

Research Article

Envisioning the Future, Revisioning the Past: Wayang and Topeng as (Re)Sources

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ORCIDKathy Foley: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3036-8493>**Abstract.**

Indonesia has a rich array of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) forms on which artists can draw to create new forms and variations. Among these, two of them are the sibling arts of *wayang* puppetry and *topeng* mask dance which show significant overlap in character typology, repertoire and other features. Outsiders often focus on narrative content and surmise these forms – first documented in the Hindu-Buddhist period (around the ninth century), are merely Indian materials in the Indonesian dress. However, anyone who has studied the *wayang/topeng* complex, knows that Indian practices, especially as we see them today, only partly inform these arts. Understanding the macrocosm via the microcosm of art is a core point of *wayang/topeng*. The numerology of Muslim esoteric ideas is also deeply embedded. Indigenous ideas of personhood and intergenerational links are inherent. The *wayang/topeng* tradition compresses cosmic conceptions into performance's limited space-time continuum. Masking/puppetry has many layers from indigenous to internationally linked concepts, and the art has been elaborated on by thinkers of the Indonesian cultural heritage for at least a 1000 years. How and why should new generations of artist-makers keep these concepts alive as they experiment with new media and respond to changing times? What elements of design, what histories, and what ideas inform these arts and artifacts? What can be gained by using cultural heritage through the arts to envision and respond to the future?

Keywords: wayang, performance, design

First a self-introduction, I was not born to a *dalang* (puppet master/mask dancer) lineage, but, as a Euro-American artist trained during an intercultural movement of Euro-American performance, became a student of *wayang* in the late 1970s[1]. I was seeking a revival of commedia dell'arte, that western mask improvised theatre, and was following the work of modern Italian master Dario Fo [2] and French physical theatre trainer Jaques Lecoq [3]. During travel, I discovered embodied improvisatory performance was alive in 1970s Indonesian *topeng* and *wayang*. And once I discovered this, like a comet

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under the gravitational pull of magnetic planet, I was pulled deeper into the *wayang* complex, writing dissertation on *wayang golek* (1979) and I have been performing for forty years, usually in the US, but also in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Australia. I am most familiar with *wayang golek*, *wayang orang*, and *topeng cirebon* but have also done *teater modern* with Arifin C Noer[4], played gamelan, and created exhibits of Indonesian and Southeast Asian masks and puppets. I have explored forms like (group Islamic chant-movement) and *kuda kepong* (horse dance) and *sintren* (Cirebon trance dance)[5], and combined Sundanese and Balinese dance movement with non-Indonesian stories including the Iranian tale of Shirin-Kosrow, India's Radha-Krishna, Arabia's Layla-Majnun, and even Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Goethe's *Faust*. I have, with the help of Bandung born drummer Undang Sumarna, mounted many University of California Santa Cruz student productions in *wayang orang* style. 1-14. Based on some of this activity I explore the relation of Indonesian cultural heritage in contemporary performance innovations.

Indonesia has a rich array of intangible cultural heritage forms artist can tap for form and/or content, including the sibling arts of *wayang* puppetry and *topeng* mask dance, sibling arts that show significant overlap in character typology, repertoire and other features. Outsiders often focus on narrative content of *wayang* and therefore surmise the art first documented from the Hindu-Buddhist period (ninth century), is merely Indian materials in Indonesian dress. However, anyone who has been inside the *wayang/topeng* complex, knows Indian *Mahabharatas*, *Ramayanas*, can only roughly explain these genres. Probably 75% of the repertoire is homegrown *carangan* (branch stories) made in Indonesia and even the seemingly Hindu epic base of the core moments when Hindu heroes were born or died is interpreted with a distinctly Indonesian eye and aesthetic.

How art (as a microcosm) can illuminate wider meaning (the macrocosm) is a persistent theme in the *wayang* complex. How the "one" (as in the imagery of the *kayon* or "tree of life" puppet) becomes and is many, is fundamental to the performance. Numerological thinking of the five (four directions and center) the ten (nine apertures of the body and the divine) add Muslim esoteric thought as part of the package. *Wayang* is meant to compress cosmic understanding into our limited space-time continuum, simultaneously providing hearty entertainment, politico-social messaging, and a bit of psycho-somatic magic. The multiple layers include indigenous thinking of Austronesian ancestors who came from Taiwan with concepts of spirit siblings that guard us in life

to more international influences floating in from India, Iran, China and the Hejaz. From Panji as a Southeast Asian cultural hero, to Arjuna or Rama as Indian prototypes, to Amir Hamzah with his Shiite colorings, to the Wali Songgo (Nine Saints) history tales, to modern appropriations of western tales (including Goenawan Mohamad and Endo Suanda's 2019-2022 *Den Kisot* (Don Quixote), deep thinkers of the Indonesian cultural heritage have reworked ideas through multiple generations. Thus I invite you to think: should new generations of artist-makers keep these concepts alive as they experiment with new media and respond to changing times? If so what elements of design are embedded in these performing visual artifacts that might persist in appeal? What are the motivating ideas? What might be gained by using these sources as resource to envision the future?

