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## **A ‘CULTURAL COLD WAR’?**

### **Lekra, the left and the arts in West Java, Indonesia, 1951–65**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the development of the Institute of People’s Culture (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, Lekra) in West Java in the 1950s and 1960s. Drawing on contemporary publications, oral histories and archival documents, the article incorporates views ‘from below’ into an account of what became a vibrant cultural force. It shows how Lekra attracted a cultural elite but also wove itself into everyday life, as part of a web of organisations linked to the Indonesian Communist Party. Lekra in West Java combined an outward looking engagement in cultural diplomacy with efforts to reform Sundanese culture. Some developments in West Java paralleled national trends, including Lekra’s intensifying politicisation and growing cultural polarisation. However, developments in the province also had their own dynamics, manifesting in the contributions of prominent Sundanese Lekra figures to the ‘*wayang* controversy’ and in the role of a group of Sundanese writers who rejected the choice between Lekra and a rival group supporting the Cultural Manifesto. The article highlights challenges in applying a Cold War framework to cultural life in the decolonising world, and the need to move beyond elites in capital cities to incorporate views from the provinces and the grassroots.

## KEYWORDS

the arts; Cold War culture; communism; Lekra; West Java

## Introduction

The Indonesian People's Culture Institute (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, Lekra) was founded in 1950, within a year of the end of Indonesia's War of Independence. Two members of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) politburo, D.N. Aidit and Nyoto, were among Lekra's founders.<sup>1</sup> Nyoto also remained on Lekra's central secretariat into the 1960s, but not all of Lekra's members, or even all of its leaders, were in the PKI. By 1963 Lekra claimed to have 100,000 members, and this included many of the most prominent figures in the arts in Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> Indeed one scholar has described it as 'the most prominent, important and active cultural force of the period' (Lindsay 2012: 21). Lekra was banned along with the PKI following a military takeover in 1965 that claimed to be saving Indonesia from a PKI coup.<sup>3</sup> In the anti-communist purges that followed across Indonesia, many Lekra members were killed, and thousands more endured years of imprisonment without trial.<sup>4</sup> A number of others who were abroad at the time were barred from returning to Indonesia (Chambert-Loir 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> Nyoto was among the founding leadership mentioned in Lekra (1951: 1). For Aidit's role in Lekra's founding see Lekra (1959: 4), though see also *Tempo* (2013: 60) for his limited subsequent involvement.

<sup>2</sup> The 100,000 figure comes from *Harian Rakjat* (1963). All Lekra membership figures must be treated cautiously, but this figure for 1963 is much more plausible than the 5 million in 1965 quoted in Mortimer (1974: 366). For the difficulty Lekra had in counting its members see *Tempo* (2013: 62).

<sup>3</sup> For events surrounding the alleged PKI coup, see Roosa (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Patterns of repression in West Java will be discussed below. For an account indicating the effect on Lekra members in Bali, one of the areas where the violence was more extreme, see Bhumi (2014).

The article is part of an ongoing effort to re-evaluate Lekra and go beyond early narratives which wrote Lekra off as the product of the PKI's machinations.<sup>5</sup> More recently a number of scholars have warned against treating Lekra as simply a PKI 'front organisation'. They have stressed that scholars need to engage with Lekra activists on their own terms and recognise their desire for 'a new national culture reflecting and promoting the politics of anti-imperialism, social justice and self-reliance' (Miller 2015: 370-1; see also Foulcher 1986: 56). More broadly, recent research on the arts in Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s has pointed to the dangers of narratives that project back from the events of 1965 a determining left-right binary. Instead it points to patterns of fluidity in a context of varied transnational influences and regional dynamics (Lindsay 2012).

The debate over Lekra has strong resonances with broader discussions in the study of the Cold War, used here to mean a state of polarisation in world affairs linked to superpower rivalry and a related ideological struggle between capitalism and communism. A number of scholars have argued for a need to move beyond a narrow diplomatic focus in studies of the Cold War, and for researchers to examine the relationships between the Cold War and forms of cultural production, such as the mass media, propaganda, advertising, religion and the arts (Mitter and Major 2004; Day and Liem 2010). This has sometimes been framed in terms of studying a 'cultural Cold War' (Scott-Smith and Krabbendam 2003; Shaw 2005). At the same time, some researchers have cautioned against the danger of reading 'the Cold War into every issue' (Mitter and Major 2003: 17–18; Connelly 2000), and warned that an excessive emphasis on the Cold War may distract from 'the worldviews, immediate priorities, and interests closest

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<sup>5</sup> For a classic example of such a narrative, see Yahaya (1972: 8–9) which argues that Lekra was 'under the direction of the PKI', which 'pulled its strings'. In a similar vein, Moeljanto and Ismail (1995) frequently use the term 'Lekra/PKI'.

to home' (Montesano 2019). Others have pointed to the need to integrate the 'dual processes of decolonization and Third World radicalization' into accounts of a global Cold War (Westad 2005: 396).

This article analyses the relationship between Lekra, the left and the arts within the cultural milieu of West Java during the 1950s and 1960s. West Java is a particularly interesting case study because of its ambivalent position within Indonesian society and culture. On the one hand it is part of Indonesia's 'core', as one of the most populous provinces, on Indonesia's most populous island and being geographically adjacent to the capital, Jakarta. Yet at the same time, it is in a sense an outsider as the large majority of West Java's inhabitants are ethnically Sundanese rather than Javanese, with most of the Javanese living in Central and East Java. The Javanese, as well as being the largest ethnic group in Indonesia, tend to have an outsized role in Indonesia's political and cultural life. During the 1950s and 1960s these patterns also took on a left-right dimension, with parts of East and Central Java forming the heartland of the PKI and the left more broadly. As such there has sometimes been an uneasiness about how West Java fits into analysis that juxtaposes the 'outer islands' to Java and the Javanese (Mortimer 1969: 196–201; McVey 1986: 26). These considerations reinforce Michael Bodden's argument that: 'By looking not just at the Indonesian capital, or even at activities in Central or East Java, we may gain a rather different picture of a part of what Lekra was about' (2010: 52).

