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Dis/Obedience Performed

Melê Yamomo

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Dis/Obedience Performed¹

MELÊ YAMOMO

Makuha ka sa tingin, a Filipino expression, roughly translates to: with one look, you should already know. In the high-context Philippine culture, a big part of everyday communication transpires non-verbally. Knowing and understanding occur implicitly. A parent's look should already be understood by a misbehaving child. A glimpse from a lover conveys an unuttered message to a partner. *Makuha ka sa tingin* could extend to the performing arts when musical cues are quietly communicated through movements of eyes among ensemble members. Or when dancing partners map the sequence of their steps through unspoken glances.

Facebook Messenger, 27 July 2021

Therese Jaynario, a former classmate and a dancer of the Philippine Ballet Theatre, explains that in the dance company, when one sees your dance partner's eyes growing wide, this might translate to: "Hey! You're doing the wrong dance sequence!" She further explains that in choreographies where the musical rhythm is hard to count, they rely on other company members giving each other 'eye cues' to know when one's part comes in. Therese also intimated through chat that she would use the same technique to give a reprimanding look to one of her daughters, who might have committed a social behavior that she disapproves of. (*Facebook Messenger 2021.07.27*)

[Southeast of Now
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WhatsApp, 2 March 2021

Citra Sudarmanto, a filmmaker friend and lecturer at the Department of Ethnomusicology at Institut Seni Indonesia, Yogyakarta, gives a similar example of a Javanese adage: “Ngonono yo ngonono nanging ojo ngonono.” She translates this to “That’s that but don’t be like that.” This expression is typically “used when someone [does] something wrong, and [the] community reminds [the person that] what they do is too much.” Citra explains that these aphorisms are considered Javanese philosophy, but she asserts that she “feels they are rules to make us obedient.”

Whether in parenting, or in art training, certain forms of understanding or knowing happen implicitly and are unarticulated. They are shaped by the disciplining of the body and mind that embody these social, cultural or artistic knowledges as forms of epistemic obedience, as Citra argues. Social systems and state and cultural institutions train and choreograph their citizens into social repertoires of performative behaviours of colonialism, patriarchy or capitalism. These epistemes are reproduced through their repeated performative acts within social interactions, as well as on the theatre stage or on social media.

Email, 22 March 2021

Yennu Ariendra (aka Y-DRA), a Yogyakarta-based music composer, producer, musician, DJ and digital artist, told me through WhatsApp that “the majority of [Indonesian] people already distrust the system, the rule, and the government.” He asserts that “systematically tax didn’t benefit people; public facilities are really messed up, social insurance [is] not working”, and thus disobedience to the state is a form of survival. When the global Covid pandemic hit, the Indonesian population’s distrust and rejection of the government brought the grassroots community to build their local social support system. Yennu’s artistic work engages *Jaranan*, *jathilan*, *angguk* and *dholalak*, dance practices of “common people that deconstruct/reject the Royal dance art, such as the Bedoyo royal dance”. To him, these dance practices are political in how they “mock and find alternatives to [the] strict royal dance/music/performance art”. Yennu’s work examines the power of the local to survive and adapt to various global changes, and in doing so, exposes how “nationality is a myth.” Sometimes, “It is hard for people to admit that they are Indonesian,” he points out. “People are more confident to [identify themselves] as Javanese, Maduranese, Toraja, Medan, Bali, etc.” Today, “maybe TikTok has more loyal citizens than Indonesia,” he quips.

Email, 8 March 2021

Jocelyn Ching, a theatre artist, dancer and performance researcher friend from Singapore whom I emailed to ask about her experiences of (dis)obedience within her context of art education and practice, wrote that “Singapore is one of the places in the world where this topic is of most immediate relevance to practising artists in the city.” Jocelyn’s very choice of artistic discipline was, to her, an act of disobedience. She explains that “[w]hen I was in university, my father explicitly cautioned against going into theatre and being ‘self-employed,’ and my mother used emotional blackmail, saying that in wanting to do theatre, I ‘only cared about myself and not my parents.’” Jocelyn sees her personal story as a microcosm of the mentality of the wider Singaporean society. She explains that the city-state “remains a highly capitalistic, pragmatic environment, one in which the arts struggle to find a place. Anything that is not quantifiable, not translatable into KPIs and financial rewards, is not deemed worth pursuing. Practising the arts amidst such a hostile environment is itself an act of disobedience.”

In Southeast Asia, where classical forms of art hold social importance, artistic and existential survival are, as Yennu remarked, fought and negotiated through epistemic obedience and disobedience. However, in other parts of the region where societies and communities were shattered by totalitarian revisionism, can obedience to classical tradition also be a radical act in itself?

Email, 9 March 2021

Prumsodun Ok, dancer, choreographer and founding artistic director of the Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA dance company in Phnom Penh, reflects on the notion of obedience and disobedience to his art and tradition. As the first openly queer dance company in Cambodia, Natyarasa restages and infuses Khmer classical dances with “contemporary spirit and LGBTQ expressions” (<https://www.pumsodun.com/company>). When I asked Prumsodun whether he sees his radical queering of classical Khmer royal dance as a form of revolution or disobedience to tradition, he expressed his refusal to be framed within the notion of ‘disobedience’. While he sees how others might view his work as ‘disobedient’, Prumsodun believes that “in many ways, I am more “obedient” than they are —

except I am obedient to different things, to the conceptual foundation, historical purpose, and contemporary life and universality of the tradition.” He thinks that while terms like ‘disobedient’ or ‘revolutionary’ or ‘new’ have currency in the contemporary art world, this can be damaging. He argues that

our traditions and lives are multilayered and multifaceted. In some ways and parts we move forward, move back, stay still, turn left, turn right, go up, go down — all at the same time. In short, I don’t view myself as embodying ‘disobedience’ because I am very faithful and devoted to my tradition, community, and world, much like how I don’t use the word ‘political’ to describe my work because human dignity is not a game of ideological power plays. It is about what is right.

BIOGRAPHY

meLê yamomo is an Assistant Professor of Theatre, Performance and Sound Studies (University of Amsterdam), and author of *Sounding Modernities: Theatre and Music in Manila and the Asia Pacific, 1869–1946* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). He is the project leader/principal investigator of *Sonic Entanglements* (Dutch Research Council, 2017–22), *Decolonizing Southeast Asian Sound Archives* (DeCoSEAS) (European Joint Initiative for Cultural Heritage, 2021–24). At Theater Ballhaus Naunynstrasse where he is resident artist, meLê curates the *Decolonial Frequencies Festival*, and his productions, *Echoing Europe—Postcolonial Reverberations, sonus—the sound within us*, and *Forces of Overtones* are in repertoire.

NOTE

- ¹ Drawing mainly from digital ethnography to tune into embodied epistemologies, this article also performs disobedience to academic conventions of citing the usual suspects of established academics from prestigious institutions often writing from a top-down perspective.