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Javanese Shadow Puppets

WARD KEELER

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Preface

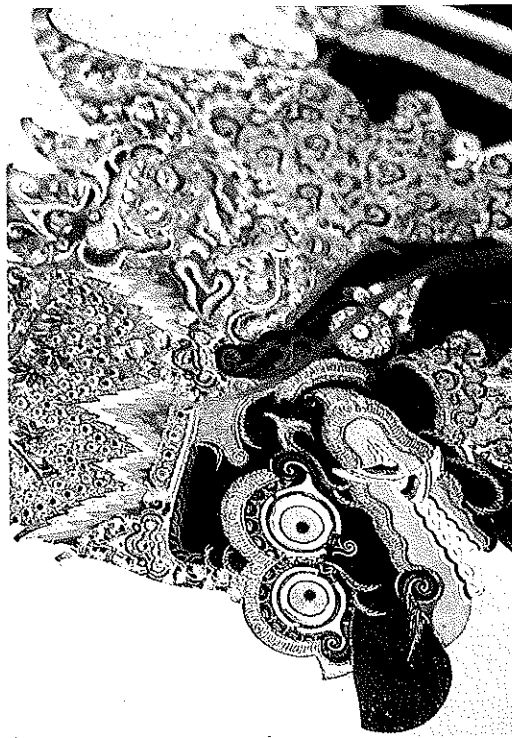
WHEN I travelled to Java for the first time, in 1968, after my first year in college, I was pleased when a friend, Mas Siswanto Soedomo, invited me to go to a shadow puppet performance in Jogjakarta one Saturday night. Once at the performance, however, I recall feeling frustrated: when I asked my friend every few minutes what was happening, he answered, 'Nothing much'. A few years later, while living in a village on the outskirts of Jogjakarta, I was thrilled to discover that my efforts to learn the Javanese language had progressed far enough to enable me to understand a few phrases in a performance without tugging on anyone's sleeve for an explanation. But the more Javanese I learned and the more I understood of the performances I attended, the more I was aware that my impatience had been misplaced. A shadow play is a very verbal form of entertainment, and for the first forty minutes or so, just as my friend had assured me, virtually nothing happens. An avid opera fan, I saw in shadow plays a distant relative of that art form's grand mix of music, story, and extravagant stylization, but I was puzzled by the different sorts of conventions that shape a performance of shadow puppets, including its very deliberate pace. Returning to Java to do anthropological field work in 1988, I spent two years researching just that issue: what the aesthetic principles underlying the art form are, and how this very unusual and intriguing genre fits into its particular cultural setting. I lived with a puppeteer and his family for most of that time, learning about shadow plays and about Javanese culture, in conversation with them and their neighbours, and I attended performances put on by him and other puppeteers in Central Java. I look back on that time with great nostalgia, forgetting in retrospect the anxieties and difficulties

Introduction

AMONG Asia's many glories are its colourful and unusual performing arts. Yet none surpasses the Javanese shadow play in the strangeness of its format and, by virtue of that strangeness, the promise of aesthetic and perhaps even mystical riches to be found within it. That an art form should be based on shadows is already intriguing. Even aside from that, few art forms anywhere in the world stylize the human form as radically or impose as rigorous constraints on its practitioners as does the *wayang kulit* (shadow play) tradition. Its refined heroes with tiny waists and impossibly long arms, the big-nosed, pop-eyed giants (Plate 1), and the heroines with skirts that extend forward rather than trail behind them, these conventionalized images rule out any straightforward equivalences between the physical appearance of characters in the plays and the look of humans in life (Colour Plate 1). (It is indicative of how far the distortion of human features goes in shadow puppets that most Westerners are unable to distinguish male and female figures accurately until they acquire some familiarity with the tradition.) The stories that get told in performances concern gods, heroes, and monsters who are able to flout the usual limits on human capacities: many can fly, for example, and some control weapons of great magical potency (Plate 2). There is virtually no scenery, and the puppets themselves can be manipulated only very little. If Western arts, especially popular ones, have opted for a realistic style in which the successful imitation of 'real' life is ostensibly the standard to which performers are held, then shadow plays' radical departure from life as we know it clearly puts them across an enormous aesthetic divide.

It would be vain, and a bit deflating, to try to dispel the aura of strangeness that surrounds a Westerner's vision of Javanese shadow plays. Yet it is also true that shadow plays display

JAVANESE SHADOW PUPPETS

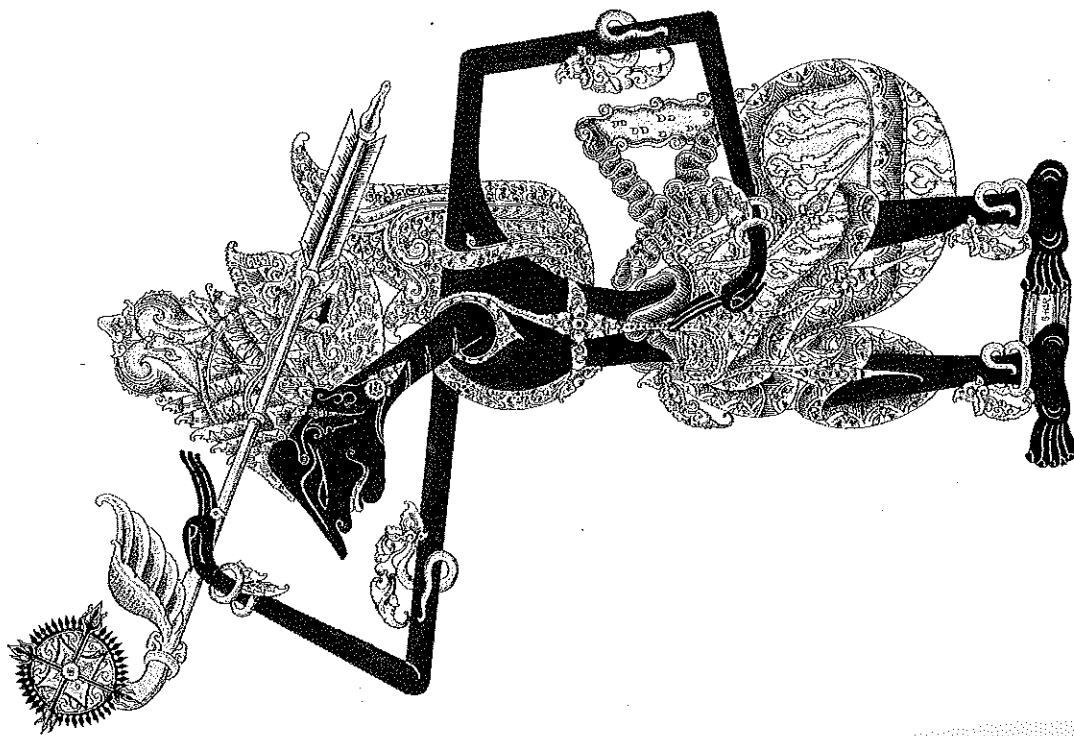


1. A demon king with coarse features and fangs.

aesthetic principles that are intelligible and even sensible to outsiders: they need not remain unapproachably exotic. To make them somewhat more accessible, it is worth considering the stories they relate, their place in Javanese social life, what the Javanese have to say about them, what meanings both Javanese and foreign analysts have seen in them, and the place they may retain in Javanese society in future. The chapters that follow will address these topics in turn.

One brief caveat would not be out of place at the outset. To most Westerners, the word 'puppets' evokes pleasant images of performances seen in childhood, and of familiar figures—Punch and Judy, or Kermit the Frog—held dear to memory. In Java, children love puppets, too. But as they grow older, they need not lose track of the figures they came to know in countless performances in their childhood. On the contrary, Javanese get to know those characters better as they see them appear and reappear in every shadow play they attend throughout their lives. Some of the characters are as lovable and familiar as

INTRODUCTION



2. Kresna wields a terrifying weapon, the *takra*, whose magical powers can be unleashed only by incarnations of the god Wisnu. (Drawing by Suharso)

Big Bird, while others are far more complex—perhaps heroic, perhaps cowardly, or even sinister. The stories in which they figure are by no means restricted to light and charming fantasies. They may, instead, turn on deadly serious histories of political rivalry, sexual jealousy, and bloodthirsty revenge. Javanese shadow plays are by no means entertainment intended primarily for children.

