end of Yogyakarta style *langendriyan*, an all-female dance opera in the early twentieth century]. His family still lives in Yogyakarta. In his time in Yogya, women were not allowed to perform in public because of Muslim religion, and men and women were not allowed to dance together, so men performed as women. Because there are erotic elements in the *golek* dance, it was considered improper for a woman to dance. . . . [Didik told a story about how during Surakarta *golek* court dance some male audience members would become enamored with the dancer's grace and follow "her" to "her" dressing room where the audience member would discover "she" is a man.]

But in the early twentieth century, under Sultan Hamengku Buwono IX, women themselves began dancing *golek*, a tradition that continues today. It is important to remember that when I dance *golek* or even *bedhaya* [a female style court dance, formerly danced by a male in Yogyakarta style dance] in the Yogyakarta palace, it is not something new or strange. When I dance, people are reminded of this very old practice. They may have family members who once danced in this tradition.

Other examples of crossing gender are in dance-drama [*wayang wong*] stories. The female character dresses as a man when looking for her mate. Sometimes the men dress as women, too. Then suddenly [from 1945] the government became interested in protecting the "morality" of the people in accordance with a Western model. Prostitution was not thought of as "prostitution" until the West came in and gave it this name.

So here I am, performing in this cross-gender style following a long absence. The younger generation has no sense of this gap. I

like to discuss cross-gender performance in relationship to our history. Indonesians are often surprised to learn about this part of their past. I talk about this when I give workshops in Japan, India, and Korea, but these discussions always occur outside of Indonesia, never inside. [See Plate 3.] In Japan they have a word, *onnagata*, which is very special to me because in Indonesia, this language is unknown—it just means a male is dancing a female role. It is an expected and anticipated part of the performance. The audience has a positive response to the *onnagata*. For them, it is not something strange or cheap. We [Indonesians] need to find a new word and we need to promote it.

ROSS: I think of the kind of performance you do as transgender, because you are crossing borders. How is this transgender mask performance understood in Indonesian culture?

DIDIK: For me, I never think about who is behind the mask. I only see the character *in* the mask. So “transgender” is not the right word to use: “mystical” is better.

When a woman dances the male mask, she is transformed—it is mystical. And when a man dresses up as a woman, in *bedhaya*, we don’t always recognize that the dancer is male—it is mystical. He, too, is transformed. I believe a better term is “mystical gender.” I plan to start using this term.