



Dangdut Music as a Realization of Indonesian Cultural Diplomacy and Social Relations Between Countries

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Abstract

Music is a means of cultural diplomacy that has drawn considerable scholarly attention worldwide. This study describes the Indonesian government's efforts to strengthen cultural diplomacy at the international level through dangdut music, an effort aided by developments in the digital era, particularly television programming and pan-Asian sporting events. Dangdut Academy Asia and the 2018 Asian Games are treated here as two of the principal vehicles through which dangdut has been promoted on the international stage, particularly within Asia. The study draws on theories of popular culture and cultural diplomacy to explain how dangdut music, packaged for television, can shape public life in a constructive way.

Keywords: Music, Cultural Diplomacy, Dangdut Music, Dangdut Academy Asia

INTRODUCTION

Dangdut is a genre of Indonesian popular music with a broad and devoted following. Minawati (2016), drawing on Piliang, observes that popular culture is adapted into a lifestyle organized around the consumptive use of space, time, and particular objects by specific groups; this consumptive character eventually forms a lifestyle of its own; dangdut enthusiasts, notably, are unable to separate the genre from their daily lives. This is borne out by how readily the music can be found in residential neighborhoods, markets, roadside stalls, and even public transportation.

Within International Relations, diplomacy is generally defined as a process of communication carried out between actors in international relations in pursuit of an interest, whether a specific agreement or a shared goal. In the current era of globalization, diplomacy has diversified considerably; cultural diplomacy, one strand of this diversification, falls under



what is termed multitrack diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy is considered an effective instrument precisely because it can be pursued under any condition – peace, crisis, conflict, or war alike. Such cultural relationships may draw two or more countries closer together or establish a cooperative relationship between them, a possibility that has led an increasing number of countries to invest more deliberately in cultural relations as an effective diplomatic tool. Indonesia possesses a wide range of cultural forms recognized abroad, from its many traditional dances to the culture surrounding dangdut music (Fitriyadi & Alam, 2020).

Dangdut is among the most widely enjoyed musical genres in Indonesia, even though it was initially regarded, and at times dismissed, as an unremarkable, lower-status form of folk music. Today, by contrast, dangdut rhythms are embraced across Indonesian society and increasingly beyond it, drawing interest from international audiences as well. The 2018 Asian Games, hosted in Indonesia and featuring dangdut prominently in its programming, marked a turning point through which the genre moved from a national musical culture toward international recognition. Dangdut now appears regularly across radio, television, and events beyond these media, forming part of everyday programming in Indonesia. One notable example is Dangdut Academy Asia, a singing competition whose participants are drawn from across Asia and whose panel of judges likewise includes figures from countries such as Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and Singapore (Rahayu, 2018).

This research is intended as a resource for understanding the theory of cultural diplomacy as it applies specifically to dangdut music, and may be of use to the public in interpreting the meaning and purpose behind this kind of television programming.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework used in this study rests on two related concepts: popular culture and cultural diplomacy. Popular culture, in its simplest sense, refers to a culture widely favored or enjoyed by large numbers of people; this quantitative dimension – book sales, and CD and DVD sales among them – is a necessary but not sufficient component of any adequate definition. A purely quantitative index, taken alone, is difficult to distinguish from officially recognized “high culture,” which, judged by book sales, record sales, or audiences for classic television drama, could equally be described as “popular” in this narrow sense (Bennett, 1980).

Any workable definition of popular culture must therefore combine this quantitative dimension with attention to the broader social and consumptive practices through which such culture is lived.

Cultural diplomacy, meanwhile, admits several understandings. Some scholars situate it within public diplomacy, in which culture functions as a form of national identity that can serve as a constructive bridge toward mutual understanding between peoples. A positive image and a shared sense of mutual understanding, in turn, support a state's pursuit of its national interests – a view consistent with the concept of soft power, in which diplomacy serves as an instrument for advancing a country's political or economic interests (Nye, 2004)

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses an explanatory method to account for how dangdut music has come to function as an instrument of cultural diplomacy for the Indonesian government. Data were collected through a literature study, drawing on internet media, academic journals, and news coverage relevant to dangdut music as a form of Indonesian cultural diplomacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Relationship between Dangdut Culture and Social Relations

Dangdut music in Indonesia sits at the intersection of social, cultural, economic, and political networks within society. As a form of folk music, dangdut is often described as having grown out of ordinary people's everyday lived experience. It is accordingly unsurprising that dangdut performances, wherever they are held, tend to draw large crowds. Audiences at these performances show no clear boundary by age: adults and children alike attend, and both engage with the music readily – evidence of how accessible dangdut is as a musical form.