Wayang kulit is not the only performing art that flourishes in Java. At the royal courts, human dancers impersonate shadow puppets in a dance genre called *wayang wong* (human shadow puppets) (Colour Plate 2). Folk drama, in which human actors enact any of a great array of historical, fictional, even Shakespearean, Biblical, or other stories, are extremely popular, and attract the interest of more women than *wayang* does. Music concerts, such as of Javanese, Indonesian, and 'Muslim' pop music, often attract larger numbers of young people, especially among city-dwellers, than shadow plays.

Nevertheless, shadow plays enjoy the greatest prestige among all the arts in Java, so much so that *wayang* imagery crops up in many different media (Colour Plates 3 and 4). One reason for their prestige is that they are considered Java's oldest and therefore most venerable genre. The dean of Old Javanese studies, Father Zoetmulder, points to a reference to a performance of *wayang* in a royal charter issued in 907 of our era.¹ He warns that we cannot know for sure what the nature of that performance was. But a reference in a twelfth-century Javanese epic poem makes more explicit mention of spectators watching 'carved leather': clearly this shows that *wayang* were being given in Java 900 years ago.² In a society in which age necessarily garners respect, something so ancient is accorded enormous value. Yet, at the same time, shadow plays are found genuinely entertaining by a great many Javanese, young and old. Looking at a particular performance should help to see why.

¹See Zoetmulder, 1974, pp. 208–9.

²Ibid., p. 210.

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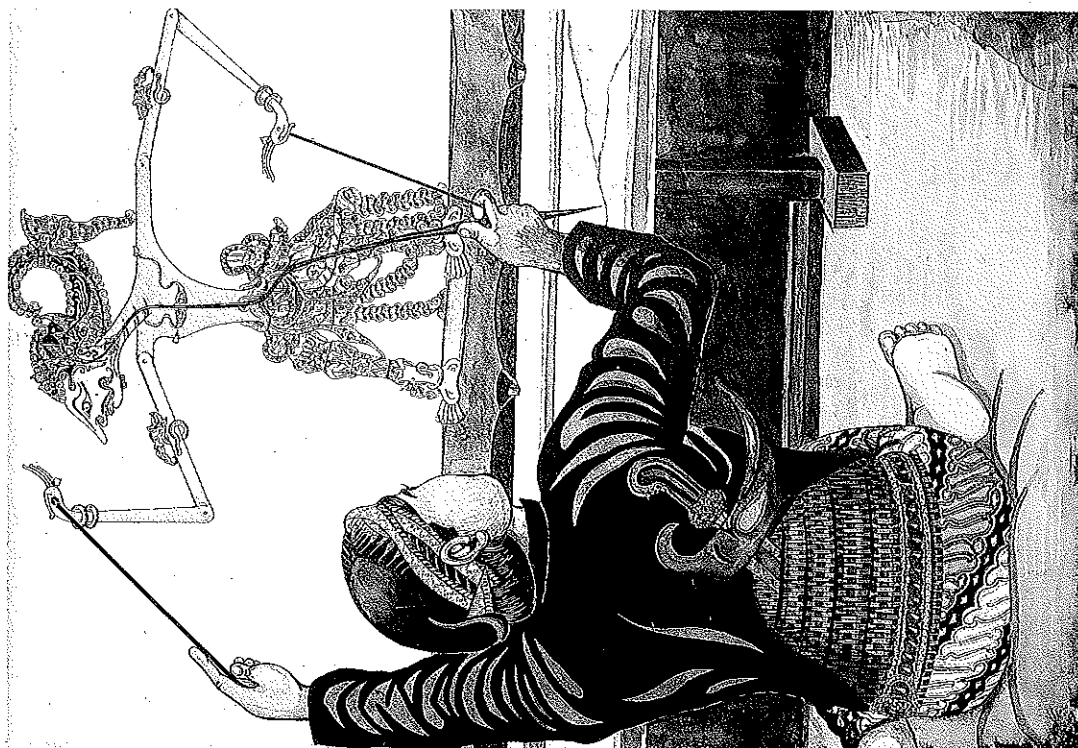
Pandhu Crowned King

WALKING along a road at night in Java, whether in town or in the countryside, one often hears a distinctive sound coming from an unseen loudspeaker. It is usually hard to figure out what direction it is coming from, but the sound consists of a man's voice, either singing or speaking, heard against the background of the Javanese percussion orchestra, or *gamelan*. At times the man sings long phrases while a soft, velvety sound provides subtle musical support. At other times the sound of the orchestra swells and a number of voices, both men's and women's, can be heard, in addition to the single male voice in the foreground. Then there are moments when the man's voice sounds like a drone, neither really speaking nor singing, intoning phrases with a rapid but uninflected delivery. Through it all, there is another, non-musical background, the sound of people speaking among themselves, some voices clearly those of children, plus a few dogs barking.

These are the sounds of a Javanese shadow play, or *wayang kulit*.¹ If it is still early, about nine or so at night, the various sorts of sounds just described continue for about twenty minutes, and someone walking along who heard them might feel interested in tracing them to their source. It is likely to be the dry season, sometime between April and November, and there may be a bright moon to light the way. The day was hot

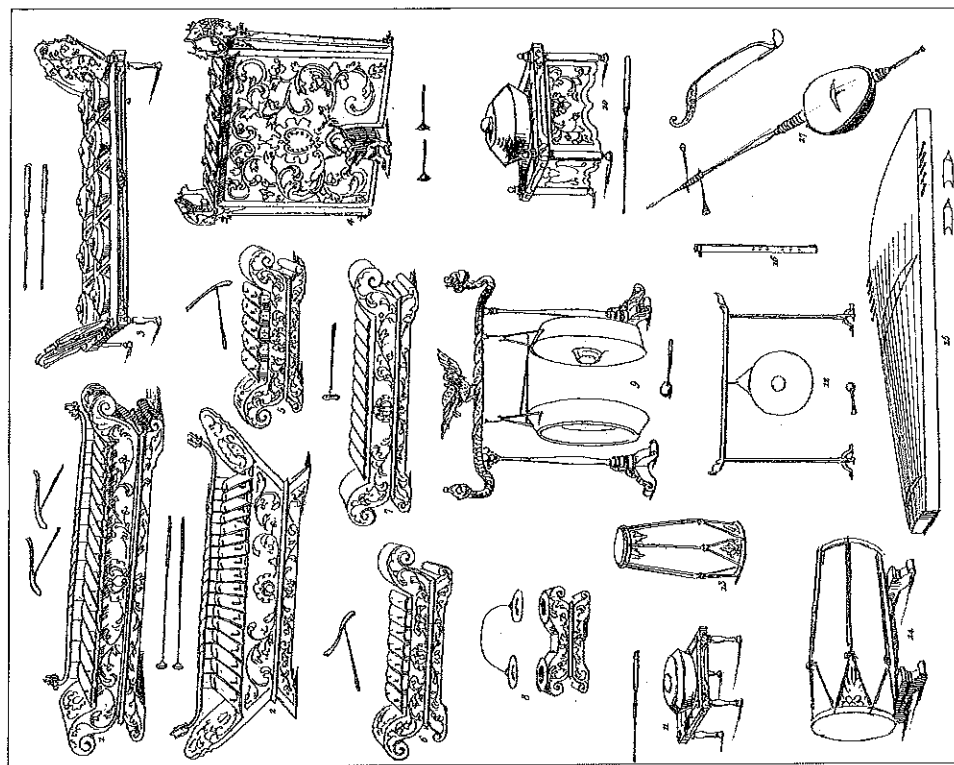
¹'Javanese *wayang kulit*', usually referred to by Javanese (and in the text below) simply as *wayang*, refers to shadow plays as performed in Central and East Java. The word *wayang* in Javanese can refer to performances, to individual puppets, or to the tradition more generally, and no distinction is made in Javanese between singular and plural. *Wayang kulit* also exists in Bali and Lombok, while a rod puppet tradition, called *wayang getèk*, is popular among the Sundanese of West Java, as well as among some Javanese in the area west of Jogjakarta. Within the Javanese *wayang kulit* tradition, there are regional variations, most notably those of Jogjakarta, Surakarta, and Banyumas.