The first section of this article explores how Lekra developed as an organisation in West Java and its relations to a family of organisations linked to the PKI. A second section looks at some of the international dimensions of Lekra's experience, including its involvement in cultural diplomacy and its increasing hostility to 'cultural imperialism'. The third section focuses on ideological developments, tracing growing

polarisation in West Java's cultural life, but also trends that cut across attempts to apply binary divisions. The fourth section explores the aftermath of the events of 1965. A concluding section summarises the findings, and suggests some implications for our understanding of Lekra and the idea of a cultural Cold War.

### **The social and organisational profile of Lekra in West Java**

From a modest start in the early 1950s, Lekra grew to become a significant force in the cultural life of West Java as a result of persistent efforts to expand beyond its early bases, which tended to be urban centres, trade union strongholds, or both.<sup>6</sup> By 1953 the Bandung branch had set up 'People's Village Culture Halls' and it was reported that through these Lekra had started to 'spread to the villages' (*Harian Rakjat* 1953a, 1953b). By the late 1950s further progress had been made. In preparation for the 1958 West Java Lekra Conference there were meetings held in Sumedang, Indramayu, Garut, Ciamis as well as Bandung city and regency (*Harian Rakjat* 1958b).<sup>7</sup> The conference appointed regional 'promoters' for ten regencies or cities besides Bandung, although Bandung was still over-represented (*Harian Rakjat* 1958c). A renewed effort was made with the so called 'go down' (*turun ke bawah*) campaigns in the 1960s whereby activists went to rural areas to study conditions and build up the organisation. A West Java Lekra leader noted that this gave an opportunity to meet artists 'hidden in the villages and among the workers' (*Harian Rakjat* 1962b). An internal report from 1964 based on research from a 'go down' campaign noted increased organisational work

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<sup>6</sup> There is a list of branches in Lekra (1951: 1). For a broader discussion of the organisational development of Lekra in the early 1950s see Miller (2015: 107–159).

<sup>7</sup> Note that the regency of Bandung was the rural territory surrounding (and separate from) the provincial capital Bandung.

being done in the villages.<sup>8</sup> Although numbers were likely lower than in Central and Eastern Java, internal figures suggest that there were around 20,000 Lekra members in West Java by 1964.<sup>9</sup>

Lekra became involved in a wide range of cultural activities, from literature and visual art to cultural discussions, arts nights, exhibitions, and performances by bands, as well as dance and drama troupes (*Harian Rakjat* 1953b, 1954, 1957). The most detailed information on Lekra activities in West Java comes from Bandung, which was both the largest population centre and the best covered by the media. For example, for the anniversary of the Bandung Lekra branch in 1956 there were performances of *reog*, *wayang golek*, *tari topeng*, folk music bands, as well as an itinerant exhibition (*Harian Rakjat* 1956a).<sup>10</sup> Through the 1950s and into the 1960s, Lekra's areas of activity in Bandung continued to grow, including a modern drama group (*Aneka* 1960), working on public monuments (*Harian Rakjat* 1962b), and in 1962 the foundation of the People's Arts University (Universitas Kesenian Rakjat) with the close involvement of Lekra members (*Harian Rakjat* 1962d). Lekra also played an important role in shaping the arts coverage of *Warta Bandung*, a left-leaning newspaper that was set up in the mid 1950s. Although details on the activities of branches outside of Bandung are sparser, we can occasionally get a glimpse at what was going on in more peripheral areas. For example, the Indramayu branch announced plans shortly after its establishment in 1958, with activities to include participating in local cultural events and festivities, setting up

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<sup>8</sup> Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia [ANRI], Arsip Komando Operasi Tertinggi [KOTI] 802, 'Kesimpulan hasil riset sastra dan seni: rakyat Djabar mengganjang setan2 kebudajaan', Bandung, early August 1964.

<sup>9</sup> ANRI KOTI 350, 'Pengubahan imbangan kekuatan di Djabar', Bandung, December 1964. This number is still speculative but is more plausible than the 50,000 claimed in a *Harian Rakjat* article around the same time (*Harian Rakjat* 1964h). The relative strength of Lekra in different parts of Java is hinted at in Miller (2015: 109).

<sup>10</sup> *Reog* in West Java combines music, dance, comedy and storytelling. *Wayang* refers to a number of dramatic forms popular across parts of Southeast Asia. *Wayang golek* is a form of puppet theatre popular in west Java. *Tari topeng* is a form of dance that involves one or more masked dancers, accompanied by music and dialogue.

*wayang* performances, holding cultural lectures, publishing a book on Indramayu's culture, and sending a troupe of acrobats to the national Lekra congress (*Harian Rakjat* 1958a, 1958d).

Lekra fitted into a web of mutually supportive mass organisations linked to the PKI, creating a symbiotic network which strengthened their attraction at grassroots level. In this sense they played a role in the formation of what have sometimes been termed *aliran* or 'streams' within society, whereby a 'political party [was] surrounded by a set of ... voluntary organisations – formally or informally linked to it' (Geertz 1965: 127–128).<sup>11</sup> Lekra often performed at events organised by the PKI or its allied mass organisations such as the Party's youth organisation the People's Youth (Pemuda Rakyat) and trade unions (*Harian Rakjat* 1954, 1965c; *Warta Bandung* 1963b).<sup>12</sup> An activist in the PKI-aligned Indonesian Plantation Workers Union (Serikat Buruh Perkebunan Indonesia, Sarbupri), recalled Lekra participating for free at union celebrations, performing at plantations, and only asking for food and transport.<sup>13</sup> These activities were particularly valuable given that groups such as plantation workers and poor village youth often had few entertainment options. Lekra's involvement complemented the efforts of Sarbupri's culture and sport sections (*Warta Sarbupri* 1954), and the People's Youth's drama troupe and drum bands (*Warta Bandung* 1959a; Adnan 2007). Mutually reinforcing networks developed. One *dalang* (puppeteer) remembered becoming increasingly close to Lekra as he performed for plantation workers.<sup>14</sup> A People's Youth member recalled seeing Lekra as an 'allied organisation'

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<sup>11</sup> The term *aliran* has also been used by scholars in a number of other ways, for which see the discussion in Liddle (1977).

