

The Essence of *Wayang* in Modern Indonesian Artworks: Examining the Works of Nasirun and Heri Dono

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Abstract

In Indonesia, Java specifically, *wayang* holds a significant cultural role. More than a story-telling technique, *wayang* is embedded deeply in the magico-spiritual beliefs and mysticism of the Javanese sphere. During prehistoric times, *wayang* was used as a tool to narrate both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata epics in Indonesia as well as the Southeast Asian region. In its primary form, *Wayang Kulit Purwa* dates back to the 10th century in the Southeast Asian region. Over the years, *wayang* transcended its primary form to transform into more creative and expressive forms such as oral literature, bas reliefs, dance dramas, stage performances, fine arts and visual paintings—as such the essence of *wayang* persists in other fields. Although over centuries, the technicality and performance of *wayang kulit* have evolved and transformed into a multitude of creative art forms, the essence of *wayang* has continued its presence in modern features and contemporary context based on the persistence of symbolism and its mysticism that could be traced and highlighted in these works. This article examines the works of modern Indonesian artists Nasirun and Heri Dono by discussing the essence of *wayang*, through its symbolism and mysticism in particular, as this paper will argue, present in their works.

Keywords: *Wayang*, Indonesia, symbolism, mysticism, visual art, Nasirun, Heri Dono

Introduction

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata epics' foothold in Southeast Asia is vast and deep. Vatsyayan (2004) proposed that the Ramayana epic travelled to this region by sea at the end of the first millennium. Along with the Ramayana, the Mahabharata epic arrived in

Java between the second and third century where these two epics would further form the basis of *Wayang Kulit Purwa* (Irvine, 2005c). The widespread influence of the mythological texts Ramayana and Mahabharata in Southeast Asia's local arts and literature was inevitable due to the relic of the Indian influence over this region in the first millennia (Vecchia, 2007). In other words, both the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics were passed down through generations by way of oral tradition, and were indigenised into local languages through adaptation. They were used as a source of narrative for the *wayang kulit* tradition as well as bas-reliefs in ancient temples, which then further flourished into stage performances and dance drama.

In a general sense, the term '*wayang*' is associated with a theatrical performance. In the Malay-Indo world, *wayang* specifically relates to leather puppet shadow plays and its puppet characters. The practice of *wayang kulit* in Java can be traced back to the 9th century (Krishnan, 1997) with the Ramayana as one of its recitals. Krishnan further highlighted that the popularity of the current *wayang* practice was long established during the reign of the Majapahit empire. In elaborating the significance of *wayang*, Krishnan (1997) asserted that:

Shadow play is probably the oldest form of theatre, believed to precede human theatre. Much before man ventured to impersonate the form of the divine beings, he conceived their images into shadow play (p. 16).

The adaptation and indigenisation of the Indian epics along with the transmission process of the aforementioned were not unheard of. In the case of *wayang kulit* performances in Southeast Asia, Krishnan (1997) noted that the Ramayana epic was indigenised, infused with local tales, to suit the local socio-cultural environment. The indigenisation resulted in localised variations, retellings or recensions of the tales that can be found sporadically throughout the Southeast Asian region. In contemporary times, the stylisation of *wayang* puppets has been stretched by various artists and made to evolve into different mediums. This comes as no surprise due to the significance of *wayang* in the socio-cultural, spiritual and ritualistic realm in Indonesia.

The disparities in style, composition and technique in capturing the essence of *wayang* in their paintings were thus explained by Wright (1994) :

Among the artists who are inspired by *wayang* mythology, some paint more or less direct, traditionalist translations of specific characters or scenes from a *wayang* play and are less central to questions of modernism in Indonesian art; others paint specific *wayang* characters but in more personally reconceived styles; a few take a non-traditional approach and envision a generic rather than a specific *wayang* figure (p. 54).

The application of the *wayang* style by modern Indonesian painters is evident in the continued tradition of artists who were engrossed in mythological themes (Wright, 1994b). This particular 'style' is an application and transformation that was captured by modern artists from *wayang* tradition. Albeit designs and styling of characters may not be identical to the traditional leather puppets, the resemblance and distinguishable styles of *wayang* (two-dimensional, flattened characters that are positioned similar to *wayang* puppets) are notable in modern and contemporary artworks. The 'style' that

denotes *wayang* characters in modern and contemporary artworks is enhanced by various compositional elements derived from *wayang* performances (such as the projection of shadows on a screen) and themes or references to moral, spiritual, socio-cultural or religious values. Fischer (1990) summarised the importance of puppet plays and mask dramas of Java and Bali as a traditional source for modern Indonesian artists as such:

This world of *wayang* and *topeng* is a storehouse of traditional values and beliefs and social practices set within the great Mahabharata and Ramayana epics. Preferred morals are extolled; flaws and strengths in the personalities of individual characters are underscored and consequences played out. The plays are veritable microcosms of a cast comprehensive tradition of symbols, myths, stories and histories familiar to most Indonesians, young and old (p. 18).

