

## *Dakwah, Missionizing, and Wayang*

*Hindu, Islamic, Christian, Buddhist*

Kathy Foley

The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) have sometimes had a vexed relationship with theatrical performance. Visualizations and representations of the sacred and enactments can cause puritanical rejections. The aniconic bent may come from a focus on the divine as incomparable in perfection and radically separated from creation. In this line of thinking, by separation of self from everyday experience of the senses and the embrace of stillness, the embodied subject has the best possibility of encounter with the absolute.

Disembodied principles—written text and God-given laws/commandments—become the binding covenants that attach us to the eternal. Of course, such traditions use the arts but with some ambivalence, often awarding higher marks to less immediately sensorial manifestations. Writing, music, and church/mosque architecture, which can give a sense of distance and our smallness, may have pride of place. Visual arts representing the sacred may be considered more appropriate if they move toward the calligraphic and abstract, as in Islam and Judaism. Christianity, due to the embodiment of the godhead in Jesus, grants dispensation to bodily representation of the divine, but arguably the still visuals and sonic arts trump the mimetic. Embodied arts—dance and theater—rank lower since the body is regarded with some suspicion, needing to be disciplined in life and sloughed off in eternity to meet a divine, which has no tangible face.<sup>1</sup>

Hindu-Buddhist traditions, especially those with tantric leanings, operate differently. Manifestations of the divine are potential sources of destruction (Siwa/Shiva-Uma/Durga) as well as of creation and the divine and the material often are seen as having permeable borders (for example, avatars). Trance can sometimes allow human bodies to manifest the divine. This encourages a different hierarchy of the arts. Tangibility enhances, so sacred dance and theater, as the fuller

representations of how the divine suffuses the mundane, receive high valuation. Visual representations (yantra, mandala, sculptures, paintings) flourish, since the physical can manifest divinity in creation. The body in Tantrism is the *sine qua non* for human ascent toward the divine. Writing and music remain valued but do not seem to dominate in Mahayana (large vehicle, popular Buddhism) or yogic tantric cults, especially for lay people.

These very broad generalizations serve as background for spiritual practice in Javanized Southeast Asia, where preexisting spirituality related to ancestors, place spirits, and shamanic belief was a foundation. However, Austronesian religious strains will not be dealt with here but rather the persistent spiritual valuation of wayang, a music-dance-puppet theater of Indonesia and the Malay areas around the Gulf of Thailand.<sup>2</sup> Wayang serves historically as part of life-cycle ceremonies on Java for weddings and circumcisions as well as village purifications (*bersih desa*, literally “cleansing the village” of malign influences), and individual *ruwatan* (purification) ceremonies. This essay will point out Javanese/Sundanese wayang’s traces of Hindu-Buddhism of the eighth to the fourteenth centuries, in its lore of Indian culture bringer Aji Saka, which set the precedent for embodiment in spirituality; share legends of Islamization in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries by the Nine Saints (Wali Songo) showing spiritual valuation persisted in Indonesian Islam; and, finally note postcolonial experiments highlighting spirituality. The latter forms include Christian *wayang wahyu* (“revelation” wayang) from 1957; contemporary Buddhist *wayang buddha* beginning in 1975 and other experiments developed more recently; and neo-Islamic *wayang sadat*, promoting *dakwah* (“invitation”/proselytization) from 1985. Wayang in ritual first evolved in Hindu-Buddhist praxis. Puppetry for Islamic *dakwah* may be more legend than documented history, but the Islamic spiritual intents of the repertoire remained clear, if Sufi, in orientation. The postcolonial reinventions, if dimmed by secular modern urban culture, show puppetry with spiritual dimension continues across religious boundaries.

Spiritual mission is avowed by *dalangs* (puppet masters), who see wayang as both aesthetic entertainment and vehicle of spiritual communication. For example, in the 2021 International Wayang Day, Institute Seni Indonesia (Indonesian institute of the arts, ISI)-Surakarta sponsored a *ruwatan* (purification) performance for twenty-five individuals. Meanwhile, in a conference at ISI-Denpasar, faculty members—Balinese *dalang* I Ketut Kodi of ISI-Denpasar and Javanese *dalang* Bagong Pujiono from ISI Surakarta—emphasized spiritual-philosophical impacts of being a *dalang* in talks.<sup>3</sup> The spiritual intents of *tuntunan* (advisement, teaching) are central, these *dalangs* said, while social aspects of *tontonan* (spectacle, entertainment) allow audiences to receive teachings, Hindu, Muslim, or other.

#### HINDU-BUDDHIST CONVERSION: AJI SAKA

Aji Saka (*saka*—“pillar, core”) is the mythical Indic Hindu-Buddhist culture bringer who is credited with importing the Indian Hindu-Buddhist calendar to Java. No

dates are given for his arrival, but aspects of Indian culture have been present in the archipelago since the fifth century CE. Aji Saka is said to have ruled in “Medang Kemulan” (Old Mataram). By the ninth century, we encounter Javanese inscriptions with clear references to wayang-like puppetry and masking (*topeng*)—both of which now fall under the broader term wayang. The major repertoire from the ninth century to the present is adaptations of Indian epics (*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*), reworked to local needs. By the eleventh century, literature gives recognizable description of wayang performances, and thirteenth-century temple bas reliefs, such as those at Penataran in East Java, show iconography similar to current puppet figures of Bali. The Indian-influenced religion philosophically posits an unseen/unseeable power from which the universe was generated, which does not always clearly separate the divine from the negative as Middle Eastern religions do. Hence, there is significant concern in Hinduism with appeasing the demonic, probably contributing to wayang’s plenitude of demonic characters.

Aji Saka as cultural bringer remains significant in wayang, however shadowy. This hero from Bumi Majeti (India) comes to Medang Kemulan (Kingdom of origin) where he defeats Prabu Dewata Cengkar (Barren spirit), a cannibalistic spirit king, pushing him into the southern ocean where Cengkar becomes Bajul Putih (White crocodile). Aji Saka sends word to his two servants, Doro and Sembada, to bring his *kris pusaka* (heirloom dagger) to him. Each suspects the other of malfeasance. They fight and kill one another. To commemorate their deaths, Aji Saka wrote the pangram/poem inventing Java’s Indic-based alphabet (*hanacaraka*) and linked to word magic of old Javanese culture. The phrases are associated with cardinal points.

Ha-na ca-ra-ka. (There is a story, or, there was a ruler. East)

Da-ta sa-wa-la. (Two were sent. South)

Pa-dha Ja-ya-nya. (Equal in power. West)

Ma-ga ba-tha-nga. (Both win death, or, carry the dead. North)

In addition to inventing writing, Aji Saka fathers a *naga* snake-child when Aji Saka ejaculates at the sight of a beautiful village girl while on a hunting excursion. His spilt seed results in a miraculous, outside-the-womb conception, as his semen along with the maid’s female flow are swallowed by a chicken that lays an egg, which becomes the *naga*/snake Jaka Linglung (Stupid youth). This unruly child is tended by his mother and lives in her rice storage shed.

Jaka Linglung seeks his father, who tests the *naga*/snake, sending him to finish off to crocodile Dewata Cengkar in the southern ocean. In the 1814 *Serat Centhini* version of the story, Jaka Linglung kills the white crocodile, then marries Nyi Blorong, a manifestation of /or the chief follower of Lara Kidul, the chthonic goddess of the southern sea who can bring wealth and worldly power. Jaka Linglung abandons Nyi Blorong for a home in volcanic mud (becoming a traditional deity of the Grobogan-area salt workers), where he eats children who enter his open mouth, which they mistake for a cave.

I will not unpack fully this imagery—out-of-womb conception, rice houses as the “womb” of life, cannibalism, snake men, sea women, animistic dangers of the southern sea (full of vulcanism and tsunamis)—but merely note the following two parallels with other wayang lore.

1. Directional thinking. Civilization and religious truth comes from maritime arrivals on the north coast, establish on the central plain (Medang Kemulan) east to west, and push demons—representing both fertility and danger—to the South Sea. This directional mandala is related to an Indic worldview and establishes the geography of the central plain of Java as core of life.
2. Spiritual figures deal with, but also generate, the demonic (as Aji Saka fathers Jaka Linglung). Thus, our Hindu missionizing source (Aji Saka) and the chaotic natural (Dewata Cengkar, Jaka Linglung, Nyi Blorong) are balanced rather than simply suppressed. Purification, not elimination, is the pattern of Indic thinking.

The story of Aji Saka is only rarely played in wayang. Yet Aji Saka remains part of wayang’s mindscape. In the *murwa*, the opening narration of Sundanese and north coast puppeteers, Aji Saka, and his alphabet are referenced.

*Asta gangga wira tanu patra.* *Asta?* *Asta* is hand. *Gangga* is water. *Wira* is poet, high minded person. *Tanu* is ink. *Patra* means pen. Ink is transformed into the alphabets *wilanjana-wilanjani*. The *wilanjana* are *aksara alip* [Arabic alphabet]. The *wilanjani* [Javanese alphabet] are the *aksara ha*.