<sup>12</sup> See also Institut Sejarah Sosial Indonesia, Oral History Project '65 [ISSI OHP 65], Interview 2.22 'Kamaludin' (a People's Youth member).

<sup>13</sup> ISSI OHP 65, Interview 2.14 'Koswara'.

<sup>14</sup> ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.24 'Dalang'.

even if the precise connection was not always clear.<sup>15</sup> For those who took part in artistic activities, which were often free, they offered opportunities for self-development and building self-esteem. One plantation union activist saw Lekra activities as allowing people to ‘develop their respective talents in whatever kind of art,’<sup>16</sup> whilst a former member of the People’s Youth in Bandung vividly recalled with pride her experiences in its drum band, including at events held by the PKI and trade unions (Adnan 2007: 54–55).

At the other end of the social scale was an elite of ethnically Sundanese writers and artists, who maintained connections to West Java but whose lives, careers and interests spanned beyond West Java to national and international levels. The best known included the painters Hendra Gunawan and Tatang Ganar, the playwright Utuy Tatang Sontani, and a number who wrote and edited including S. Rukiah, A.S. Dharta and Buyung Saleh.<sup>17</sup> A.S. Dharta was one of the founders of Lekra and was the first General Secretary of the organisation until he was removed from his position in 1957. S. Rukiah and Buyung Saleh joined in the early 1950s, and Utuy Tatang Sontani became increasingly close to Lekra from the late 1950s.<sup>18</sup> Whilst all had been born in West Java, A.S. Dharta, Buyung Saleh, S. Rukiah and Utuy Tatang Sontani spent significant parts of their careers based in Jakarta, home of most national institutions and national publications.<sup>19</sup> Hendra Gunawan and Tatang Ganar spent much of their early careers in

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<sup>15</sup> ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.16 ‘Suratna’.

<sup>16</sup> ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.14 ‘Koswara’.

<sup>17</sup> S. Rukiah was also sometimes known by her married name S. Rukiah Kertapati. A.S Dharta wrote under a number of other names (Setiyono 2010: x). Buyung Saleh sometimes used variations on the name Saleh Iskandar Puradisastra.

<sup>18</sup> A.S. Dharta is mentioned in *Lekra* (1951); for Buyung Saleh’s and S. Rukiah’s early involvement in *Lekra* see *Pikiran Rakjat* (1951) and *Harian Rakjat* (1952b); for Utuy Tatang Sontani see Rosidi (2001: 10–12), and Chambert-Loir (2018: 123–129).

<sup>19</sup> For relevant biographical data see, Gallop (1985: 2–5), Aveling (1979: 1–4), Wisetrotomo (2013: 50–92), International Institute of Social History [IISH], Suparna Sastradiredja Papers, Folder 130, ‘Buyung Saleh: trade unionist and writer’.

Yogyakarta, another national cultural centre.<sup>20</sup> Many also travelled abroad as part of some form of cultural delegation or exchange.<sup>21</sup> Yet they also engaged with cultural activities in West Java or Sundanese culture during the period. For example Buyung Saleh, A.S. Dharta, S. Rukiah, and Utuy Tatang Sontani participated in conferences focused on Sundanese language and culture (*Harian Rakjat* 1952c, 1956c; *Pikiran Rakjat* 1955b). Hendra Gunawan, A.S. Dharta and Utuy Tatang Sontani were also involved in establishing the People's Arts University in Bandung in 1962.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Hendra Gunawan headed the West Java branch of Lekra from the late 1950s and S. Rukiah and Tatang Ganar both had roles in the branch at some point (*Harian Rakjat* 1952b, 1964e; Wisetrotomo 2013: 70–71).

### **Lekra, West Java, cultural diplomacy and 'cultural imperialism'**

A small number of those associated with Lekra had the opportunity to travel abroad or have their works made available in other countries, especially in the communist world. Lekra's engagement with culture from around the world, and its potential to support travel for a select few, was part of its attraction (*Tempo* 2013: 65). In terms of Sundanese artists and writers, the most likely to travel abroad were those from the elite described above. Hendra Gunawan was among the first delegation sent by Lekra to the Soviet-sponsored World Youth Festival in Berlin, and also later had an art exhibition in Peking (Lekra 1951: 2; *Harian Rakjat* 1959c). Lekra in West Java subsequently celebrated the participation of artists in Soviet-sponsored World Youth Festivals on a number of occasions (*Harian Rakjat* 1957, 1962c). S. Rukiah visited East Germany as

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<sup>20</sup> Wisetrotomo (2013: 50-66), ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.8 'Angga' (a Lekra activist).

<sup>21</sup> See the sub-section below.

<sup>22</sup> *Harian Rakjat* (1962e) includes a full page spread on the People's Arts University. See also the interview with A.S. Dharta's friend and biographer Budi Setiyono (Buruan 2016).

part of an artistic delegation in 1961 and on her way back stopped off in the Soviet Union and China (*Harian Rakjat* 1961a). Her story ‘A long letter from the mountains’ was also translated into Russian (Rukiah 1961b). Utuy Tatang Sontani’s attendance at the founding conference of the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau in 1957 in Tashkent was seen by some as part of an effort by Lekra to win him over, and some of his works were translated into Russian and Chinese (Rosidi 2001: 9). Buyung Saleh was a visiting professor at Moscow State University from 1962 to 1964 (Hill 2014: 623).

