The Javanese Ludrug play reconsidered

a review of James Peacock's Rites of Modernization

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Introduction

As a young research student at SOAS, faced with the formidable canon of ethnographic literature on Indonesia, I had decided to take two years, rather than the conventional one, to prepare for field research. Early on, I happened to read Peacock's *Rites of modernization: symbolic and social aspects of Indonesian proletarian drama*, which came as a pleasant interlude to the sometimes operose task of scouring libraries. So I wrote this piece for my own amusement for a postgraduate seminar.

In the late 1960s, the prevailing orthodoxy of Dutch structuralism was being challenged by what Dutch scholars saw as an ignorant American upstart: Geertz's symbolic or interpretive anthropology. In this mêlée *Rites of modernization* was distinctly refreshing. Unlike both the Dutch and Geertz's largely uncritical adoption of a hegemonic aristocratic vision of Javanese society, Peacock offered a quite antithetical account. It introduced the reader to the vast urban proletariat, who were always fated to be represented by others and not permitted to represent themselves. As a skilled ethnographer, he brought a far more nuanced account in which we heard the voices (literally, as this was theatre) of working class people—or, at least, the actors who spoke to, and for, them. In the tradition of good ethnography, you could hear the people and almost smell the backstreets of Surabaya.

As behoved a sensible American PhD student at that time, Peacock kept his theoretical head well below the parapet by framing his research as an exercise in 'symbolic action'. Thanks to the quality of his ethnography however, a little scrutiny revealed how his depiction of the social aspects offered a contradictory reading to the dominant symbolic aspects. Far from popular *Ludruk* theatre performances serving as rites of modernization, Peacock's own explication suggested something quite different. In passing, he noted that young people eschewed *Ludruk* and preferred cinema as their way of confronting a changing world. By contrast, *Ludruk* recruited its audiences almost exclusively from the married poor whose lives were preoccupied with surviving. It offered those who stood little chance of embracing, or benefitting from, the modern world a way of framing, reflecting on and living with their marginal position presented with a certain distinctive style and humour. As I can attest from watching *Ludruk* in the more genteel setting of Malang, such performances were an elegant, engaging and often hilarious, reflexive commentary on Javanese society and what it was to be Javanese. Charmingly *Rites of modernization* undermined, and ultimately transcended, its theoretical framework. (I cannot now recall whether, in subsequent conversations with Jim Peacock, I ever asked what he thought in retrospect of his own analysis.)

This introduction was added in 1999.

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players
As You Like It. Act 2. Sc.7.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Peacock's recent work on the role of the Ludrug play in moulding Javanese values in a rapidly changing society. Peacock has suggested that a useful way to study social change in Java is to understand some processes in terms of 'symbolic action' (1968: 234), i.e. 'actions... which present certain symbolic classifications, conceptions of social action, and forms' (1968: 10). For, he says, only thus can religion, art and ideologies be understood (1968: 234, citing Geertz 1966: 42.) In this paper, I shall examine the ideas he puts forward with reference to the Ludrug play.

But first, in order to understand Peacock's arguments, it is necessary to look at the social context in which Ludrug occurs. Java is traditionally a country of exceptionally fertile volcanic soil which supported the large centralized kingdoms which have marked its history over the last fourteen hundred years. The peasantry, subject to a succession of dynasties were supported by capital and labour intensive irrigated ricelands, and were grouped into clustered village communities with strong internal solidarity. Since the seventeenth century Java has been colonized by the Dutch, who exploited its agricultural and human resources for the plantation production of sugar cane and coffee especially: So, in 1948, after war against the Dutch, the Javanese, now part of Indonesia—formerly the Dutch East Indies, were left with the aftermath of colonization which included two most unfortunate legacies: serious overpopulation and resultant under-employment (Geertz 1963, esp. Ch. 3).