The *wilanjana* fall to the west [Arabia] becoming the thirty letters: *alip, ba, ta, tsa . . .*

Pause with the Arabic alphabet, tell of the Javanese alphabet. These letters are thrown to the east, arriving in the island of Java, becoming the alphabet *kalih dasa* [twenty letters]. *Kalih* is two, *dasa* is ten. They are split to the four directions. . . . *Hana cara-ka* “the one who sends.” *Data sawala* “those who are sent.” *Pada jayanya*, “equal in struggle.” *Magaba tanga* [carrying the corpse], not to be said. The letters fall, dead in the north.

Leave the twenty letters, return again to the *wilanjana-wilanjani*.

*Wilanjana* is the semen of the Father. *Wilanjani* is the flow of the mother. The Father’s semen meets the mother’s flow in the *kenya puri* [palace meeting hall/rice storage barn/womb].

*Kenya?* *Kenya* is the container/mother. And *puri* is the palace.

In what kingdom do we open? The palace of Astina is the scene. Open the story *eka adi dasa purwa* [oneness, nobility, tenfold-ness, origins]. Who is the king who rules here? Guru Nata [Siwa/Shiva]. *Guru* means teacher. *Nata* means king.

The one who becomes the *dalang* [puppeteer] is Dora Sembada. Dora is liar. Sembada is truth-teller. What is the proof? There is evidence. What evidence? The *wayang purwa* of origins.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in opening, a traditional Sundanese wayang summons up palm leaf manuscripts as its origin: “Asta ganga wira tanu lan patra” (“Hand, water, writer, ink/soot, pen”—how one inscribes palm leaf), thereby referencing Aji Saka and all the literati (*pujangga*) who wrote with dampened soot on palm leaves (*lontar*). These civilizers gave us wayang’s textual base. Their tales, transmitted through writing (*hanacaraka*), are now in performance orally delivered in improvised language, providing access to Hindu-Buddhist knowledge. The passage praises the two alphabets, the Arabic (*wilanjana/aksara alip*, generating the Quran) and the Javanese (*wilanjani/aksara ha[nacaraka]*, generating the Indian-based stories). The *murwa* tells us the poet (*wira*, i.e., Aji Saka) splits the letters to the four directions, moving from east (“hana caraka,” beginnings and birth) to north (“maga bathanga,” endings and death). The two messengers (Doro and Sembada, “those sent”) represent the twoness experienced in the material world (right-left, male-female, day-night, heaven-earth, life-death, good-bad), which must be reconciled in oneness (ruler/divinity), both in the microcosm and the macrocosm. The twoness is echoed again in discussing performance as “lie” (Dora, associated with the left hand that usually holds the ogre character) and “truth” (Sembada, associated with right hand that grasps the hero). Wayang points us back to beginnings—*purwa* (origin). The ruler (*nata*) as the “one who sends,” linked with mind/poet/ruler/teacher/Aji Saka/divine. Stories, like society and the cosmos have positivity countered by the negative, but both come from the same source, the divine teacher [Siwa]. The twoness (servants) must be reconciled in the oneness (Aji Saka/guru/divinity/mindfulness) that precedes them.

The two alphabets in the *murwa* are further identified with the male and female principles. “The Father’s semen meets the mother’s flow in the *kenya puri*,” the womb. The *murwa* then continues, in a section not included above, to discuss the arrival of the nine Islamic saints (Wali Songo, who will be discussed later), as a second wave of culture bringers. Then it advises the hearer to *golek* (search for the meaning) of/in the wayang, since understanding our being is the task each human is sent into life to accomplish. Language and ideas of the *murwa* are admittedly obscure—most *dalangs* when interviewed give only approximations of what it all means—but it was traditionally intoned at the beginning of each story to remind, in a mantric way, of both Aji Saka and the Wali Songo as bringers of truth and give performances spiritual weight.

The Hindu-Buddhist legacy is widespread in the openings of puppet shows in Southeast Asia. The fight of two servants is just words in Sundanese wayang but is echoed in the played-out battle of two Hanumans (black vs. white) at the beginning of Thai *nang* (leather puppet traditions), as well as the two *dewa panah* (spirits, called “male” and “female”) in Kelantanese wayang. The Thai and Malay fights do not end with death, as with the Doro-Sembada fight, but instead with a scene of their reconciliation by the guru (*reusi*/the sacred teacher) who is an equivalent of Aji Saka—the guru is the divine (Siwa/Shiva as Batara Guru). This concept—two

in opposition, leading back to the one who controls knowledge—is set at the beginning of most Southeast Asian puppet genres and tied to a common Hindu-Buddhist puppet heritage.<sup>5</sup>

Another echo of Hindu-Buddhist patterning is tales of split seed generating a demonic child who eats people. The Jaka Linglung episode has similarity to the wayang purification story of the demon Kala (Time), the son of Batara Guru/Siwa. Kala, as with Jaka Linglung, is conceived outside the womb from an ejaculation when Batara Guru tries to rape his wife (Goddess Uma/Durga). Batara Guru's seed falls into the ocean, creating Kala and havoc. As Jaka Linglung seeks out Aji Saka, Kala searches for his father Batara Guru. Both gain acknowledgment from the missing parent and then eat people. In Kala's case, Wisnu as *dalang* assuages Kala's demonic tendencies by reading syllables/mantra that were written by Siwa on Kala's limbs. This rite seems inspired by *nyasa*, a Hindu-Buddhist purification, by imaginatively placing syllables, gods, and other visualization on different parts of an adept's body; by moving from the lower regions, up the spine and head, one can trace his/her return to the divine source.<sup>6</sup>

I will not here cite particulars of the exorcism (*ruwatan*) but note that song and mantra magic provide purification by placing powers at directional points.<sup>7</sup> In both the *ruwatan* and in the Aji Saka legend, the refined rulers give rise to the demonic by their bad behavior (spilt seed), behavior that also exists in ordinary people. To subdue our external/eternal threats and internal/finite failings, we must work back from our demonic impulses to find everything's origin in the divine. The writing on Kala's limbs, which he cannot understand/read himself (and so the *dalang* must read/sing to him), and the *hanacaraka* (assigned by Aji Saka's poem to the directional points) make up a cycle of birth, life, and death that underlies all human stories, each of us being this cycle's center. The *ruwatan* are tales and the *murwa* are prompts toward human self-knowledge of divine origins and demonic potentials of being in the material world. The *murwa* and aspects of Aji Saka's legend acknowledge our place at the center of our mini-world, yet also are enmeshed in cosmic processes. The Aji Saka tale, like the story of Kala, is about how misbegotten humans, fallen from some divine source and encountering demonic challenges, can reformulate themselves via mantric practice. Life comes from and goes back to higher principles. Sounding/performing causes one (or at least *dalang*) to *golek* (search for) the meaning of these obscure mantras and odd stories that haunt the genre.

Nor are memories of Aji Saka forgotten in contemporary Javanese arts practices. Recent digitalization of the Javanese *aksara* was supported by the cultural department of Yogyakarta and led by Sultan Hamengku Bowono X (born Herjuno Darpito, 1946–) and was celebrated with the Sultan's 2020 choreography of “Beksan Aji Saka,” an all-male, strong character-type dance performed by ten dancers and inspired by *Serat Ajisaka* (Book of Ajisaka). The dance was choreographed to communicate the “essential meaning behind the Javanese script (Ha Na Ca Ra Ka, etc.). The Javanese script, which is full of meaning on noble teachings, and then

is used in education in human identity as the most perfect creation.”<sup>8</sup> A 2017 animated film version of Aji Saka’s tale was also done with wayang-style animation.<sup>9</sup> Aji Saka’s letter magic and directional thinking persists in contemporary Java, and performances show how the demonic is calmed by higher potential via dance, music, and story. This spiritual insight has been translated across religions in Java and was recycled in the Islamic period in Sufistic thought.

#### WALI SONGO

The Nine Saints or Wali Songo are the next wave of culture bringers and credited with the Islamic proselytization of Java. Wayang and the other arts are seen as their tools of conversion. The most prominent performer-saints are Sunan Kalijaga (1460–1513), credited with *wayang kulit purwa*, *topeng* mask dance, *ronggeng* (female/male cross-dresser song-dance), and *pencak silat* (martial arts); Sunan Giri I (1442–1506), Saint of the Mountain, credited with *wayang gedog* (telling Panji and Damar Wulan tales); Sunan Kudus (d. 1550), creator of *wayang golek*, said to be modeled on *wayang kulit* shadow puppetry; and Sunan Bonang (1465–1525), creator of gamelan whose musical expertise provided the score.<sup>10</sup> They, along with other saints, are said to have contributed to wayang. In reality, there are, of course, more than nine *walis*. When one died, he was replaced by a son or close associate, who often took the same name/title, confusing genealogical tracing.