Yet it would be problematic to see these as simply following a Cold War logic. Studies of students’ participation in the World Youth Festival have highlighted how varied delegates’ experiences were (Koivunen 2011). Lekra-affiliated artists brought a range of concerns with their travels. In her account of her experience in East Germany, S. Rukiah expressed optimism about the future of socialism in the country, but the issue of imperialism was clearly on her mind when she met delegates from Indonesia’s former coloniser, the Netherlands (*Harian Rakjat* 1961b). While the meetings of the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau that Utuy Tatang Sontani attended were supported by the Soviet Union, they also represented an engagement with an Afro-Asian solidarity that drew on the tradition of the 1955 Asia-Africa conference at Bandung.<sup>23</sup> Moreover in the late 1950s Utuy was keen to visit the United States, and was described by a US official as having a ‘friendly relationship’ with the embassy.<sup>24</sup>

Within West Java itself, Lekra supported the cultural diplomacy efforts of communist countries, as part of a broader pattern of connections that involved officials as well as sympathetic non-governmental organisations. The most important of these activities within West Java were concentrated in the provincial capital Bandung. The

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<sup>23</sup> On these alternate perspectives on the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau see Yoon (2014: Chps.1–2), and Djagalov (2011).

<sup>24</sup> Rosidi (2001: 9); National Archives and Records Administration [NARA], Record Group 59, 1955–59, Box 3447, Despatch 24 April 59.

city hosted delegations including from the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Soviet Union, East Germany and North Vietnam (*Pikiran Rakjat* 1955c, 1960a, 1960c; *Warta Bandung* 1960b). Lekra welcomed visitors and supported events. For example, when a PRC film delegation visited Bandung in 1963, Hendra Gunawan and Tatang Ganar took them on a tour of Lekra activities in the area (*Warta Bandung* 1963e). In these efforts Lekra and other left-wing organisations complemented the work of officials, who attended performances by foreign delegations and opened events (*Pikiran Rakjat* 1960b; *Warta Bandung* 1963d). The dual nature of the connection is encapsulated in the Indonesia-Soviet Union Cultural Relations Organisation. The Bandung branch set up in 1959 had representatives from Lekra as well as the PKI. However, it also had local politicians and cultural figures linked to the Indonesian National Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia, PNI) and the Proletarian Party (Partai Musyawarah Orang Banyak, Murba) (*Warta Bandung* 1959e, 1959f).

Lekra also grew increasingly strident in criticisms of Western cultural influence. An implied link between cultural imports and immorality, which had been present to some extent in statements by Lekra in West Java in the 1950s, became more intense in the 1960s, with a growing denunciation of 'imperialist culture' (*Harian Rakjat* 1962a; *Pikiran Rakjat* 1955a). For example, West Java Lekra member J.T. Rahma railed against the Twist dance as 'a reflection of a moral corruption that expresses the view of an oppressive ideology, blindly in a delirium, giving vent to a [morally] bankrupt, avaricious lust' (*Warta Bandung* 1963c). The pattern intensified in 1963–64, which saw a growing PKI campaign against Western culture and an effort to boycott American films, with Lekra in West Java following the national Lekra position in announcing its support (*Harian Rakjat* 1964a). Efforts on the ground were supported by PKI-allied youth organisations, that demonstrated and even wrecked cinemas showing American

films.<sup>25</sup> Yet Lekra and the PKI were to a significant extent in step with a broader cultural climate. President Sukarno became increasingly vocal in his attacks on cultural imperialism from the late 1950s, eventually banning the Twist, the Beatles, and most American films (Farram 2007). Within West Java, Islamic parties and organisations associated with the PNI also became increasingly critical of perceived Western cultural infiltration and immorality (*Harian Rakjat* 1964c; *Warta Bandung* 1963a). A People's Youth activist remembered the anti-American film campaign as an area where 'we could unite' with the local Muslim youth group.<sup>26</sup>

### **Culture, ideology, polarisation and its limitations**

Lekra's stances, both nationally and within West Java, were united by a commitment to 'siding with the people', in the words of Lekra's 1955 manifesto-style *Mukadimah*.<sup>27</sup> This could be seen in Hendra Gunawan's paintings of ordinary people at the beach or the market (Wisetroto 2013: 318–320), or in S. Rukiah's children's story about a refugee from the Darul Islam rebellion (Rukiah: 1961a). It could take a more didactic form emphasising social issues or nationalism, for example, a 'peasant's dance ... showing the landlords' exploitation of peasants' (*Harian Rakjat* 1953b) or a dance routine designed to show the need to unite against continuing Dutch imperialism in West Papua (*Harian Rakjat* 1959a). Yet the more propagandistic works should not obscure the subtlety and variety of themes explored by artists who became affiliated with Lekra. For example S. Rukiah and Utuy Tatang Sontani both explored, in different ways, the moral dilemmas that resulted from the Indonesian revolution, and both had

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<sup>25</sup> ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.16 'Suratna'. Also author's interview with respondent 1 (a People's Youth member), Bandung, 13 February 2018. Note that all of the author's interviews were conducted on the basis that interviewee names would not be disclosed.

<sup>26</sup> ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.16 'Suratna'.