Java is, consequently, suffering from what Geertz has called 'shared poverty'. As a result of severe land shortage, there has been a movement towards the towns, and it is this largely unskilled proletariat which compose, in Surabaya at least, the Ludrug audience. Surabaya, itself, is Indonesia's largest industrial town, with most industry European, Chinese or Muslim Javanese owned, and with a partially integrated proletariat which is politically communist oriented, under-employed and resident in village-like suburbs. While formally members of the Indonesian Communist party, most Surabayan working class people have a sketchy knowledge of, and allegiance to, the party ideology and by the early 1960's tended to dissociate themselves from the party organization—a trend which is reflected in Ludrug values.

Apart from the social context within which Ludrug occurs, there is also a cultural system from which the values and symbols of the plays are drawn. According to Peacock, 'Javanese proletarians...think in terms of two schemes of symbolic classification' (1968: 7). These are the *alus/kasar* and *madju/kuna* categories by which the Javanese order their social universe (see figure 1). As Javanese society changes and the old patterns of social relationships are broken down, so Peacock argues, the Javanese are coming to see their society in terms of a Progressive *versus* Conservative distinction. One of the functions of Ludrug is to assist this process.

Some of the characters acted in Ludrug have a long history within the Javanese theatre. The clowns, who feature in both the *Dagelan* and *Tjerita*,[1] have been central characters of the classical Wayang Kulit, the shadow puppet play, and Wayang Wong, a court masked play. In these the clowns represent supernatural beings who have taken on roles as servants to the heroes of the Indian epics, and are instrumental in bringing their masters victory through their ability to mediate between their masters and the gods. They are ambiguous figures—both servants and

[1] See *Figure 2 – Scenes in Ludrug*, below.

deities, comic yet possessing supernatural powers, grotesque in appearance yet sacred—they resemble in some ways Lévi-Strauss's tricksters. In traditional Wayang Wong the clowns were often played by the princes, a custom which occurs in Ludrug in the practice of the troupe manager playing the clown. Yet as Ludrug has evolved, the clown has lost many of his mediating characteristics and is coming to symbolize the stereotypical conservative proletarian, with whom Peacock argues the audience identify.

The main features of the Ludrug plays themselves are laid out in Figure 2 and, according to Peacock, most performances in Surabaya and the surrounding villages seem to correspond to this form. An interesting feature of Ludrug is both the extent of audience participation—by shouting approval or abuse—and the widespread attendance of the poorer Surabayans, unlike Western theatre Ludrug is an important mass medium (1968: 7). Each performance starts with an example of *Ngremo,* a dance in bizarre clothes acting out love-making 'from preparation to consummation' (1968: 61-2), which is apparently intended to seduce the spectator into the show (1968: 61-2). This is followed by a single clown who begins his performance by singing a song usually complaining about modern trends. For example:

> In this 'era of progress Women dare wear pants.
> To the point they dare wear tight pants!
> (But there's not yet a man who dares wear a skirt.)' etc. (1968: 176).

Meanwhile the older members of the audience mutter or shout agreement, while youths may start heckling. Other songs that he may sing are complaints of ordinary peoples' poverty and of officials' corruptness—both of which are quite real! After this he turns to a monologue complaining how unhappy and poor he is, while the audience heap insults on him (1968: 83). Soon another character enters and they abuse one another, throughout this they tend to assume dominant and submissive roles to one another while playing out a dialogue which includes riddles like:

> A: How many traffic lights in Surabaya?
> B: Maybe twenty.'
> A: Wrong! Three!
> B: Three! '
> A: Yeah! Red, green and yellow' (1968:209).

Or one acts as employer to the other, asking him if he wants a job, and after much discussion it emerges he hasn't a job himself. The audience laugh at this type of humour.

The last part of the clowns' act is a scene of a robbery, usually young hoods from down-town beating up or cheating an old villager by taking advantage of his adherence to old Javanese customs, while everyone laughs at the victim's expense. In the clowns' performance, then, traditional values are being both supported and mocked by the audience and much of the acting produces a cathartic response.