JAVANESE SHADOW PUPPETS



4. The puppeteer, or *dalang*, is dressed in formal Javanese attire, including the Javanese dagger, or *kris*, at his back. He is seated in front of the screen. (Drawing by Suharso)

PANDHU CROWNED KING



5. *Gamelan* instruments. (From Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, 1817)

Wayang in Javanese Society

THE story related in the course of an eight-hour long shadow play may be quite complicated, as the many different scenes and characters in 'Pandhu Crowned King' demonstrate. But untangling the various characters and turns in the plot of a performance does not exhaust the complexity of the event. Another kind of complexity about a *wayang kulit* performance lies in its social complexity, the many ways people are brought together in preparing, executing, and even recollecting the performance. It is worth taking up the performance of 'Pandhu Crowned King' described in the preceding chapter once again to fill in some of this social depth, thereby adding an essential dimension.

Just before and during the opening scene of the performance, a great many people converge on the house where the play is being held. A majority of them join the many others milling about in front of the house, but a few of them proceed inside the house, shaking hands with a number of men lining their path as they do so. These men entering the house are invited guests of the sponsoring family, the family that has commissioned Ki Anom and his troupe to perform. Many of the guests wear what might be termed Javanese semi-formal attire: a suit jacket over a white shirt, either a batik or a machine-woven skirt, and a black velvet cap. One or two of the men greeting the guests are dressed, like Ki Anom, in full Javanese dress: a batik skirt with pleats down the front and a long sash wrapped several times around the waist, a plain shirt, and a double-breasted Javanese court jacket, plus a Javanese dagger at the back and a batik cap. These, the most important men among those greeting the guests, are close relatives of the sponsoring family. Once the guests have been greeted and have gone inside, they are seated, usually (in the Solonese region) on metal chairs set out in rows in the inner part of the house, or

WAYANG IN JAVANESE SOCIETY

(in the Jogjane region) on mats. (In Plate 6 men can be seen sitting on metal chairs behind the screen, whereas in Plate 17 they can be seen sitting on mats.)

Some guests arrive on motor bikes. They make their way slowly through the crowd to an area off to one side of the house where young men take the motor bike and give its owner a numbered check with which to reclaim it later. These young men are neighbourhood youths, a few among the many people donating their labour to the sponsoring family. They are dressed in dark slacks, white shirts, and ties that clip on at the collar. Some of the guests wear slacks and a shirt, too; several of them wear elaborately batiked shirts that are the mark of the wealthy new Javanese bourgeoisie. After parking and locking their motor bikes, these men, too, make their way inside the house.

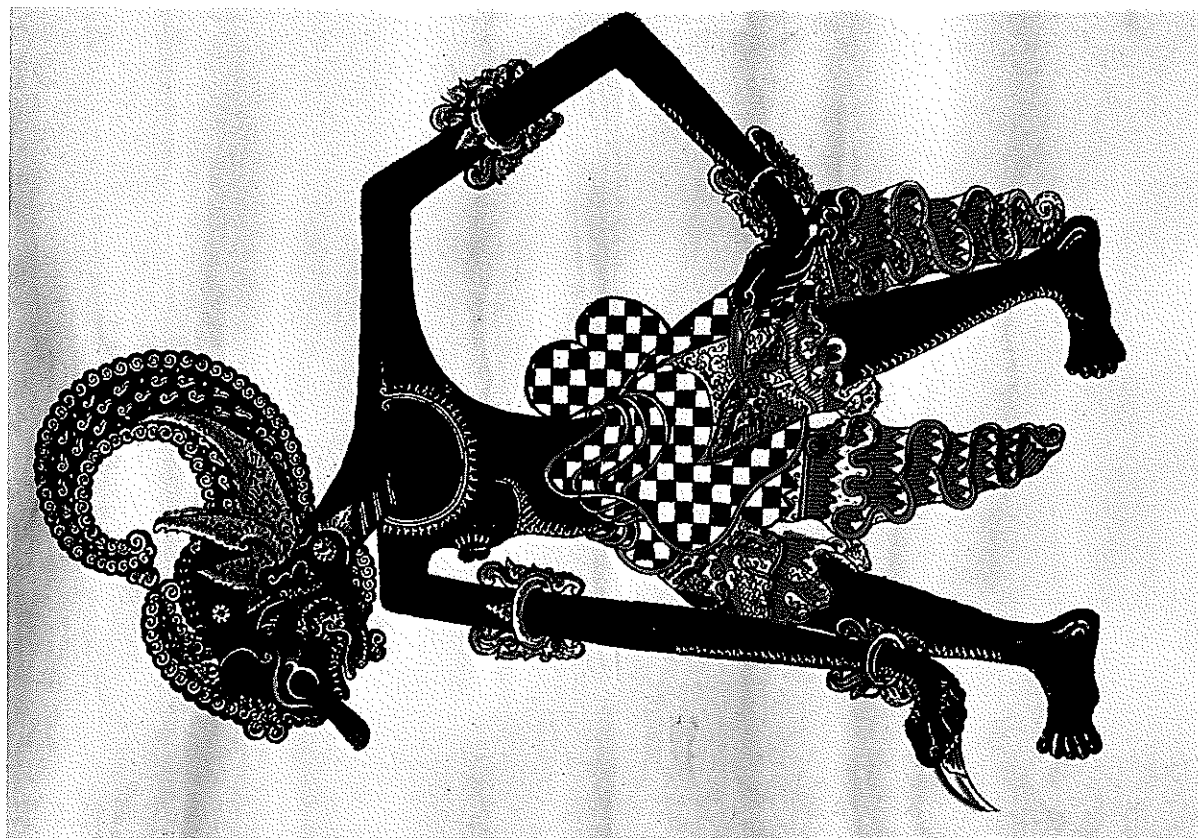
Only a few women accompany their husbands to the *wayang*. Those that do come wear formal Javanese women's attire: a long batik skirt tightly wrapped around the legs, a lacy, close-fitting blouse over a dark bodice, and a large hairpiece at the back of the head, plus as much jewellery as they own or can borrow for the occasion. These ladies go with their husbands only as far as the entrance to the house, whereupon they leave them and go toward the inner part of the house to join other women, both guests and assistants to the sponsors. If they watch any part of the performance, they will do so from within the interior of the house. Women do not usually think it appropriate to be seen staying up till all hours watching a shadow play performance.

Once the play is well under way—by the time Abyasa has returned to his chambers and the queens' maidservants are conversing casually with each other—the guests sitting behind the screen are served snacks. This performance is being given near Klaten, in the Solonese region, and as is customary in that area a pair of young people do the serving: a young man in Western clothes carries a tray filled with glasses of sweet tea and slices of cake, and a young woman in Javanese dress serves them to each guest. In Jogja, young men do the serving. Rather

than walk among guests seated on the floor, which would be an affront to their elders' status, the young men must practise an elaborate movement—called 'kneeling walking'—in which they hold trays level with their heads while walking in a crouching position. Later, by eleven or midnight, these young people will return to refill people's glasses and to serve each of them a plate of rice plus side dishes. (If the sponsors are very well-to-do, they may increase the number of courses, possibly including a soup course before the rice, and/or dessert. Particularly dramatic is to serve a little cup of ice-cream, since refrigeration is not yet widespread in Java, especially in villages.)

