

Dance the World from Java, Connecting with People



Photo by Naoaki Yamamoto

Eko Supriyanto (Dancer / Choreographer) [Indonesia]

In Indonesia, the multiethnic, multicultural country, Eko Supriyanto, whose background is the strong tradition of Java, actively communicates with diverse ethnic groups not only in Java but also various regions, communicates with the world beyond Indonesia, and his performances reflect the communications. Traditions are carefully deconstructed and reappear with new reality there. Before the presentation in Japan of his latest piece *Cry Jailolo*, which exhibits his attitude most vividly, we had him talk enthusiastically about his personal attachment to Jailolo, his work in the entertainment industry, and the current situation of Indonesian contemporary dance.

Interviewer: Yuki Hata (Performing Arts Producer / Coordinator)

I Don't Teach but Connect

— Your latest work, *Cry Jailolo*, is going to be presented in Japan soon. This work was created based on the traditional dances in a region called Jailolo¹ on Halmahera Island in the Maluku Islands in Indonesia. Commissioned by the Jailolo City, you created a show performed by local junior and senior high school students, *Sasadu on the Sea*, for Festival Teluk Jailolo (Jailolo Bay Festival) in 2013. Did that lead to *Cry Jailolo*?

Eko: Yes. Jailolo Bay Festival is a large annual event that has been organized by the tourist office of West Halmahera since 2007 to promote tourism, to which tourists come even from overseas.

Several ethnic groups reside in Jailolo, and in the previous festivals, the traditional dance of each ethnic group was shown one after another on a big special stage on the sea. When the regent gave me the offer, I said that I wouldn't do that but would approach the local traditions in a different way and connect the ethnic groups. I am from Java, which has "colonized" various areas of Indonesia, so I thought my role wouldn't be about teaching people in Jailolo but connecting the peoples, while having them stay where they are supposed be.

I visited Jailolo for the first time at the end of 2011, and the regent invited me to diving first. Diving, which was my first experience, let me discover the underwater beauty and a new dance zone against gravity. And then I researched on traditional dances, traditional cuisines and other various things for about one month. I became a frequent visitor of the place; I have even stayed there for five months.

In the performers of the show, who were junior and senior high school students in Jailolo, there were four ethnicities: Sahu, Tobaru, Gamkonora and Jailolo. Gamkonora and Jailolo are Muslim, and Sahu and Tobaru are Christian. I visited all the schools in Jailolo and had a series of workshops, since there were as many as 450 students.

That resulted in *Sasadu on the Sea*. *Sasadu* is a house built in a traditional style of Sahu, which we built on a special stage on the sea. We involved each ethnic group's traditional dance, and it cannot be said that there was no conflict about that. For example, Sahus have a ritual dance called "legu salai" that little boys perform on the roof when a *sasadu* is reroofed — though there has remained only one person who can perform the dance. While employing *legu salai* as an important element, I wanted to place a war dancing called "cakalele" from the Tobaru tradition. I told that to the head of Tobaru, and he said that it was out of the question to perform *cakalele* on the roof of a Sahu *sasadu*. So we quickly built a *sasadu* on the stage and had a dancer perform *cakalele* on the roof to show it to him, and he understood the beauty. We were allowed to have a 10-year old Tobaru boy perform it there.

¹ A city in the west part of Halmahera Island in the Maluku Islands (or the Moluccas) in East Indonesia. In terms of administration, it is the capital of West Halmahera Regency, North Maluku Province. It has the Jailolo Bay, and its beautiful water, coral reef and diving attract tourists. The Maluku Islands had long been known for the spice trade, became the battlefield for hegemony among Portugal and other Western powers in the 16th century, and had been ruled by the Netherlands until transferred to Indonesia in 1949. The residents comprise Muslims and Christians. There have been ethnic conflicts across the region since 1999, and in Halmahera, thousands were killed in a conflict.

² A German choreographer, dancer, director and dramaturge. Leading a dance company "Kobalt Works" based in Brussels, he works on a number of commissions from theaters around the world in addition to his own productions. Actively involving himself in collaborations with Asian artists, he has created

Through the work with the communities and children, though Jailolo had been a place of ethnic conflicts, I think we were able to show that they can be together by understanding their own arts and using them.