Thus, the continued vitality of *wayang* and its elements in Indonesian art—both modern and contemporary—is difficult to ignore. *Wayang*, which is embedded in the socio-culture, magic and spirituality, as well as the mysticism of Indonesia and its people, is multifarious. In discussing the significance of *wayang* style, Wright (1994) surmised that “[t]o many people, the *wayang* is seen as the most elaborate and popular visual expression of Javanese mysticism” (p. 54). Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta (1957) established that *wayang* is a high form of culture that reflects the spiritual and mental life of a whole society, similarly done by thinkers and poets alike. In his lecture paper, Mangkunagoro highlighted symbolism and mysticism as the central subjects in Javanese *wayang* (Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta, 1957).

The *wayang*'s richness, depth and diversity makes it a preferred source for local Indonesian artists due to its historical ties with their cultural identity, myths and spiritual beliefs. Nasirun and Heri Dono, like many other artists born in the 1960s in Java, Indonesia, pursued their art education in Yogyakarta. Despite this similarity, each artist had distinctive styles and personal ties to *wayang* in the way it was captured or represented in their works. Heri Dono was well-known for his broad knowledge in Javanese *wayang* and this was clearly translated onto his canvases. This research intends to discuss the ‘essence of *wayang*’ in traditional *wayang kulit* performances in which the riveting cores captivated modern and contemporary Indonesian artists and were adapted in their works. This paper will examine selected works by Heri Dono and Nasirun in terms of the content and context of the artworks by way of examining the characters, symbolism and stylisation of the *wayang kulit*. By using the ‘essence of *wayang*’ as a lens in analysing the works of Nasirun and Heri Dono, this paper will argue and elucidate the different symbols that were employed by artists in composing their message and relation to Javanese mysticism. As the Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are tightly woven with the practice of *wayang kulit* in Indonesia, works that reflect these epics were chosen to be a part of the analysis in this paper.

Background of the *Wayang* Practice

The exact beginning or place of origin of *wayang kulit* has been contested by various scholars. Several scholars associate the origin of *wayang kulit* with India while others stated the possibility of its origin being in Central Asia or Southeast Asia. Written

records remain vague with conflicting propositions and unsubstantiated sources for this pre-historic practice as a storytelling technique or as an instrument of animistic and magico-spiritual beliefs. Yousof (2006) pointed out the problematic nature of *wayang*'s origin:

Existing theories—and there are several important ones—in most instances trace the origins of this genre to various locations in South, Southeast and Central Asia. There is even a proposal that the shadow play might have developed independently in the various regions or countries and that a search for a single source makes no sense (p. 6).

According to Haryanto (as cited in Irvine, 2005a, p. 129), the origin of Javanese *wayang* practices is rooted in ancestral worship dating back to 1000BC. Brandon (as cited in Irvine, 2005a, p. 129) observed that in prehistoric Java, ancestral worship was an essential practice where the shadows that were brought to life were believed to be the souls of the ancestors from whom magical assistance or advice were sought. Since the beginning, these shadow puppets were used as an instrument by mortals to connect to the magical/supernatural/spiritual plane in order to overcome challenges and obstacles.

The characteristics of Javanese shadow play involve several attributes and various layers of meanings. Among the attributes are: (i) the *wayang kulit* acts as a medium to connect with the spiritual world; (ii) the symbolic representation of the *panggun* and the leather puppets that signify the cosmos, the source of life and the challenges that humans face; (iii) the practice/performance of *wayang kulit* in religious ceremonies; (iv) the use of *wayang kulit* to appease the spirits or to cure individuals from certain 'illnesses' or disturbances of spirits, and lastly; (v) the performance of *wayang kulit* as a source of entertainment, education or political propaganda. *Wayang kulit* in Java has evolved into various *wayang kulit* practices in Indonesia as well as its neighbouring region, resulting in newer and even different versions from its origin. Despite the external influences and transition of modern times, the ritualistic and mysticism that surrounds the *wayang kulit* practice is not lost. The belief in the higher order of things, the contemplation of life, the link between microcosm and macrocosm that is represented in *wayang*, and finally the belief that the performance of *wayang* extends itself as a spiritual connection underline the mysticism in *wayang*. Irvine (2005c) surmised:

In such circumstances, the shadow play itself becomes a vehicle which transports man's contemplative faculties into higher metaphysical realms as he reaches for ethical and moral values and, ultimately, for Enlightenment and Perfection (p. 106).

Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta (1957) pointed out that *wayang* is an important aspect of Javanese culture, and the noble expression in *wayang* practice has become known to the intellectual world. *Wayang* is a theatrical art where the shadows of leather puppet figurines are cast on a white cloth by a suspended light source, and these shadows are controlled, animated and voiced by the *dalang* (puppet master) with the audience seated on the other side of the screen. At the heart of the performance of *wayang*, lies storytelling by the *dalang* who is commonly acknowledged and believed to be an

individual with supernatural powers. In its simplest form, *wayang*, also known as *wayang kulit*, is primarily a storytelling technique and a tool of communication during prehistoric times. However, beyond the narration and the ‘livelihood’ of these leather puppets, the practice of *wayang* transcends into something deeper and more mythical. Apart from these features, Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta (1957) highlighted the significance of the symbolism and mysticism of *wayang*, the Javanese elite’s approach to delve into the mysteries of *wayang*, the *dalang*’s role, and the responsibility of the princely courts in the aggrandisement of both the *wayang* as a traditional art and its puppet, specifically in Java.