After they have finished their meal, the invited guests sitting behind the screen remain a little while, watching the antics of the servants attending Pandhu at the hermitage of Seven Peaks. But they soon leave, filing out in a long line as the same men who welcomed them now bid them goodbye. By this time it is midnight or one in the morning, and youths and young boys stream into the area behind the screen that the guests have vacated. Most of them soon fall asleep, but they wake up for the battles with ogres, a part of the performance they greatly enjoy, and for the battles that take up much of the last part of the performance (Plate 18). A few of their elders have enjoyed the first part of Ki Anom's performance so much that they would prefer not to go home just yet. But they are reluctant to stay on inside, where the sponsors would still feel obliged to serve them more food and tea, and so they go outside and mix anonymously in the crowd.

This performance is being given by a wealthy family whose business ventures have done well, especially in the production and sale of elaborately carved teak and rattan furniture to urban dwellers. As Ki Anom has hinted in an earlier scene, they wish to express their gratitude to God, to the spirit of the vicinity, and to the spirits of their ancestors in granting them such prosperity. In providing an entertainment that will attract a great many people, both guests and casual spectators, they will also win the thanks of a multitude of people and give their own prestige a great boost.



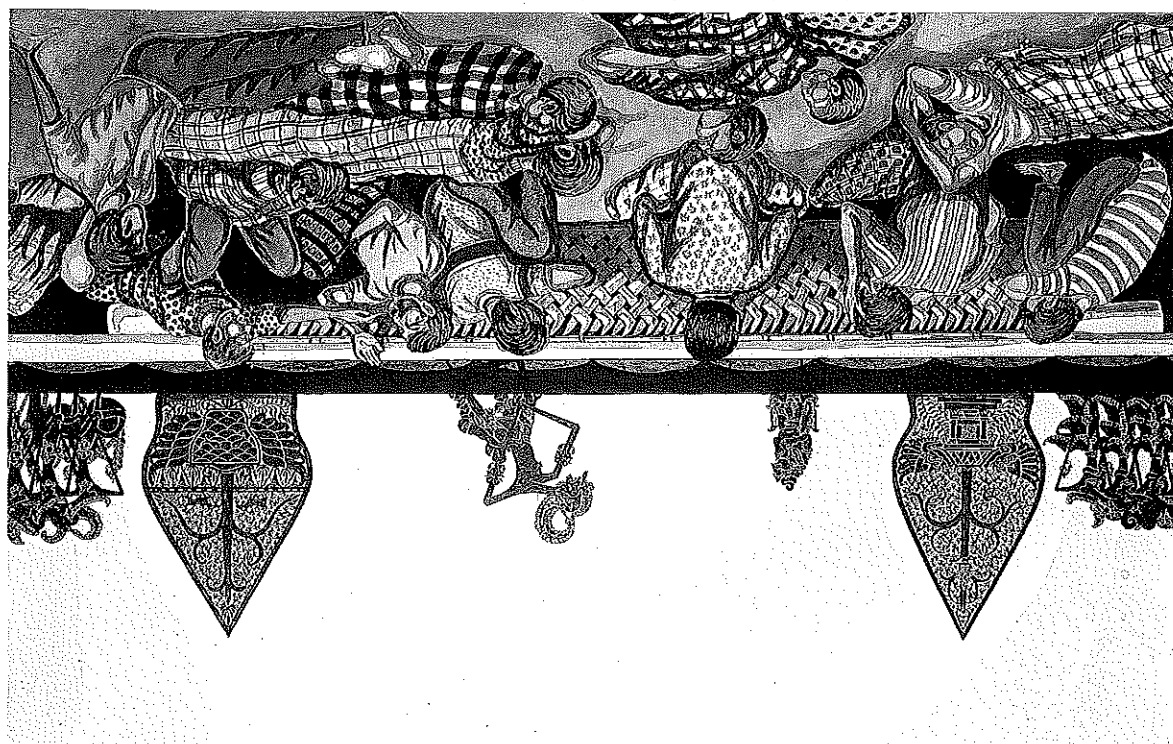
16. Bima, painted on paper. (Jacques Dumarçay)

Since long before Ki Anom sat down in front of the screen and started the performance, the sponsors have been overseeing the arrangements, checking the food supplies, greeting their guests, and receiving contributions from them to help defray their expenses. (They must carefully commit the amounts of these contributions to memory, so that they can reciprocate appropriately at a later date.) They have been doing all this for days, they have had very little sleep, and they are exhausted.

Javanese think that going without sleep is beneficial to one's well-being; they view it as a form of self-sacrifice that will win God's favour, and they do not think it inappropriate that sponsors confronting an important event like this one should undertake such an ascetic exercise. After all, everyone involved in such an event stands at risk of attack from evil forces abroad in the world. Ascetic rigours of any sort are a means to stave off those forces' attacks. Many sponsors, however, collapse into an exhausted sleep long before a *wayang* ends, and must be roused at its completion in order to pay the puppeteer and say farewell to him and his troupe. Nevertheless, while they have been both too busy and too exhausted to enjoy the performance they have made possible, the sponsors are happy. They know that they will long be remembered as the family that engaged Ki Anom Soeroto to perform.

Not all *wayang* are performed at the behest of families. In general, sponsors fall into three categories: families observing life-passage rituals, communities observing community-wide ritual occasions, usually on an annual basis, and institutions, most often government ones, marking some important event, such as the anniversary of its founding or the opening of a new building.

Families sponsor shadow play performances to celebrate any of a number of events in their lives. A daughter's wedding is the event most likely to be put on with the greatest display a family can manage, and a *wayang* is considered by many Javanese to be the grandest display of all. A son's circumcision, which takes place anywhere from the age of eight to fourteen or so, may be marked with a *wayang*, as can a woman's first



18. Long past midnight, the invited guests stretch out for a sleep until the battles near the end of the performance wake them up. (Drawing by Suharto)

pregnancy ritual, the ritual on the thirty-fifth day following the birth of a child, or the final funerary ritual that occurs 1,000 days after a person's death.

These and other life-passage rituals can all be observed very modestly, in which case the family invites only a few close kin and friends. They would put on no entertainment, let alone a large-scale one like a *wayang*. But if they wish to make something of the event—and most people wish to do so if their finances permit—then they mount a large social gathering called *nduwé gawé*, literally, 'to have work'. This means sending out invitations to hundreds of people, and marshalling many kinspeople and neighbours, who contribute both labour and foodstuffs in order to entertain and feed those guests. Men work on setting up the house. If it is an old-style Javanese house with a row of doors across the front, they remove these to create a large space opening out to the front yard in which to accommodate guests. Women, meanwhile, cook huge quantities of rice and side dishes to serve the many guests and volunteer labourers that gather in the course of the event (Colour Plates 13 and 14).

All of this activity goes on for a day, or even several days, before the main ritual event, such as the meeting of bride and groom or a son's circumcision. Over that same time, couples come to give the family monetary contributions and they are given snacks and a meal as well as the sponsors' formal greetings. Or they may come and make their contributions on the day of the event. In any case, people who have made contributions are welcome to attend the event itself, often sitting in straight, hard-backed chairs for long periods while high-status guests of the sponsors give speeches. Weddings are particularly liable to prove long and dull, but any event may elicit copious amounts of talk from those people asked to do the sponsors the honour of addressing the assembled guests.

A *wayang*, when held in connection with these events, becomes a part of the crowded, noisy, enjoyable atmosphere that sponsors hope to assure at such times. It should draw a large number of guests, something that helps to keep

potentially bothersome spirits at bay, and at the same time reflects well on the status of the sponsors in the human world. The sponsors may even put on two performances: one during the day, for the benefit of guests come to make their contributions, and then the performance held at night, which is the main event. A daytime performance does not keep anyone's attention, except for some neighbourhood children's, for very long, and the *dalang* who will be performing at night usually has a relative take his place during the day (Colour Plate 15).

How many people come to watch a night-time performance depends, of course, on the fame and popularity of the puppeteer the sponsors hire. A local puppeteer who performs often in the area may not draw much of a crowd, although there will always be some people interested in coming to see at least the first few scenes of a performance. By inviting Ki Anom Soeroto to perform, the sponsors of the performance described above guaranteed that a great crowd would gather, and proved—since they could lay out the funds necessary to pay Ki Anom's large fee, and to feed all those guests—that they were doing very well for themselves indeed.