I urge you as artists and thinkers of the twenty-first century to forge your personal relationship to your Intangible Cultural Heritage in the same way that a western artist might rework Shakespeare or commedia dell'arte. Forms like *wayang* that were created by long tradition have had the "kinks" worked out of them and parts are worth carrying forward and making anew. Of course there is that dilemma of what parts to take.

This predicament was articulated by cultural critic Walter Benjamin's in his essay about the "Angel of History"[6]. In 1921 had brought a monoprint by avantgarde artist Paul Klee called "Angelus Novus" (New Angel). Writing about this work of art, as Benjamin was trying to avoid Nazi extermination in World War II Europe, Benjamin wrote:

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer hold them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. [6]

The Angel's predicament was that of Benjamin in 1940. European culture was crumbling. He was fleeing, hoping to get to Portugal and America for survival. In fraught times you carry little, what do you take with you in difficult times when you cannot even see what will be needed the future?

Java of course has its own vision of a "storm blowing from Paradise", demon time—Batara Kala, the demon son of Batara Guru, high god of the universe, born of Guru's semen that falls as that high god attempts to rape his wife, Uma who resists [7]. That "spilt seed" Kala stalks each of us just as he hunts Bambang Jatusmati. Misguided Demon Time, consumes each of us, in the same way the phantom wind propels Benjamin's

angel: so what to take forward from a dense cultural heritage in an embattled moment moving toward our unknowable future?

I invite you to consider SIGNPOSTS of past, present, future as you confront the question and note that Education is a time when one begins to choose what to take forward. Since we live socially, community and self are points to consider and one must remember the economic realities. We need enough to live, people with whom to share our lives, and space—an ecologically sound existence, for a sustainable future; the green “center” that we see makes a world that is environmentally viable, just, and well informed. I urge you to look to roots and heritage to help you as you must make present choices and am encouraging you to take *wayang/topeng*—an art form that can expand into colossal show of a hundred or a thousand *wayang orang* dancers, but it is in its essence a one *dalang*/one person endeavor. Realize too that embodied experience and the liveness of arts is what can alleviate the depression, suicide, and vitriol that pulses through the world wide web pushing society into the present’s divisive fragments. Making music, dancing together, creating images and stories brings order to a disordered universe and pulls communities together to understand and not apart.

Our study of history is not really to remember the past, but it is to pave the way for the future. The heritage of Southeast Asia has always been hybrid. Austronesian who became Malayo-Polynesian speakers may pushed off from Taiwan by sea spreading to islands and mainland areas of Southeast Asia—an early “settler culture” as we define that term today encountering Melanesian early inhabitants. Influences and people circulated in this region always via sea. Tradition tells us that Islam came to Java from Champa (Malana Malik Ibrahim who may have earlier connections or line of descent from Samarakand). History notes many of the early Muslims were at least part-Chinese since they were involved as merchants in these trade routes. Indo-Persian influences have always been in the mix—the night before the fall of Malacca in 1511 the story of Amir Hamzah imported via Persia was chanted to the soldiers and was later taken up by the court of Surakarta, probably to model the *susuhunan*’s resistance to the Dutch. Southeast Asia. Current China-Indonesia or Sunni-Shi’a splits should not mask how Islam arrived and why it was embraced. The past embraced and reconciled different ethnic and sectarian groups. This was an interconnected world where ideas travel via water and outsiders were welcomed. *Wayang*, *topeng* and *ronggeng* are found all around the Gulf of Thailand moving freely across the divides modern nationalism has raised and these arts were shared across the region.

I am going to talk about numbers that seem part of the heritage of the Islamic numerology tradition which built on earlier thinking associated with Austronesian and Hindu-Buddhist culture. The numbers add up to a philosophy of *wayang/topeng*.

One and ten are the ultimate numbers—where thinking begins and ends with two, four and nine as the steps in between. There are stories and thought processes to go with each of these numbers. They begin and end with our body and our ability to see ourself in relation to the elements the of tree, mountain, and cosmos. Envisioning ourselves as a potential center and becoming unified with the divine is part of a process of moving from the lower needs to our highest potential. While this process is old and in Hindu-Buddhist culture might be called *nyasa* (a process of imagining letters or syllables on various points of the body and moving up to cleanse or purify), it is a widespread practice that crosses different religious systems. Chinese Taoism calls in *neiden*, the Balinese do it with their use of the *aksara*, in the west there is Leonardo Da Vinci's Vitruvian man, the whirling dervish is the image of the Mevlani Sufi: all represent the same idea. Movement from lower to higher through the imaginative process to get from the mundane to the eternal.

