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# Limbo Position and Vulnerability of *Campursari* Singer: Memory of *Wayang Hura-Hura* in Pre-COVID 19 Jakarta

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In Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, large-scale social restrictions (known as PSBB) were issued on 10 April 2022 by Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan (2017-2022) to limit social interaction that could allow COVID-19 to spread. Jakarta, after the pandemic, has already seen a revival of Javanese art performances. Yet for the musician itself, the more frequent ‘gig’ and the more spectacular scale performance is already left in the past.

In Jakarta, Javanese musical accompaniment (whether *karawitan* or *campursari* performances) as well as shadow puppet performances (*wayang kulit*) were in high demand to enhance ceremonial events (Himawan 2019; 2020). Migrants from Central Java, East Java, and Yogyakarta who settle in Jakarta still regard the *slametan* (blessing ceremony) as an important ritual (Geertz 1957; Woodward 1988). They attempt to preserve their cultural heritage in a cosmopolitan environment (Schlehe 2019). Since Javanese performance art in Jakarta was based on a very niche community, a skilled artist could potentially find themselves in high demand (Himawan 2019; 2020). During the pandemic era, while musicians with a steady ‘main job’ have a chance to survive, many of those who are ‘full-time’ musicians live in hardship (Himawan 2020; 2021). This situation also happened with *campursari* musicians. Unlike their peers performing traditional *karawitan*, which (compared to *campursari*) is less popular, *campursari* was deemed a more populist and more economical artistic form, even before COVID-19 struck the country.

**Picture 1.** An *uyon-uyon* (*karawitan* music accompaniment) at a wedding reception in pre-pandemic Jakarta. Javanese art musician, whether part of a *karawitan* or *campursari* group, normally live 'from gigs to gigs', meaning that their daily livelihood depends on any chance of performance (*manggung*). Meanwhile, some artists work solely from gigs; others secure more stable jobs in schools or government institutions, or operate as small-scale businessmen on a daily basis (Jakarta, 2019, Sekar Diah Prasistiya).



**Picture 2.** A *klenengan* (*karawitan* 'jamming session') held independently by some musicians in the pandemic era as a form of sending prayers. Since employment from gigs was reduced during COVID-19, many musicians living in hardship (Jakarta, 2021, Rahmadi Fajar Himawan)

**Picture 3.** A man playing the keyboard, known as *organ*, during an interlude session of shadow puppet theatre. For Supanggih (2003), the ‘lightness’ of *organ* music can serve not only popular songs associated with *campursari* but also *gendhing* (repertoire associated with *karawitan*), which is commonly played during *slametan*. This ‘instrument-effectiveness’ was deemed relevant for Javanese listeners who couldn’t spend more time on an occasion, as well as beneficial for those ceremony sponsors who need more options for cost-effective performance. (Jakarta, 2018, Rahmadi Fajar Himawan).



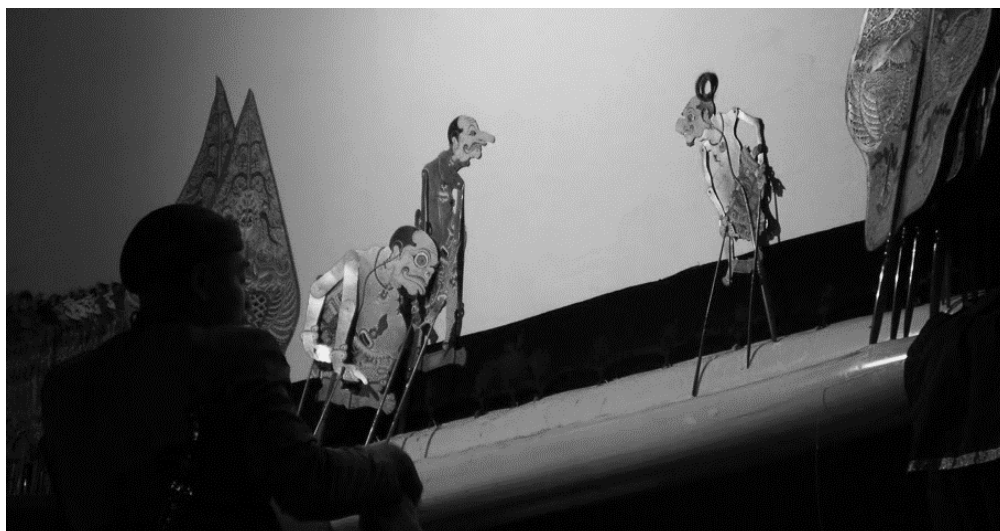
*Sindhen* (women who play as singers for *karawitan* performance) are often sexually objectified, whether on or offstage. Although *sindhen*’s archaic ‘singer-dancer’ (*talédhék*) role, which carries a stigma, had faded amid the development of *karawitan* music (Sutton 1984), *sindhen* are still vulnerable (Hatley 1995; Cooper 2000). It is not unusual to find *dhalang* or the audience openly harassing (*guyon saru*) *sindhen* to enhance the festive atmosphere (Himawan 2019). Since *campursari* singers—mostly young women—are frequently hired as guest stars in *wayangan*, they have also become victims. In this photo essay, I want to illustrate how the popularity of *campursari* singers has grown within the realm of shadow puppet theatre in Jakarta and how this reflects the vulnerability they experience.