As highlighted by Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta (1957), the essence of *wayang* is made up of symbolism and mysticism. Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta (1957) has discussed several elements of the symbolism of *Wayang Kulit Purwa*, such as the characters, their colours, weapons, and evilness, as well as their particular time of appearance. Firstly, characters can be categorised into two distinct groups—*raksasas* (monstrous creatures and giants) and *ksatriya* (basically the hero and protagonist in a *wayang lakon*). These character(s) symbolise certain attributes or strengths, for instance, a *ksatriya* defeats several giants on its own, while other character(s) display enormous physical strength. Secondly, for the element of colour, the colour of a particular *raksasa* denotes its hierarchy; with black at the top, followed by red, then yellow and brown, and violet or green occupying the last position. *Ksatriya* are commonly given a white face, although this strict adherence has been loosened in recent times.

The third element of symbolism consists of weapons or special features, such as cock spurs or fiery hair, which can be associated with a particular historical event or period of time for the character. In regards to the fourth element, certain characters (such as the popular *raksasa*) make an appearance at a particular time in a *wayang lakon*. Such selective timing is also applicable to the appearance of Semar which happens during midnight. Lastly, as Good (*ksatriya*) and Bad (*raksasas*) fight each other, which is done through the visual symbols of character designs, colours, and weapons, it leads towards a “symbolic struggle” (Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta, 1957).

Moving on to the second attribute, Sarsita (as cited in Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta, 1957, p. 3) surmised that the mysticism in a *wayang kulit* performance is a symbolisation of the inner and spiritual development of man in a society. Soeroto (as cited in Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta, 1957, p. 4) further elaborated that “mysticism seeks the whole universe in the wee human heart”. Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta (1957) concluded that *wayang* relates to the macrocosmos and microcosmos in terms of how a *wayang* performance reflects the world and vice-versa, and how we understand or perceive our role in the greater universe and works of life. This can also be seen in how the world is also reflected within an individual. Thus, *wayang*’s mysticism, according to Mangkunogoro, revolves around the knowledge, comprehension and question of life. Fluid and intangible, it stimulates the questioning of the mind about our origin and what life is (Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta, 1957).

Identifying the Essence of *Wayang* in Modern Indonesian artworks

It can be argued that the images and figures of *wayang* have become a channel for the manifestation of mysticism for the Javanese people. Embedded and woven deeply in Javanese culture, *wayang* has evolved with the progression of time and technology. The localisation of characters, plots, narration and even the practice of *wayang* are still evolving to this very day. The stylisation of *wayang* characters—elongated limbs with elaborate costumes and accessories—appear to be a common and favourite adaptation among artists. The most iconic style of *wayang* puppets—the flat side profile of the face—is commonly applied by artists into their character's designs regardless of whether they are referring specifically to a character from the *wayang* or to real-life/fantasy/abstract characters in their artworks.

Along with adaptation and localisation, the essence of *wayang* has been used as an inspirational tool by artists to build a conceptual bridge to communicate/engage the audience/viewer on the content and context of the artwork. Thus, the essence of *wayang* can be traced in various paintings and artworks as *wayang* holds significant value in the cultural tradition and historical identity of many Indonesians. As such, it can be argued that the essence of *wayang* continues to influence modern and contemporary art forms, as creative output by several Indonesian artists reflect that they're upholding the value of this old tradition. Fischer (1990) further elaborated:

Here resides for Indonesian artists not only a theatre for constantly hearing and experiencing their cultural traditions but it is also packed with colours, shapes, movement and dramatic settings—the stuff of which art is made of. Again here we are talking about artists who use these sources in a creative and novel way, yet derive much force and attraction in their art from stories, puppets, and masks of the epic tradition (p. 18).

Wright (1994) also discussed the significance of traditional spiritual-religious symbols as a source of inspiration for Indonesian artists where spirituality, mysticism and symbols are used as metaphorical themes in art. In reference to the application of tree and mountain in modern Indonesian artworks, Wright (1994) indicates that:

In the work of some artists, symbols with traditional spiritual content are consciously used as metaphors of spiritual power or as vehicles for ascent, symbols experienced in earnest by many as relevant to modern life. In other artists' work, however, such symbols are reproduced in a facile and repetitive way, frequently with great skill but without a sense of deeper, personal involvement (p. 50-51).

Thus, as highlighted earlier, the essence of *wayang* could also be traced in these modern and contemporary artworks by drawing on its symbolisms (for example, the lines and colours used; the objects portrayed such as weapons and armoury; and even the themes implied such as evilness) that are enhanced by the magico-religious significance of *wayang*, as the audience 'anticipates' and 'participates' in the spirituality of the *wayang* performance (Hidding as cited in Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta, 1957, p. 3). If the message that the audience perceives, comprehends or even associates with their own experiences in life comes as a result of the *wayang* performance, a similar visual experience could also be produced if one views a *wayang* created in the context of modern and contemporary visual arts. It is this dialectical

process of relating *wayang* (performance or through visuals) to life, and vice versa that forms this mysticism.