Photo by Naoaki Yamamoto

— The main tourist attractions of Jailolo are diving and the coral reef, but you were faced with the issue of the destruction of the reef during your research. The theme of environmental destruction should involve the interests of regional communities. Didn't the research and creation trigger political arguments?

Eko: It was a project for promotion of tourism in the first place, so I didn't intend to work on political issues. However, when I visited Jailolo, the coral reef had already died, and the regent actually wanted the local fishers to stop the blast fishing (practice of using explosives to stun schools of fish for easy collection), since its impact on the coral was tremendous. Also, there were a lot of sharks in the Jailolo Bay, and a number of fishers had killed sharks to sell the fins to China and Australia, which had been a big issue until recently. The regent established a regulation that bans the blast fishing and shark fishing. In Indonesia, the central government rarely recognizes a regional regulation, so the fact that a local city has established this kind of unique regulation can be considered a political issue.

The regulation was a matter of life and death for the fishers, so the regent conceived the idea of forming a koperasi, an Indonesian style co-op, where fishers share a fishery, they can fish anything there, and what they have fished are distributed equally. I heard that the fishers gradually understood, though in the beginning some of them were frustrated. I think it was wonderful that they created a co-op to support each other, let alone the conservation of nature.

I Want to Give Back *Cry Jailolo* to Jailolo

— Then you created *Cry Jailolo* developing on legu salai, the Sahu dance that you employed in *Sasadu on the Sea*. The piece was premiered in the international dance festival “Tari ’13 – Dancing Across Borders” held at ASWARA (Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan / National Academy of Arts, Culture & Heritage) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in July 2013. Next year in November, it was presented in “Indonesian Dance Festival” in Jakarta, which received a huge response. Could you please talk about this piece?

Eko: Jailolo has shown me a lot of beautiful things, not only traditional dances. On the other hand, the regent not only changed the fishing custom by establishing the regulation but also had the idea of inviting divers from across the country to have them plant coral. So I thought I would create a piece, based on a traditional dance in Jailolo, with the theme of the environmental destruction expressing the lamentation of the sea and hope for regeneration. I selected six high school students from the performers of *Sasadu on the Sea*. No one had experience in dance except one of them who had performed ritual dance in his village.

A large audience came to the show at ASWARA, and it was very well received. I was surprised because I didn’t expect that good response at all. That encouraged me to think of the next show in Jakarta.

— Arco Renz² was involved in the show in Jakarta as dramaturge.

Eko: Yes. I had worked with him for a piece called *solid.states* when I was visiting Jailolo frequently. After the show in Kuala Lumpur, I wanted someone that knows me well and would raise objective questions and discuss with me to make the piece more profound. One day I told about my first experience of diving in Jailolo to Arco. He was interested in it so much, and we talked about various things. I decided to have him as dramaturge, and in June 2014, he came to Jailolo from Vietnam, where he worked at that time, and joined us.

He not only raised objective questions about the choreography and other elements that were directly related to the piece but also tried the new, zero gravity realm of dance together with me — I, of course, went diving with him — and tried to get out from the safe gravitational field of Javanese dance. He also observed the dancers’ daily life and deeply engaged with them.

Consequently, the elements of a Ternate traditional dance “soya soya” as well as more expression of young people’s dreams and hope were added to the piece, and it became longer, from 22 minutes to one hour.

— There was one more dancer in the show in Jakarta.

² A German choreographer, dancer, director and dramaturge. Leading a dance company “Kobalt Works” based in Brussels, he works on a number of commissions from theaters around the world in addition to his own productions. Actively involving himself in collaborations with Asian artists, he has created *solid.states* and *KRIS IS* in Indonesia, *Hanoi Stardust* in Vietnam, *COKE* in the Philippines and *ALPHA* in Singapore and the Philippines since 2013. He has also been organizing “Monsoon,” a research/exchange project by European and Asian artists, in various locations.