Some *walis*, such as Siti Jenar (1426?–1517?), one of the original nine, were ousted as heretics for teaching mystical gnosis (not sharia) as the path to perfection.<sup>11</sup> The other Wali Songo are said to have agreed that Siti Jenar’s interpretation was literally true but bad for social order, so lore says they executed him in the mosque at Demak. A similar saint-heretic is Sunan Panggung (Saint of the Stage, d. 1613), a son (or some say follower) of Sunan Kalijaga who also studied with Siti Jenar. Sunan Panggung was supposedly condemned to the stake for bringing his dogs, scandalously named Iman (Faith) and Tawhid (Oneness of God), into the mosque. “Suluk Maling Sumirang,” a poem attributed to Sunan Panggung and supposedly written amid the flames, includes the following: “If a person does not understand heretical teachings, he is certainly not yet perfect, his knowledge is still immature. He should choose to become a heretic, for heresy is indeed the final perfection. This heresy is faith, the witness and ritual prayer; it is also worship, feeling and life, and also the essence of peace.”<sup>12</sup> The strict constructionists condemn such antinomian teachings as un-Islamic. Lore says the flames did not harm Sunan Panggung (or his dogs) and he either retreated to a forest hermitage or ascended into heaven at the time of his burning. One can, however, visit his grave in Tegal, a site where some puppeteers may spend the night in contemplation (*ziarah*) to accumulate performance power.

For tales of saints and heretics founding Javanese Islam using the arts, consider stories of the Wali Songo.<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I merely note that these saints are seen as those who converted Java and the wider area around the Gulf



of Thailand to Islam via performances, reworking puppetry, music, and dance. The terminology of *orang putih* (white ones, those who hold to strict sharia and condemn the use of arts in religion) and the *abangan* (red ones, those who take an ecumenical approach to Islam) may have crystalized only in the late colonial period.<sup>14</sup> However, the idea of Islamic artist-missionizers is old and was deeply ingrained in the thinking of my wayang teachers in the 1970s. *Dalangs* Abeng Sunarya and Otong Rasta, whose families originated in the north coast Cirebon area, saw themselves as both literal and metaphorical “descendants of the Saints” (*keturunan para wali*), since wayang passes down in family lines. Puppeteers believed that their stories that came from the *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana* were remolded by the Wali Songo to teach Islamic religious truths.

Java’s conversion (*dakwah* or “invitation”) saw Islam as the completion of pre-existing spiritual knowledge. Sunan Kalijaga is said to have taught, “Between Buddhism and Islam there is no difference. They are two in form but one in name.”<sup>15</sup> The mythos says that Kalijaga (also known as Seh Melaya, Raden Said, and Ki Lokajaya) first created *wayang kulit purwa* (leather puppetry telling Hindu derived tales) and soon inspired other saints to create their own permutations of wayang. Conversion of Java and, sometimes, Malaya is credited to Kalijaga. While we know that wayang preexisted Islamization, there were changes in the narratives, music, and other features to better fit with Islam (Pandita heroes like Dorna were denigrated, Drupadi’s five husbands in India were reduced to one Pandawa hero, Yudistira, as spouse, etc.). But the extensive use of theater and dance to communicate spiritual ideas shows that the strain of Islam imported to Java was not imitative of Hijaz culture. There, theater has always been sparse.

Arguments continue as to the bloodlines (and hence Islamic brand) of these *wali* figures. Champa, a Hinduized Muslim kingdom now part of Vietnam is the source of a central figure Malauna Malik Ibrahim (d. 1419), who is said to have been born in Samarkand or may have had Chinese blood, perhaps a link to Indo-Iranian Islam.<sup>16</sup> Maulana Malik established a school for teaching Islam in Surabaya/Gresik, and his son Sunan Ampel (1401–81) was teacher of Sunan Kalijaga (*wayang kulit purwa*) and Sunan Giri I (1442–1506), whose *wayang gedog* told Panji and Damar Wulan tales. Sunan Kalijaga is said to have married Sunan Giri’s sister—wayang was in the family. Sunan Prapen (1510–1605), either a son, grandson, or great-grandson of Sunan Giri I, is said to have converted parts of Bali, Lombok, Sumbawa, and Bima, performing *wayang sasak*, which tells tales of Amir Hamzah (the uncle of Mohammed and a hero of Islam before the Prophet’s revelation).<sup>17</sup> This leather shadow form in Lombok uses figures approximating the iconography of the *wayang gedog* characters (hence its assignment to the lineage of Sunan Giri). Amir Hamzah’s feats of Islamizing the world (before the birth of the Prophet) became popular on Java and Lombok in the seventeenth century.

Though tales say Sunan Prapen’s missionary zeal created the community of *waktu telu* (“three times” a day praying Muslims), who long predominated in





FIGURE 12-1. Figures from the Muslim story of Amir Hamzah (uncle of the Prophet).  
 Left to right: Minister Bestak, Raja Nursiwan of Persia, his ally Raja Jobin, Raja Amir Hamzah (uncle of Mohammed), Minister Umar Maya, and the clown servants Lam Si Jang and Sabda Palon. Photo by Kathy Foley.

Lombok, this *waktu telu* religion now wanes.<sup>18</sup> The post-1980s Muslim revival with strict Sunni leaders (*tuan guru*), demands *waktu lima* (“five times” a day observance) and generally attacks *wayang sasak*. Hence, stories of Amir Hamzah that came to Indonesia via Shi’a lines from the Indo-Iranian area are now attacked on Lombok as un-Islamic by Sunni religious teachers.

On Java, other Indo-Iranian links appear. Sunan Kudus (Sayyid Ja’far Shadiq Azmatkhan d. 1550), yet another of the Nine Saints, it is said to have created *wayang golek*, wooden doll rod puppetry, presenting Panji, Amir Hamzah, and local histories (*babad*), chronicles that may even present the stories of the Wali Songo’s conversion of Java (figure 12-1). Sunan Kudus’ personal name, “Ja’far Shadiq,” is the same as that of the sixth Shi’a imam who lived 732–65 CE. Sunan Kudus’ grave is refurbished on the tenth of Muharram, the day Shi’a commemorate the Prophet’s grandson Hussain’s death at Karbala. These links, pointing to Persia and Shi’a lines as a possible source of Javanese Islam, prove distressing to Indonesia’s contemporary Sunni cohorts who advocate Wahabi orthodoxy.

A story told by my teachers is that as the Nine Saints were discussing how to convert people to Islam, Sunan Gunung Jati, the ruler-saint of Cirebon, outlined a

figure of a wayang shadow figure in the sand, and Sunan Kalijaga used that design for the first *wayang kulit purwa* (leather shadow puppet for the Hindu-based epics). He played in the Cirebon and Demak mosques. To enter a performance “payment” was recitation of the confession of faith, the Kalimat Sahadat (“There is no God but Allah, Mohamed is his Prophet”). In another well-known episode, Sunan Kalijaga meets Yudistira, the hero of the *Mahabharata*, now living on the Dieng Plateau in Java. Yudistira, though already many centuries old, cannot die until he understands the meaning of his heirloom treasure the Kalimasada. Sunan Kalijaga recognizes that the writing is Arabic and the Islamic Kalimat Sahadat, the avowal of faith. Yudistira enters Islam, and Dalang Sunan Kalijaga does a *ruwatan* performance to release Yudistira’s soul into eternity.

Of course, Hindu-Buddhist temple friezes and pre-Islamic literature document that wayang was alive and well long before the *walis*. But figure design, narrative structures, musical features, and dance aesthetics of wayang were, indeed, remolded post-Islam to fit the new religion.<sup>19</sup> The features were, from the fifteenth century, reinterpreted by puppeteers to teach Islamic wisdom with Sufi inclinations, and they also presented Muslim stories, especially tales of the local Islamization. Although the Islamic bone fides of wayang are being questioned by contemporary fundamentalist Islamic teachers (as I noted with *wayang sasak* and will discuss later with *wayang purwa* in Java), the traditional association of wayang with Islamic teaching remains the credo of performers and the moderate Islamic community.

#### POSTCOLONIAL WAYANG AND MISSIONIZATIONS

Postcolonial Indonesian experiments have attempted to use wayang to promote Christianity, Buddhism, and the post-1979 Islamic revival. As with earlier wayang repertoires—Panji, Amir Hamzah, and history chronicles—new genres generally look to the *wayang purwa* models for characterizations, story patterns, music, and so on. Arguably, the mystical leanings of the *purwa* repertoire have made missionizers of Christianity, Buddhism, and revivalist Islam value wayang as a tool.

The late colonial period further developed narratives on spiritual-civic morality supporting nationalist ambitions at time when more formal education of puppeteers solidified. Palace *dalang* schools and post-independence, national high schools and universities of the performing arts highlighted stories that emphasized spiritual values. Suratno notes that story lists from the late nineteenth century include only eleven *wahyu* (divine power) *lakon* (plot narratives), but by the 1980s the common repertoire in Central Java included over forty well-known stories with this “vision/quest” pattern.<sup>20</sup> While *wahyu* stories are generally set in the *Mahabharata* locus, the pattern would be adapted to concepts of Catholic “grace” and contemporary Buddhist enlightenment.

*Wahyu* stories concern acquisition of a mystical power—sometimes envisioned as a radiance, other times as a secret teaching, supernatural weapon, or idealized

princess (who is in reality a manifestation of divine power)—needed by a righteous hero to save the polity. Normally, a righteous Pandawa and greedy Kurawa (the *Mahabharata*'s two sets of cousins and their offspring) are candidates pursuing the same blessing. The Pandawa's moral compass brings success; the worldly Kurawa fail. Factors that encouraged the proliferation of *wahyu* stories include the political situation moving from colonial dependency to post-independence self-governance and the use of such stories in formal education of puppeteers, supplementing the previously family lineage training.

