

[Bayona on Keppy, 'Tales of the Southeast Asia's Jazz Age: Filipinos, Indonesians and Popular Culture, 1920-1936'](#)

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Peter Keppy. *Tales of the Southeast Asia's Jazz Age: Filipinos, Indonesians and Popular Culture, 1920-1936*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2019. xiii + 269 pp. \$36.00 (paper),

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Commissioned by Bradley C. Davis (Eastern Connecticut State University)

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Peter Keppy is a senior researcher at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, where he studies revolutions and nation building in the twentieth century. While some of his previous work has focused on issues of compensation for war victims in Indonesia and the Philippines, he has also written previously on matters of popular music in Southeast Asia, having co-authored *Popular music in Southeast Asia: Banal Beats, Muted Histories* (2017) alongside Bart Barendregt and Henk Schulte Nordholt. In *Tales of Southeast Asia's Jazz Age*, Keppy brings to bear an impressive amount of primary source research in a remarkable array of languages to craft a narrative of the trajectories of two major characters in popular music and theater in maritime Southeast Asia: Luis Borromeo in the Philippines and Miss Riboet in Indonesia. Meticulously sourced and clearly presented, Keppy's book gives an insight into how his protagonists articulated a popular culture that engaged with some of the political and social issues of the day until their ultimate eclipse as a result of the Great Depression, competition from "talkies," and political developments surrounding nationalism.

Keppy frontloads the theory in his book, presenting the concepts of pop cosmopolitanism (a socially broad taste for international pop culture), popular modernity ("modernity" as advanced by non-elite sectors of society), and participatory pop (whereby audiences play an important role in the shaping of popular culture). Making use of these foundations, the author argues that "Luis Borromeo and Miss Riboet were pivotal actors, who helped create a pop cosmopolitanism and popular modernity in their respective colonial societies, but whose social cultural positions and significance were misunderstood and ignored by contemporaries in the metropolises of America and Europe" (p. 8). In this sense, they both participate in the shaping of an "in-between culture" (p. 7). Although the ensuing chapters do not engage in further theoretical disquisitions, the theoretical guideposts established by Keppy early in the book continue to inform his writing throughout. Thus, while the inclusion of the word "tales" in the title may suggest a collection of amusing—yet perhaps not altogether momentous—stories, Keppy's book does have a point to make about the trajectory of pop culture in a colonial context in continuous flux.

Although Keppy seeks to compare and connect the trajectories of his two main characters, rather than organize his book around thematic chapters in which specific aspects of both are contrasted, he instead dedicates separate chapters to each. Chapters 2 to 6 focus on Luis Borromeo, a Filipino

vaudeville musician and impresario who in the 1920s and 1930s successfully created an in-between kind of popular theater that blended American musical styles with local tastes and patriotic desires. Chapters 7-10 are dedicated to Miss Riboet, an Indonesian opera singer who, together with her husband Tio Tek Djien Jr., became a popular icon by innovating in the genre of vernacular theater by introducing topical commentary, and eventually bringing it colonial respectability at the cost of losing its nationalistic appeal. The result of this organization of the book is a clearer trajectory for each character, which could have become muddled in a more comparative approach. Although the structure is mostly narrative, his writing is inflected by the questions he asks of one case on the basis of previous scholarship on the other; he uses discussions of cultural hybridity originating from scholarship on Indonesia to interrogate the case of Luis Borromeo, and conversations of cultural appropriation and resistance arising from scholarship on the Philippines to interrogate the case of Miss Riboet.

Keppy's research is built upon an impressive variety of primary sources. Not only has he consulted periodicals from numerous cities in the Philippines and Indonesia, he has also studied audio recordings and musical scores from the time period to draw conclusions on the kinds of musical influences that were in play. This enables him to present a data-rich, almost blow-by-blow account of the trajectory of the cohort of musicians, producers, and fans that emerged in the time period he studies. His work with primary sources in at least five different languages (English, Spanish, Tagalog, Indonesian, and Dutch) is especially commendable, and one can only hope that he will continue to take advantage of his multilingual proficiency to explore these kinds of transnational histories in his future scholarship.

Given its narrative approach, *Tales of Southeast Asia's Jazz Age* is an ideal book to assign to undergraduate classes focusing on cultural history of Southeast Asia or the world at large. Chapters 5 ("The Biggest of Noise") and 10 ("Approbation and Alienation") are particular standouts inasmuch as they paint a broader picture of popular culture during this time period in the Philippines and Indonesia respectively. The former explores the ambivalent ways that jazz and African American popular music was incorporated into Filipino pop culture, ranging from scorn from the colonial elite to its hearty acceptance on the part of the numerous patrons of dance halls and local composers; additionally, it delves into matters of the Manila Carnival and the gendered way Manileños participated and gives some clues regarding the longevity of the Southeast Asian stereotype of the Filipino as a natural musician. The latter chapter traces the ways that popular theater troupes interfaced with rising nationalist consciousness in Indonesia: while Miss Riboet gained more artistic legitimacy in the eyes of European and Eurasian elites as she toned down her commentary on social issues, a rival company—Dardanella—aroused the interest of intellectuals seeking to pin down a national culture that could serve the cause of emancipation from the Dutch.

Although *Tales of Southeast Asia's Jazz Age* does put its two cases in comparative perspective in its introductory chapter and its brief epilogue, as well as in brief references to each other in the chapters in between, it could have perhaps benefited from the inclusion of a chapter that switched from the narrative to the comparative. It would have been interesting to see Keppy move from his primary source-focused approach to one in which he could foreground his interpretation of the implications of the comparison between both cases. Also, an earlier explanation for the inclusion of the title "Miss" in Riboet's name could have helped the reader understand why she is referred to as such in the book and how it in itself was important—according to Keppy, the use of this Anglo-Saxon

term signaled an artist's "modern and cosmopolitan orientation," and Riboet was the trendsetter who sparked a succession of "Misses" in the Indonesian stage (p. 188). In this sense one can wonder to what degree some of the same mechanisms were or were not in play in the transformation of Luis Borromeo into the more anglicized "Louis Borromeo" (or "Borromeo Lou") that appears in some of the illustrations included in the book. Was he also signaling a "modern and cosmopolitan orientation" as a pop musician, or was it simply part of a wider trend to adapt Spanish names to their Anglo cognates? These minor quibbles notwithstanding, with its clear presentation and rich archival research, students and scholars interested in Southeast Asian cultural history and the spread, propagation, and adaptation of popular culture worldwide will find *Tales of Southeast Asia's Jazz Age* a worthwhile read.

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