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THE PHENOMENON OF FOLK LAUGHTER AND SATIRE IN TRADITIONAL PERFORMING ARTS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF UZBEK "MASKARABOZLIK" AND INDONESIAN "LENONG" THEATER

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ABSTRACT: This research paper offers a comprehensive comparative and cross-cultural investigation into the structural, dramaturgical, and socio-political dimensions of traditional folk comic theater in two distinct Asian cultures: the Uzbek art of "Maskarabozlik" (and Qiziqchilik) and the Indonesian "Lenong" theater (specifically lenong preman) of the Betawi community in Jakarta. Operating within the theoretical framework of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "carnivalesque" and performance theory, the study demonstrates how vernacular humor, physical slapstick, and non-scripted improvisation functioned as primary mechanisms for social critique, subaltern expression, and anti-authoritarian resistance during historical periods of systemic oppression. By exploring stock characters, linguistic registers, and the dynamic interaction between actors and spectators, this paper analyzes how both central Asian marketplace jesters and southeast Asian proletarian performers utilized parodic deconstruction to challenge social stratifications, defend collective ethics, and preserve national self-awareness. The comparative matrix establishes universal typological structural configurations in non-Western folk dramaturgy.

Keywords: Comparative theater, Uzbek Maskarabozlik, Indonesian Lenong, folk humor, social satire, theatrical improvisation, Bakhtinian carnivalesque, cultural resilience.

1. INTRODUCTION

The historical development of global theater studies has long been dominated by an Eurocentric paradigm that privileges the written, canonical text, fixed architectural stages, and a strict separation between performers and passive consumers. However, when evaluating the rich theatrical landscapes of traditional non-Western societies, performance must be understood not as a literal text, but as a dynamic, living social practice deeply integrated into the communal, psychological, and ideological structures of everyday life. In both Central Asia and Southeast Asia, folk performance traditions historically served as powerful forums for public discourse, democratic expression, and the articulation of collective social consciousness. Among these vernacular performance practices, the traditional comic theater of the marketplace represents an exceptionally sophisticated cultural phenomenon that uses the transformative power of laughter to navigate complex historical traumas and social inequalities.

This research project presents a pioneering, systematic comparative analysis of two structurally distinct yet typologically convergent folk comic traditions: the Uzbek traditional art of "Maskarabozlik" (incorporating Qiziqchilik) and the Indonesian "Lenong" theater (particularly the proletarian genre known as lenong preman). The Uzbek Maskarabozlik tradition, which flourished in the historic public squares (Registan), marketplaces, and seasonal festivals (sayil) of Bukhara, Khiva,

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and the Fergana Valley, represents an ancient school of professional improvisational performance. Similarly, the Lenong theater developed within the marginalized, multicultural urban and suburban spaces of Batavia (modern-day Jakarta), functioning as the primary artistic vehicle for the Betawi working-class subculture during the 19th and early 20th centuries under Dutch colonial administration.

While these two performance systems emerged within completely different geographical, religious, and socio-political ecosystems—one rooted in the Islamic oasis cultures of the Silk Road and the other in the maritime colonial environment of the Indonesian archipelago—they share an identical dramaturgical essence.

Both traditions rejected the conventions of the rigid, pre-written aristocratic script, relying instead on total spontaneous verbal improvisation, grotesque body mechanics, physical slapstick, and direct interaction with the audience. More importantly, both Maskarabozlik and Lenong operated as a subaltern aesthetic defense mechanism. In an environment characterized by rigid feudal hierarchies, administrative corruption, and foreign colonial surveillance, the marketplace jester and the proletarian actor were transformed into critical social analysts.