### Life in *Hura-Hura* Interlude Session

The large-scale *wayangan* was the norm in pre-pandemic Jakarta (though it was limited by *wayangans* sponsored by big sponsors). Until the 2010s, *wayangan* in Jakarta still carried the legacy of *wayang hura-hura*, a term used by Emerson (2017) to describe the overall realm of *wayangan* style initiated and held by PANTAP (Panitia Tetap Apresiasi dan Pengembangan Seni Pedhalangan) in 1993-1998. Although *wayang* nowadays does not fully adopt all elements associated with PANTAP (Emerson 2017), its legacy is unavoidable. There is an urgent need to expand the ‘entertainment’ segment of the interlude session for the Jakarta audience. Having guest stars perform during the *wayangan* interlude is quite

common (Emerson 2017; Mrázek 2019). However, not every sponsor could afford to invite a ‘superstar’ name. Hiring a local *campursari* singer and having them sit together with *sindhen* is a common option for middle to lower-class sponsors

**Picture 4.** A scene of *Gârâ-gârâ*, an interlude session during shadow puppet theatre. In this session, the *dalang* could shift their focus from puppets and their stories into the realm of light entertainment, which has no association with the *wayang* story they brought into the performance (Jakarta, 2018, Rahmadi Fajar Himawan).



**Picture 5.** Five *campursari* singers sit in the row reserved for *sindhen*. That night, only one *sindhen* was designated to serve as both the singer for the ‘classical’ section and as the musical accompaniment for the *wayang* performance, meaning she worked outside the interlude session. The number of *campursari* singers hired for the interlude session mostly depends on the sponsor’s request and budget. Sometimes, the sponsor or *dhalang* itself was so eager to create a festive atmosphere that they ended up hiring more *campursari* singers than *sindhen*. (Jakarta, 2018, Rahmadi Fajar Himawan).



## Popular among the Audience, Marginalized by *Seniman Klasik*

*Campursari* singers have a chance to become popular due to various reasons. Knowledge of *campursari* repertoire was always mandatory, as they were expected to sing any song requested by the *dhalang* or the audience. Furthermore, maintaining appearance and cultivating 'entertainer ethics' were also important for enhancing a *campursari* singer's career.

**Picture 6.** Another term for *sindhen* is *waranggana*, a term derived from *widadari*, which could be translated as 'angel' or 'nymph' – to be a *sindhen*. In other words, it aims to capture the beauty of an 'angel' on stage (Sutton 1984). In recent developments, compared to *sindhen*, *campursari* singers pay more attention to their appearance. The photo above shows two *campursari* singers (left) in *kebaya payet*, while two *sindhen* (right) wear more 'cover-up' *kebaya*. *Campursari* singers' eagerness to enhance their appearance was also viewed cynically by *seniman klasik*. For example, the *seniman klasik* humorously mocks a *campursari* singer's *kebaya* by calling it *kebaya kurang bahan* (*kebaya* with less material) and compares it to a *sindhen's* *kebaya*, which is usually more covered. This perception might confirm the *seniman klasik* judgement that *campursari* singers have a lower status than *sindhen*, since *sindhen* rely more on their musical ability, while *campursari* singers have to 'show' their physical appearance in front of audiences (Jakarta, 2018, Rahmadi Fajar Himawan).