Eko: A dancer Geri Kisdianto joined. He is a successful show business man who dances and choreographs for pop singers in Jakarta, and my assistant in my TV work. I involved the man who had no attachment to contemporary dance because I expected that he, who has a position in the huge market called pop culture, would disseminate the project widely. As I expected, he told everyone, “You’ve got to check out Indonesian tradition, not only hip-hop!”



Photo by Pandji VascoDagam

— How was the show in Jakarta received? Both in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta, the piece was detached from the original context. Did that affect the meaning of the piece?

Eko: The regent of Jailolo invited all the 92 staff members who worked for the festival with us to the show in Jakarta. They knew that I was making the piece, but hadn’t seen the rehearsals and this was the first time they saw it. They became fond of the piece, wondering in surprise, “Is this really from Jailolo?”

The meaning of the piece didn’t change by detaching from the local context of Jailolo, but I put importance on dissemination of the fact that Indonesia doesn’t consist only of Java, Bali, Sumatra and Papua to the whole Indonesia and the world. Thanks to the show in Jakarta, Jailolo, about which even Indonesians knew very little, became a popular topic. I am so happy that we successfully introduced Jailolo as a place of culture and the arts that has to be explored.

I want to bring back the piece to the festival in Jailolo this year. If the six dancers teach 50 people, it will become *Cry Jailolo* with 300 performers. I want to tell them that *Cry Jailolo* was created out of their own things, so it is their property that should be handed down from generation to generation. Then, the reason why I created *Sasadu on the Sea* will be understood too.

The Indonesian tourism is always like “Jailolo is a beautiful place, please come, please come.” But what I aim for is “silent tourism” where people actually visit Jailolo and quietly see *Cry Jailolo*.



Photo by Pandji VascoDagam

— What in Jailolo moves you so much?

Eko: I had experienced projects with local people, but most of them were about workshopping for one month or so and create a piece. But in Jailolo I didn't have any temporal or thematic limitation. It's a special place for me.

My parents died right after I came back from the United States, where I studied. I have one younger sister, but she got married and left Solo. So, it's almost like I don't have a family. When I visit Jailolo and meet children and the regent, I feel as if they are my family. Because of the conflict, Maluku people are thought to be aggressive, but that is not true. They are very gentle people. I fell in love with the place and the project.

Each of the six dancers had a family problem. One's parents didn't want him to be born, his father would hit him everyday, and he works at a construction site to pay the school fees. Another's parents disappeared when he was little, and neighbors raised him. Another was born from a gang-raped mother, and he was raised by his grandmother because the mother died. Another saw his parents, brother and sister killed in front of him in the riot in Maluku. Maluku is beautiful, but it is also a tragic place, which might captivate me.

— What do they do now?

Eko: The one whose parents disappeared and was raised by neighbors has been studying at ISI³ in Solo. The regent of Jailolo pays the school fee. Four more will enter ISI next year. I hope they will come back as leaders to Jailolo Bay Festival.

Javanese Identity and the World

— You were raised in Java, but were born in Kalimantan.

Eko: Yes. I was born in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan. My father was a Dayak (proto-Malay indigenous people of Borneo) from East Kalimantan. He came to Java to enter high school, met my mother who was from Magelang (a city in Central Java), and fell in love with her. He went back to Kalimantan with her, but his family didn't let him marry a Javanese, so they moved to Magelang when I was five years old. My father married into my mother's family, and loved his father-in-law as if he were the real father. He didn't identify himself as a Dayak.

— And you were raised in Magelang and began to study dancing. I think your dance is quite Javanese, and from the early stage you studied under the masters of Javanese traditional dance, Bagong Kussuardja and Suprpto Suryodarmo, who are known as the initiators of the innovative movement that reinvestigated traditional dance from a new point of view. Why were you interested in the new direction while you were still young?

Eko: My mother's father had the traditional idea that a boy has to learn pencak silat (traditional martial arts), so my uncle trained me in pencak silat since when I was around five years old. Also, Magelang is known for various ethnic dances, which my grandfather taught me for five or six years. I was in the ethnic dance community in Magelang.