In the 1920s through 1940s, the Central Javanese palaces created training programs with curricula that continue today. *Dalang* training in Solo began at the Museum Radyapustaka in the Kesunan Palace under monarch Pakubuwana X (1866–1939) in 1923. The Habirandha School in Yogyakarta was established by Sultan Hamangku Buwono VIII (1880–1939) in 1925. Solo's Prince Mangkunegoro VII (1885–1944) created a training program at PDAAN at his palace in 1931. Lessons were thought to improve the village *dalangs* by exposing them to the palace models. The more elite concerns of palaces meant that often, *wahyu* (spiritual power) stories were chosen as training devices, making performances more *alus* (refined) and steering learners away from simple stories of kidnapped ladies, marriage contests, and petty fights between Pandawa and Kurawa. Stories like *Wahyu Cakraningrat* (Divine power of kings) were preferred; in this tale, Lesmana (the coarse son of the Kurawa King Duryodana), Samba (the overly proud son of Kresna), and Abimanyu (the refined son of the Pandawa Arjuna) vie for a spiritual power descending into the world.<sup>21</sup> Such stories inculcated socio-religious values that underscored Javanese ideals of a just ruler (*ratu adil*), helping lay the groundwork for lofty home rule.<sup>22</sup>

Even in 1978 when I was studying in West Java, the Central Javanese palace model of *wahyu* stories was clearly impacting the curriculum at the government High School of the Arts in Bandung (SMKI, Sekolah Menengah Karwitan Indonesia). Rather than learning a story from the active Sundanese *wayang golek* repertoire, our year-long wayang course was *Wahyu Makuta Rama* (Power of Rama's crown), an adaptation of a *wahyu* story from Central Java. The mystical power of the *Ramayana* heroes, King Rama (avatar of the preserver god Wisnu/Vishnu) and Laksmana (Rama's brother), reincarnate in *Mahabharata* heroes Kresna and Arjuna, respectively. Suratno notes that *wahyu* tales were popular in the 1950s as the new republic emerged from the colonial shadow, faded in the 1960s as fierce political rivalries of communist verses capitalist exploded, but returned by the 1980s as critique to Suharto's corrupt New Order regime.<sup>23</sup> In this same era, new forms of wayang were innovated by Christians, Buddhists, and revivalist Muslims, and the *wahyu* concept, spiritual and moral, promoted the borrowing.

### Wayang Wahyu

Postcolonial changes in Western religions' missionization made *wahyu* an apt hook for indigenizing the "good news" of the Bible.<sup>24</sup> *Wahyu Cakraningrat* was

adapted to become the first Christian wayang performance, with the Bible's King David replacing the Pandawa hero who attains the spiritual-religious grace. In postcolonial era, indigenization was replacing the enforcement of earlier Eurocentric religious models of music and liturgy in churches. Valorizing agency of pre-colonial ancestors was good cultural politics in newly independent Africa, South America, and Asia. The Latin mass, Gregorian chants, classic European hymns, and passion plays with a white Jesus and Mary were passé. Inculturation (using elements of local culture) was embraced.<sup>25</sup> Liberation theology attention to the local, already at work in the 1950s, was fully affirmed by Catholics at the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), freeing clerics' choices for the mass and other liturgies.<sup>26</sup> In Java, European missionaries were being replaced by indigenous priests and bishops. European priests who stayed were ones attuned to local culture, for example, the Jesuit Petrus Josephus Zoetmulder (1906–95), who devoted himself to training a new generation of Indonesian scholars in the wonders of Javanese spiritual thought as expressed in Kawi and Middle Javanese literature.

Catholic missionaries introduced local music and theater for teaching and liturgy. Brother Timotheus L. Wignyosoebroto (FIC, Brothers of the Immaculate Conception), the Jesuit head of Pangudi Luhur (High seeker) Catholic School in Solo was instrumental in Catholic wayang. On October 13, 1957, Dalang M. M. Atmowijoyo presented the adaptation *Wahyu Cakraningrat*, but now adapted to the Bible as *Daud Medapat Wahyu Keraton* (David receives the divine power of kingship). This performance used standard *wayang kulit purwa* figures for Bible characters; refined knight Bambang Wijanarka (a son of Arjuna) was David and *Ramayana* giant Kumbakara became Goliath. The success of this first effort led Brother Timotheus to commission an actual set of puppets portraying Bible figures (made from cardboard by R. Roesradi Wijayasawarno). Dalang Atmowijoyo presented this further developed form in *Malaikat Mbalelo* (Rebellion of the angels) on February 2, 1962. Soon, leather puppets were made; a full set contains 200–250 figures. Working in committee, Catholic educators-priests and wayang and gamelan experts (both Christians and Muslims) innovated and designed. Jesuit Mgr. A. Soegijapranoto named the form *wayang wahyu* ("revelation *wayang*") and soon the form was presented nationally in 1969 and 1974 during the important Pekan Wayang (Wayang festivals) that occur every five years.<sup>27</sup>

Poplawska notes, "Wayang Wahyu was conceived first of all as an alternative communication medium to spread God's revelation as recounted by the Bible. It forms a unique synthesis between art and religious communication [*pewataan*]."<sup>28</sup> Clergy oversaw the accuracy of the Bible narratives, with special attention to New Testament stories, but *dalangs* (sometimes Muslims like Atmowijoyo) collaborated creatively to see how tales could be "fit" into wayang narrative structure. In time, a number of priests and lay Catholics became *dalangs*. Popular stories include Genesis, Samson and Delilah, David and Goliath, Joseph, Esther, Noah, Isaac, Daniel, Moses, John the Baptist, Maria Magdalen, the Nativity (figure 12-2), Flight into Egypt, the Passion, and the Resurrection.





FIGURE 12-2. *Wayang wahyu* Nativity scene of Joseph (left) and Mary holding baby Jesus. Photo by Kathy Foley.

Music was originally the traditional wayang repertoire of Solo with the role of the *pesindhen* (female singer) deemphasized in favor of group choral singing.<sup>29</sup> Song texts for *suluk* (mood songs) were drawn from Psalms rather than the old Javanese poetry used in *wayang purwa*. Major church holidays (Christmas and Easter) were prime times for shows in parishes. The form had a strong presence

in the 1980s in performances Ngajab Rahayu (Blessings foundation) troupe. The genre lapsed in the 1990s but was revived in the 2000s. Radio Republic Indonesia, where a female *wayang wahyu dalang*, Lucia Siti Aminah Subanto (1955–), is affiliated, broadcasts stories for Christian holidays.<sup>30</sup> Catholic Schools commission performances, and church bursaries and private donors pay the considerable costs for such events. Celebrations of rites of passage for individual families might also include a show.

*Wayang wahyu* was also taught at what is now Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI, Indonesian institute of the arts) in Surakarta/Solo, where the Christian Dalang Blacius Subono (1954–2024) was on the faculty of *padalangan* (puppetry).<sup>31</sup> Subono was the son of Dalang Yusuf Kiyatdiharjo, a famous Solo *dalang* who mentored top Javanese *dalangs* like Ki Anom Suroto and Ki Manteb Soedarsono. Subono's mother was a female singer.<sup>32</sup> Subono's students included local Christians and even some foreigners. American *dalang* Matthew Isaac Cohen in a blog post discussed Subono's 2009 performance:

*Purwaning Dadi* (Genesis) was by Blacius Subono, one of my teachers at ISI Solo between 1988 and 1990. It was a three hour performance about Lucifer's revolt against the Almighty and the temptation of Adam. Paguyuban Wayang Wahyu [troupe name] and all the musicians (an ensemble of some 30 players and singers) were teachers at Pangudi Luhur [Solo Catholic School] or associated schools. . . . Performing 5 times over the last couple of years with three different puppeteers. . . . [They] bring an obvious passion for the work.<sup>33</sup>

Pop and *keroncong* songs as well as standard wayang music are included, especially for the prelude and clown scenes—*limbukan* (female servant clown scene) and *goro-goro* (clown scene with Semar). Puppeteers may normalize non-Biblical material; for example, Limbuk's joking was explained as a “dream” of Adam in the performance above. The important clowns (the god-clown Semar and his three sons) in *wayang purwa* make the ideas of the narrative accessible to and comically applicable for audiences. In *wayang wahyu*, they became Jesus's disciples: Gareng becomes Marcus (Mark); Petruk, Matius (Matthew); Bagong, Yohanes (John), and so on.