This “oneness” is what the *Kayon/Gunungan* (tree/ mountain) of Indonesian wayang. An image of our potential for self-realization, movement from the demon (ogre at the bottom) to the divine (lotus at the top). Its trunk is our spine and the snake (*naga*) the spinal cord and nerves (India's *nadi*). The symbol is related to the Greek god Hermes caduseus, the symbol of doctors in the west. “Oneness” is also the clown(*punakawan*)-black and white, day and night and male and female. This is the characteristic Semar in Sunda/Java, Pak Dogol in Kelantan. He is first principle emerging from the cosmic egg when the universe first came to be. The preference for a solo storyteller *dalang* or a solo dancer in *topeng* is about the same “oneness”: in one person—all the many characters good, bad, and beautiful and ugly exist. Whether, *kulit* shadows, *topeng* masks, wooden *klitik* puppets or *beber* scroll narration—one person is behind all the goodness and badness that is. The demon and the deity are just the right and left hands of the same being.

Perhaps the most important story in the traditional repertoire and already mentioned, is the same *Murwa Kala* (Origin of Kala). Kala, literally time, is son of Siwa, Batara Guru, who's born of Siwa's own attempt at rape. Siwa gives Kala his sword—death, disease—to smite us. But if we read the syllables Siwa wrote on Kala's body (an art of *nyasa*) to music, Kala can see his demon nature and become calm, to be divine. Western drama's

most important repertoire is dialectical—the protagonist struggles with the antagonist and overcomes him and usually gets the girl. It is Hegelian struggle. Wayang's struggle is of the lower body with the upper, of left arm with right, of self with self, and you don't "get the girl," you get enlightenment. This is the exorcism/the *ruwatan* or "making safe" we see in the Kala story. You escape Kala/time and can then live in time out of time. Music, dance, images, chants help you get to the "eternal" goal, but the work of getting there is up to each of us to calm our inner Kala.

The next story is really the related but of two mediated by threenes It is inset at the opening of most Southeast Asian plays. In Java mostly just the mantra which draw on the Javanese *aksara*, alphabet.

Hanacaraka, datasawala, padajayanya, magabatanga

Tell of a story, two were sent, equal in power, both win death.

This passage is found in the Murwa of many genres of *wayang*. It is the story composed by Aji Saka the Hindu cultural bringer who left a *pusaka* (heirloom) dagger with his two men, who fought and killed one other. But this odd passage is also referring to the twoness, male and female; black and white; day and night. The difference we experience in the material world. We study under the same "teacher" (the One referenced above) who can impart true wisdom. The fight is both living and the sexual act. The *lakon* (our journey) will conclude in death. The fight at the beginning of a wayang play that we hear in the Murwa is visually presented in related mask/puppet genres of Southeast Asia. In the *wayang kelantan* play it is the female verses the male spirits (*dewa panah*) who fight until admonished by the guru/*reusi*, the two monkeys that fight in nang talung of southern Thailand (Hanuman and Nilapat or white monkey and black monkey) and Khmer, Thai, Lao Khon/Khol mask performance are doing the same fight as we hear in the Murwa. They are confronting this cycle of living toward dying and must turn to the "teacher," the guru, the eternal for reconciliation and release.

The next story is of four moving toward fiveness. This is the four directions and the center, the path from youth to age. The reason that there are four major character types in *topeng* along the north coast is that this is a genre, like *wayang* created by the Wali to teach us about life. The characters are refined, semi-refined, strong and emotionally uncontrolled. They are danced by one person in *topeng* of the Cirebon region and the dance is meant, like the *ruwatan* to open us to our full potentiality. Masks of the red face are also the southern ocean where Tunami comes from and the base of the volcano which explodes. The white is the sky and the clam mountaintop that catches the clouds

delivers soothing rains. You can map these red lower and white higher on your body and then split them into all the characters (shades of beige and pink) that make up a play. The one in the center is the all-knowing because it recognizes all the good as well as the evil that our human potential and inevitable.