Private families probably sponsor a majority of performances in Java today, but it may not always have been so. In the past, most villagers probably saw shadow plays primarily in the context of annual village rituals. Many hamlets in Java traditionally celebrated—and many still do—an annual ritual to protect the area from misfortune and the depredations of malevolent spirits. Sometimes this is linked to procedures marking the harvesting of rice; sometimes the two events are observed on different occasions. Either event, village purification (*bersih désa*) or harvest festival, might be celebrated with a *wayang*, and in the past many *dalang* performed on such occasions in the same villages year after year, and their sons after them. Indeed, in the old days some *dalang* travelled a circuit of villages as the harvest came ripe. They performed village-sponsored plays to celebrate the harvest and were also available if any families, with their rice granaries full, wished to put on a performance in connection with a life-passage ritual.

A village-sponsored *wayang* is paid for by contributions collected from the head of every household in the village. Often the headman of a hamlet or village divides its households into three categories according to their wealth and, going from house to house, levies a contribution appropriate to each household's classification.

Although statistics are lacking, it appears that such communally sponsored *wayang* are diminishing in number. With the advent of new strains of rice, people living in the same community harvest their crop over a longer period, and more villagers can harvest two rather than only one crop of rice per year. The whole ritual dimension of rice growing seems to be fading, for that matter, and village-based rituals seem less common. Annual celebrations of Indonesian Independence Day, on 17 August, do take place in villages, and sometimes these are marked with *wayang*. But other performances that are easier to put on, such as athletic competitions and folk drama, are held more often than *wayang* in connection with Independence Day celebrations.

If communally sponsored performances are growing rarer, that has not threatened the livelihood of *dalang*, because with the increasing affluence of some portions of the Javanese populace it appears that more private families have the means to sponsor a performance now than in the past. In addition, it has become standard practice for government offices, universities, banks, and other institutions to sponsor performances to mark important events in that institution's history. On such occasions, high-level employees of the institution take the places of invited guests behind the screen, food is catered, and low-level employees may be pressed into service to help set up the space, serve the refreshments, etc.

No matter who the sponsors of a particular performance may be, it is important to note a fundamental fact about most *wayang*: their social embeddedness. Most people in the world today, including urban Indonesians, are used to paying cash for tickets to performances. Those tickets gain their buyers entry to a space usually set aside for such events, and the

performances are usually conceived of as, among other things, money-making ventures. However personally we may think of our relations with our favourite performers, the sponsors (or 'producers') that arrange for their appearances are likely to be faceless partners to a transaction we take for granted. A great deal of money changes hands at a Javanese ritual celebration, and the relations among the sponsors of a performance, the *dalang*, and his troupe, are based on financial considerations. But *dalang* are quick to claim that making money is less important to them than providing instruction in the form of entertainment. And while invited guests have indeed made financial contributions to the event, they do not conceive of the invitation to see the play as a ticket they have bought either with money or foodstuffs given to the sponsors. Both contributions and invitations fit into a long history of exchanges between the two parties. Meanwhile, a greater number of people watch the performance from outside the sponsors' house, in which case there is no question of their having to pay.

Performances put on by institutions are something of an exception to the social embeddedness of *wayang*: they do not implicate the relations among families characteristic of privately sponsored performances. Nevertheless, they fit into another long-standing tradition, that of royal entertainments held to mark important occasions. The royal courts in Jogja and Solo still occasionally hold *wayang* that the public is free to attend.

Only in a few, atypical situations, such as when the national radio stations sponsor performances of shadow plays in enclosed halls, are Javanese accustomed to paying to attend. In most circumstances, a *wayang* is put on as a splendid display of the sponsors' largesse, something Westerners are at best familiar with when, for example, the Metropolitan Opera performs free concerts in New York's Central Park. And unlike in the Western tradition of support for the arts, at a *wayang* all of the invited guests and many of the casual spectators have personal connections to the sponsors and will recall long afterwards who it was that treated them to, say,

Ki Anom's brilliant rendering of 'Pandhu Crowned King'.

A family puts on a *wayang* as a bid for prestige. Villages do so as part of community-wide traditions thought to help assure prosperity and harmony. Government offices, banks, and other institutions sponsor performances as a means of furthering their image as pillars of society. In each case, a *wayang* brings honour upon its sponsors and pleasure to the community and thereby enters into the fabric of Javanese social life.

3

The Repertoire of Stories and the Structure of the Performance

MUCH about Ki Anom Soeroto's performance of 'Pandhu Crowned King' is representative of *wayang kulit* performances in general. Some of it is specific to that particular story, and to Ki Anom's particular telling of it. The story of Abyasa's selection of his successor fits into an enormous cycle of stories about his kin, and those stories make up the bulk of the *wayang* repertoire in Java today. At the same time, almost all performances follow a set structure of scenes much like the series of scenes that organized Ki Anom's telling of the story of Pandhu's coronation. Looking at the *wayang* repertoire more broadly, and pointing out the order of scenes that is common to virtually all performances, shows how much of the performance we have been considering is characteristic of other performances of *wayang* as well.

There are a very few *wayang* stories of purely Javanese origin. Those that are indigenous to Java deal with such mythic events as the original peopling of the island, the origins of rice, and the generation and eventual domestication of a frightening monster born out of the god Siva's semen. Few of these stories are performed very often in Java today, although the last-mentioned one, called *Muruakala*, is given in connection with a daytime performance-cum-ritual on behalf of people thought to be at risk of misfortune. Some stories native to Java that were performed annually as part of village-wide rituals are now falling into disuse as those rituals are abandoned.

In the past, many Javanese believed that the stories about Abyasa and his ancestors and descendants recounted the history of Java. Ancient temples on the Dieng Plateau (near Wonosobo in Central Java) are considered by some Javanese to this day to be the tombs of certain of Abyasa's grandsons and their servants. Most Javanese, however, have been taught that the

stories are originally from India, and they are inclined to be non-committal on the subject of whether the events ever really happened anywhere.

In actual fact, the vast majority of shadow plays performed in Java relate stories based on one of the two great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*. It is impossible to know precisely how or when Java came to obtain this immense cache of stories. But it is clear that they have influenced Javanese arts for centuries, even as Javanese artists of all sorts have shaped the stories to their own purposes.

The *Mahabharata* is the more popular of the two epics in Java.¹ It contains hundreds of stories about several generations of characters whose lives intertwine in a complex history of heroism, deceit, and violence. Out of the welter of stories, Javanese focus their attention on those that concern the final two generations of heroes and their enemies, the Pandhawa and the Kurawa, whose civil war, the *Bratayuda*, brings the epic to a close. The story 'Pandhu Crowned King' narrates events before that period and is referred to by Javanese as an 'old story', meaning that it features the ancestors of the best-known characters, not those characters themselves. It is relatively rare for a *dalang* to give such a performance: many fear that the spectators will be disappointed if the figures they know best do not appear.

The antecedents of the *Bratayuda*, the concluding war, go far back before the story of Pandhu's coronation. But Abyasa's decision to give up his throne in favour of his second, not his eldest, son, provides the immediate impetus to that fratricidal conflict among his grandsons. Drestarata, Abyasa's blind son, sires 100 offspring, known collectively as the Kurawa. Pandhu has only five children, three sons by his first wife and two by his second. The five together are known as the Pandhawa, and they personify all the virtues of the warrior ethic. The eldest,

¹This may not always have been the case. The temples at Prambanan in Central Java are decorated with stunning reliefs depicting scenes from the *Ramayana*.

Yudhistira, is supremely patient, honest, and judicious. The second, Bima, is larger and much less refined in appearance and manner (Colour Plate 16), but he always uses his great physical strength to champion righteousness. (Plate 19) The third son, Ajuna, is unrivalled in his attractiveness, his physical grace, and his martial skill, and in his capacity to bring spiritual force to bear in the effort to achieve any goal. The twins Nakula and Sadéwa, born to Pandhu's younger queen, have less sharply delineated character traits, but they are trusted and valiant assistants to their older half-brothers.

