

Indonesian Puppet Theater: Puppets and Politics in Indonesia

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For a long time, Southeast Asia has connected with India and China by trade routes, although it has been thought of as their smaller, lesser neighbor. These routes were already fully developed by 100 AD: Indonesian sailors were early adept at traveling long distances. (As an example of this, Madagascar's languages are related to those of Indonesia because of ancient trade and settlement.) Although the main islands in Indonesia are Sumatra, Java, Bali, and Borneo, there are thousands and thousands of other islands. This talk will focus on the puppetry of Java: when the religions of Hinduism and Buddhism started to infiltrate into Indonesia, it was in Java that we see their temples constructed by the eighth century AD. Further, both the Dutch who occupied Indonesia for over 300 years since the early 17th century, and the independent Indonesian state, centered their governments in Java.

Unlike puppetry's connotations in the present-day United States, puppetry is thought of as the highest form of performance art in the country of Indonesia. It is not for children. However, early Punch and Judy shows, including in England in 1919, were aimed for adults as well. The present-day automatic association of puppetry with children is inappropriate to other places and times.

Terminology is important here.

- *Wayang* is one word. It is derived from the Javanese word for shadow. But is used now for all forms of theater.
- The *Dalang* is the puppetmaster. He or she is responsible for many things.
- *Wayang kulit*: kulit – hide/leather.
- *Wayang klithik*: wooden flat puppet
- *Wayang golek*: rod puppet. These are found mostly in Sunda and N. coast of Java, having similarities.
- *Wayang orang* – this term means “theater.” *Orang* means “person.” The costume that the human actors wear in the theater of this type is modeled after puppet costumes, and the movement of the human actors' bodies is modeled after the movement of puppets. Even the stage has a puppet illustration in center. Much of the non-puppet forms of theater in Java derives from shadow puppet theater.

Whence derive these puppets? They are different in different regions. A map shows us that shadow puppetry occurs now in the same places where there were ancient trade routes in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The closest to what we have today is shadow puppetry in India, which is more similar to Indonesian puppetry than is the puppetry we have in China. Indian puppets are larger than Indonesian puppets, but they tell the same stories. But the terms used for the art of puppetry in Java have indigenous roots, such as the previously mentioned term *wayang*.

These are very intricately painted puppets, and the colors have significance, even though the audience mostly sees only shadows. But the audience members can go on either side of the screen: they can go in the back and watch the puppeteer at work, and when they do that, they can see the colors of the puppets. Puppet shows will last from 9 in the evening until dawn: they last 6 – 8 hours. Often they celebrate a life event: for example, a birth, circumcision, the opening of new store. All sorts of milestones in one's life or career can be celebrated by these performances.

The plot and content of the story itself is less interesting to the Javanese than who is the puppet master and who are the singers. The show starts with a long musical segment. Some conflict occurs. Then around midnight, clown characters are introduced.

The key to it all is the *Dalang* or puppet master who has to be a very skilled individual. In some sets there are 500 puppets – you would not use 500 in one play, but their all move differently. The puppet master also must be a musician and singer. He even also has a knocker between his toes to articulate the music. He must have dramatic skill to tell the story well. He needs great vocal skills to make different voices for up to 50 different characters. He must know a several registers of the Javanese language, as well as ancient versions of it. He must be able to have philosophical and literary-critical discussions about the stories he enacts. He must be able to entertain, teach, and impart certain moral lessons, and do this sitting cross-legged for 8 hours. The *Dalang* starts learning the art very young, and typically there is a patrilineal descent of training. There are three-year old boys who can not yet perform the way the characters are supposed to converse, but who do know how the puppets move.

Audiences consist of both invited and non-invited members. The sponsors are invited. For example, a big chemical company may open a factory and desires to have a puppet show to celebrate and commemorate this event. Some people, the invitees, will come for 20 minutes and leave – and then everyone else will take over.

The repertoire comes from several sources.

