

Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints

Volume 68
Number 1 *Transregional Southeast Asia*

Article 9

3-16-2020

Peter Keppy's Tales of Southeast Asia's Jazz Age: Filipinos, Indonesians and Popular Culture, 1920–1936

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Recommended Citation

Navarro, Review Author: (2020) "Peter Keppy's Tales of Southeast Asia's Jazz Age: Filipinos, Indonesians and Popular Culture, 1920–1936," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*: Vol. 68: No. 1, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13185/2244-1638.1038>

Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/phstudies/vol68/iss1/9>

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Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints

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Peter Keppy's

Tales of Southeast Asia's Jazz Age: Filipinos, Indonesians and Popular Culture, 1920–1936

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Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints

vol. 68 no. 1 (2020): 123–26

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to the loss of comrades, as seen in “Sampaguita” (1973), “Ipil,” and “Rosal” (1975). Barros, through these poems, deemed such sacrifices necessary to strengthen the ongoing struggle.

Toward the end of the book, Hernando claims that language, similar to how Barros had used it in her poems, has an immense capacity to be a political instrument (185). Publishing her work in a time of upheaval in the present-day Philippines, Hernando’s methodology of using language to intertwine Barros’s life story with her writings remains vital in the ongoing struggle, which Barros and her contemporaries started. Hernando’s book can serve as fuel to today’s social movements that work toward democracy and liberation, perhaps similar to what Lorena achieved through her political and literary works.

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PETER KEPPY

Tales of Southeast Asia’s Jazz Age: Filipinos, Indonesians and Popular Culture, 1920–1936

Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. 269 pages.

Peter Keppy has written extensively on Indonesia since the 1990s. His *Politics of Redress: War Damage and Restitution in Indonesia and the Philippines, 1940–1957* (KITLV Press, 2010) was his first major work, in which he tackled postwar issues in both countries. The present work is the author’s second, in which he fuses together the intersections of politico-historical events and popular music in the two Southeast Asian nations.

Viewed against the political backdrop of colonization characterized by two contrasting modes of subjugation—Indonesia under the repressive Dutch government and the Philippines under the “benevolent assimilation” of the American insular government—both countries were gifted with artists who touched their respective nation’s popular imagination. Keppy chose Luis Borromeo, aka Borromeo Lou, who was among the first proponents of jazz music in the Philippines, to initiate his discussion on popular culture in the Philippines, and he picked the multitalented Ms. Riboet, actress, dancer, singer, and recording artist, as an appropriate representative of both low- and high-brow Indonesian culture.

The author uses three key concepts to weave his data to produce the present work. Two of the concepts, “pop cosmopolitanism” and “participatory culture,” are derived from media scholar Henry Jenkins, and the last one, “popular modernism,” is a take on anthropologist Joel Kahn’s cultural theory. To make a small twist to Jenkins’s theory, Keppy uses the term “participatory pop” instead of “participatory culture.” The inclusive term “participatory culture” could have sufficed to navigate seamlessly through both mass and elite cultures discussed in the book because, after all, the author does not offer any new meaning for the phrase “participatory pop.” Besides, the words “participatory” and “popular” basically connote the same thing. Any cultural artifact could not have been created or formed without the participation or popular support of its audience as both consumer and producer.

On the one hand, Keppy highlights specific groups of Filipinos (as the following chapter titles attest: “Cabaret Girls and Legislators” and “Jasistas, Balagtansistas [sic], Zarzuelistas”) to suggest a varied cultural scenario that Borromeo negotiated as a musician. On the other hand, aside from being a singer, Ms. Riboet was introduced by the author as a cultural broker, a bridge between arts and artists and the masses. These interconnections among artists, producers, and consumers suggest a broad participation of people in the creation of popular culture.

The book has ten chapters, the first of which introduces both Borromeo and Riboet as leitmotif in discussing popular culture in their respective countries. The next five chapters narrate stories of Borromeo’s work relationships with other Filipino artists, his active theater life, and the groups he founded or performed with. The last four chapters are devoted to a close reading of Riboet’s career and the development of politics and popular theater in Indonesia; the genres “popular theater” and political theater were fortes of the theater groups *Komedie Stamboel* and *Dardanella* at the height of their popularity.