Blacius Subono, along with Brother Savio, FIC, helped with further development in the 2000s. Subono was the major composer of new music for the form, giving it a specific opening composition (“Talu Wayang Wahyu”), closing tune (“Panutup Pra Sadulur”), and other compositions. The style of *pakeliran padat* (heavily rehearsed, short performances with tight cues, a form developed by Subono and others in the 1980s at ASKI/ISI) has become the style.<sup>34</sup> Innovations like dubbing voices (provided by students of St. Joseph High School [SMA St. Yusep]) was done for a story of Samuel developed by Bambang Suwarno, Subono's colleague at ASKI/ISI. Frank Fosdahl, a Protestant missionary from Colorado, is one of Subono's students. I observed Fosdahl's manipulation in a 2003 class in Surakarta, and it

was clear that Fosdahl, who has written a number of *lakon* (puppet plays/scenarios performed by Subono and others), had mastered puppet movement. Some of Fosdahl's performances have used the large screen with multiple manipulators casting shadows at the same time, another innovation of the national schools.<sup>35</sup> Pangudi Luhur School, where *wayang wahyu* first emerged, now includes regular training in the form in its curriculum. Dalang Indra Suroinggeno, another student Subono trained, founded Bhuana Alit (Microcosm) Workshop, which trains young Javanese Catholic students in *wayang wahyu*, and he performs regularly. Ernest Udayana and Father F. X. Wiyono are other *wayang wahyu* puppet masters. There have even been festivals of *wayang wahyu* with various child puppeteers.<sup>36</sup>

Surakarta is not the only site. Yogyakarta activities developed at Duta Wacana Christian University, a Protestant private institution, under Ki Johannes Yulius. Fr. Agustinus Handi Setyanto, a Catholic priest in the Diocese of Purwokerto and rector of a seminary in Tegal, has performed over fifty-one times since 2009. In a 2022 interview, Fr. Agustinus noted, "As far as I'm concerned, the *wayang wahyu* is important because I can spread Catholic teachings through the nation's most popular and entertaining puppet show."<sup>37</sup>

Presentations are truncated (two to four hours). Puppets are generally more realistic than traditional *wayang kulit purwa* figures (and so do not always move perfectly in fight scenes due to different balance). Bambang Suwarno made figures closer to traditional wayang in style and therefore better suited to manipulation. The logic of adaption of *purwa* figures makes sense to those who know *purwa* stories; the image of Jesus for the Passion, for example, is modeled on Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna who is brutally slain by his Kurawa uncles. The puppet of Abimanyu in his suffering *wanda* (manifestation), when pierced by multiple Kurawa's arrows, is apt for Jesus with his crown of thorns when carrying the cross.

Other Christian groups have followed the Catholic model but sometimes give the form a different name. Protestant *wayang prajanjian* (Biblical/"promise" wayang) uses both *wayang kulit* shadows and *wayang golek* (wooden rod puppet) forms.<sup>38</sup> In Klaten Protestant wayang is called *wayang warta* ("[good] news" wayang). Sundanese teachers at a Christian university in West Java spoke to me in 2009 of their use of Sundanese-style *wayang golek* for Bible tales. Comic book versions of *Alkitab Wayang* (Wayang Bible) are advertised with the invitation, "Let's read Bible stories and get acquainted with *wayang orang* through the *Wayang Bible*."<sup>39</sup> Illustrations show characters in wayang dress, influenced by *wayang purwa* models. Dance dramas using wayang style have also been presented. Choreographer Bagong Kussudiarjo (1928–2004) created *wayang wong* (human wayang, dance drama), such as *Kebangkitan dan Kelahiran Isa Almasih* (The ascension and the birth of Jesus, 1968) with movement and characterization for Mary modeled on Sumbadra (refined wife of Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*), Herod on Rawana (ogre king and antagonist in the *Ramayana*), and the adult Jesus on Bima (strong hero and second of the Pandawa brothers in the *Mahabharata*). Music for Bagong's



performance was by noted maestro Wasitodipuro (1909–2007), who chose *pelog* tuning, appropriate given that non-*purwa* stories (i.e., Panji, Amir Hamzah, Damar Wulan, and now the Bible) traditionally used *pelog* accompaniment.<sup>40</sup>

Christian *wayang wahyu* and dance dramas have continued to evolve but are still sometimes limited by Eurocentric thinking regarding church arts, as some parishioners call for European church hymns over gamelan accompaniment. This can limit freedom to exploit the well-defined tools (figures, music, story patterns) that traditional wayang affords. Still, liberation theology encouraged Christian clerics to explore local art resources. Modern Javanese priests, lay persons, and Muslim collaborators in molding *wayang wahyu* have followed the example of the Wali Songo. They have reworked preexisting wayang, recognizing its potential for spiritual teaching and harnessed puppetry to guide the faithful while attracting converts. As *dalang* Fr. Agustinus Setyanto responded when queried about a 2022 attack of fundamentalist Muslim cleric Ustadz Khalid Basalamah on the idea of using wayang: “The (Second) Vatican Council told us that every form of knowledge and culture should be respected and preserved. . . . As stated in *Gaudium et Spes* n. 58, the Catholic Church should cement her union with all local cultures so that both parties can enrich each other.”<sup>41</sup>

### *Wayang Buddha*

Recent Buddhist revivals, while less widespread than *wayang wahyu*, also exist. *Wayang buda/buddha* was first developed by visual artist Hajar Satoto at Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia (ASRI, Indonesian academy of art) in Yogyakarta in 1975 and presented as *wayang arca* (“statue/sculpture” wayang) at Sasana Mulya Cultural Center.<sup>42</sup> In 1976, Satoto did a performance with new music composed by R. L. Martopangrawit (1914–86) and executed with Rahayu Suppangah (1949–2020) leading the gamelan, Dalang Bambang Suwarno (b. 1955) narrating, and movement by Agus Tasman. Hajar’s puppets were inspired by the *nang yai/nang sbek* (large leather puppetry of Thailand and Cambodia, respectively) wherein a single dancer presents a large panel puppet, which may either be a single figure or a scene in which multiple characters interact. The dancer-manipulator’s lower body executes the customary gaits of dance (according to the character type of the figure/scene); meanwhile, the figure is held above the mover’s head. A long white screen is used. The original puppets were made of thin metal but proved unwieldy, so large leather figures soon replaced them.

Suprpto Suryodarmo (1945–2019), a Surakarta dancer, meditation practitioner, and ASKI/[ISI]-Surakarta faculty member, was intrigued. Suprpto advanced the form in the 1970s and 1980s. He collaborated with artists and students of ASKI-Surakarta in his version. Narration was by Dalang Blacius Subono, the exponent of *wayang wahyu*. Making puppets and contributing additional narration were Subono’s fellow faculty members in the puppetry division, Dalang Bambang Suwarno and Dalang Sumanto. Suprpto, a Surakarta style classical Javanese

dancer, combined *sumarah* (Javanese meditation, a form of *kebatinan*) learned from his father with contemporary Vipassana Buddhist meditation (based on Burmese traditions and popularized in a transnational spirituality movement). Suprpto has been affected by and himself influenced international somatic movement and meditation models. Over time, Suprpto became an internationally known teacher of modern Javanese spiritualism and eco-improvisation, teaching what he dubbed Joged Amirta (Amirta movement training) at his Padepokan Lemah Putih (White earth workshop), founded in 1986, an international arts training center currently run by his son. *Amirta* is the elixir of life/enlightenment churned out of the Sea of Milk in Hindu myth; movement was Suprpto's way of accessing oneness, nature consciousness, and *amirta*. *Wayang buddha* evolved in this context.<sup>43</sup>

Suprpto's *wayang buddha* was initially accompanied with Buddhist chant by Sukemi Darmosurjo, a Buddhist monk, and was presented first in 1975 for a Wesak (Buddha's birth and enlightenment day) performance at Mendut Temple, a ninth-century Buddhist monument. Mendut along with Borobudur is part of a Buddhist pilgrimage each Wesak. Suprpto's initial version involved improvised movement using leaves as puppets (adhering to Suprpto's eco-somatics technique). But soon he developed the actual puppets and a more formal, full-scale narrative based on the Buddhist old Javanese *Kekawin Sutasoma*, a fourteenth-century Kawi manuscript by Mpu Tantalur.<sup>44</sup> Born as a prince, Sutasoma converts an elephant-headed demon, a *naga*/snake, and a tigress as he offers each attacker his body for food—each animal instead decides to become Sutasoma's disciple. Finally, Sutasoma offers himself to the demon Kala to spare the lives of a hundred kings. Sutasoma's is a tale of self-sacrificing Buddhahood. Short episodes from *Kunjarakarna*, another old Javanese Buddhist *kakawin*, and *Digahayu* (Longevity) have been additional *wayang buddha* themes presented by Suprpto's group.

Suprpto worked with both international and national artists, including Solonese master choreographer Sardono Kusumo. Suprpto's group performed at the National Wayang Festival (1978), where traditional *dalangs* I knew puzzled over this large ensemble from the Surakarta academy with comparatively static scenes and slow narrative. Plié poses, multiple large figures in formations, and momentary freezes were reminiscent of Thai-Khmer art rather than emulating Java's solo *dalang*'s delivering sharp action of *wayang kulit* performance scenes. However, it was clear to all that Suprpto and cocreators were forging a new style.