<sup>27</sup> This text is reproduced in Foulcher (1986: 218–220). *Mukadimah* can be literally translated as 'preamble' or 'introduction'.

rich, substantial bodies of work before they joined Lekra.<sup>28</sup>

Through the 1950s Lekra maintained at least a rhetorical commitment to open enquiry and diversity of views. At a central level this was evident in the skilful approach Nyoto took to dealing with Lekra's artists and in the diversity of the cultural pages of the PKI newspaper *Harian Rakjat* (the 'People's Daily'), which he edited, and to which Lekra artists frequently contributed.<sup>29</sup> In West Java, a province where the position of the left often felt precarious, a degree of flexibility was even more necessary. In his address at the inauguration of the Bandung branch, Mh. Isa declared that 'Lekra consists of members from various streams and views with the aim: 'to raise up the way of life of the Indonesian people' (*Harian Rakjat* 1952a). In a similar spirit, a report from 1954 described village-level bodies sponsored by Lekra in West Java as representing 'people's artists from various arts, views of life', in a context of broader cultural change where people 'look for freedom to move, freedom of thought and opinion' (*Harian Rakjat* 1954). Two years later, the Lekra leader A.S. Dharta, facing suggestions during a discussion in Bandung that the idea of a 'people's art' might be too overtly political, said that those putting forward views should 'individually decide their own attitude' (*Harian Rakjat* 1956b).

The combination of social commitment and an openness to different perspectives was evident in the cultural pages of the newspaper *Warta Bandung*. Politically, *Warta Bandung* had a left nationalist orientation, and in the 1960s became increasingly close to the PKI in its political coverage.<sup>30</sup> However its cultural pages were notable for their breadth. Although Lekra members worked on the culture section, so did individuals whose allegiances were harder to pin down, such as the writer Riyono

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<sup>28</sup> The major works include (Rukiah 1950), and the stories and poems collected in (Rukiah 1952). See also the analysis in Gallop (1985) and Wirawan (2018). For Utuy Tatang Sontani see Aveling (1979).

<sup>29</sup> On Nyoto see *Tempo* (2009); for the cultural coverage of *Harian Rakjat* see Miller (2015).

<sup>30</sup> ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.4 'Kang Adjat' (a former *Warta Bandung* journalist).

Pratikto (PWI 2008; Rosidi 2010: 393–400). Indeed, Usep Romli, at the time a member of the youth group of the Islamic organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), recalled later that his short stories were more likely to get published by *Warta Bandung* than NU's own newspaper (*NU Online* 2013). An indication of the range of *Warta Bandung*'s cultural pages can be illustrated by the edition for 10 October 1959 (*Warta Bandung* 1959b). It included a number of items with a strong social or political message, such as a poem entitled 'Regional government for the peasants', and a story discussing the visit of an artistic delegation from East Germany to Bandung. However, the edition also included an item about an event to commemorate Chopin and a discussion about the Nobel Prize.

The cultural activities of Lekra were becoming woven into the fabric of public life in West Java. Lekra supported *reog* and drama festivals, and took part in government arts events (*Warta Bandung* 1960a). Likewise, sometimes non-Lekra artists joined in events organised by Lekra, with Lekra activist and journalist Imam Sudjono praising 'the cooperation between artists from various "streams", both those in Lekra, as well as those in other art organisations' (*Harian Rakjat* 1956a). A Lekra artist even won a commission to produce a massive relief in Bandung for the West Java government.<sup>31</sup> Art could sometimes bring unexpected groups together. A left-wing activist recalled how a leader from the local branch of the Islamic organisation NU used to like watching Lekra performances of *wayang golek*, although some were offended by innovative *wayang* performances.<sup>32</sup> Another activist remembered getting to know soldiers who used the musical instruments at the local PKI office.<sup>33</sup>

Lekra was keen to engage with Sundanese culture but also saw it as in need of reform. As mentioned above, a number of Lekra members attended major meetings

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<sup>31</sup> ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.8 'Angga'.

<sup>32</sup> ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.22 'Kamaludin'. On the potential for tension over *wayang* performances see also Cohen (1997: 174–177).

<sup>33</sup> ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.18, 'Djayadi' (a PKI member).

focused on the state of Sundanese culture. This was part of a broader engagement that included efforts to protect the teaching of Sundanese in schools (*Harian Rakjat* 1958c; *Harian Rakjat* 1964e), calls to honour past contributions to Sundanese art and cultural life (*Harian Rakjat* 1955), and support for devolved responsibility over regional culture (*Harian Rakjat* 1956c). However, the commitment of Lekra activists to Sundanese culture tended to be qualified. Although some writers did compose pieces in Sundanese, the bulk of writing by the best-known writers was in Indonesian.<sup>34</sup> Besides the wider national reach of the Indonesian language, there were concerns that an over-emphasis on Sundanese language and culture could be ethnically exclusive and socially conservative. Hendra Gunawan warned against a ‘narrow feeling of provincialism’ (*Harian Rakjat* 1955). Buyung Saleh expressed concern that Sundanese literature was ‘conservative’ (*Pikiran Rakjat* 1955b), and argued that Sundanese language contained ‘feudal’ elements and needed to be ‘democratised’ (*Harian Rakjat* 1956c; *Pikiran Rakjat* 1955b). In this context there was a concern to draw on Sundanese culture selectively and, where necessary, reform it. Utuy Tatang Sontani argued for drawing on demotic ‘lower culture’ traditions in Sundanese literature rather than its conservative ‘upper culture’ (*Harian Rakjat* 1964g).<sup>35</sup>

The concern to reform Sundanese culture has parallels in Lekra’s approach to Javanese culture (Yuliantri and Dahlan 2008b: 159–165). However, there were also different emphases, particularly on the issue of *wayang*. Buyung Saleh and Hendra Gunawan were two prominent supporters of reforming *wayang* performances, with ideas ranging from new plays, new performance techniques and the possibility of performing in Indonesian (*Harian Rakjat* 1965a; *Warta Bandung* 1959d). However,

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<sup>34</sup> A number of Sundanese poems by A.S. Dharta are included in Rosidi and Sutiasumarga (1963). Utuy Tatang Sontani published a number of his works in both Indonesian and Sundanese.