In the following scene of the transvestite singer, there is a different pattern. The male transvestite dressed in female alus clothes sings songs with a strong nationalist flavour:

> Indonesia, all my folk,
> Islam, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu,
> Come be together. Do not quarrel and argue.
> Remember this is an era of progress (1968: 209).

The audience do not react verbally to this, but only to the seductive remarks and dress of the transvestite. So her act contains a dichotomy between the refined traditional appearance and the progressive, nationalist songs. Peacock argues that this is a means for communicating

modern attitudes and values in a traditional guise, backed by the seductive manner of the actor which encourages empathy with her words. There is additionally a second dichotomy, that between the role of the clown which symbolizes Kuna and Kasar values and the transvestite who represents Alus and Madju qualities. Thus, if Peacock is correct that the *alus/kasar* classification is giving way to a *madju/kuna* one the clowns bridge the gap by embodying *kasar* and *kuna* values and the transvestite *alus* and *madju* ones. While the audience identify with the clowns, they admire or desire the transvestite—in other words the clown symbolizes their level of achievement and the transvestite their aspirations.

This is further borne out by the themes of the stories which form the conclusion to the performance. Most of the plots fall into one of two types, which Peacock refers to as Traditional-Plots and Modern-Plots. The former are based on a story such as the illegitimate daughter of a *Prijaji* (Aristocrat) being rediscovered by her father many years later and accepted into his family as a full daughter. The modern plots have a theme like: a flashy village girl leaves her husband and meets up with a Prijaji boy who has mistreated and abandoned his wife. Her husband escapes from jail, where he was sent for embezzlement to keep his wife, and meets and marries the élite boy's deserted wife. The story ends with this couple living in an élite home and the flashy village girl and the unfaithful élite boy as beggars in the street. From a large sample of plots, Peacock extracted the following differences between Traditional and Modern plots:

Traditional plots	**Modern plots**
a. Long time span b. Preservation of consanguineal kin ties c. Old kin groups maintained d. Senior generation dominant e. Mobility due to consanguineal relationship f. Outcome determined by fate g. Emphasis on harmony and stasis	Short time span of plot Negation of kin ties New groups formed Younger generation dominant Mobility through marriage, and sexual attraction Outcome determined by will Emphasis on change

In Ludrug performances, traditional plots are decreasing in frequency and modern plots are shown increasingly more often. This, Peacock argues indicates a trend towards 'modernization'. The themes of social mobility by a successful marriage, and individual mobility by achievement are perhaps the two most significant new goals being portrayed in Ludrug. Similarly, individual volition and individual achievement are sanctioned by the modern-plots as legitimate means to the goals. Peacock suggests that

> each play draws participants into identifying with actors who are employing means to move towards goals...in this way the participants develop a proclivity to favor certain roles ...goals, or means on occasions when daily life offers a chance (1968: 8-9).

In the stories, the clowns play further important roles, which are more reminiscent of their parts as clown-servants in Wayang Wong. They make fun of their master's alus manners, and much of their joking turns on mixing of *alus/kasar* and *madju/kuna* categories. For example, the scene may show *alus* Javanese having coffee, alus values require guests and host to wait a long time while they conduct polite conversation before drinking, while the servant says immediately on serving them: 'Go on! Slurp it up!' in low Javanese. He interposes a *kasar* remark in an *alus* context and lays bare the biological impulses beneath the refined veneer. In this case the opposition between *alus* or cultured behaviour and *kasar* or natural biological behaviour is made overt and is recognized by the audience, unlike the latent nature/culture

distinction in Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myth. Similarly, the clown makes fun of *madju* institutions through his ignorance of them. So, in a scene when police visit a house the police officer says:

> 'I am here in my official capacity.' and the clown replies
> 'I am here in my unofficial capacity' (1968: 155).