Before discussing the essence of *wayang* in the works of Nasirun and Heri Dono in depth, this sub-section will highlight the essence of *wayang* that is also present in works by other artists. In the context of modern Indonesian art, the essence of *wayang* has appeared even in works by Affandi and Sudjojono, who are both renowned Indonesian artists, and Anak Agung Gede Sobrat, a Balinese artist. In the following work by Affandi, the artist represented Semar (a vital character in the Javanese *wayang kulit*) and Hanuman from the Ramayana epic. Semar is the most important character in the *wayang* set in the localised version of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata epics in Indonesia. In Javanese culture, Semar, who resembles a clown, is a god-like character who appears in times of danger and distress. Semar is also considered the most sacred figure in the *wayang* set (Holt, 1967b). Wright (2007) further elaborated:

Semar is, in the wayang shadow puppet repertoire of Java, both the lowliest and the highest, both ancestral and contemporary, both servant and teacher to the Pandavas, and imbued with both male and female characteristics—in short, to many minds, God (p. 180).



Figure 1. Affandi, Flying Kites at Parangtritis, 1987. In Wright, A. (1994). *Soul, Spirit and Mountain – Preoccupations of Contemporary Indonesian Painters*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Semar represents the divine, albeit not the refined-looking type of other noble and godly characters. Wright (2007) noted the significance of Semar as “the ancient mythological figure of Java” (p.180). Irvine (2005b) suggested the foundation of Semar in the Javanese *wayang* as:

Hindu wayang characters were fused with local spirits and ancestors, or local gods were simply grafted as new characters into wayang stories. Perhaps the best example of this was the famous clown-companion character, Semar, who was, in fact, the mythical Guardian God of Java, and who assumed a prominent place in the Javanised Hindu pantheon (p. 16).

The symbols of Semar in a *wayang kulit* performance are his physical characteristics and the particular time (about midnight) that marks his appearance in a *wayang kulit* performance. The appearance of Semar provides a cue to the audience, who then 'anticipate' and 'participate' spiritually in the *wayang kulit lakon*, as Semar's appearance is usually associated with the solution to problems and the end of danger or distress. The mysticism of *wayang kulit* could be experienced when one comprehends and negotiates the meaning of the events of the *wayang kulit lakon*, and then tries to position himself or herself in the higher order of life as they confront these characters.

The composition of Semar and Hanuman in Affandi's work can be argued to be more than just mere coincidence. The Hanuman character, which was derived from the Ramayana epic, is Rama's most loyal devotee. Hanuman was initially sent to rescue Sita from the clutches of Ravana in Lanka. In a battle there, Laksmana was hit by Indrajit's poisonous arrow, and needed to be treated before the next sunrise. In search for magic herbs to treat Laksmana, Hanuman scoured the whole mountain from the Himalayas back to Lanka. Hanuman can be considered to be similar to Semar, as Hanuman comes to the rescue of Rama in times of trouble, danger, and distress. More than that, Hanuman is bestowed with the magical ability to expand himself enormously and to shrink himself to be as small as a fly. As such, it can be argued that in Affandi's painting, the presence of both Semar and Hanuman connotes solutions and problem-solving that one may face in life. More importantly, in both Javanese and Hindu cultures, Semar and Hanuman resonate with the representation of 'the divine'—as both Semar and Hanuman are characters that come to the rescue, despite challenges and distresses. This could be read as related to the belief of mysticism where good triumphs over evil, and how we position ourselves in our daily struggles as well as challenges.

In another example, Sudjojono captured a vital moment of the Ramayana epic in his painting as shown in Figure 2. In this work, the stylisation of the characters is very much localised. This can be seen in the headgear worn by Laksmana and in the way Sita is portrayed as a local indigenous woman with a headgear/crown and an almost bare chest except for a translucent white cloth that flows from her crown to around her upper body. The deer in this composition is unmistakably from the Valmikian Ramayana epic. The plot of the golden deer in the Ramayana epic is significant as it is this plot that brings around a major turn of events. In the Ramayana epic, the golden deer is Mareecha (Ravana's uncle in disguise). Sita is captivated by the beauty of the golden deer that she insists Rama gets it for her. When Rama goes after the deer, Mareecha calls out for Sita and Laksmana in the voice of Rama. Laksmana goes in search of Rama after being ordered to by Sita. It is at this point that Ravana makes an appearance as a Brahmin and kidnaps Sita and brings her to Lanka.



Figure 2. S. Sudjojono, (1963). Ramayana,. Retrieved from <http://archive.ivaa-online.org/artworks/detail/11783>.

The symbolism of the golden deer in the Ramayana epic is most vital, as it changes the plot of the story as Sita is abducted by Ravana, resulting in Rama and Laksmana's journey in search for her. As both the brothers go in search of Sita, they meet Hanuman who then helps Rama wage war against Ravana. The symbolisms of this particular plot are multi-dimensional, but for this paper, only the symbolisms of the golden deer will be analysed and discussed. Firstly, the golden deer that is portrayed as docile, gentle, alluring and shy is actually Mareecha in disguise to distract Rama. Despite his beautiful physical appearance and gold colour as the deer, Mareecha is in actuality a shape-shifter, a *raksasa* nonetheless. Secondly, the appearance of this golden deer, a vital plot in the Valmikian Ramayana, sets the turn of events that eventually result in Rama going to war against Ravana in order to save Sita and the eventual unfolding of many tragedies and unprecedented events.



Figure 3. Anak Agung Gede Sorbat , Rama meets Wibisana, 1930. Museum Puri Lukisan 1999, Ratna Wartha Foundation, Ubud, Bali.