**Picture 7.** During the interlude session, the *dhalang* usually has a conversation with the *campursari* singer, often full of humor. During my fieldwork, I often notice that people expect *campursari* singers to be cheerful and as humorous as the *dhalang* itself. *Campursari* singers who avoid any conversation are ‘convo killers’, often judged as snobs if they focus only on singing, and gain less popularity. It should be noted that some *campursari* singers were even famous not for their singing ability, but for their talent in creating a festive atmosphere (Jakarta, 2018, Rahmadi Fajar Himawan).



Unfortunately, various ways for *campursari* singers to achieve success were often judged harshly by their peers in the *karawitan* group. Most *karawitan* musicians, particularly the older classical performers, distinguish themselves from *campursari* musicians. In their defense, *campursari* music ‘only’ mimics the sound of gamelan, as noted by previous scholars. (Supanggah 2003; Brinner 2008; Wallach 2008; Cooper 2025).



**Picture 8.** A *sindhen* was left alone in her seat as the *campursari* singer, who at that moment had stepped off the stage to sing and interact with the audience, moved away. *Sindhen* singers were scarcer than *campursari* singers. *Sindhenan*, the vocal part sung by the *sindhen*, is considered more challenging to learn than *campursari* pieces. *Seniman klasik* believes that *campursari* singers must memorize (*hafal*) any popular Javanese song. Due to this perception, *campursari* singers are often viewed as ‘lazy’ (*malas belajar*), with less musical ability than *sindhen*, and women’s decision to become *campursari* singers is viewed merely as a shortcut to popularity. (Jakarta, 2018, Rahmadi Fajar Himawan).

**Picture 9.** Mimi Waiten (right), a renowned guest star usually invited by the sponsor of *wayangan* and famous for her humorous style, is also a former *sindhèn* and usually takes part in a *campursari* troupe. During a casual interaction between the *dhalang*, the *campursari* singer, and the audience, the conversation was lively and full of jokes. Some of the jokes involved sexual elements that were unbearable for older *karawitan* musicians and *sindhèn*. *Campursari* singers are viewed as undemure in their stage appearance, and an older musician sometimes judges them as *saru* (inappropriate). (Jakarta, 2018, Rahmadi Fajar Himawan).



### **Widadari in the Garden of Evil until Now**

Being vulnerable is a situation most *campursari* singers (at least those I have interviewed so far) are unavoidably familiar with. Various parties involved, whether audience, *dhalang*, or sponsor, are often unaware that they have become 'the actor' who perpetuates female objectification (Rahmiati et al. 2025). What makes the vulnerability more apparent is the fact that *campursari* singers couldn't openly challenge the objectification because they feared their actions could destroy the 'happy' atmosphere. Instead of being viewed as a 'victim', the *campursari* singer may be blamed by the audience, the *dhalang*, or, worst of all, the sponsor.

**Picture 10.** Various *campursari* singers get off the stage and embrace the audience, while the *karawitan* musicians look silently. *Campursari* singers' compliance with 'codified' appearance, singing style, and duty to maintain the festive vibe made them prone to objectification. Sexual jokes become 'norm' during light conversation with *dhalang*. The audience also had the liberty to shout vulgar words and dance with the *campursari* singer in any manner they desired. Finding a man inserting money inside the singer's brassiere is a common landscape. (Jakarta, 2018, Rahmadi Fajar Himawan).



**Picture 11.** The landscape of a *campursari* singer, singing while dancing to the rhythm of *kendang*, might revive audience imagery of *talédhék/ronggéng*, the 'singer-dancer', along with its negative ascription and the risk of being harassed (Durban 1989; Hughes-Freeland 2008). The best action a *campursari* singer could take (at least on stage) was to give the 'silent treatment' or be 'cold' toward any perpetrator. Unfortunately, not everyone could understand these kinds of signals. The man inserting money into the singer's brassiere kept dancing and directed his body gesture toward another singer. (Jakarta, 2018, Rahmadi Fajar Himawan).



COVID-19 is over. *Wayang* and *campursari* performances are being revived in Jakarta, although, whatever the scale, they are not as *hura-hura* as *wayang* in the pre-pandemic era. A few *campursari* singers also began to challenge their limbo position by beginning classical pieces with a *karawitan* musician. For *campursari* singers, the aspiration to become *sindhen* means they can rely more on musical ability and thus be taken seriously by *karawitan* peers. Regardless of their actions, *campursari* singers in post-pandemic Jakarta are still struggling to prove that their marginalization is pointless, and resisting vulnerability is an attitude that couldn't be discounted.

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