The Pandhawa's adherence to the code of conduct of warriors contrasts with the inclinations of their cousins, the Kurawa, who are given to greed, envy, and deceitfulness. The eldest of Drestarata's sons is Duryudana, whose own weaknesses are only exacerbated by the malevolent stratagems urged upon him by his counsellors, the potent but evil Priest Durna, and the equally devious prime minister of Ngastina, Arya Sangkuni. Fate offers these power-hungry characters an opportunity to test their nefarious skills, because Pandhu dies before his sons have grown and the Kurawa exercise authority over Ngastina as regents until the Pandhawa reach maturity. When that time arrives, however, Duryudana is persuaded by Priest Durna and Prime Minister Sangkuni to use every conceivable artifice to retain control over the kingdom. To make matters still worse, when the Pandhawa, banished to the forest, use their talents and virtue to build a kingdom of their own, Ngamarta, the Kurawa are filled with envy and wish to wrest it from them as well. The Kurawa's refusal to grant the Pandhawa the patrimony they are due, and the further insult of their demanding the kingdom that is the fruit of the Pandhawa's own labour, pits the Kurawa and Pandhawa against each other and leads to the carnage of the *Bratayuda*, a struggle in which both camps suffer tragically but that the gods themselves insist must occur.

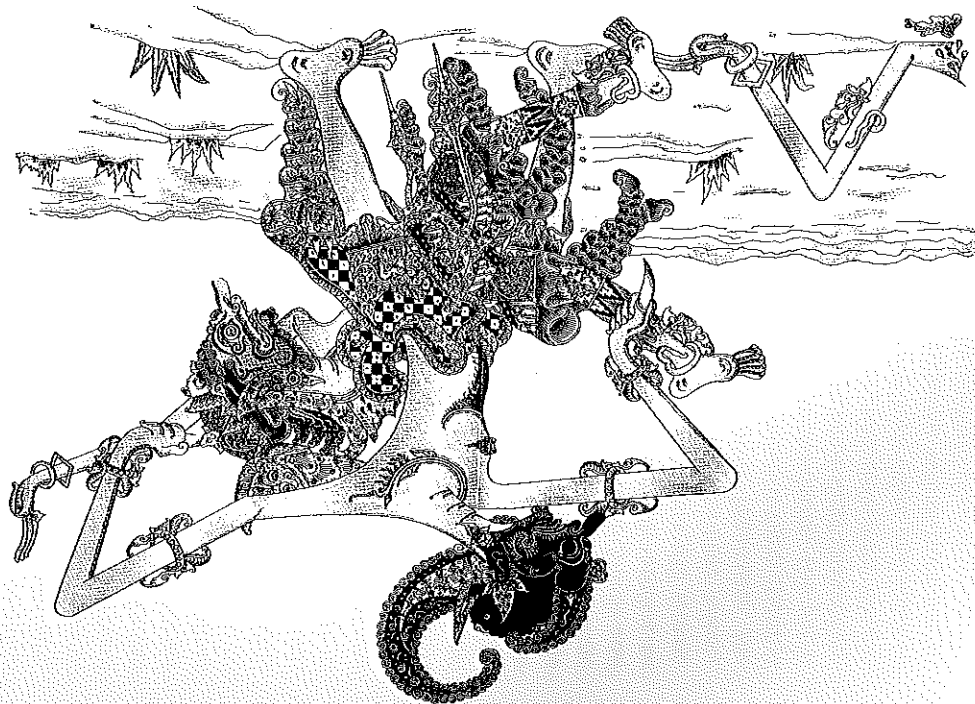
Despite the outward simplicity of the central conflict between Abyasa's grandsons, an endless net of incidents, coincidences, and unexpected causal links ties the corpus of stories into an immense epic whole. But a great majority of shadow plays

narrate events during the time when the Pandhawa have established their kingdom in Ngamarta and stand poised to challenge the Kurawa for the return of Ngastina to their authority. That is why Javanese audiences are more likely to recognize the Kurawa, Pandhawa, and their respective children, kinsmen, and advisers, than characters from earlier parts of the cycle.

Although the moment just before the outbreak of the *Bratayuda* seems to intrigue Javanese most, few performances actually recount the events of that war. Some villages give annual performances of all or part of the *Bratayuda* in conjunction with a village purification or harvest ritual. This practice is usually justified on the grounds that the spirits of the villages' founders demand it. But it is considered very dangerous. The violence in the stories has always been thought powerful enough to unleash the forces of chaos in life, and few people have the nerve to ask a *dalang* to give such a performance.

Although the outlines of the epic stories, and even fine details about feuds and grudges that mark relations between particular characters, are clearly traceable to Indian sources, Javanese *dalang* have not been purely passive recipients of that heritage. They distinguish between 'principal stories' (*lakon pokok*) and 'branch stories' (*lakon carangan*). The former concern the great events of the epics, stories that must remain largely unchanged by their narrators, while the latter embellish that larger structure with imaginative additions. Puppeteers are enjoined to respect the basic character traits, kinship ties, and chronological sequence of events in the two epics, as well as the outline of the stories, but are free to make up branch stories of their own, weaving diverting and original patterns into the larger design.

Such stories may be played only a few times by a single *dalang*, or they may prove so popular and widely diffused as to become part of the permanent repertoire. However, these newer branch stories, including a great many for which Ki Anom Soeroto is famous, are actually less complex and less distinctive than many of the classical stories. 'Pandu Crowned King' has a more elaborate plot than most branch stories, and



19. Blima, one of the five Pandhawa brothers, tears his enemy, Dursasana, limb from limb. In a performance, there would be no background, but a puppeteer might fashion a special, cardboard puppet to rip apart in this climactic battle near the conclusion of the *Mahabharata*. (Drawing by Suharto)

because it recounts events that play a critical part in the later relations among Abyasa's descendants, it resonates much more deeply with the larger structure of the epic. Yet it is performed relatively rarely, crowded out by the lighter, simpler stories devised by contemporary *dalang*.

A common plot device in many newly invented stories, for example, turns on the attempt on the part of both the Pandhawa and the Kurawa to obtain a mystical boon, a *wahyu*, that will bring with it a guarantee of prosperity, well-being, and/or assurance of rule over a kingdom. Often a third party from across the sea is also in pursuit of the same *wahyu*. Such boons, however, cannot be won by force of arms or intrigue: they are granted only in recognition of superior spiritual potency, a self-denying control over all one's own desires and whims. The Pandhawa are models of such ascetic capacity while the Kurawa cannot do any more than go through the motions. People from across the sea are all known to be in the thrall of their own impulses—many a contemporary tourist confirms that long-held Javanese impression—and there is really no doubt about the outcome of such a story: the contender from the Pandhawa camp, usually Arjuna's son Angkawijaya, will win the *wahyu* in the end. But the *dalang* who creates any given version of this type of story can introduce various novel situations. Like a Hollywood Western, one then enjoys the variations on the same old themes and does not expect to be held in any suspense as to the ultimate result.

The few stories of indigenous, as opposed to Indic, origin, plus some versions of the *Bratayuda* stories, are the only ones that permit a puppeteer to structure a performance freely. All other performances follow a fixed pattern that gives them a surprising degree of consistency. Every performance begins with a long introduction in which the *dalang* describes a kingdom enjoying prosperity and peace, followed by a series of greetings among the people assembled at court. A matter of concern to the king and his courtiers is eventually broached, but no matter what the nature of that problem is, the king's return to his private chambers and the departure of the troops invariably follow the opening scene. A scene in another court

comes next, followed by some skirmishes among troops sent out from the two kingdoms so far implicated in events. And so it goes: a scene in a hermitage, the humorous routines when the servants first appear, the knight's progress through the forest and encounter with an ogre in which the latter suffers the ultimate disgrace of dying by his own sword—all these scenes are included in every performance.