In Anak Agung Gede Sobrat's monotoned Kamasan painting titled "Rama meets Wibisana" dated 1930, the elements of symbolism and mysticism are identifiable. In its early days, Kamasan paintings had a larger role than purely 'aesthetic works' where they were placed in palaces and temples. The use of Kamasan paintings in religious or festive ceremonies is still practiced in certain villages in Bali where these paintings are hung around pavilions or offering places. Vickers (2012) elaborated, "[p]aintings are meant to convey meanings that bridge communication between the material world that humans inhabit and the immaterial world of the divine and demonic forces." (p. 14). Furthermore, storylines and plots from the Ramayana and Mahabharata are commonly found as narratives used by Balinese artists in their paintings. Vickers (2012) surmised that Kamasan paintings are the epitome of the classic form of Balinese painting, a high point tradition of Balinese art that is connected directly to the *wayang* tradition.

The symbolisms notable in this work by Anak Agung Gede Sobrat are the vital characters such as Wibisana, Rama, Laksamana and also Semar who is below Wibisana. The aura of light of Wibisana denotes the divinity of his character. As the use of colour is absent in this monotone painting, the visual aspect of the character's design determines if they are good or evil. Another important symbol is the presence of Semar, whose presence is commonly associated with the end of troubles and dangers. A point to note here is that Wibisana is Ravana's brother, who is his total opposite. Wibisana's belief in good moral codes causes him to defy Ravana and join Rama and Laksamana in defeating Ravana. The defying act of Wibisana, who, in order to seek the truth, goes against his brother and therefore cuts his relationship with him, is proof of his sense of justice and good morals. As such, Wibisana's brave choice to follow the path of Rama (wise, truthful, and noble), instead of his brother Ravana (greed, evil, and unjust) can be related to the choices that one faces in his or her daily life. Despite Ravana being his brother, Wibisana chose to go against him. It is this contemplation and comprehension of Wibisana's choice that points towards the mysticism of the *wayang kulit*—as audience reflects on the message in the painting, and relate it to their own experience or reality.

The three works that have been discussed in this sub-section were intentionally chosen based on the plots of the Ramayana epic in order to facilitate the discussion and analysis of the essence of *wayang*. Inadvertently, the strong influence of *wayang kulit* characters, especially in the works of Affandi and Anak Agung Gede Sobrat, is unavoidable. The popular choice of using *wayang* as inspiration, either contextually or even as the content of the artwork, among Indonesian artists comes as no surprise. Wright (1994) established the three general categories of inspirations of *wayang* mythology that are used by artists: (i) specific scenes or characters in a *wayang* performance that are translated in a traditionalist way (such as in Anak Agung Sorbet's work); (ii) personally reconceived styles of a particular *wayang* character (such as by Affandi and Sudjojono) and lastly; (iii) a generic and non-traditional approach (such as by Heri Dono and Nasirun). Nevertheless, in the context of this paper, only selected works by Heri Dono and Nasirun will be discussed at length.

Tracing the Essence of *Wayang* in Nasirun and Heri Dono's Works: Symbolism and Mysticism

The representation of symbols from *wayang* is not something new in the Indonesian art landscape. Characters, specific 'icons or symbols', shapes, colours, stylisations and the spiritual aspects of *wayang* are continuously revived and transformed into a multitude of art forms. *Wayang* has become the medium that connects tradition with new artistic creations when artists need a source for an idea, inspiration or reference. Yudoseputro (2001) highlighted:

When modern Indonesian artists began to be concerned about the root of culture, the physical and spiritual values of *wayang* became the source of inspiration. [...] In this case, the use of the visual elements of *wayang* such as lines, shapes and colour produce the figures of symbols from the myths and heroic stories in the old Indonesian culture. Therefore, the visual aspects of *wayang* as a medium of moral and religious education reflects the spiritual meaning in every *wayang* performance (p. 66).

Yudoseputro's above statement is relatable to the symbolism that was elaborated by Mangkunagoro. Lines, shapes and colour that construct the appearance of a particular *wayang kulit* puppet help establish it as a certain character to the viewer or audience, hence associating it with particular characteristics or values familiar with *wayang* narratives.

In the 2013 Singapore Biennale, Nasirun's installation entitled "Between Worlds" was inspired by *wayang*. Unlike the common leather puppets in a usual *wayang* or shadow performance, Nasirun's leather puppets in this work were much smaller in scale, and were positioned in chemistry laboratory flasks forming a concentric structure that looked similar to a pyramid. The various characters in Nasirun's work—either from local folklore or from epics—were placed randomly in separate flasks, illuminated by light bulbs at the bottom of every flask. In relation to some of the characters in Nasirun's installation:

Nasirun has placed a cast of imaginary characters – represented by *wayang* puppets – inside glass bottles and beakers and lit them to mimic the effect of television, which the artist sees as essentially a glass box filled with light across which a myriad of mythical characters enact their roles (Singapore Biennale, 2013, p. 26).



Figure 4. Nasirun (2013). “Between Worlds” (detail). Photographed by the author.