Dangdut lyrics, which typically address romance, personal tragedy, or domestic life, are both easy to grasp and closely tied to everyday experience; the music itself is pleasant to listen to, and its rhythm readily invites movement and dance. As with many forms of popular music, dangdut's producers describe a familiar tension: even as its production and circulation are widely felt to be shaped by a powerful and at times manipulative music industry, dangdut simultaneously gives voice to the aspirations of ordinary people, who make up the majority of dangdut's audience in Indonesia (Weintraub, 2010).

Within dangdut performance, dance functions almost as a second focal point alongside the drum, itself a defining feature of the genre. Dangdut lyrics also carry a tendency toward social commentary; in more contemporary dangdut, verses have increasingly leaned toward sensual themes, reflecting current market preferences. Some observers regard dangdut's poetry and lyrics as capturing, in fine-grained detail, universal values present in Indonesian society — in part through everyday idioms of ordinary life rarely touched by other musical genres (Muttaqin, 2006).

Held's (2000) concept of interconnection – the emergence of social, cultural, economic, and political networks capable of crossing national borders – is visible in dangdut's cultural diplomacy, notably through the Dangdut Academy Asia (DAA) program, the largest dangdut singing-talent competition in Asia, drawing participants from six countries in the region: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, and Timor-Leste (Rahayu, 2018).

The program's varied participant base gives it a distinctive character. Beyond entertainment, Dangdut Academy Asia also conveys broader cultural knowledge to its audience – language, the arts, customs, and regional specialty foods drawn from each participating country.

Dangdut Culture as Indonesian Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy occupies an important and compelling place within the study of International Relations. Rather than operating through government-to-government channels, it emphasizes government-to-community and, more importantly still, community-to-community relations. Cultural diplomacy is often regarded as a marker of a nation's level of civilization: attention paid to a particular country's culture tends to generate a deeper curiosity about that country more broadly. Triyono argues that cultural and artistic diplomacy makes a positive contribution to world peace, coining the phrase “a million friends and zero enemies” to describe relations built through community-to-community, or “people,” contact – relations that can be woven more deeply than those achievable through military force (Fitriyadi & Alam, 2020).

In this connection, the Government of Indonesia, through the Ministry of Education and Culture, established ten Indonesian cultural centers abroad from 2012 onward, known as *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* (RBI). The policy grew out of a recognition of the importance of a national cultural presence abroad. RBI serves three functions: cultural expression, cultural

learning, and cultural promotion, and functions as a platform that helps the Indonesian government coordinate cultural diplomacy efforts across ministries. To extend its reach, the Ministry of Education and Culture subsequently expanded the number of Indonesian Cultural Houses in the years that followed, extending coverage to Indonesian embassies with an Education and Culture Attaché (Fitriyadi & Alam, 2020).

Even with several cultural centers established abroad, Indonesia's cultural foreign policy still has room for improvement. RBI activities to date have tended to remain limited to short-term cultural events, whereas sustained, longer-term activity – though it demands more time and resources – should be prioritized. Overseas RBIs, in other words, should aim to cultivate lasting local interest and curiosity about Indonesia rather than episodic attention (Fitriyadi & Alam, 2020).

Dangdut Academy Asia 2, a televised dangdut singing competition with participants from the same six countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Thailand, and Timor-Leste – illustrates this dynamic well. Beyond the competition itself, the program is designed to introduce Indonesian culture and to build a positive image of the country in the eyes of other nations.

As a variety show, Dangdut Academy Asia 2 packages dangdut music in a more polished format intended to raise its international profile, while also functioning as part of Indonesia's public diplomacy through the cultural sector, incorporating a range of cultural elements into its programming. This form of cultural diplomacy extends beyond popular culture alone, touching on other facets of Indonesia as well – traditional culture, tourism, and regional culinary specialties among them (Futri, Mahzuni, & Rahmat, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Dangdut functions as a discursive space in which social meanings around poverty, unemployment, infidelity, romance, and intoxication are mediated and worked through. The appearance of dangdut-related programming on television at an international scale – Dangdut Academy Asia and the 2018 Asian Games opening ceremony among them – has allowed the genre to become a channel of Indonesian cultural diplomacy internationally.

Within this context, the Indonesian government has pursued the international introduction of dangdut music through both formal and informal channels. Through the informal channel of the Indonesian diaspora, the government hopes that diaspora communities

will help introduce dangdut abroad at events hosted by Indonesian embassies or cultural attachés – whether through community singing and dancing, or by bringing in dangdut performers to entertain diaspora audiences living overseas.

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