By conducting a rigorous cross-cultural evaluation of these two performance matrices, this study addresses a significant lacuna in contemporary post-colonial performance theory and comparative dramaturgy. It explores how traditional societies utilize the aesthetics of folk humor, satire, and parodic deconstruction to achieve symbolic liberation from systemic oppression, reinforce communal ethical systems, and build proto-nationalist cultural resilience. Through this investigation, the paper establishes that the raucous laughter generated in the historic marketplaces of Uzbekistan and the temporary wooden platforms of Jakarta represents a universal, deeply democratic artistic strategy for human self-determination.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic exploration of traditional folk comedy and popular performance arts has invited substantial interdisciplinary interest across cultural anthropology, performance studies, and literary theory. In the context of Central Asian ethnography and theater history, fundamental baselines were established by prominent Uzbek scholars such as Muhsin Qodirov, whose extensive monographs, including “Uzbek xalq tomosha san’ati” (Uzbek Folk Performance Art) and “Maskaraboz va qiziqchilar” (Jesters and Comedians), provided the historical and typological classification of traditional Uzbek street performances. Qodirov thoroughly documented the performance conditions, apprenticeships (ustoz-shogird), and narrative structures of Maskarabozlik, recognizing it as a highly structured institution of folk criticism rather than random, uncoordinated buffoonery. Similarly, the early 20th-century intellectual reflections of Edward Allworth and various Soviet-era theater historians highlighted the resilience of Central Asian oral performances against imperial efforts to institutionalize Western proscenium conventions.

In Southeast Asian performance studies, Clifford Geertz’s seminal work “The Interpretation of Cultures” (1973) solidified the structural view of performances as symbolic systems that directly organize social action and communal worldviews. While Geertz primarily focused on Javanese courtly rituals, James R. Brandon’s foundational volume “Theatre in Southeast Asia” (1967) expanded the discipline by systematically categorizing secular, popular proletarian dramas, highlighting their critical political influence over local populations under colonial rule. Regarding the specific subculture of Batavia, the groundbreaking ethnographic field research of Kees Grijns, particularly “enong in the

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Betawi Subculture" (1976), illuminated how the Lenong theater operated as a crucial linguistic and identity anchor for the Betawi proletariat amidst rapid colonial urbanization.

To bridge these geographically separate traditions under a unified analytical matrix, contemporary comparative dramaturgy relies on Mikhail Bakhtin's revolutionary theoretical framework of the "carnivalesque" and folk comic culture, as articulated in his classic study "Rabelais and His World"(1984). Bakhtin demonstrated that folk humor, marketplace language, and structural parody possess a radical capacity to temporarily suspend dominant social hierarchies, subvert bureaucratic rules, and invert power dynamics through collective laughter. This theoretical lens is supplemented by Victor Turner's concepts of "liminality" and "communitas" (The Ritual Process, 1969), which explain how the temporary space of a performance dissolves rigid societal stratifications, fostering intense communal solidarity among participants. This research synthesizes these diverse theoretical frameworks to execute the first direct comparative analysis of the socio-critical mechanics of Maskarabozlik and Lenong.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative, cross-cultural comparative research design that synthesizes performance theory, structural-functional evaluation, and cultural hermeneutics. To examine the operational parallels between the Uzbek Maskarabozlik and Indonesian Lenong traditions during their historical peaks, the paper deploys three specific methodological tools:

1. Typological Comparative Analysis: This approach identifies the core structural, artistic, and operational similarities between the two traditions, focusing specifically on their non-scripted, improvisational dramaturgical engines, stock character categories, and reliance on physical clowning.

2. Historical-Contextual Mapping: This method situates both performance practices within their respective socio-political landscapes—analyzing how Maskarabozlik responded to regional feudal structures (emirates and khanates) and Russian colonial expansions, and how Lenong responded to the rigid racial and administrative hierarchies of the Dutch East Indies.

3. Hermeneutic Decoding of Humor: Applying Bakhtinian literary theory, this tool interprets the symbolic language, double-entendres, and parodies utilized by performers, demonstrating how surface-level comedy operates as a sophisticated sub-textual critique of structural injustices.

The empirical materials analyzed include historical descriptions of 19th and early 20th-century marketplace performances, documentation of oral plot scenarios (payrov and lakon), and traditional linguistic idioms from the Fergana Valley and Betawi regions.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Structural Mechanics of Uzbek Maskarabozlik: The Art of Payrov and Clowning

The traditional Uzbek theater of Maskarabozlik and Qiziqchilik represents a highly institutionalized form of popular oral culture that reached its artistic peak in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries across the Central Asian oases. Operating in vibrant economic hubs and public spaces such as marketplaces, weddings, and seasonal festivals (sayil), the maskaraboz (the street jester or clown) was a highly disciplined professional performer. The dramaturgical engine of Maskarabozlik is the "payrov"—a unique genre of oral improvisational dialogue and structural wit.