Much of the laughter to this is cathartic, most poor Surabayans are afraid of the police.

Douglas has recently pointed out that jokes may express 'the value of less articulate sectors of social relationships compared with formalized structures' (1968: 374). A joke may question and challenge the established social order and reveal the arbitrary nature of the categories of thought on which the social order rests. She sees jokes as aiding the 'social control of experience' (1968: 373), yet one could equally well argue that jokes, in Ludrug, may serve to alter categories of thought and provide an impetus to change.

One interesting feature of the plots which Peacock says little about is that both modern and traditional plots emphasize social mobility by proletarians into the élite. None of them however suggest a reordering of social groups. The values of Ludrug stories are in a sense 'bourgeois', the goals of the heroes are always integration into the élite, never its destruction. Peacock does, however, point out that the rejection of communist ideology by the Surabayan proletariat in favour of Ludrug's 'bourgeois' values foreshadowed subsequent political trends. He suggests that changing values in art often predict subsequent shifts in attitudes. In this context, it may be worth note that in fact social mobility into the élite has always been fairly open in Java and that social conflict has always centred on the Muslim reformist sect, the *santri*, who are highly endogamous and exclusive, rather than on élite/non-élite membership.

Having described the separate parts which compose a typical Ludrug performance, I shall now turn to Peacock's analysis of the functions of Ludrug. He argues that

> Ludrug...helps...participants to apprehend modernization movements in terms of vivid and meaningful symbolic classifications; second it seduces Ludrug participants into empathy with modes of social action involved in the modernization process; third, it involves the participants in aesthetic forms that structure their most general thoughts and feelings in ways stimulating to the modernization process (1968: 6).

In other words, Ludrug classifies sets of values and symbols, the *alus/kasar* and *madju/kuna* categories mentioned above. It also portrays social action with which participants empathize and employs characters with whom they can identify, so orienting them towards new goals and familiarizing them with new patterns of behaviour. Lastly Ludrug utilizes forms new to Javanese drama. Traditional drama, according to Peacock, is 'cyclical' (i.e. there is an emphasis on stasis), 'disjointed' (i.e. there is little narrative sequence), and 'non-achieving' (i.e. there is no sense of the play leading anywhere). Ludrug adapts participants to think in terms of linear sequences which culminate in climaxes and new situations (1968: 9-10). So Ludrug changes its audiences' ways of organizing and responding to reality, by substituting a diachronic causal view of reality for a cyclical static one.

Further, he contrasts the ways in which religion and art—or Ludrug—manipulate symbols. The values of religion are overt, while Ludrug's influence is subliminal because its values are latent, and hence are possibly more effective. The audience is unaware that it is empathizing with and assuming new symbols and values. Similarly, Ludrug differs from myth, according to Peacock, in that myth serves to validate social organization. Leach he says views myth as validating rival claims to status, while Lévi-Strauss views myth as validating cosmology (1968: 243-4, citing Lévi-Strauss 1964: 216). Yet in the same article Lévi-Strauss says that 'the

purpose of myth is to provide a logical model'. Of what? Culture, society, precisely what? (1963: 229). As Burridge or Milner interpret this, myth is a method of ordering reality, and as such differs little from Peacock's symbolic classifications—both are ways of categorizing social and natural reality. But myth differs from Ludrug in other features, for Ludrug communicates on more levels, musical, verbal and visual, while for most purposes myth communicates verbally only. Also, the mediation of categories in Ludrug takes place at a level of which the participants are consciously aware, Lévi-Strauss implies that myth is often a sub-conscious communication. Peacock develops this theme that Ludrug communicates on several different levels simultaneously, for example, the transvestite communicates *alus* values in dress, but *madju* values verbally and arouses emotions of admiration in women and sexual attraction in men, so communication is visual, verbal and emotional and none of the messages transmitted are the same. He goes on to suggest that 'syncretic religions' if carefully studied might prove no more than simultaneous communication through different channels on different levels. Though Leach and Tambiah's work on Sinhalese Buddhism might bear this out, I suspect that the Balinese material would not, for there communication with different and complementary systems of deities bear strong resemblance.