<sup>35</sup> For a broader discussion of his comments see Yuliantri and Dahlan (2008b: 165–173).

some Javanese PKI leaders were more cautious about reforming the *wayang*, as was evident in Sakirman's response to one of Hendra Gunawan's articles on the issue (*Harian Rakjat* 1965b). This differing emphasis reflected the close identification of Javanese cultural identity with parts of the national PKI leadership as well as the special place of *wayang kulit* in Javanese culture (McVey 1986: 29).<sup>36</sup>

Reformed Sundanese folk arts offered opportunities to reach the masses. A Lekra report noted that '*reog, wayang and pencak ... these are the art activities which are most widespread in West Java (Harian Rakjat 1962b).*'<sup>37</sup> Folk arts were particularly important in rural areas where literacy rates were lower, Indonesian language less frequently spoken, and alternative forms of entertainment more limited. In rural areas Lekra activists worked to get good coverage across a range of folk arts.<sup>38</sup> These arts could also be used to convey a social message. A Lekra seminar in West Java in 1960 argued that *wayang* stories could be used to tackle issues including inflation, 'feudalism, landlord exploitation, corruption' (*Warta Bandung* 1959c). Hendra Gunawan co-wrote a new *wayang* story, *Astrajingga Juta*, in which an army of lowly characters who feel unfairly treated take on the kings and even the gods (Wisetrotomo 2013: 346). There is evidence that socially reformist *wayang* was beginning to spread, although progress was patchy.<sup>39</sup> Oral history testimonies back up the findings of a PKI report from early 1964 that found various forms of folk art, including *Astrajingga Juta*, 'playing a very positive role' in generating a 'revolutionary culture' in the villages of West Java.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Wayang kulit*, shadow puppet theatre, is more popular in Central and Eastern Java, whereas *wayang golek*, using wooden puppets, is more popular in West Java.

<sup>37</sup> *Pencak* is a form of martial art.

<sup>38</sup> ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.24 'Dalang'.

<sup>39</sup> ANRI KOTI 802, 'Kesimpulan hasil riset sastra dan seni'.

<sup>40</sup> Aidit (1964: 83); ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.18 'Djayadi'; ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.22 'Kamaludin'.

From the later 1950s, there were growing attempts to strengthen discipline and to imbue Lekra with a political ethos down to its roots. In the 1950s reports in *Harian Rakjat* had occasionally raised concerns that some activities organised by Lekra in West Java were just ‘entertainment for entertainment’s sake’ (*Harian Rakjat* 1956b). By the end of the 1950s Lekra was placing a more insistent emphasis on politics, with Nyoto advocating the slogan ‘politics is the commander’ (*Harian Rakjat* 1959b). Statements coming from the West Java Lekra branch came to echo this sentiment, with Hendra Gunawan arguing that ‘art cannot not be political’ (*Harian Rakjat* 1962a). There was also a renewed focus on planning and organisational consolidation. Lekra statements made increasingly frequent references to multi-year plans and targets, as was tending to happen within the PKI itself (*Harian Rakjat* 1962b, 1964e).<sup>41</sup> Greater attention to planning was coupled with waves of the ‘go down’ movement which combined information gathering with organisation building.<sup>42</sup> Whilst the ‘go down’ approaches built on organically existing approaches within Lekra, it was increasingly shaped by PKI priorities and drew on Maoist ideas.<sup>43</sup> A wave of ‘go down’ activities in 1964 was marked by an increased level of PKI involvement.<sup>44</sup> Although the results of the PKI push for conformity were uneven,<sup>45</sup> overall there was a growing focus on ‘agitation’.<sup>46</sup>

Intensifying politicisation was matched by increasing hostility between a radical left and the right in the cultural sphere. In this context Lekra’s public statements came

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<sup>41</sup> For a PKI plan that had implications for Lekra as well as other organisations, see ANRI KOTI 332 ‘Plan 4 tahun tentang kebudayaan, ideology dan organisasi untuk daerah Djawa Barat’ [undated but from 1962 or later].

<sup>42</sup> *Harian Rakjat* 1962b; ANRI KOTI 802, ‘Kesimpulan hasil riset sastra dan seni’.

<sup>43</sup> For longstanding practices of art amongst the people, see for example Wisetrotomo (2013: 69). On the combination of traditions see also Foulcher (1986: 203–205).

<sup>44</sup> ANRI KOTI 802, ‘Kesimpulan hasil riset sastra dan seni’. The programme echoed that called for by the West Javanese PKI politician Amir in *Harian Rakjat* (1964d). For somewhat parallel developments in Central Java see Kusni (2005).

<sup>45</sup> ANRI KOTI 466, ‘Dengan sastra dan seni revolusioner kita dжебol kebudayaan imperialis dan feodal (laporan tambahan tentang kebudayaan)’, Bandung, 24 December 1964.

<sup>46</sup> ANRI KOTI 301, ‘Laporan fase I’ [undated].

more closely to echo that of the PKI, with slogans such as ‘Nasakom’ (an abbreviation of the Indonesian for ‘Nationalism, Religion and Communism’) being used to push for greater communist representation on official bodies and to marginalise opponents (*Harian Rakjat* 1964h, 1964i). Politics penetrated ever more deeply into cultural life. The writer Ajip Rosidi, who was living in Bandung in the 1960s, recalled artists increasingly joining cultural associations linked to political parties, amid an increasingly tense atmosphere (Rosidi 2008a: 304). Yet Lekra was not acting alone; it also drew on the increasingly radical anti-imperialist language of Sukarno, and the left wing of the PNI and its allied organisations (Farram 2007; *Harian Rakjat* 1964c). A sign of the growing polarisation on a national level was the bitter dispute that erupted over the Cultural Manifesto (*Manifes Kebudayaan*) issued by a number of non-Lekra artists and writers. The signatories came under attack in the press, the manifesto was banned by Sukarno and those who were state employees lost their jobs (Mohamad 2011: 2). One of the signatories, Taufiq Ismail, was at the time teaching at the Bogor Agricultural Institute. He faced a campaign led by student organisations linked to the PKI and PNI to have him dismissed from his post (*Harian Rakjat* 1964f). Meanwhile, Lekra’s opponents could sometimes draw on the army or police for support, especially in rural areas.<sup>47</sup> A *Wayang* Foundation was formed in 1961 with the backing of the authorities with the aim to counter leftist performers, and especially female singers at *wayang golek* performances, who were seen as potentially politically sympathetic to the PKI (Weintraub 2004: 74).