When entered high school, I was introduced to Bagong, who was in Yogyakarta, and I went back and forth between Magelang and Yogyakarta. I was lucky to be in that environment already before entering STSI.

Soon after entering STSI (currently ISI) in Solo, I saw a performance by Suprpto. It was almost a fateful encounter. I wanted to understand what happened, so I approached him and pleaded with him to let me study with him. I would go everywhere he went and tried to learn from him.

³ Institut Seni Indonesia (Indonesian Institute of the Art) is an art college known as ISI. It has campuses and branches in Yogyakarta and Surakarta (Solo) in Central Java, Bandung in West Java, Padang Panjang in Sumatra, and Denpasar in Bali. The Surakarta campus was established in 1965 as STSI Surakarta (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia Surakarta / High School of Art Indonesia Surakarta) and was called so until 2006. While serving as the center of Indonesian traditional dance and music education, it has been producing a lot of prominent contemporary dancers and choreographers including Eko Supriyanto, Sardono Kusumo who is mentioned in this interview, Martinus Miroto and Mugiyono Kasido.



Photo by Naoaki Yamamoto

— And then you met Sardono Kusumo⁴. The innovator of Indonesian contemporary dance has been creating works through research and cooperation with local people since the 1970s. Your relation with Jailolo reminds me of his works.

Eko: Sardono is the teacher and choreographer that I respect and was inspired by the most. I met him in 1993. My generation didn't witness his works in Bali or East Kalimantan, but I have read about them in various sources, heard about them from him, and seen the film version of *Dongeng Dari Dirah*. In 1995, while still being a STSI student, I participated in the Vienna and Hong Kong tours of his *Passage through the Gong* as a dancer.

Sardono saw *Cry Jailolo* in Jakarta, and said to me, "What you are doing is exactly what I did, but the difference is in that you are literally diving into other cultures. In Bali, I was just a Javanese that were researching on Bali."

I didn't imitate Sardono when I started *Cry Jailolo*, but what he said made me realize how much my artistic ideas were influenced by him in the depth. I happen to be following the path that he had followed, and I am happy about that.

— After STSI, you went to UCLA. I suppose you met various dancers from the world there. Did that influence your view, thought or choreography?

⁴ A dancer and choreographer from Java. With Javanese traditional dance as his background, his perceptive insight into the contemporary reality drew attention, and he has internationally been acknowledged since the 1970s. One of his main focuses is ecology, and among his numerous important pieces through research and collaboration with local people are *Dongeng Dari Dirah* (*The Sorceress of Dirah*, premiered in 1974, and a film version was made in 1992, directed by the choreographer himself), which he created in the village of Teges in Bali, *Meta Ekologi* (*Meta Ecology*, premiered in 1974) and *Hutan Plastik* (*Plastic Jungle*, premiered in 1983) which accused the destruction of the tropical rain forests in East Kalimantan. Currently, teaching at IKJ (Institut Kesenian Jakarta / Jakarta Institute of the Arts) and ISI campuses, he has still been influential as one of the most important artists in Indonesian arts and culture.

Eko: Absolutely. Before UCLA, I was invited to American Dance Festival in 1997, where I was exposed to dances other than Javanese dance. That was a wonderful experience that expanded my concept of not only dance but also art.

UCLA did that to me too. I am grateful for the encounters with Victoria Marks, Judy Mitoma, and many others. Peter Sellars, also, let me learn about another aspect of dance through his operatic work.

I also learned even from Madonna. Her tour that I took part in as a dancer was very professional and organized, which taught me about the reality of the non-academic world of dance.

I taught Indonesian dance there too, which made me realize that Indonesia is vast, I knew only about Java, and the world of dance is huge and complicated. At the same time, I appreciated the fact that I was from Java and felt thankful to my teachers in Java including my grandfather.



Photo by Pandji VascoDagama

— You have worked together with such artists as Peter Sellars, whom you mentioned, and Lemi Ponifasio. You saw the world, while having the strong tradition of Java in your background. How have the universalism and particularism — in your case, “the Javanese” — reached an agreement in these collaborations?