The types that underly *wayang* and *topeng* or unmasked dance drama are related to this system, these are the characters that make up every *wayang/topeng* story cycle, they have animals that represent the physical world, all of which appear on the Javanese “tree of life” *kayon*. You can find them whenever you want—just put your four fingers together hugging your thumb—uniting them into one. They are the *pancanaka*—Bima’s favored weapon and the reason that in stories like *Bima Suci* (Purification of Bima), this Mahabharat hero learns to achieve Sufi enlightenment by taking the journey into the self. The significance of the unification of the four directions into the center probably comes from an earlier the idea that one finds in Austronesian cultures which tell us we never come alone into the world. We are born with four siblings, the *saudara empat—ari-ari, puser, getih, air* (afterbirth, umbilical cord, blood, water). These siblings in our journey can help or harm us. For this reason in Java four masks around the central mask of Rumiang in *topeng Cirebon*, four clowns (*punakawan*) around the refined hero. This belief is related to rites given in times past to the *ari-ari* most places in the Malayo-Polynesian world. Our life, our fate, our destination are bound up with a dimension which is beyond the material and must be thought about with deliberation.

The final story I will tell is a story of completion which builds on but does not negate these earlier stories. It is the story of Nine which has a prehistory of the *nawangsa* (the four directions, quadrants and the center)—our nine directions. To get to completion you need nine going toward ten. This is the reason Java acknowledges Nine Wali (Wali Songo) (see Foley forthcoming [2023]). The most central to the arts is Sunan Kalijaga, though all of them are important in spreading Islam through the archipelago. It is even said that Kalijaga did *dawah* in Malaysia as Syek Malaya, creating some say *silat* as well as *wayang* and *topeng* there. The *wali* were also architects. The early masjid/mosques emulate their building principles which that the idea of the mountain/tree as an image in the pointed roof (perhaps following the earliest Chinese models of a Mosque in Southern China). The pillars descend from above like the branches of a waringan or banyan tree. A Chinese connection is found in the stories of intermarriages of the saints—Chinese wives or mothers or teachers are linked to many of these *wali*—and their connection to

trade networks are evinced in the pottery shards that decorate all the tombs and vases that are used in Mulud ceremonials in places like Cirebon [8].

The story of Sunan Kalijaga tells us how he (like Sultan Agung later) met and married Lara Kidul the goddess of Laut Kidul. She however hears of the Wali Songo and wants to study with Sunan Gunung Jati in Cirebon. She leaves Kalijaga. He in anger turns a robber highwayman, until he meets Nabi Khidir (the Green man of Islamic mysticism), who tells him to meditate by the stream. When he meditates Kalijaga decides to become a wali and uses his art to calm turbulent soul and invite the world into Islam. As a wandering *dalang* he meets Yudistira the last of the Pandawa brothers from the *Mahabharata* epic, who cannot die until he comprehends the *pusaka*, heirloom treasure that has been brought from heaven and given him by Semar, the *punakawan*. This is the Kalimadada. Kalijaga reads it—it is in Arabic. He translates: “There is no God but Allah, Mohammed is the Prophet.” Yudistira’s soul is complete and, entering Islam, he is released from earthly life uniting with Allah. This brings us to the end of stories from *wayang* arts but the completion is signified by the number ten—which is a return back to oneness by union with the divine. Ten, Five, and Three all are really related and point us back to the point of origin and destination—Ones is all.

I have spent too much time in the past, but I encourage you to look at the hybrid and many cultured past that build indigenous arts of beauty use and truth that are found in *wayang/topeng*. These arts brought Southeast Asians to Islam, that did not espouse the dialectical model that the Middle Easterners and Europeans put forth to define arts and drama. That model articulates that there is an enemy that one must first master. *Wayang* teaches that the “enemy” is just the unruly human soul that caught up like Kala in time and twoness. The illiterate who fails to read or hear the mantra that written into our body and sounded in the *kidung* which can calm, causing the demonic within to attacks others outside instead of realizing the fight is a battle for our soul. We must follow the signs of the one, the clown, the tree, the mosque, the mountain are pointing us on the journey up from our lower to higher. Taking the journey will put the human into contact with the divine.

There are great arts as part of Indonesian cultural heritage. All of them in their own ways link in to this same truth/journey. So get up from your computers and put your body into the music, your limb into the dance. Take up your puppets and try on your masks. Do it for your children, use your clowns, *punakawan*, to reflect on society’s inevitable failing. Southeast Asian artist ancestors have left traces of the path, the *tarik*at, which

allowed them to visualize the eternal in their arts. Merge these old arts with what you choose from the present, be it Asian, European, modern, or whatever. Digitize these resources if you want, just do not forget to keep dancing and singing in the community of others and realizing that you do not need bigger sound system or more lights to make great art. Beauty, wisdom, and truth are the greatest tools of the artist. They lead you toward a sustainable future and these home grown arts are strong sources and resources for building better lives for self and society. .

“Kembang pinitik tibar,an, tutup lawing si gotaka.” (Formula for closing *wayang golek sunda*)

The flower has been picked may its fragrance spread close the gate of Wisnu’s palace.

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