Spiritual transformation through movement was always Suprpto's goal, rather than theater qua spectacle. Suprpto noted, "The essence of movement is not expression but a form of transformation. The form could be a movement from the state of being unaware to being aware, existence to non-existence."<sup>45</sup> Though the initial experiment lapsed from the 1980s, *wayang buddha* was revived in the 2000s as a performance-meditative form for Buddhist holidays using the leather puppets. Rather than "dance drama" with a tight narrative, Suprpto's work focused on embodiment and non-anthropocentric recognition of being through

movement. His dancers presented outdoors at ancient Buddhist temple sites, including for the Borobudur International Festival (2013), which used new figures crafted by Bibit Jrabang Waluyo Wibowo. Other Buddhist groups in Indonesia have also explored presenting Jataka (tales of Buddha's previous incarnations) with wayang. Performances are usually connected with Buddhist temples, part of the Buddhist school education, and for holidays like Wesak. Performances often borrow heavily from normative *wayang kulit purwa* music, staging conventions, and so on, with figures from standard *purwa* shadow puppet sets rather than purpose made figures.<sup>46</sup>

### *Islamic Revival and Wayang Survivals*

In light of the post-1979 Islamic revival, Indonesian Muslims revisited the concept of wayang as a tool of religious thought to renew or deflect attacks by fundamentalists on the practice of wayang as “un-Islamic” due to its depiction of humans. *Wayang sadat*—short for “Sarana dakwah dan tabligh” (Means of proselytizing Islamic teachings)—was created in 1985–86 by Suryadi WS (Warnosuhardjo) a *dalang* and math teacher of Mireng Village, Trucuk District, Klaten, who trained at the Muhammadiyah Klaten School of Teacher Education (SPG).<sup>47</sup> Inspired by *wayang wahyu* performances, Suryadi sought to “clean up” *wayang kulit*, which he saw as the legacy of the *walis* but which his *santri* (observant) family felt was now polluted by “un-Islamic” elements—humor, sexual innuendo, and Hindu-based characters. His puppets featured the conservative Middle Eastern style dress that in the 1980s was a growing style in Java. His male figures wear turbans and the females wear the hijab (veil). Stories of the Wali Songo's Islamization of Java—the founding of the Demak Mosque, the story of Sunan Kalijaga, and so on—are the repertoire. His clowns (Semar and his sons) are named Kyai Imam, Ki Salim, and Ki Kasan, and they are students at Sunan Ampel's religious school. Shows open with singing “Assalaamualaikum” and close with “Hamdalah.” Songs during the performance are mostly created by Suryadi's Sanggar Sadat and include, “Basmalah,” “Istighfar,” “Robbana,” “Pengawal Islam,” and “Arkanul Ima.”<sup>48</sup>

Drums initially replaced the gamelan (though current performances may use gamelan), and Muslim prayer in Arabic replaced *suluk* (mood songs). Performers, like puppets, wear Middle Eastern styles rather than normal Javanese formal dress. Though Suryadi's efforts achieved only modest attention in the 1980s, *wayang sadat* has widened its audience as the Islamic revival progressed and has been performed at Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), for the Office of the Ministry of Religion, TVRI, RRI, the Muslim Istiqlal Festival, universities, and the Jakarta Wayang Museum for the Muharram Festival. One of Suryadi's *kayon* (tree of life) figures was inscribed with Arabic calligraphy, and another features the mosque at Demak (founded by the *walis*), the latter inspired no doubt by the *wayang wahyu kayon* that features St. Peter Basilica in Rome.

Since the 1990s, ordinary *dalangs* have seen some of their business at weddings and circumcisions co-opted by Muslim *ustadzs* (teachers, speakers) who give sermons instead of performing wayang. They of course generally frown on traditional community performances such as *bersih desa* (purification of village). A son of my teacher Abeng Sunarya, Agus Sunarya, pivoted from being a *dalang* to giving these Islamic speeches at these life cycle events. (It was useful to have both kinds of “performers” in one family, and the advice *dalangs* supply at life cycle events is not unlike what the *ustadz* sermonizer does.) Groups of fundamentalists in the 2000s have broken up performances of wayang or torn down statues representing the traditional figures of wayang, finding them *syirik* (worshipping another god than Allah). Top *dalangs* have responded by becoming more overtly observant and incorporating more Arabic prayers and concepts into performances.<sup>49</sup> For example, Dalang Enthus Susmono (1966–2018) created *wayang santri* to make it easier for observant Muslims to hire performances. His troupe wore white “Islamic garb” and used more Arabic phrases throughout. Saskia Boonstra described Susmono’s mix of prayers and coarse humor:

There was also a puppet whose head was not fastened to its body and therefore could kiss his own genitals. And then there was Enthus Susmono’s famous drunken puppet. This puppet peed in his bottle of grog, then promptly forgot that he had done so and took another sip. The crowd screamed with laughter, took pictures and recorded the action on their phones. But then, the dalang closed the lively show with a prayer.

I was struck to see Enthus Susmono perform his usual crude—to some perhaps vulgar—jokes in a most obviously Islamic wayang show. The alternation of these jokes with Islamic songs appeared contradictory, but nobody in the audience seemed to care. The crowd couldn’t get enough of the spectacle.<sup>50</sup>

What Enthus was doing with *wayang santri* was what *dalangs* always do: they move with and reflect the values of the audience, combining *tuntunan* and *ton-tonan*, advisement and entertainment. Enthus’ blend of spirituality and raw humor reflects the mixture of high and low in Javanese culture (see Sumarsam’s essay in this volume).

Some overtly “Islamic” forms of the past, *wayang menak* and *wayang sasak*, both presenting Amir Hamzah stories featuring the uncle of the Prophet, have lost popularity and have pulled back to the relative sanctuary of “intangible cultural heritage,” hoping for life support from local departments of culture. Today, defining *menak* repertoires as “Islamic epics” brings fundamentalist ire from the Sunni fanatics. Even *wayang kulit purwa*, despite its venerable place in society and its declaration as a Masterpiece of World Heritage (2003) and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2008) by UNESCO, has suffered these attacks as un-Islamic. Rituals that once opened the show are often cut. The village purifications that once had been annual events in rural areas are becoming more infrequent as the country grows more observant along Middle Eastern lines. In a 2022 posting of

a video of Makassar-born Ustadz Khalid Basalamah, this popular Islamic teacher advised a follower, “If he has [a puppet], then it is better to destroy it, in the sense of the word, it’s better to get rid of it” and if “in Islam it [*wayang*/image making] is forbidden, we should leave it.”<sup>51</sup>

*Dalangs* protested vociferously. On February 18, 2022, Dalang Ki Warseno (Hardiodarsono) Slenk did a performance at Ora Aji, an Islamic school in Yogyakarta led by the moderate ulama Gus Miftah. A puppet resembling Ustadz Khalid was beaten up by the *Mahabharata* character Baladewa and other figures in Warseno’s show called *Puppet Haram, Dalang Ngamuk, Wayang Basalamah Dikepruki Dalang* (Puppets banned, dalangs outraged, Basalamah beaten up by the *dalang*). On February 20, the video was uploaded on Adara NH’s YouTube. Fundamentalists then filled social media with attacks on Dalang Warseno and Ustadz Gus Miftah.

The *dalang* organizations of Banyumas and Bandung gave more measured responses than Warseno yet expressed outrage. The moderate Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) intellectual Syafiq Hasyim argued, “Ustaz Khalid Basalamah’s controversial lecture on the destruction of *wayang* to his congregation was similar to the actions of the Talib[an] ruler, ISIS in Afghanistan, who destroyed historical heritage statues from non-Muslim groups.”<sup>52</sup> Dalang Purbo Asmoro of Solo at the same time created a new story in which a bigoted ulama (again resembling Khalid Basalamah) obstructed the marriage of two young lovers. Meanwhile, Dalang Kanda Buwana (using the *dalang*’s story name during the *ruwatan* purification when he is seen as the living power of Wisnu) intervened.<sup>53</sup> Purbo’s story *Wayang Ilang, Dhalang Nantang* (Wayang tested, *dalang* protested) ended with the puppet of an *ustadz* (made of cardboard for the event) burning as the *padalangan* (puppetry) students from ISI-Surakarta cheered. Ki Purbo’s version clarified that it was the spirit of Kala (the demon son of Siwa that necessitates the *ruwatan*) that infused the meddling *ustadz* causing attacks on wayang, heritage, and true religion. In the same period, the Hindu Balinese *dalangs* discussed freedom of speech at ISI-Denpasar. Professor I Nyoman Sedana wrote:

Article 32 paragraph (1) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia mandates that “The State shall advance the Indonesian national culture [WAYANG] in the midst of world civilization.”

The fact [is] that Indonesia is the home of Wayang since Ancient Mataram kingdom as recorded in Matyasih inscription Saka year 825.

Arab Saudi is the home of Ustadz. Please kindly go back to your own home and do whatsoever you like in your own home.<sup>54</sup>

To cool the inflamed social media, Ustadz Khalid Basalamah made a tempered apology, as did Ustadz Gus Miftah and Ki Warseno. But the disagreements have not dissipated. Attacks make it clear that a puppet form that started with Hindu

teaching, was adapted for Islamic *dakwah*, and has accommodated Christianity, modern Buddhism, and neo-Islam spiritual messages is caught in an ongoing battle in contemporary Southeast Asia.