Eko: In the collaboration with Peter Sellars, although he was the director, he didn’t look down on me as the choreographer. It was a smart collaboration where I didn’t see hierarchy. In contrast, Lemi Ponifasio completely used me as a dancer, and I had to exploit my body as if I were in the army (laughs). However, we discussed a lot in both projects, and that absolutely enlightened me.

A good example of what made me aware of my Javanese background is the collaboration with Arco Renz that I mentioned before, *solid.states*. This is a piece about the stability and instability of Javanese culture, which I performed together with

a female dancer Melanie Lane. Melanie's mother is Javanese, and father is Australian. She was raised in Australia, so she doesn't know much about Javanese culture. On the other hand, even though I was raised in Java, I go abroad frequently, so sometimes I am told that I am not a Javanese anymore. In the piece Arco, as the negotiator, asks Melanie and me who we are, and we rediscover ourselves through answering his questions. I sometimes fought with Arco. I would say, "No, I can't do that, nobody does that in Java," and he would argue, "But you danced for Madonna and worked as dance consultant for *The Lion King* in the U.S." I said, "Then why don't you go to Java?" And then he really went there and studied Javanese dance for three months under my teacher. He also visited Magelang, my hometown, and learned pencak silat from my uncle as I did and heard the stories of my family. He came back and said, "Eko, your uncle told me this and that," which reminded me of my past. This process lasted for a year. I think what was more important than trying to be on equal footing with each other was that there was someone who led me to discover another aspect of myself.

Taking Advantage of Entertainment

— Since coming back from the U.S., your work has widely been covering TV shows, films and entertainment events. How are these activities connected in you?

Eko: In short, I take advantage of them. I took part in Madonna's shows as a dancer, and a writer wrote a long article about me on a major newspaper in Washington. Because of that, when I came back, there were a number of TV crews at the airport, and I was treated as if I were a celebrity. I have been interviewed many times since then, and I would always say, "I am a traditional dancer from ISI Solo, and studied also at UCLA. That's why I was chosen as Madonna's dancer. If you want to become like me, working with a pop star isn't difficult, but you've got to know who you are first."

I received more offers from TV, and I would always tell them, "If you want my choreography, I don't offer my dancers as backup dancers for a pop singer, so send your dancers to Solo and let them intensively practice there." And I would declare, "If you want me to dance, this is the fee" — a considerable amount. By teaching TV dancers this way, the members of my group could own houses and cars (laughs). I work this way in films too.

Recently, we have a program like *So You Think You Can Dance* (an American dance audition TV show) in Indonesia. When the national TV asked me to be an advisor for this show, I proposed that the program should not copy the American program but take an Indonesian approach. Therefore, the program began to invite traditional dancers from across the country. The prize money is quite good. I have been able to do this thanks to the fact that my involvement in Madonna and *The Lion King* made me recognized. Students come to ISI Solo, where I teach, from across the country now. There was only one class when I came back from the U.S., but now there are three.

Every time I appear in the TV program, I tell the participants, "To be a dance professional is not about training and contract. It is about whether you can use your talent to make your living and support your family."

The Present of Contemporary Dance

— One of the most important characteristics of Indonesian contemporary dance seems to be the fact that most of the excellent contemporary dancers have a traditional dance background. What do you think about that?

Ekko: Indeed, a lot of dancers have a traditional dance background. Ery Mefri from Padang is from Minangkabau (Sumatra), Martinus Miroto and Mugiyono Kasido are from Java, and Jecko Siompo is from Papua, but they all reconsider and reinterpret their own tradition. Younger generations take a bit different approach, but it is still true that they start from their tradition. That is naturally understood because the “habitus” (conventional behaviors that have been socially obtained) comes from the environment of where you were born, and that is always traditional culture. However, what is important is not the styles or appearances but whether there is a creative statement or not. Regardless of having a traditional background or not, regardless of what your cultural identity is, you have to have your own strong and creative statement. The dancers that I mentioned are similar in that they all have a traditional background, but each of them has a unique and strong statement, so they are different.



Photo by Naoaki Yamamoto

— You mentioned some important names, but including younger generations, what do you think of the current situation of Indonesian contemporary dance? Also, what do you think of education?