Performances given in the two Javanese court centres of Solo (or Surakarta) and Jogja (or Yogyakarta) differ in detail with regard to the fixed sequence of scenes. For example, in Jogjane performances a battle develops out of the discussion in the first scene, whereas in Solo the first battle does not usually occur until later, after the scene introducing a second court. Other differences in stylistic detail distinguish language, dress, music, dance, and custom among the royal houses of Jogja and Solo and the people once subject to them. Those differences are still jealously maintained and they explain why, for example, Ki Anom Soeroto draws a large crowd when he performs in the region of Jogja but much larger ones when he performs in his native Solo, but they are not really fundamental.

Ki Anom Soeroto's telling of 'Pandhu Jumeneng Nata' (Pandhu Crowned King) is representative of much about other performances of *wayang kulit*. Another *dalang* would certainly perform it differently, and Ki Anom himself made many changes when he performed the same story for a different occasion. (For the radio he greatly reduced the comic elements and increased the moralizing ones, for example, Bagong's remarks about the need to stop meting-out-summary justice.) Nevertheless, the story fits into the larger-story cycle of the *Mahabharata*, as do most stories performed in Javanese *wayang*, and the set order of scenes structured the performance just as it does virtually all performances, no matter what the story. Like most other *wayang*, too, this occasion was a noteworthy event in the sponsors' relations with other families. It remains to ask what deeper sense people might make of the performance, or really, of the *wayang* tradition overall. The next chapter will outline suggestions that have been made as to what *wayang* means.

What Might *Wayang* Mean?

AN extravagantly beautiful and complicated art form, Javanese *wayang kulit* has long attracted the interest of people from outside Java. Many accounts have been provided, by foreign as well as Javanese commentators, to explain one or another facet of the genre.

Interpreting any art form opens on to controversy, and *wayang* is no exception to this rule. That so many ways of construing it have been proposed—some mutually contradictory, some complementary—demonstrates how rich, suggestive, and at the same time elusive, a performing art it is.

Javanese Commentaries

Javanese commentary on *wayang* tends to focus not on where the stories came from or what historical validity they might have, but rather on the moral lessons that might inhere in them all. In this reading, every story is reduced to a single progression in an individual's ethical development. A performance is taken to be analogous with the life-course. It starts from pregnancy and birth—equated with the music played before the play begins—and continues through the travails of youth—equated with the battles with ogres that take place during the middle section of every performance—and finally ends with the triumph of virtue both in a person's life and among the competing parties in a performance. What this interpretive approach really does is to disregard individual stories in favour of the fixed structure common to all performances, including the threefold division into sections (as distinguished by different musical modes) and the recurrence of certain invariant scenes.

Probably one reason many Javanese feel inclined to gloss stories in this way is because Java's religious history has

removed the theological resonance the stories once had in Javanese culture. Ancient Java was deeply influenced by both Hindu and Buddhist teachings, as well as by indigenous ideas both about spirits that inhabit places and about spirits of one's ancestors that still hover about the living. Most Javanese lowlanders were eventually converted to Islam, however, and the Hindu gods ceased to be seen as the rulers of the cosmos. Stories about them could no longer be thought to account for the nature of the world. In place of the cosmological significance they had in the past, therefore, the Hindu myths had to be given some other sort of significance.

The result seems to represent a compromise between Javanese religious understandings, on the one hand, and their longstanding cultural inheritance, on the other. That is, Muslim doctrine replaced Hindu as an explanation of how the cosmos operates. But subjective experience could still be described in diverse kinds of imagery, and the Hindu myths as preserved and narrated in *wayang* eventually came to be seen, at least by some Javanese commentators, to refer to individual, psychological matters. *Wayang*, in this view, describes the moral progress of an individual as he or she comes to reach spiritual maturity.

This way of interpreting *wayang* does not, however, seem convincing to all Javanese. Strict Muslims in Java have long argued against Javanese practices intended to propitiate territorial and ancestral spirits, and some express disapproval of *wayang* as a heathen entertainment, one smacking of heterodox ideas and practices. When Ki Anom has Semar praise Pandhu's ascetic exercises in Seven Peaks, saying that doing so is not at all the same as praying to rocks and trees, he is defending Javanese practices from their religiously more orthodox detractors.

When non-Javanese ask, as many do, about the religious significance of *wayang*, it is difficult to come up with a simple response. Few Javanese are comfortable with a distinction Westerners make between secular and religious domains: ideas Westerners would classify as one or the other tend to be combined in Javanese thinking about experience. To the extent

that Javanese do think in terms of formal religious doctrine, *wayang* does not enter into discussion: Muslim doctrine, or in the case of lesser numbers of people, Christian or other dogma, fulfils the definition of 'religion'. To the extent, though, that religion might imply a concern with either supernatural beings or with ethical matters, *wayang* could well be said to have religious overtones.

Many Javanese believe the landscape to be crowded with querulous and potentially troublesome spirits, and such spirits are thought particularly likely to interfere in humans' affairs at times of life-passage rituals. Providing spirits with offerings—a specially shaped mound of rice, some bananas, a coconut, etc.—helps dissuade them from attack. At a shadow play, such offerings are placed beneath the screen (Plate 20). However, Javanese ideas about spirits are somewhat vague, whereas the



20. Offerings are set out beneath the screen at a performance in order to placate any spirits that may inhabit particularly old puppets or musical instruments, or any other spirits—ancestral, territorial, or whatever—that may come upon the performance.

people that attend performances are immediately present. That makes the human audience rather more vivid to people's minds, especially the minds of performers and sponsors, than any spirits thought likely to be about. Furthermore, spirits are believed to cause upset and trouble, and people are apt to try to send them away rather than attract them. It would therefore be an exaggeration to say, as some Westerners have claimed, that spirits are the audience for which a performance is really intended.¹

As for the ethical side of *wayang*, many Javanese, and certainly many *dalang*, believe the stories to contain moral teachings of great value, and of central importance to Javanese culture.² Concepts of moral responsibility, self-control, obligations to one's kin, and the consequences of one's actions, are all implicated in the stories *wayang* tell. To the extent that one wishes to label such lessons as 'religious', then a *wayang* performance has a religious dimension.

Rather than look for 'religious' meanings in shadow plays, however, it is really more fitting to see in them what Javanese often speak of as their most important quality: the way they illustrate both the importance of hierarchy in ordering social relations and every person's responsibility to respect that order by fulfilling his or her own role within it. Javanese society is profoundly shaped by understandings of people's 'place' (as in the English phrase, 'to know your place'), and any behaviour that flies in the face of such notions is very disturbing to many people. The world *wayang* presents to spectators is one even more consistently and irrevocably defined by hierarchy than everyday life. Most stories develop out of challenges or contraventions of the proper, that is to say, hierarchically ordered, way things are and are meant to be. The resolution of every 'plot' is the neutralization of that threat to order in the world.

The whole conflict between the Pandhawa and the Kurawa develops because the elder line, the Kurawa, normally the hierarchically superior party, are born to a physically defective

¹See, for example, the conclusion to Becker, 1979.

²See, for example, Sastroamidjojo, 1964, or Mulyono, 1977.

father and so lose their rights to Ngastina. It is easy to see why they would want to challenge the hierarchical ordering that results, yet they are wrong to do so.³ In the course of the struggle between the Kurawa and the Pandhawa, meanwhile, a great cast of characters exemplifies in words and deeds the styles of interaction that go with status differences, differences that include all types of beings, whether human, divine, animal, or supernatural. To call this image of the world either religious or not would be to impose upon it categories foreign to Javanese thinking. It is an image of the world that is simply, and universally, hierarchical.

To respect hierarchy and fulfil one's responsibilities in the social order it sets up means, above all, to speak in a manner appropriate to one's own station and to the station of the person one addresses. Non-Javanese are often startled by the degree to which this issue of speaking in the proper style concerns Javanese. But Javanese see the ability to speak and to interact with the appropriate degree of formality as the defining characteristic of personal maturity. The Javanese language obliges a speaker to choose every time he or she says anything at all—among a number of different words, all of which mean the same thing but imply different kinds of relations among speakers. *Wayang* illustrates this system of speech styles in all its precision and richness, thereby helping to maintain it, and many Javanese praise *wayang* and explain its unique prestige by reference to just that fact.⁴

Western Commentaries

Western analysts have looked for different sorts of information in *wayang*, and they have constructed a number of theories to account for its origins and for its significance in Javanese

³See Anderson, 1965, for a sensitive account of the moral ambiguities of the conflict, as well as the importance of hierarchy in all of *wayang*.

