

Indonesia
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Semar Makes the Hajj Shadow Puppet Theatre and Islam in Indonesia

Indonesia, with a population of more than 200 million, of which perhaps 80 percent is Muslim, is frequently portrayed in popular presses as 'the world's largest Islamic nation.' Typically, this statement is then immediately qualified. But, portrayals often continue, 'the Islam practised by Indonesians is different than that practised in the countries of the Middle and Near East. It is more tempered or syncretic, less dogmatic, doctrinal, or fundamentalist. If proof of this more 'relaxed' attitude to the strict observance of Islam is offered, more often than not it is not through what Indonesian scholars of Islamic law have written (which tends to be rather conservative) nor by attendance figures at Friday mosque services or the number of women who are wearing *jilbab* head covers (both of which are escalating at remarkable rates). Rather, commentators characteristically turn to the continuing popularity of pre-Islamic cultural forms in contemporary Indonesia – Java's celebrated shadow puppet theatre or *wayang*, with its stories based on the characters and situations of the Indic epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, above all.

The fact that many of the people who live in Java (which contains nearly half of Indonesia's population) enjoy watching the adventures of Arjuna and Gathotkaca enacted as theatre is taken as incontrovertible evidence that Indonesians, as a people, are somehow 'less Islamic' than other member-peoples of the Islamic world community. This view is not limited to reporters, but pervades the discourse of anthropology.

Ward Keeler, a renowned scholar of Javanese culture and language, has written that 'the message of Islam stands counter to the Hindu-based image of the cosmos inherent to the world of the *wayang*', while James Boon has argued that 'Islam diminishes the *wayangish* properties of culture.'

Such views are stereotypes, of course. There is no monolithic 'message of Islam' nor are wayang

and Islam really in a state of competition for the souls of 'the Javanese.' Going beyond these reified absolutes requires more nuanced understandings of the relation of wayang and Islam, and particularly how Islam is represented in wayang performances. For if wayang really is the encyclopedic crystallization of Javanese culture that anthropologists and philologists have long claimed, Islam merits at least an entry.

A characteristic southern wayang play is Semar Munggah Haji, 'Semar Makes the Hajj,' which I saw performed by the young southern puppeteer Purjadi in 1994. Purjadi is a graduate of Cirebon's branch of the National Institute for Islamic Studies, and frequently draws upon his Islamic learning in performance. The play's title character is Semar, the elder brother of Divine Guru (Shiva to South Asians), the faithful clown-servant of Arjuna and the other Pandhawa brothers. A toll road, not unlike the Jakarta-Surabaya superhighway that passes through the Cirebon region, has been constructed through Semar's hamlet of Karangtumaritis and Semar has received 25 million rupiah as retribution for the appropriation of his property. Subsequently, Semar receives a divine vision: he must use this windfall profit to make the pilgrimage to the Arabian peninsula. He sends his youngest son, Cungkring, to see if Semar's brother, Divine Guru, will come to see him off. Guru refuses, for going on the hajj is for Muslims and he and his ancestors have always been Hindu-Buddhists. Semar's de facto conversion to Islam would be a black mark on Guru's genealogy. Battles erupt. After many complications, including the destruction of Semar's corporeal body, Semar is instructed in the various laws concerning the hajj by a Muslim *jinn* (genie) named Nalikaparman (with reference to Algensindo et al.'s *Fiqh Islam*, an oft-reprinted textbook on Islamic law that the puppeteer read in his student days at the Islamic Institute), goes on the hajj, and changes his name to Haji Asmaruddin.

Semar Munggah Haji, and the southern wayang school in general, cannot speak for the entire 'Javanese wayang tradition,' if such an entity exists. Nor is it clear whether such plays and institutions are prognostic of a new integration of wayang and Islam, a remnant of an old tradition, or both. They do serve to unsettle old assumptions and boundaries, however, and sensitize us to the remarkable range of local dynamics of Islam world-wide. ♦

Historical research on Javanese literature demonstrates that before the late nineteenth century, wayang and Islam interacted in complex ways. *Suluk*, or Javanese mystical poems, appropriated images and symbols from the shadow puppet theatre to meditate upon notions of unity of God and Man, the workings of fate and free will, and knowing and doing. Encyclopedists and chroniclers redacted genealogies and tales co-articulating the formerly distinct histories of Javanese gods and culture heroes and Islamic prophets and holy men. Stories circulated concerning the exemplary uses of wayang by Sunan Kalijaga, one of the semi-legendary *waliullah* or 'Friends of God' credited with introducing Islam to Java in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. One particularly well-known tale describes how Sunan Kalijaga gave wayang performances for sponsors who paid by reciting the Islamic declaration of belief: 'There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger.'

So much does the Javanese manuscript tradition, as compiled in public collections in Leiden, Jakarta, and Yogyakarta, tell us. The question arises as to what continuity such practices have with contemporary Java, after the rise of Islamic mass organizations, the development of Middle Eastern-style Islamic modernism, and the massive growth of Islamic institutions of learning through the university level.

A partial answer to this query is found in a particular 'school' or 'regional sub-style' (*kaol*) of wayang, the so-called *kidulan* or 'southern' style epicentred in the town of Palimanan, some 15 kilometres west of the city of Cirebon, in north-coastal West Java. The greater Cirebon area is renowned throughout the Indonesian archipelago as a centre for Islamic learning, and particularly its mystical traditions. It is also famed for its characteristic art forms, particularly its distinctive batik cloth, reverse paintings on glass, and mask dance. Southern puppeteers, over four generations of an extended family, have inflected wayang in particularly Islamic ways, taking seriously their charge as descendants (biological as well as spiritual) of Sunan Kalijaga. Wayang is viewed as a *warisan sing para wali*, an 'inheritance from the Friends of God,' and the puppeteer as a *juru dakwah* or 'Islamic proselytizer.' In southern wayang, the familiar characters of wayang, including the Hindu gods and culture heroes, remain at centre stage. But they are animated by Islamic ideas and ideals.

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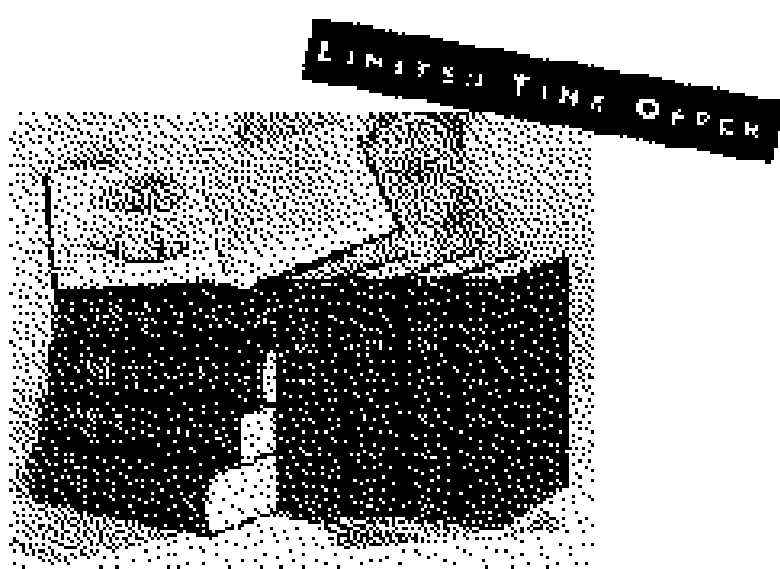
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