Yet on an individual level, affiliations could still be hard to pin down, given that in addition to formal members Lekra also had informal associates and sympathisers.

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<sup>47</sup> ANRI KOTI 802 ‘Kesimpulan hasil riset sastra dan seni’; *Harian Rakjat* (1964j).

One such case was the short-story writer and dramatist Riyono Pratikto.<sup>48</sup> His works appeared in publications that spanned the political spectrum, and he co-edited *Warta Bandung*'s eclectic cultural pages.<sup>49</sup> He translated a novel from Russian and in 1957 attended the World Youth Festival in Moscow. Yet although he participated in some events involving Lekra (*Harian Rakjat* 1956b), he does not seem to have formally joined. Another example was poet Dodong Djiwapradja, who published in a broad range of newspapers and journals, including *Harian Rakjat*.<sup>50</sup> He also attended meetings of the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau and visited Moscow and Beijing (Santoso 2002: 14; Yuliantri and Dahlan 2008a: 303). He became increasingly close to Lekra in the 1960s (Rosidi 2010: 428–429), and stridently criticised the Cultural Manifesto (*Harian Rakjat* 1964b). However, Ajip Rosidi doubted that he formally joined Lekra, which would have been difficult to combine with his employment in the the air force (Rosidi 2008b: 370–371). Yet another case was the well known *dalang* Abyor. He incorporated elements of the PKI's 'village devils' (*setan desa*) campaign into his performances (Cohen: 173–174), was offered a 'professorship' by Lekra, and at one point was on a Lekra committee (*Harian Rakjat* 1964e; *Warta Bandung* 1964). Yet Ajip Rosidi (1999: 451–453), argued Abyor had been a member of the PNI, and saw his involvement with Lekra as a means to set up a local school for artists and puppeteers.

Moreover, despite a pattern of growing polarisation, the experience of West Java poses challenges to accounts that posit a cultural scene characterised by a binary opposition, between Lekra and opponents gathered under the Cultural Manifesto (Latief 2018; Moeljanto and Ismail 1995: 149). Many of the most prominent non-Lekra artists in West Java did not sign the manifesto, with Ajip Rosidi arguing that it was tactically

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<sup>48</sup> The following account of Riyono Pratikto draws on, in addition to other sources cited, Rosidi (2010: 393–400); Santosa (2005).

<sup>49</sup> Some of his stories were collected in Pratikto (1951, 1958).

<sup>50</sup> A number of his poems are collected in Djiwapradja (1997).

misguided and devoid of content (Rosidi 1995a: 150–151).<sup>51</sup> The difficulty of imposing a neat division between pro- and anti-Manifesto groups was again highlighted in the development of the Indonesian Literary Workers' Conference. The conference, backed by the military, gathered artists looking to respond to the increasing pressure from Lekra (Mohamad 2011: 24–25). Yet the grouping around Ajip Rosidi, many of whom identified closely with Sundanese culture and often wrote in Sundanese, were initially discouraged from attending by the approach of the organisers, who had proposed those writing in regional languages were to only have observer status (Rosidi 1995a: 157). Although the West Java delegation ultimately attended to show solidarity against goading from the left, bad feeling about their treatment and the military's involvement remained (Rosidi 1995b: 172–189). The difficulty of placing the West Java group was summed up by the writer Iwan Simatupang, who complained that this 'Bandung School' sometimes seemed 'rightist', but at other times were 'more left than the left', concluding that they wanted to maintain a 'free and active' politics (Rosidi 1995b: 154).<sup>52</sup>

### **The aftermath of 1965**

The events of 1965 saw the forcible imposition of a left-right binary in stark terms. An abortive coup attempt by the Thirtieth September Movement, in which the PKI Chairman D.N. Aidit seems to have played a role, was crushed by a military counter-coup.<sup>53</sup> This counter action, led by General Suharto, was accompanied by violent anti-communist purges, in which somewhere in the region of 500,000 alleged communists

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<sup>51</sup> A list of signatories from Bandung is provided in Moeljanto and Ismail (1995: 439).

<sup>52</sup> 'Free and active' was the famous tagline of Indonesian foreign policy in the 1950s (avoiding both the American and Soviet blocs).

<sup>53</sup> On the Thirtieth September Movement, see Roosa (2006).

were killed (Robinson 2018: 121). Even in West Java, which saw much lower levels of killing than in Central and Eastern Java, likely upwards of 3,000 were killed and somewhere in the region of 10,000 detained without trial.<sup>54</sup> Among those targeted were members of organisations allied to the PKI, such as Lekra. The repression was predicated on a Manichean logic that pitted the PKI, and any individual or organisation associated with it, against the rest of society. As a witness to the violence in East Java wrote: ‘The questions “PKI or Non-PKI,” and “Marxist or Non-Marxist”... do not raise the issue of a person’s views or thought, merely that of his or her “color”’ (Rochijat and Anderson 1985: 37).