An animal face with a human body combined with a white head serve as symbolism for Hanuman is found among the many other characters in the installation. This is because Hanuman is often illustrated and portrayed in white, whether in shadow puppet, in Kamasan paintings or even puppet masks. According to Fischer (1990), black and white are commonly used to symbolise bravery and purity, which illustrate the character of Hanuman. In discussing the performance of a *Wayang Purwa lakon*, a host of *raksasas* (demons, monsters, giants) can be of various colours while the *ksatriya* (warrior or hero) is usually in white (Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta, 1957). The variation of colour is to signify a particular characteristic and the chronology of appearances of the *raksasas* in the performance. For instance, a particular colour may also reflect the popularity of a character within the repertoire. As such, in an installation consisting of a multitude of characters from *wayang*, the spiritual realm, our daily lives and even fantasy-like characters in individual chemistry laboratory flasks, the association of the white-headed monkey to Hanuman is unmistakable.



Figure 5. Nasirun (2013). Detail (Buta Terong character) of “Between Worlds.” Photographed by the author.

In another flask, there is an ogre-like character with spotted green skin looking downwards ferociously, with a red snake encircling his neck. The green colour, the distinct shape of the nose that distinguishes this particular character from others, and the red snake (some sort of weapon or armoury) serve as symbolism for this particular puppet figure. This ogre-looking character is Buta Terong—The Eggplant Giant (see Figure 6)—with his iconic nose resembling an aubergine (Irvine, 2005b). Irvine (2005b) further explained that the Buta Terong character, which is of Javanese origin, was created in the 17th century. Buta Terong, a *raksasa* from overseas, appears with Buta Pragalba and Buta Cakil and is known for his insatiable appetite and thin nasal voice. Irvine (2005b) elaborated on this particular character as:

Terong is a short fat character who appears with Buta Cakil and Buta Pragalba in many lakons as a foil to the panakawan characters of the Right and as generic opponents of the Pandawa heroes (p. 286)

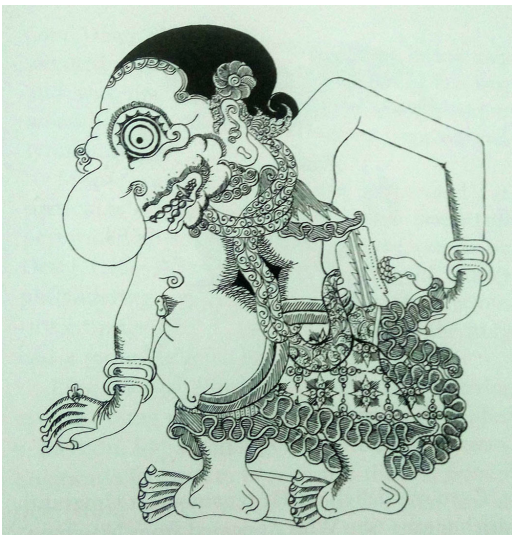


Figure 6. Puppet figure for Buta Terong (The Eggplant Giant). In Irvine, D. (2005a). Javanese Wayang - The Art Forms. In *Leather Gods and Wooden Heroes Java's Classical Wayang* (pp. 128–135). Singapore: Times Edition - Marshall Cavendish.

There are many other intriguing monster-like hybrid characters in this installation. There is a side-profile of a *wayang* character with a tiger's body. Another character is a green monster with a lion-like head and a fish in his hand. This led to the assumption that this is the '*Singa Barong*' of Bali. The *Singa Barong* (Lion *Barong*), which is an impressive animal mask with a big and fierce protruding set of eyes as well as a monstrous face, was performed by two men (Holt, 1967a). Therefore, for this particular puppet figure, the lion face/head of the figure serves as a symbol that is to be associated with the *Singa Barong*. In the cultural mythological realm of the Balinese, the *Singa Barong* originated from pre-Hindu times and is known for its magical powers as a protector.



Figure 7. Nasirun (2013). Detail (*Singa Barong* character) of “Between Worlds.” Photographed by the author.

The symbolic aspects of *wayang* that can be observed from characters, fundamental colours and lines, are visible in Nasirun's installation. The various combinations of colours, lines, and finishing that were used on these miniature puppets portray how these elements were used to project different characters and their symbolisms from the socio-cultural and magico-religious realm of Indonesian society. These symbolic elements—a white monkey, which immediately associates with the character of Hanuman, relating to his character of bravery and purity as Rama's loyal devotee—essentially provide the basis for understanding the narrative. Therefore, with the presence of certain elements of the characters as symbolism (a white monkey as Hanuman, and an ugly and fat character with a bulging nose as Buta Terong), the viewers can identify these symbols and further recognise the characters and then relate to their roles in the *wayang*. As observed by Hidding (as cited in Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta, 1957, p.3) when these characters came into action in the *wayang*, the audience both ‘anticipated’ and ‘participated’ in the transmission that occurred before them, as they related similar situations to their own lives, and believed that good would triumph in the end.

Moreover, the fact that characters from the epics were combined with local mythical or spiritual characters clearly illustrates the fabrication of the epics (in the form of *wayang* puppetry—both masks and shadow play) in the cultural tradition of the Indonesians. With the analysis of the characters, as discussed above, such as Hanuman, Buta Terong and *Singa Barong* of Bali, and how these characters were constructed into the magico-spiritual belief system of the locals, the spiritual belief of these characters is then related to the larger aspect of mysticism that enveloped the entire *wayang* performance. For instance, in a performance of the *Singa Barong* of Bali dance, the facial expression and body movements combined with the background music helped the audience comprehend whether the *Singa Barong* was furious or happy. The build-up of the background music and mysterious movement of the *Singa Barong* proliferated the ‘anticipation,’ and gradually, with ascending music and dance tempo, the audience was transported into the realm of magic and spirituality. Like the Barong dance where Barong kills the evil Rangda, the Javanese people believe that good deeds will prevail over evil in the end, and this reflects the “symbolic struggle” as postulated by Mangkunagoro as one of the symbolisms.