⁴A more complete discussion of Javanese interpretations of *wayang*, and of *wayang's* place in Javanese society, is to be found in Keeler, 1987.

society. As in all matters intercultural, the debates within Western circles about *wayang* reflect the preoccupations and assumptions Westerners have brought to the subject.⁵ A brief review of some of the major positions Westerners have taken points to shifts in Western intellectual history, as well as to contrasting ways of making sense of *wayang*.

Western scholarly interest in the genre goes back to the late eighteenth century, and it grew in the course of the nineteenth century, as more and more Westerners visited Java. Before he became Singapore's earliest developer, the colourful and resourceful Thomas Raffles was the lieutenant-governor of Java: his *History of Java*, published in 1817, attests to his interest in *wayang*. Dutch scholars soon started making available translations of texts of performances, although—disappointingly to modern scholars—they tended to omit the jokes and clowning routines that they thought insignificant. In line with the philological bent of nineteenth-century Orientalist scholarship, several Westerners devoted time and attention to searching for the sources in Indian literature of Javanese *wayang* stories, pointing out the deviations from Indian models to be found in Javanese versions of the epics.

Not just variants in the stories, but the relations between Javanese *wayang* and Indian and other prototypes more generally became the subject of debate among Western scholars by the end of the nineteenth century, and the debate continued well into the twentieth. Although the place of origin of the stories was never in doubt, it could not be decided where or why the basic technique of the performance arose. Could the Javanese simply have imitated an ancient Indian shadow puppet tradition, even if that tradition had disappeared in India? Could they, instead, have imitated the Chinese shadow play, since it is still performed in China, even though in general Chinese cultural influence in Java has been relatively slight?

⁵The Dutch *wayang* scholar, Victoria Clara van Groenendael, provides an excellent synopsis of these debates in the 'Introduction' to her annotated bibliography, 1987, pp. 11–21, and I am drawing on her work here.

The argument about the indigenous versus the Indian or Chinese origins of *wayang* precisely mirrors controversies about the prehistory of South-East Asia that continue to this day. It was long believed that such mainstays of South-East Asian societies as rice and metal-working were introduced to the region from the supposedly culturally and technologically more dynamic neighbouring civilizations of India and China. This representation of South-East Asia as the passive recipient of outside influences, rather than as the active creator of its own heritage, permeated the colonial powers' vision of the region. Whether consciously or unconsciously, it helped justify the colonialists' presence as the virile force needed to make the area bear fruit.⁶ In recent years, archaeological work, particularly in mainland South-East Asia, has contested the view that rice or metal-working need necessarily have developed elsewhere,⁷ and in any case the possibility of independent invention in several regions is not to be ruled out. The whole argument about where certain technological methods were first adopted suggests an anachronistic application of nationalistic or communal concerns—competition for glory among rival ethnic groups or national populations—to questions that are based on faulty assumptions. The domestication of rice, for example, was not a sudden invention to be claimed by one person or group of persons. It was not a contest in which we can, with hindsight, declare certain people the winners.

It is not surprising, however, that when they turned to consider the prehistory of *wayang*, Western scholars were apt to assume by the same sorts of reasoning that South-East Asia depended on foreign traditions for cultural stimuli. The emphasis on texts in Western approaches to Asian civilization, following the pioneering work on Sanskrit in the eighteenth century, meant that places with the largest quantities of writing as well as the longest tradition of writing practices—and in Asia this meant India and China—appeared to be the founts of all

⁶See on this point Peterson, 1982-3.

⁷See Higham, 1989.

civilization. Furthermore, Java could be seen to have borrowed heavily from India with respect to religious ideas. It was easy to conclude that Java had borrowed much of everything else.

Claims for the Indian origin of the practice of projecting images upon a screen appeared stronger when it was found that shadow plays were performed in southern India. Already in the nineteenth century, however, some scholars thought that the genre must have been created by the Javanese themselves. This claim was supported by reference to the vocabulary describing the basic tools of the *dalang's* craft, such as the name of the coconut-oil lamp that was the traditional light source: the word, *bléncong*, is not of Indic origin. Neither, for that matter, is the word *dalang*.

The debate about the origins of *wayang* was linked to speculation about its original purpose or function. An eminent Dutch scholar, Hazeu, suggested at the end of the last century that the whole genre developed out of a cult in honour of the spirits of the ancestors.⁸ Rituals surrounding death are numerous in Java, as indeed they are throughout Indonesia. Every Javanese who dies beyond infancy is honoured by ceremonies observed on the day of death, three days later, seven days later, forty days later, 100 days later, one year later, two years later, and 1,000 days after the date of death. This profusion of funerary observances—by no means the most elaborate or extensive in the region—is indicative of how important many South-East Asian peoples, including Javanese, believe relations between the living and the dead to be. It seemed evident to many Dutch scholars that *wayang* must fit in with this preoccupation with one's ancestors. Indeed, it was felt that the shadow figures themselves probably originally represented the spirits of the ancestors, and only later came to be identified with the characters of the Indic epics, as Hindu influence suffused Javanese culture.

The problem with such reconstructions of the original or essential nature of *wayang* is that they are virtually impossible

⁸See Hazeu, 1897.

to verify. Javanese today certainly do not look upon the shadows cast upon the screen as the spirits of their ancestors. Actually, some Javanese think that the first propagators of Islam in Java—the so-called *Wali Sanga*—originated, or at least developed, *wayang* as a means of spreading Muslim teachings and converting people to the religion. This view seems hardly credible, both on the grounds of historical chronology and on the grounds that the message of Islam stands counter to the Hindu-based image of the cosmos inherent to the world of *wayang*. Yet, because so little evidence exists concerning *wayang* in Java in the past, no theory can be either accepted or rejected out of hand. Once again, the preconceptions and preoccupations of the analysts necessarily inform every suggestion as to *wayang*'s essence. To cite two somewhat outrageous examples, one Dutch scholar saw in a *wayang* performance vestiges of initiation rites carried out in an originally totemistic Javanese society,⁹ while another¹⁰ saw phallic implications in such details as the large thumbs of certain figures, including Bima, related to the god of the winds! Initiation rites, totemism, and phallic symbols were all in the air in Western intellectual circles at the turn of the century, and it is not surprising that they cropped up in theories about the meaning of *wayang*.

Another favoured suggestion about *wayang* among Western commentators would have it that they afford *dalang* an opportunity to engage in political criticism—this in a society that has otherwise always severely restricted political expression. By veiled allusions in the story-line and sly comments put in the mouths of 'foolish' servants, it is claimed, *dalang* can make political points without fear of reprisal. The image of *dalang* making subversive comments and getting away with it is appealing to anyone who favours freedom of expression over uncritical acceptance of authority. At a very local level, *dalang* probably do make covert references to familiar political figures, and at times of dynastic change or upheaval in Javanese history

⁹Rassers, 1922.

¹⁰Serrurier, 1896.

wayang probably did become a means of more daring political expression. In the 1950s and early 1960s, when Indonesian society became divided into intensely competing political factions, *wayang* certainly was drawn into the general politicization of Javanese life. Nevertheless, it would be an exaggeration to think that most *dalang* engage in the risks of political controversy today, that they did so routinely in the past, or that spectators expect to find examples of such resistance to established authority in many performances they attend. To treat *wayang* as a form of political expression would also be unduly reductionist, since it would explain a complex art form with reference to only one kind of meaning.

More central to the *wayang* tradition than any essential 'meaning' is the aesthetic pleasure it affords its spectators by means of the compelling quality of its images, the beauty of its music, the complexity of its stories, and the enveloping atmosphere of a night-long, deliberately paced entertainment. Some of these very qualities, particularly the last one, seem out of kilter with the society Java is now becoming, and raise questions about whether *wayang* can remain a viable art form—questions that will be addressed in the concluding chapter.