Although Keppy utilizes them as handles for discussion, Borromeo and Riboet are not given equal treatment. The obvious wealth of data on Indonesia and Riboet (or perhaps the number of years devoted by the author to the study of Indonesia) has yielded a richly woven story about popular theater in Batavia and other centers of cultural activity in the Dutch East Indies. There is also the impression that the author is much more knowledgeable about this colony than the Philippines, as inaccuracies about the latter are found in the text. A few examples of these slips are as

follows: “as a consequence of impending Philippine Independence in 1935” (132) (the Philippines was granted its independence by the US in 1946); and “In the early 1930s, Bocobo would lead a research project aimed at documenting native music and dances” (46) (Bocobo was president of the University of the Philippines [UP] when he created the “UP Committee on Folk Songs and Dances” in 1934. He appointed Dr. Francisco Santiago to head the committee, which included H. Otley Beyer, Francisca Reyes-Tolentino, Cecilio Lopez, and Antonio Molina.). This point also brings to light the issue regarding Borromeo’s “My Beautiful Philippines,” with lyrics by the American Geo Hunt, which Keppy repeatedly claims to be the composer’s “signature patriotic song.” The title does not, and cannot, make it patriotic. Moreover, the author does not present any analysis of either music or text. The song could have been jazzy, but it definitely was not Filipino; if the lyrics were about love, the song would be too universal to be patriotically Filipino. Only the cover page of the music sheet (35), with Borromeo in a photo framed within an elongated orb, in traditional Chinese garb, accompanies the discussion about the song in the book.

The book is probably the first major work that features both Borromeo and Riboet, two early–twentieth-century popular icons that time has relegated to obscurity. Almost forgotten, still they have found their voices again in *Tales of Southeast Asia’s Jazz Age*, the title of which is reminiscent of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1922 book, *Tales of the Jazz Age*. Keppy frames this “Jazz Age” within the context of issues of colonization, politics, morality, and the advent of popular technologies like the talkies, which slowly replaced silent movies. However, he does not discuss the early technical problems that accompanied the introduction of sound in movies; for instance, its grainy quality and the seemingly imperfect timing of the spoken sound with the actual enunciation in the visual film that affected its ready acceptance in its nascent years in the Philippines. This omission gives the impression that the transition from silent movies to the talkies, which caused the waning interest in live theatrical and musical shows, was smooth. Also, the use of “Jazz Age” in the title does not do justice to the whole opus. The book is also a discussion of traditional music and performers, of writers and politicians, of life at the margins of the colonial world, and of the colonial subjugation of Filipinos and Indonesians.

Keppy stresses that business had a lot to do with popular culture in both the Philippines and Indonesia during the “Jazz Age.” The mass production of

music, print, and sound recording meant easier access to music by ordinary people. These developments also hastened the spread of and appreciation for new types of music. Vinyl sales also affirmed the taste divide between the greater masses and the elites. The latter opted to buy vinyl records of opera, while the former bought the easily accessible popular songs. With the aid of a record player or turntable, a greater number of people were able to listen to both traditional and classical music in the comfort of their homes.

Chapters 7 to 10, which are about Indonesia, are far too focused on Riboet, theater, Indonesian politics, and local culture. Other than highlighting the politically repressive government, the chapters fail to bring to light any meaningful Dutch influence on the culture of colonial Indonesia, which was perhaps the author's deliberate decision. In contrast, the effect of Americanism is very much felt in the chapters discussing Borromeo and the cultural landscape of the Philippines under the US; even anthropology students under Beyer, an American professor of anthropology in UP, are given space regarding their studies on the prevailing tastes of the Filipino people in popular music and views on traditional folk songs and dances.

With all its strengths and weaknesses in the discussion of two distinct colonial experiences during the "Jazz Age," Keppy's book is still an important contribution to the growing conversation about popular music in the first decades of the twentieth century in the Philippines and Indonesia. It has given both Luis Borromeo and Ms. Riboet a much-deserved retelling of their contributions to the popular music movements in their respective worlds. Although not the author's intention, the book can also stand as a preliminary output on the study of tastes in popular culture in both colonies. However, considering the supposed scope of the study, i.e., Southeast Asia, the author should have cast a wider net to include other colonial Southeast Asian countries, aside from the Philippines and Indonesia, to be more inclusive and really paint a complete image and soundscape of its "Jazz Age."

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