The various individual characters in Nasirun’s installation exemplifies the symbolic attributes of the essence of *wayang*—colours, characters, weapons and other symbols that make up each of these individual characters. Nasirun intended to create an argumentative message by relating to television as the new source of entertainment, replacing the old *wayang* tradition. He posits that these puppets may become irrelevant in the current times. The following text elaborates on the conceptual idea of Nasirun’s installation titled “Between Worlds” which was displayed as part of the 2013 Singapore Biennale exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum:

Like modern-day television, traditional *wayang* performances also serve as a form of entertainment for the masses, with shadowy epics enacted by leather puppets unfolding across backlit screens, evoking other worlds. [...] While this may suggest on one hand that these figures, and the ancient myths and philosophies that they are associated with, are now regarded as relics of an older, forgotten time and culture, their unmistakable vitality as they dance across the surfaces is also a refutation of this fate. Caught between the worlds of past and present, of myths and reality, of spirits and flesh, Nasirun’s cast of characters embody the contradictions and reconciliations negotiated between a world that once used to exist, and a changed world where this mythos may no longer be relevant (“Between Worlds”, Singapore Biennale 2013, Singapore Art Museum).

In this installation, Nasirun had used a variety of miniature puppets in glass beakers to demonstrate his idea of television replacing the *wayang* tradition. What is more intriguing is the fact that he still uses the representations and symbolism of the *wayang* puppet by creating a variety of characters—monsters, individuals, mythical heroes, divine beings, folklore spirits and such. The question here would be if these myths and philosophies were no longer relevant, why even apply them in the first place? This dialectical process that was brought forth by the artist was the very spiritual aspect of

wayang which is the microcosm and macrocosm of *wayang*, that eventually would lead towards the ideology of mysticism.



Figure 8. Heri Dono (2001). Dialogue About 5 Bulbs. In Dono, H., & Sandhu, J. (2010). *Fortress of the Heart by Heri Dono*. Singapore: Gajah Gallery.

Unlike Nasirun, Heri Dono metamorphosed and created psychedelic artworks that bring an interesting twist in examining the essence of *wayang* in his works. Heri Dono's works took a departure from the traditional finishing of *wayang* puppets in the form of the slim and elongated limbs, refined patterns and finishing on their garments and accessories. Heri Dono's works are much more bold, loud and intoxicating, with grotesque and monster-like characters and some sort of 'communication' occurring between his characters with their notable facial expressions. Communication between characters in *wayang* performances is one of the essential elements as it may relate to political scenarios, religious or moral teachings where this element is intersected with jokes, or even adaptations of plots from the Indian epics.

Within the context of this work, the aspect of 'communication' is not only limited to the two characters on the canvas, but also the communication that takes place between the canvas and the audience. In discussing his view of *wayang kulit*, Heri Dono related that *wayang kulit* is a form of communication, which results in a 'shared value' that is fluid and not necessarily absolute (Cohen, 2016). Heri Dono further emphasised that the *wayang kulit* performance is an expressive medium owned by the audience. In an interview with Tim Martin, Dono elaborated:

In wayang, there is a strong notion of how best to communicate. If a work needs more, then it gets it, maybe sounds, or a voice, or a story. Wayang is owned by the audience, they own wayang, it isn't kept by masters (Elliott & Tawadros, 1996, p. 14).

This 'communication' which resulted in a shared value or meaning is related to the magico-religious aspect of a traditional *wayang kulit* performance. As observed by Hidding (1931, as cited in Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta, 1957, p. 3) the negotiation of this shared meaning or "initiation of the spectators into the secrets of earthly existence" occurs when the audience participates in whatever that is happening on the screen—whether it is a wedding, a battle scene or the triumph of good over evil (Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta, 1957).

Heri Dono's disfigured and grotesque characters take a departure from the traditional *wayang kulit* figurines with their slim, elongated and refined look. Wright (1994a) explained that the external influence (the disfigured faces and alienated limbs) was acknowledged by the artist himself as part of seeking inspiration and the creative process. Instead of "preserving the traditional arts," the artist transformed and experimented with it while being rooted in the idea of "everything that is in Indonesia" (Wright, 1994a). The grotesque human features serve as a symbolic representation of the state of modern society that has lost its values. The background is filled with rough strokes of brown, black and small patches of red to project the socio-political climate of the country. In the "Fortress Heart by Heri Dono" catalogue, the artist highlights the socio-political situation in Indonesia. He states:

The 5 symbols of the chaste of Garuda "Pancasila" represent 5 principles: the one and only God, the humanity, the unity, the harmony, and the justice to the people. Yet, despite all this representation, there is still much violence and cruelty these days (Dono & Sandhu, 2010).