Two obvious points for discussion remain: How valuable are the concepts Peacock uses to analyse Ludrug? And to what degree is his analysis likely to be correct that Ludrug helps modernization of values? One of his concepts 'Rites of Modernization' form the title of his book. He argues, 'Ludrug is a rite, a symbolic action… (which)… has certain consequences—it encourages the modernization of Javanese society' (1968: 5-6). Ludrug is a rite because it is analogous to rites de passage. These 'enable society to symbolically define persons' movements from one situation to another – from boyhood to manhood, celibacy to matrimony, life to death' (1968: 6). While 'Ludrug helps persons symbolically define their movements from one type of situation to another—from traditional to modern situations' (1968: 6).

Yet *rites de passage* differ significantly from rites of modernization. *Rites de passage* provide social recognition and validation of changes in status during an individual's life-cycle; Ludrug provides symbolic forms and modes of action which help individuals adapt to a changing society, they involve no status change. In the former case, the individual is changing; in the latter the society. Ludrug is a rite in the sense of an habitual action, *rites de passage* imply social or supernatural sanction of status changes. Only a most generous interpretation of 'rite' can embrace both Ludrug and life-cycle ceremonies. If Ludrug is a rite, then so is the other recent mass medium in Java—the cinema.

This term is extended to cover traditional village ceremonies which reaffirm the moral community, such as the *slametan*, which is referred to as a 'rite of incorporation 'in contradistinction to Ludrug which is a 'rite of separation' from the village. I suggest that the difference between these rites and rites de passage is greater than their apparent similarity.

Two other concepts which Peacock uses to study symbols, are 'symbolic classification' (or 'symbolic classifier', apparently synonymously) and 'symbolic action'. The former term he derives from Durkheim and Mauss's 'Primitive Classification', and means by it 'a set of categories, each designated by a native word, into which the natives classify qualities of behaviour or thought as well as social groups, natural objects' (1968: 7). While this term is designed to fit the Javanese material which consists of unusually thorough classifications, it may have to be seriously adapted from one culture to another. Such a symbolic classification, though true of the Javanese, and incorporating social groups, behaviour places, language etc., does not occur among the adjacent Malays. Secondly, Peacock's terminology tends to confuse

distinct concepts under one label. It is used indiscriminately to refer to symbols, values and the actors who represent them. By symbol is generally meant something that stands for, or represents, something else, especially a material object representing an abstraction. As Geertz put it, a symbol is 'any object, act, event, quality, or relation which, serves as a vehicle for a conception—the conception is the symbol's meaning' (1966: 5). The Javanese conception of *alus* is a value in itself, it represents nothing except itself. On the other hand, it is symbolized in countless acts and objects such as the high Javanese language, elegant manners, wayang kulit plays etc. Symbols, of course, can have more than one meaning, for different people, and an actor can portray more than one set of symbols simultaneously. The transvestite represents *alus* and *madju* characteristics together.

Equally, 'symbolic action' is defined by Peacock in largely negative terms as action which is neither social, empirical nor technical, or by inference as action 'oriented toward creating beautiful or stimulating form and expressing emotions, moral ideas or conceptions of reality.' (1968: 234ff.). Whether it is useful to define a concept so loosely rather than by distinguishing symbols from values, ethics, beliefs etc. is a moot point.