One source is stories from the Indian epics, notably from the *Ramayana*, which is of course one of the two most famous Indian epics. It revolves around Rama, the king, and his wife Sita. They are exiled into the forest, and there the audience sees Ravana, the demon who kidnaps Sita. There is also Hanuman, the monkey hero who helps to get Sita back. (Indonesia was mostly Hindu up to the 15th century at which point it rapidly became Islamic. Today it has the most Islamic population in the world.) The *Mahabharata* is perhaps more popular than the *Ramayana* as material for puppet shows. It is an ancient Indian epic, longer than the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* together. It concerns the conflict between two sets of brothers: the Pandava and the Kaurava, and the tragic story of their inability to find common ground. Typically only a small part of these epic tales will be told in an evening.

Indigenous Javanese legends are also used for the plots of the puppet shows, as are Islamic tales, such as of the life of Mohammed's uncle.

Several stage conventions require comment. The *Kayon* (tree) or *Gunungan* (mountain) is the first thing an audience member will see on stage. The tree is used for every time there is a change of scenery, and every time there is a natural disaster or upheaval. There are various character types and they are very standardized throughout Java. For example, the Arjuna features thin eyes, thin nose, and thin body in opposition to the features given to coarse characters, with bulbous nose and thicker limbs. There is a peculiar stylization, perhaps because of Islam's prohibition of showing the human form. But some Hindu reliefs also show similar stylization before the introduction of Islam. Another standardized type of character is the jesters who come out around midnight. They are the real connection to the audience. The *Dalang* interweaves events occurring in the local community with the plot of the story, through the comments of the jesters. The most important clown or jester is Semar, from samar meaning dim, obscure, mysterious. He is a clown, an advisor to the protagonist, a guardian, a god, a symbol of the common man. A very popular figure, perhaps the most popular of the puppets.

Politicians have made use of *wayang*. For example, there are revolutionary *wayang*, showing heroes from Indonesia's fight for independence. Indonesia gained independence after World War 2. Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, who ruled from 1945 until 1965, was huge fan of *wayang*. He famously stated that he could not tell any Bible or Koran stories, but the Wayang stories he knew like the back of his hand. Sukarno was identified mostly as the conventional character types Bima and Arjuna. Bima is strong. Arjuna is a great lover. Sukarno was a very charismatic person, with four wives and various lovers. The other analogy that was said about him was that he was like the *dalang* himself, who stood behind the screens. During his last years he was affiliated with the communist party in Indonesia, and he was trying to find balance between the Communists and the Army. The book *The Year of Living Dangerously* illustrates this relationship in its treatment of *Wayang* and politics. The book is structured like a *wayang*.

The military dictator Suharto succeeded Sukarno from 1967 - 1998. He was associated with the clown Semar. When he assumed power there was a letter whose acronym was Super-Semar. Indonesians love acronyms. Suharto was involved in using *wayang* to promote his development programs. For example, the birth control measures that he advocated resulted in *dalangs* slipping messages about birth control into their *wayangs*. In 1995 when his power was waning, he called *dalangs* into his palace and asked them to perform about Semar. This backfired somewhat.

A priest in the 1970s also tried to use Wayang to promote catholicism in Indonesia.

Ki Enthus Susmono (1966 -) is a very popular and hip *dalang* who incorporated new imagery and new techniques into the art form which some younger Indonesians might have thought of as outdated. His characters smoke cigarettes and have pyrotechnics and rock music. George Bush and Saddam Hussein are among his featured puppets. Bush appears as Shiva who in Indonesia is Batara Guru, The Highest of the Gods: he is sitting on a missile which supports the world.

In 1993, a city in northern Java constructed a freeway underpass which displaced some vendors. After they had been moved, they pooled their money together to afford an inauguration of this new place where Susmono was to do a performance. In the play an administrator was admonished for bullying the common people and at the midnight comic episode of the play, the critique became even more direct. Susmono has been criticized for promoting the one of the country's main political parties in another later performance.

In July 2009, officials guarding a ballot box were dressed as characters from the shadow puppet plays in Sukarta, Java. One of the candidates was not Javanese: he was from Sumatra. But doing a very Javanese-styled performance would make him more accessible.

Professor Reichles advises interested persons to read or consult *Puppet Theater in Contemporary Indonesia: New Approaches to Performance Events* edited by Jan Mrazek. University of Michigan Press, 2002.