Many of the artists and writers mentioned in this article were swept up. Utuy Tatang Sontani, who had been out of the country on 30 September 1965, was unable to return to Indonesia (Rosidi 2001: 13). Buyung Saleh, S. Rukiah, Hendra Gunawan, A.S. Dharta and Tatang Ganar were all imprisoned without trial.<sup>55</sup> Experiences of prison were generally harsh and many were not released until the late 1970s. Buyung Saleh, for example, who had been sent to the notorious Buru prison island, continued to suffer illness brought on by poor conditions whilst imprisoned.<sup>56</sup> Hendra Gunawan’s situation was unusual in that it was cushioned somewhat by the market demand for his artwork and the patronage of Foreign Minister Adam Malik. He had paintings commissioned by guards and even exhibited works within the Kebon Waru prison camp.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Crouch (1978: 142) mentions an internal military report estimating 3,000 killed; Sundhaussen (1982: 225) cites military sources saying at least 10,000 were killed. The estimate of those detained comes from NARA, Record Group 59, 1964–66, POL 23-9, Box 2318, Telegram 26 November 1965.

<sup>55</sup> IISH, Suparna Sastradiredja Papers, Folder 130, ‘Buyung Saleh: trade unionist and writer’; author’s oral history interview with respondent 2 (a Sundanese writer and journalist), Central Java, 7 May 2018; Wisetrotomo (2013); Setiyono 2010: x; ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.20 ‘Haryatna’ (a former political prisoner who met Hendra Gunawan and Tatang Ganar whilst in detention).

<sup>56</sup> IISH, Suparna Sastradiredja Papers, Folder 130, ‘Buyung Saleh: trade unionist and writer’.

<sup>57</sup> ISSI OHP 65, interview 2.20 ‘Haryatna’; Wisetrotomo (2013: 110) includes a remarkable picture of such an exhibition.

There was an atmosphere of uncertainty, repression and intimidation. In the Cirebon area at least several Lekra members were killed.<sup>58</sup> Across West Java many Lekra activists were imprisoned, and even after their release, could face bans on performing.<sup>59</sup> Some other performers decided to stop performing for fear of falling foul of the authorities (Wulff 2006: 10), who tightened up control of an artist registration scheme (Ross 2011: 164–165). Even years later the issue could resurface, for example, when in 1988 Riyono Pratikto was fired by Padjadjaran University, and left without a pension, apparently due to complaint from a colleague alleging an association with Lekra and the PKI (Rosidi 2010: 397–398; Santosa 2005: 10–11).

Efforts to bridge the divide became harder. After their release, Ajip Rosidi maintained good relations with a number of those who had been associated with Lekra, including S. Rukiah and Buyung Saleh, and visited Utuy Tatang Sontani in exile.<sup>60</sup> Yet the defensiveness with which Ajip Rosidi has had to proclaim his anti-PKI credentials demonstrates the ongoing barriers to reconciliation (Rosidi 2008a: 385; 2015).

## **Conclusion**

In some ways Lekra's experience in West Java paralleled national patterns. From a small-scale start, it worked consistently to become a significant force in cultural life, developing mutually supportive relationships with a family of organisations linked to the PKI. At the same time, it was able to attract a cultural elite, whose trajectories spanned beyond the province with national and international connections. Lekra supported cultural diplomacy with a leftist slant, and became increasing strident in its

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<sup>58</sup> 'Daftar korban pembunuhan tahun 1965/1966, Kabupaten Cirebon' [undated]. An NGO activist from Cirebon confirmed the veracity of this (incomplete) data sheet.

<sup>59</sup> ISSI OHP 65, 2.8 'Angga'; ISSI OHP 65, 2.24 'Dalang'.

<sup>60</sup> Oral history interview with respondent 3, Purwakarta, 12 April 2018; Rosidi (2010: 116, 359–360).

condemnation of ‘imperialist’ culture. It balanced a commitment to ‘siding with the people’ with a diversity of approaches and interests, though in the 1960s there was an increasingly overt political dimension to its activities. Cultural life became more polarised, although it was still sometimes hard to disentangle individuals’ affiliations. The repression of Lekra artists following the events of 1965 imposed, in often cruel and arbitrary ways, a binary way of thinking about cultural life that had not previously fully materialised.

However, the regional context also refracted broader patterns in particular ways. Although Lekra was keen to reshape regional culture throughout Indonesia, prominent Sundanese Lekra figures supported a thorough-going approach to reforming *wayang*, differing in their emphasis to some Javanese PKI leaders. Moreover, although cultural life in West Java polarised in the early 1960s, as was happening at a national level, the Sundanese cultural landscape cut across a left-right divide. The group around Ajip Rosidi, who strongly identified with Sundanese culture, is particularly hard to fit into an analysis predicated on a such a binary division. Overall, West Java’s cultural life was only partly ‘synchronised’ with national patterns.<sup>61</sup>

This account of developments in West Java highlights dimensions of Lekra’s experiences that are less apparent when one zooms out to a national level. Details of Lekra’s extensive cultural activities at the grassroots show how Lekra wove itself into everyday life in the provinces, from urban centres to villages and plantations. Activists’ recollections highlight how Lekra gave ordinary people opportunities for self-development, cultural pride, and ways to make sense of the world. This was an important part of the attractive power of Lekra and the left more broadly.

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<sup>61</sup> See van Bemmelen and Raben (2011: 15–16) for the metaphor of partly synchronised regional and national ‘times’.

Moreover, the arguments made above indicate a number of prerequisites for attempts to apply a Cold War framework to studies of the arts in the decolonising world. One is a sensitivity to a range of competing currents including anti-imperial nationalism.<sup>62</sup> Another is the need to recognise the reciprocal and indirect relationships between art and political life that make imposing binaries difficult.<sup>63</sup> To these considerations can be added the necessity of moving beyond the views of elites based in capital cities, to incorporate views from the provinces and the grassroots.

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<sup>62</sup> For this issue in general for the study of the Cold War, see Westad (2011).

<sup>63</sup> For this point generally, see the introduction to Curley (2019).

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## **Disclosure Statement**

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