## CONCLUSION

Traditional wayang on Java represents a spirituality that uses a multi-sensorial embodied approach to the divine. Mimesis, dance, comedy, and narrative encourage us to consider our lowest and highest impulses, recognizing that the demonic and the divine are interrelated; Siwa or Aji Saka is parent and demon Kala or Jaka Linglung is child. Hinduism, Sufi thought, Javanized Christianity, and contemporary Buddhism can accept and celebrate this message. Wayang teaches that human limitations and greed can be surpassed if we learn to explore our body-mind and that this can be done imaginatively, via performance. Ajisaka's noble letters give us tools of *nyasa* that allow us to experience our inner demonic and climb our spine, to return to our divine best—Siwa/Batara Guru. Understanding this range and speaking openly of this spiritual grounding may prove problematical for the free-thinking saints (Siti Jenar, Sunan Panggung) but remain a spiritual praxis in wayang that has persisted in local thinking. *Wayang wahyu's* Christianity and *wayang sadat's* reformed Islam may allow a more limited range for the human in relation to the cosmic (we can never fully be divine in Christianity or Islam), yet all religions find the spiritual aura, the *wahyu* in wayang, useful in affirming that the embodied, the danced, the sounded, and the visualized can launch us into the disembodied, the still, the silent, the unseen that is the encounter with eternity. Thus, these diverse religious communities borrow wayang as a space to meet and explore the unseeable, unknowable, and beyond-ness and, as with Suprpto's *wayang buddha*, aver that art is the best chance in life to enlarge ourselves to power here and yet ever “out there” beyond our ken.

## NOTES

1. Granted that Jesus, prophets, saints, and imams were and are represented and evoked great devotion in lay people, especially women and children to promote religiosity, but for the male elites, this may be seen as lower-order thinking.

2. Puppetry and mask performance of Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma have some related features, but will be excluded here.

3. PEPADI Bali, Seminar Nasional Dalam Rangka Perayaan Hari Wayang Nasional 2021 [National seminar celebrating national wayang day 2021], November 7, 2021, via Zoom.

4. See Lembaga Kebudayaan Betawi “Kekawin” for this version at [www.kebudayaanbetawi.com/4002/kekawin/](http://www.kebudayaanbetawi.com/4002/kekawin/). Compare with Ki Harsono Siswocarito's “Kekawin,” for a second approach to the Sundanese opening passage (in English translation), <http://englishlakonet.blogspot.com/2007/11/>.

5. Kathy Foley, “First Things: Opening Passages in Southeast Asian Puppet Theatre,” in *Puppet Theater in Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Jan Mrazek (Ann Arbor: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), 271–83.

6. Yogic ideas of the chakra points, *ida* and *pinggala* channels weaving around a central channel, are related to microcosm-macrocosm equivalencies in wayang and are represented in the *kayon* (tree of life) puppet with demons at the bottom and lotus at the top. The Kala figure and snake are found on this puppet figure. The iconography is a summary for those trained in *wayang* for the different energies that make up the individual, social order, and cosmos. On the possible sources of the clowns and other Indic features, see Andrea Aciri, "Birds, Bards, Buffoons and Brahmins: (Re-)Tracing the Indic Roots of Some Ancient and Modern Performing Characters from Java and Bali," *Archipel* 82 (2014): 13–70.

7. Kathy Foley, "The Origin of Kala: A Sundanese *Wayang Golek Purwa* Play by Abah Sunarya and Gamelan Giri Harja I," *Asian Theatre Journal* 18, no. 1 (2001): 1–58, doi:10.1353/atj.2001.0002.

8. See Karaton Ngyogyakarta Hadiningrat's videos: "Beksan Ajisaka"; and "Beksan Ajisaka Uyon-uyon Hadiluhung Jumadilakir 1954 Jimakir/1 Februari 2021," [www.youtube.com/watch?v=e03lQR3JOwc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e03lQR3JOwc).

9. See "Animasi 2D Indonesia // Ajisaka [Trailer]," MSV Studios (Mataram Surya Visi Ltd.), directed by Aryanto Yuniawan, YouTube video, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEOeZcz32L8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEOeZcz32L8); and Mataram Surya Visi Ltd and Universitas Amikom, "Hikayat Ajisaka di Flickfair Los Angeles," <http://msvstudio.co.id>.

10. Dates of the *walis* are impossible to verify; multiple generations in a family used the same title, complicating identifications. The Wali Songo are legendary in the same way as St. Patrick, the fourth-century Catholic culture bringer of Ireland, or Padmasambhava, the eighth-century Tibetan Buddhist saint. Dates here reflect Indonesian Wikipedia's versions. Sunan Kalijaga (literally, "Lord who meditated at the stream"), a prince of north coast city of Tuban, is credited as the first *dalang* and has a pilgrimage/gravesite in Kadilangu in the city of Demak; other saints have their own shrines along the north coast.

11. *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* (union of individual and divine) is associated with figures like the martyred mystic Mansur al-Hallaj (858–March 26, 922) and Sufi lineages. Some suggest that stories of Siti Jenar and other Javanese Islamic heretics are merely borrowings of the Mansur's story to a Javanese setting.

12. R. N. Yasadipura, *The Book of Cabolèk*, trans. and ed. S. Soebardi (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975), 151.

13. See Solichin Salam, *Sekitar Wali Songo* [Regarding the Nine Wali] (Yogyakarta: Menara Kudus, 1960); Yasadipura, *The Book of Cabolèk*; Nancy Florida, *Writing the Past, Inscripting the Future: History as Prophecy in Colonial Java* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); D. A. Rinkes, *Nine Saints of Java*, trans. H. M. Froger, ed. A. Gorden (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1996); R. Michael Feener, "A Re-examination of the Place of al-Hallaj in the Development of Southeast Asian Islam," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 154, no. 4 (1998): 571–92; George Quinn, *Bandit Saints of Java* (Melton Mowbray: Monsoon, 2019); Rinkes, *Nine Saints of Java*; Kathy Foley, "The Ronggeng, the Wayang, the Wali, and Islam: Female or Transvestite Male Dancers-Singers-Performers and Evolving Islam in West Java," *Asian Theatre Journal* 32, no. 2 (2015): 356–86, [www.jstor.org/stable/24737037](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24737037); Foley, "Les Wali réduit au silence" (Silencing the Walis), in *Marionettes et Pouvoir*, ed. R. Fleury and J. Sermon (Montpellier: Deuxieme Epoque, 2019), 150–70; and Foley, "Saintly Puppet Masters and Sacred Clowning: Antinomian Religion and Patterns in Islamic Puppetry," in *Puppets and the Spirit*, ed. Claudia Orenstein and Tim Cusack (NY: Routledge, 2022), 184–96, among other sources.

14. Geertz in his *Religion in Java* (1960) uses the terms *santri* for the purists and *abangan* (from *abang*, red) for the Javanized Muslims. While Feener ("A Re-examination of the Place of al-Hallaj") may be right that the terms are from the nineteenth century, I believe that the association of loose constructionists with red may come prior to the late colonial era since an alternate name of Siti Jenar is "Seh Lemah Abang" (Saint of the Red Earth) and areas where crafts persons often live are often called Lemah Abang, though of course, it is possible the areas are just named after red clay in places where artisans settled. Red is also the color associated with the Sufi singer mystics, animal trainers, and



wandering followers of South Asia's Lal ("ruby color") Shabaz Qalandar (1177–1274). It may again point toward Islamic roots that come not from Arab merchants but from Indo-Iranian Islam.

15. K. van Dijk and P. Nas, "Dakwah and Indigenous Culture: The Dissemination of Islam," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 154, no. 2 (1998): 218–35, at 226.

16. Such contentions of Chinese or Persian connections are distressing to Javanese Muslims given the anti-Sinitic and anti-Persian/Shi'a bent of Sunni orthodoxy in postcolonial Indonesia.

17. Credit for *wayang sasak* is also sometimes given to Pangeran Sangupati Urip sent by the Wali Songo to cure disease (David Harnish, *Change and Identity in the Music Cultures of Lombok, Indonesia* [Leiden: Brill, 2021], 118), or a wandering religious figure who cures a famine by a wayang performance, or Wali Nyatok who as a child magically spent a night in Java learning wayang and returned to demonstrate it in Lombok the following day. For some different stories, see Abdul Latief Apriaman, "Wayang Sasak Tumbuh di Bawah Bayang Kecurigaan" [Wayang Sasak growing under the shadow of suspicion], *Tempo*, July 23, 2019, <https://travel.tempo.co>.

18. See Judith Ecklund, "Paradoxes and Realities of Wayang among the Sasak of Lombok," in *Puppet Theater in Contemporary Indonesia: New Approaches to Performance Events*, ed. Jan Mrázek (Ann Arbor: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), 205–21. David Harnish, "The Worlds of Wayang Sasak: Music, Performance, and Negotiations with Religion and Modernity," *Asian Music* 34, no. 2 (2003): 91–120, [www.jstor.org/stable/4098458](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4098458).

19. Comparison of post-wali puppet figures with Hindu-Buddhist East Java temple friezes in wayang style shows greater stylization of puppets, different musical instruments, and so on.