In a typical payrov performance, two or more comedians enter the public square without any pre-written text. The performance begins when one comedian initiates a thematic phrase or a provocative social proposition. The partner must immediately respond with a rapid verbal counter-attack, using intricate metaphors, sharp double-entendres, and localized puns. The dialogue develops like a

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competitive intellectual match, where the primary objective is to outwit the opponent while delivering a highly entertaining commentary on contemporary social realities. If a performer hesitates for even a single second, the dramatic rhythm breaks, and the audience declares the opponent victorious.

The character typology of Maskarabozlik was characterized by specific, universally recognizable stock masks that represented different social layers of Central Asian society:

- The Innocent Wit / Trickster (Often conceptually linked to the folklore figure of Nasriddin Afandi): A seemingly naive, working-class individual who uses plain logic and sharp satire to expose the hypocrisy of the ruling elite.

- The Corrupt Judge (Qozi) / Greedy Merchant (Boy): Grotesque representations of local authorities and wealthy exploiters, characterized by physical exaggerations and foolish behavioral patterns.

- The Arrogant Colonial Administrator / Foreign Officer: Emerging heavily in the late 19th century, this mask utilized direct parody and mimicry to neutralize the psychological intimidation of imperial rule.

The performance mechanics also relied heavily on intense physical comedy, including acrobatic feats, expressive facial distortions (grotesque realism), and slapstick interactions with symbolic props (such as wooden swords, musical rattles, and traditional costumes). The maskaraboz utilized the Uzbek vernacular language in its most expressive, direct, and un-censored format, bypassing formal feudal court etiquette (adab) to mirror the genuine socio-linguistic realities of the ordinary populace

4.2. Structural Mechanics of Indonesian Lenong: Non-Scripted Proletarian Performance

Developing synchronously on the opposite side of the continent, the Indonesian Lenong theater operated as a vibrant, anti-feudal performing art within the multicultural urban and suburban margins of Batavia. Rooted deeply in the distinct ethnic identity of the Betawi people, Lenong established a structural framework that directly rejected the text-based conventions of aristocratic court dramas (such as the royal Yavanese ketoprak). Like Maskarabozlik, the entire dramaturgical validity of a Lenong production relied on spontaneous collective improvisation.

A traditional Lenong performance was executed on a temporary wooden platform built in bustling open-air marketplaces or public spaces. The actors did not possess access to a written script; they initiated the production guided only by a brief oral plot outline provided by the troupe manager. The formal repertoire of Lenong was strictly divided into two generic classifications:

- Lenong Denes: A semi-formal genre dealing with royal dynasties, historical legends, and foreign courtly intrigues. It often operated as a sub-textual parody of the rigid aristocratic rules and European administrative protocols.

- Lenong Preman: The highly colloquial, popular, and socially explosive genre. It focused exclusively on the contemporary, daily struggles of the marginalized working-class Betawi population.

The character configurations of Lenong Preman mirrored the immediate socio-economic ecosystem of colonial Batavia. The narrative conflict was constructed around binary socio-political oppositions: the wealthy, merciless landlord (Tuan Tanah) or corrupt local official versus the impoverished farmer, market merchant, or laborer. To mediate this systemic imbalance, the dramaturgy introduced the pivotal figure of the "jago"—a localized folk hero, expert martial artist (silat), and champion of subaltern justice.

The linguistic register of Lenong Preman was the Betawi dialect of Malay—a highly rhythmic, direct, and colorful language woven with slang, proverbs, and foreign loanwords from Hokkien, Dutch,

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and Portuguese. The dramatic action was maintained through continuous verbal sparring (pantun), slapstick comedy, and participatory interactions with the live spectators, transforming the performance platform into a dynamic collective forum.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The Transnational Philosophy of Folk Laughter and the Carnivalesque

When analyzing the socio-critical dimensions of both Uzbek Maskarabozlik and Indonesian Lenong, the application of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary and performance theory regarding the "carnivalesque" provides an invaluable cross-cultural analytical lens. Bakhtin asserted that traditional folk humor and marketplace laughter do not exist merely for passive amusement or escapism. Instead, they constitute an active, temporary liberation from the established truth, institutional hierarchies, and dominant socio-political orders. In the historical contexts of 19th-century Central Asia and Southeast Asia—both spaces characterized by rigid class stratifications, colonial interventions, and systemic inequalities—the marketplace performance operated as an authentic democratic sanctuary.