Ekko: Sardono and I have classes in the graduate schools of the ISIs, so we visit the ISI campuses across Indonesia, and I think the situation of contemporary dance is quite good now. For instance, Solo has been producing a lot of talented young artists. Jakarta too. I visited Padang Panjang in Sumatra recently, and I met some active groups. I met some dancers in Sulawesi too. In Bali, where tradition is strong and it cannot be said that contemporary dance is active, there was expectation on Nyoman

Sura, but he sadly passed away from cancer last week. But there is a student from Bali in ISI Solo now. He wants to do something, and there is something interestingly crazy in him, so Sardono and I are going to see if there is a potential in him.

Since *Cry Jailolo*, Sardono and I have also been arguing that the schools of ISI are placed from the agricultural point of view. 80% of the territory of Indonesia is water, so we have been considering establishment of ISIs in Jailolo and Papua from an aquacultural point of view.

— Is there network of contemporary dancers and choreographers?

Eko: I have also been thinking about that. I have given my links to Sal Murgiyanto. He should start something.

— Sal Murgiyanto is a pioneering dancer and dance critic who advocated that “Republic of Dance” supported by four pillars — artists, critics, audience and producers — is needed to develop dance. Development of critics and audience is one of the biggest issues in Southeast Asia.

Eko: Audience need to be introduced to as many works as possible, and opportunities such as festivals have been increasing in Indonesia. But the problem is the absence of critics and writers. Sal is trying to form a group of writers and dispatch them to performances and festivals to have them write.

— What do you think of the relation between contemporary dance and society?

Eko: I believe that contemporary dance has to have messages about humanity. It doesn't mean anything for me to create a simply eccentric piece. A work has to be connected to human beings, have some kind of message, and the message has to be open to interpretations. If not, it's not dance but just movements.

Pina Bausch always said, “I'm not interested in how people move but what moves them.” That is exactly what I want to do. Excellent dancers can make movements, but the question is how the movements move people.

— Lastly, please tell me about your next project or piece.

Eko: I want to have various dancers experience diving to explore the strange zone more. If you dive 30 meters with a heavy oxygen tank, you are like a robot and you should make minimum movements in order to stay there for a long time. If you experience it in the zero gravity, however, you find unexpected movements that you have never made. Probably the future of dance is under water (laughs).

As for my next piece, I want to work with an old woman of Jailolo with the Jailolo battle dancing I mentioned, cakalele, as the material. Cakalele used to be performed by women. I have finished my research for that, so I will stay in Jailolo in March and start choreographing. I am trying to premiere it in June 2016.

— I look forward to your future activities. Thank you so much for generously taking time to talk with us.

[February 10, 2015, at Yokohama Creativecity Center]



Photo by Naoaki Yamamoto

Profiles

Eko Supriyanto

With interest in reinvestigation of Javanese traditional dance and contemporary dance, he has been working on comparative studies on tradition and modernity, pop culture, films and multicultural collaborations. Born and raised in Kalimantan, Borneo, he has sensitivity to different cultures and tries to create new dance vocabularies to innovate in the arts. Based on the ethnic dance of Magelang, his hometown, and by combining new interpretations of Javanese court dance and his knowledge of diverse dances and cultures across Indonesia, he has been creating new dances that fuse traditional values and contemporary reality.

▼ Solo Danvce Studio <http://www.solodancestudio.org/>

Yuki Hata

Yuki Hata studied musicology at the doctoral course of Ochanomizu University, Tokyo. While on her MA at the university, she participated in the Japan Foundation's Asian performing arts exchange projects. In 1989 she joined the Foundation's newly-opened ASEAN Culture Center (later reorganized as Asia Center) as performing arts coordinator. From 2004 to 2011, she was performing arts coordinator at the Performing Arts Division at the Foundation. Through both periods, she worked on presentations of Asian contemporary performing arts in Japan, as well as international collaborations with different Asian performing artists. Currently represents Kiki Arts Project in Tokyo.

Credit

Translation: Tomoyuki Arai