20. Suratno, "Studi Tentang Lakon Wahyu Dalam Pakeuran Wayang Kultt [sic] Purwa Di Surakarta" [A Study of Wahyu plays in the Surakarta style puppetry in the last decade], *Harmonia: Journal of Arts Research and Education* 5, no. 1 (2004).

21. This story remains popular in Java and beyond, for example Sumarsam, performed it in 2023 to celebrate fifty years of the Wesleyan University World Hall of Music. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6\\_DzgGsrObk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_DzgGsrObk).

22. This model continues. For example, concerning a performance of Dalang Danang Suseno for the 2018 election, editor Danar Widiyanto wrote, "Wahyu Cakraningrat will only penetrate into the knights who are clean and spiritual, intelligent and resistant to temptation, virtuous, and high social sensitivity," and Widiyanto then quoted Hidayat Nur Wahid, the deputy speaker of the Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat (People's Consultative Assembly) on the event: "In this political year, it is very fitting to take *Wahyu Cakraningrat's* philosophy. There, the struggle for power is fully carried out ethically, humanely and with an awareness of prioritizing togetherness in behavior. It's not unjust an unscrupulous behavior"; see "Wahyu Cakraningrat, Sebuah Filosofis untuk Merebut Kekuasaan," *Krjogjan.com*, [www.krjogja.com](http://www.krjogja.com).

23. Suratno, "Studi Tentang Lakon Wahyu."

24. For in-depth discussion of *wayang wahyu*, see A. Handi Setyanto, Dr. Wisma Nugraha, Ch. R. M. Hum, and. Prof. Dr. Soetarno, DE. "Sajian Ki Blacius Subono: Mediasi Kisah Alkitab," Wayang Wahyu Lakon Hana Caraka Nabi Elia (Ki Blacius Subono's Presentation: Mediation of Bible Stories "Wayang Wahyu Play Hana Caraka"), S2 (M.A.), University Gajah Mada, 2016. Agus Handi Setyanto, *Wayang Katholik: Cara Cerdas Berkateke* (Catholic Wayang: A Smart Mode of Catechism) (Yogyakarta: Pt. Kanisius, 2017); Marzanna Poplawska, "Wayang Wahyu as an Example of Christian Forms of Shadow Theatre" *Asian Theatre Journal* 21, no. 2 (2004): 194–202, [www.jstor.org/stable/4145461](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4145461); Poplawska, *Performing Faith: Christian Music, Identity and Inculturation in Indonesia* (NY: Routledge, 2020).

25. Setyanto, *Wayang Katholik*, 27–38; Poplawska, "Wayang Wahyu as an Example of Christian Forms of Shadow Theatre."

26. Setyanto, *Wayang Katholik*, 28–29.

27. Syahrul Munir Ungaran, "Wayang Wahyu, Kisah Alkitab yang Disajikan dalam Bentuk Wayang," *Kompas* (2017). Ungaran discusses recent developments in Semarang. The most detailed history with discussion of the art analyzed in five periods is Setyanto, *Wayang Katholik*, 40–55.

28. Marzanna Poplawska, at 196.
29. This practice alleviated accusations of sexy female singers stealing the show and kept decorum. Current performances may feature female singers.
30. She was very active, performing up to the death of her drummer husband in 1993.
31. Schools mentioned in this essay have all changed their names multiple times over the years as they have added higher degrees, and all are branches of national colleges/universities of the arts. In the 1980s, this school was called ASKI (Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia, Indonesian academy of music), later STSI (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia, Indonesian college of the arts), and is now ISI-Surakarta.
32. See Ganug Nugroho Adi, "Blacius Subono: An Outlandish Dalang and Musician," *Jakarta Post*, December 30, 2013.
33. Matthew Isaac Cohen, "Wayang Wayu," *Indonesian Performance* (blog), February 15, 2009, <http://indonesianperformance.blogspot.com>.
34. See Benjamin Brinner, "Performer Interaction in a New Form of Javanese Wayang," in *Essays on Southeast Asian Performing Arts: Local Manifestations and Cross-Cultural Implications*, ed. Kathy Foley (Berkeley: Centers for South and Southeast Asia Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1992), 96–114, for more on *pakeliran padat*. For Subono's innovations, see Setyanto, *Wayang Katholik*, 48–49.
35. For a sample of Fosdahl's play for Pangudi Luhur School in April 2013, which uses a wide screen, multiple *dalangs*, Indonesian dialogue, and more, see "Wayang Wahyu Lakon Wahyu Manunggal Sejati Karya Frank Fosdahl," [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ayxsm19C3c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ayxsm19C3c).
36. Setyanto, *Wayang Katholik*, 54.
37. See Mathias Hariyadi, "Muslim Scholar against 'Wayang,' Indonesia's Traditional Theatre," *Asia News*, February 18, 2022, [www.asianews.it/news-en/Muslim-scholar-against-%27wayang%27,-Indonesia's-traditional-theatre-55181.html](http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Muslim-scholar-against-%27wayang%27,-Indonesia's-traditional-theatre-55181.html).
38. Poplawska, *Performing Faith*, 145.
39. See Boen Boen, *Alkitab Wayang=The Wayang Bible: Perjanjian Baru=The New Testament* [Illustrations by Ammar Fauzi] (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2018), comic book.
40. Poplawska, *Performing Faith*, 149–50.
41. Hariyadi, "Muslim Scholar against 'Wayang.'" The reference is to Paul IV (1998), "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium Et Spes*," promulgated December 7, 1965, which notes, "Efforts must be made so that those who foster these arts feel that the Church recognizes their activity and so that, enjoying orderly liberty, they may initiate more friendly relations with the Christian community. The Church acknowledges also new forms of art which are adapted to our age and are in keeping with the characteristics of various nations and regions. They may be brought into the sanctuary since they raise the mind to God, once the manner of expression is adapted and they are conformed to liturgical requirements." [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).
42. See Senawangi, "Wayang Budha," <https://senawangi.org>.
43. See Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter, and Sandra Reeve, *Embodied Lives: Touched by the Art of Amerta Movement with Suprpto Suryodarmo* (London: Karnac Books, 2014); and Lise Lavelle, "Amerta Movement of Java 1986–1997: An Asian Movement Improvisation" (PhD diss., Lund University, Centre for Languages and Literature, 2006). Also see images at the Routledge Performance Archive, [www.routledgeperformancearchive.com/multimedia/video/human-nature-spirit](http://www.routledgeperformancearchive.com/multimedia/video/human-nature-spirit), for sense of his eco-somatic workshops.
44. On Suprpto, see Mathew Isaac Cohen, "Contemporary 'Wayang' in Global Contexts," *Asian Theatre Journal*, 24, no. 2 (2007): 338–69, [www.jstor.org/stable/27568418](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27568418). On Sutasoma, see Soewito Santoso, *Sutasoma: A Study in Javanese Wajrayana* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1975).
45. Suprpto's life is detailed in "Obituary, Suprpto Suryodarmo 'Free Movement' Guru for Hundreds of Dancers," *Jakarta Post*, December 30, 2019. [www.thejakartapost.com](http://www.thejakartapost.com).

46. For other Buddhist-related experiments, see Anugrah, "Wayang Jataka Berbasis Sastra," (Jataka Wayang based on Literature), *Berita Magelang* (Magelang news), December 6, 2021, <http://beritamagelang.id>, on wayang inspired by Borobudur panels. Another experiment using new puppets and projections was an intercultural production by Christopher Romero, I Gusti Putu Sudarta, and Andy McGraw in Bali; see Christopher Romero, "Wayang Machinima Jataka Preview," 2007, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbNqN8vzigk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbNqN8vzigk).

47. See Sutarjo, "Wayang Sadat in Javanese Culture." For a recent version of *wayang sadat*, see a scene that features Sunan Bonang converting Lokajaya (Sunan Kalijaga) presented at a 2016 Mystic Music Festival/Konya at "Wayang Sadat—6" (2017), at [www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1353691058005070](http://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1353691058005070). Note the ending with Islamic call to prayer at 8:31.

48. Sutarjo, "Wayang Sadat in Javanese Culture," 198.

49. Foley, "The *Ronggeng*, the *Wayang*, the *Wali*, and Islam"; and Foley, "Les Wali réduit au silence."

50. Boonstra, "Performing Islam."

51. Reported in "Banuyas Dalang Will Police Khalid Basalamah about Haram Puppet Lecture," *World Today News*, 2022, [www.world-today-news.com](http://www.world-today-news.com).

52. "NU Intellectuals Are Surprised There Are Still People Like Ustaz Khalid Basalamah, Destroying Puppets Similar to the Taliban," VOI, February 21, 2022, <https://voi.id/en/news/137260/nu-intellectuals-are-surprised-there-are-still-people-like-ustaz-khalid-basalamah-destroying-puppets-similar-to-the-taliban>.

53. See Purbo Asmoro, *Wayang Ilang, Dhalang Nantang* (Wayang disappears, dalangs protest), trans. Katheryn Emerson, February 18, 2022, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4lIH1jllug](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4lIH1jllug).

54. Sedana, email to author, February 26, 2022.