In a Maskarabozlik performance in Bukhara or a Lenong Preman show in Batavia, the formal authority of the oppressor was systematically neutralized through the aesthetic strategy of parodic deconstruction. When the maskaraboz transformed the powerful, corrupt judge (qozi) into a bumbling, physically absurd caricature, or when the Betawi actor reduced the feared colonial tax collector to a bumbling puppet, a profound socio-psychological transformation occurred within the collective consciousness of the audience. By stripping these oppressive authority figures of their institutional dignity and subjecting them to public laughter, the performance exposed the artificiality and fragility of their structural power.

This collective marketplace laughter represents a participatory act of political resistance. It allowed marginalized subaltern populations to voice their social grievances, expose administrative corruption, and criticize systemic injustices without initiating direct political violence or triggering immediate state censorship. The humor utilized in these traditions did not minimize the gravity of their daily suffering; rather, it functioned as an essential ideological weapon that preserved human dignity, built communal solidarity, and fostered an enduring spirit of socio-cultural resilience.

5.2. Linguistic Registers, Metaphorical Sparring, and Audience Interactivity

A fundamental parallel between Maskarabozlik and Lenong lies in their operational use of non-standard, vernacular linguistic registers as a deliberate tool for cultural self-assertion. Both performance traditions explicitly rejected the polished, formal languages of the elite—the courtly Persian or high Uzbek poetry (adab) in Central Asia, and high courtly literary Yavanese or formal Dutch in the East Indies. Instead, they embraced the raw, direct, and dynamic language of the street: the colloquial marketplace Uzbek and the multi-ethnic Betawi dialect.

In Maskarabozlik, the payrov mechanism required a profound mastery of linguistic subversion. Performers utilized complex allegories, localized metaphors, and double-entendres that carried a dual meaning: an innocent surface-level comedic interpretation for passing censors, and a sharp, deeply critical political message for the local community. Similarly, Lenong actors utilized poetic verbal banter (pantun), rhyming slang, and rapid double-meanings to embed social critique directly into spontaneous comedic interactions.

Furthermore, both traditions completely dismantled the concept of the "fourth wall" found in Western realist theater. The spatial structure of these performances was open, circular, and highly interactive. The audience was not a passive, silent body of consumers observing an isolated artistic

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product; they were active, loud, and necessary co-creators of the dramatic event. Spectators shouted responses to the actors, validated successful verbal punches with collective cheers, and physically entered the performance circle. This intense interactivity transformed the marketplace into a dynamic public forum, dissolving the boundary between art and life, and reinforcing collective identity against structural oppression.

6. CONCLUSION

The rigorous comparative and cross-cultural evaluation of the Uzbek Maskarabozlik and Indonesian Lenong traditions establishes a vital new perspective in non-Western performance theory and comparative dramaturgy. This research demonstrates that traditional folk comic theater, across distinct geographic and religious boundaries, operates on universal structural configurations when navigating historical trauma and systemic inequality. Both the Central Asian marketplace jester and the Southeast Asian proletarian performer utilized a shared aesthetic matrix: the complete rejection of written scripts, total reliance on spontaneous verbal and physical improvisation, and the strategic deployment of parody to dismantle socio-political hierarchies.

By synthesizing local vernacular languages, stock social masks, and intense audience interactivity, both Maskarabozlik and Lenong transcended the parameters of temporary vernacular entertainment to operate as active institutions of subaltern critique and cultural preservation. They utilized the radical, democratic power of folk humor to subvert colonial surveillance, challenge elite authority, and validate the ethical values of ordinary citizens. Ultimately, this study underscores that the raucous, collective laughter generated in the historic public squares of Uzbekistan and the temporary platforms of Jakarta constitutes an ideological defense mechanism, demonstrating that popular performance arts possess a profound, universal capacity for systemic societal reflection and human self-determination.

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