Lastly, there is the question of whether Peacock's analysis is borne out by the evidence. While we are told that Ludrug 'encourages modernization of Javanese society' (1968: 6), most of the argument is that it *ought* rather than does. Obviously, it is difficult to ascertain the direct effects of Ludrug values, due to the nature of the study. Yet the only positive evidence he gives of Ludrug's effect is that pedicab drivers sing *madju* songs sometimes at work and that they may be used for lullabies. Ludrug is widely performed in Java, in both villages and towns, but no evidence is offered that its effect may differ on modern city dwellers and rural peasants, or even what its demonstrable effects are. Peacock mentions the significance of audience reactions but most of the Surabayan participants express identification with the traditional anti-modernity clown and his views, or emphasize the cathartic effects of an audience who are experiencing economic hardship and a hostile urban environment. One might also ask quite what Peacock understands by 'identification'?

Additionally, the age composition of Ludrug audiences is almost exclusively married people between the ages of 25 and 50. The social responsibilities of marriage and children mean that the audience can put few modern ideals expressed in Ludrug into practice. Social mobility through marriage into the élite and great economic success are dreams to people who are already married with children and who have marginally adequate incomes in an economy where prices are rising faster than salaries. Ludrug audiences are constrained by their existing roles in the acceptance of new values; whereas the youth of Surabaya who regard Ludrug as old-fashioned are not so constrained. It is they who absorb most modern influence through the cinema, which shows most Western and modern Indonesian films. Ludrug, in fact, tends to express this conflict between the *kuna* older generation and the *madju* youth. I suggest that it is more appropriate to see the youth, free from most constraining relations, as really subject to modernizing influences from political end entertainment media; and to see Ludrug as a reflection of traditional values under duress and as an opium of the middle-aged.

In conclusion, is it possible to say anything about symbols in a rapidly changing society, like post-revolutionary Indonesia, from an analysis of Ludrug? It is clear from Ludrug that values may vary independently of symbols. *Slametan* rituals within the village which were once highly valued are coming to be seen as old-fashioned by modern Javanese. Similarly, roles such as the clowns, who traditionally interceded between man and deity, and between élite and commoners, have become mediators between old and new. But perhaps most

significant is the nature of the values *kuna* and *kasar* themselves. The old *alus/kasar* distinction is, as Peacock points out, a cosmology in which values were imbued with religious significance, the new *madju/kuna* categories are ideological: modern Indonesia *versus* traditional patrimonialism, the religious significance of classifications has given way to a political one. The fact that many urbanized Surabayans cling to traditional values is reminiscent of the point made by Geertz, that under conditions of rapid social change the social system and 'the cultural system' (1957: 34) may be out of alignment, values appropriate to a rural setting may be continued in an urban environment where they are no longer relevant. So, proletarian Surabayans tended to be less responsive to politically innovative values like communism, although the communication of these values was the professed aim of some Ludrug managers. This is perhaps a useful reminder that there may be a difference between the values of a given system and what people actually believe—however we are to determine that. The communist-influenced Ludrug audience**,** overtly acknowledging communist ideology in fact mainly held 'bourgeois' beliefs. One problem of Symbolic Anthropology is that while it can study values, it cannot study beliefs.

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Figure 1. Peacock's 'Symbolic Classifications.'

	Alus	***Kasar***
Value	Refinement. Otherworldliness Cultured	Coarseness. Inner-worldliness. Natural
Symbols	High Javanese Language. Aristocratic (*Prijaji*) Classical Plays. Central Java. Etc.	Low Javanese Language. Peasant style of life. Proletarian Plays. Eastern Java. Etc.
Symbolic Agents	Prijaji actors. Transvestite. (Dress.)	Peasant actors. Clowns.
	Madju	***Kuna***
Value	Modernity Nationalism Universalism	Tradition. Regionalism. Particularism
Symbols	Indonesian language Urban way of life. Political meetings. Western dress	Javanese language Rural way of life Village Ritual Javanese dress
Symbolic Agents	Urban actors Transvestite (songs.)	Rural actors Clowns.

Principal Mediators	
Clowns	*a. Kasar* *b. Kuna*
Transvestites	a. *Alus* (Dress) b. *Madju* (Songs)