The representation of the disfigured and grotesque human characters laced with symbols to show hatred and violence as a reflection of the socio-political climate requires a closer examination. Apart from merely raising social awareness, the very notion of using *wayang* to mirror the world (in this context, Indonesia as a nation) and the idea that the world is reflected in *wayang* characters relates to the process of microcosm (inside) and eventually macrocosm (outside) (Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta, 1957). On Heri Dono's canvas, two grotesque figures that no longer bear human features can be read as the current state of people in general who have lost their human values as they have been driven by greed, lust and desire as a result of modernisation and development. The symbolism of the two grotesque figures can be read in a multi-dimensional way. Such as in the way we treat our family members or friends, or the way politicians treat their citizens, or the ways politicians treat one another. When the audience contemplates and negotiates the meaning of this particular work, from the canvas (microcosm) to their reality (in the political realm), and hence, the symbolic Garuda "Pancasila" – as the moral force or divine intervention or that mystic wins over magic – that would eventually instil order and justice to the country. It is along this process of negotiation and contemplation of what the audience or viewers see and perceive on the canvas, and their belief in the higher order of things, and God that relates to Javanese mysticism.



Figure 9. Heri Dono, (2001).
Inspiration for the Queen. In
Dono, H., & Sandhu, J. (2010).
*Fortress of the Heart by Heri
Dono*. Singapore: Gajah Gallery

In a more complex work, “Inspiration for the Queen”, the presence of a queen with fairy wings inside a grotesque monster figure, reflected as Semar on a mirror makes an interesting read. In the “Fortress Heart by Heri Dono” catalogue, the artist highlights patriotism and loyalty to his country. He states:

In future, this Queen will be the leader of the country. The gigantic figure outside is a symbol of power. He places a pistol to his head to show his patriotism and loyalty to his country. On the mirror is an image of Semar, a Javanese God who is also a clown, a guru and a priest (Dono & Sandhu, 2010)

The presence of Semar, in the middle of an aura of light, gives a mythical and magical feel to this particular character since the aura of light is commonly associated with divine beings that possess supernatural powers. The symbolism of Semar in this piece needs a deeper understanding as Holt highlighted that Semar is the most sacred figure in the entire *wayang* set (Holt, 1967b). Semar is an important figure that is called upon in times of distress or great danger, whereby Semar would act as the mediator between the people and the gods for a solution and assistance. In a traditional *Wayang Purwa* performance, Semar usually makes its presence at midnight with the recitation of ‘gara-gara’, which is associated with sacredness and mysteriousness, as noted by Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta) 1957):

The term “gara-gara” signifies “ominous manifestations”. In the *wayang purwa*, it stands for a temporary disturbance of the world order caused by the spiritual power of a mighty personality, a person of unusual greatness who is in a state of deep distress and who, consciously or unconsciously, appeals to the gods for help to bring about a reversal of his state (p. 11).

Semar is considered to be a powerful character who is able to solve any problem. Under certain circumstances, Semar is able to demand decisions or acts from gods (Holt, 1967b). Although Semar has a funny and silly appearance, advice and wisdom from the aforementioned is usually crucial to whatever problem or crisis that is played out in the particular plot. As Semar usually appears in times of distress in a typical *wayang kulit* performance, can it be surmised that in the future the queen (Dono &

Sandhu, 2010) will seize power and manipulate it under the name of love for the country, yet will eventually result in a social-political unrest? In this context, the audience would have to negotiate and contemplate the meaning of Heri Dono's canvas (microcosm), and what lies ahead or the reality of their country (in the context of Indonesia) in the near future (macrocosm). With Semar's symbolic presence on canvas, this will further lead the audience/viewer to ponder or question on ways to intervene or solve the problems/political unrest that they may face in the future. By questioning their role in life and the purpose of their individual destiny, this leads back to Javanese mysticism (Mangkunagoro VII of Surakarta, 1957).

The incorporation of mysticism in Javanese culture has made it a fundamental factor in understanding and applying the essence of *wayang* in various creative expressions. In its heyday, the *wayang* served as a form of cultural unifier as a source of entertainment, religious education, magico-spiritual attainment, while it serves as political conscientiousness in its latter days. As such, the role of *wayang* in the cultural tradition, and subsequently in the artistic development of Indonesia, is not unsubstantiated. The presence of *wayang*-like figures in visual arts and fine arts is notable in terms of characters from the epics, infusions of new local characters, stylisation, plots and more importantly other symbols and spiritual beliefs—all of which are captured and applied in modern and contemporary arts.

This is very much relatable to the character of Semar who is a composite of both the male and female physique, and possesses contradicting features—ugly-looking and black in appearance—but is strongly believed to be the most important and sacred figure in the *wayang* as Semar usually appears at times of distress and comes to the rescue of humans in a god-like form. Although Semar is commonly referred to as a clown, he injects wisdom and moral teachings through his appearance. Due to the arrival of Islam in the late 13th century, characters and plots were Islamised and tweaked to suit the general guideline of Islam. Nevertheless, character such as Semar have transcended religious barriers and continue to live in the socio-cultural sphere and the magico-spirituality psyche of Indonesians in general. In reference to Heri Dono's canvases, the questionings and negotiations that appear between the characters on the canvas (microcosm), reflect the current political scenario in the country (macrocosm). The microcosm and macrocosm is a common interplay in traditional *wayang* as well as in visual arts containing elements and essentials of *wayang*.

Conclusion

The storytelling technique of *wayang* seems almost inexhaustible as it has enriched by and has been intertwined with Javanese culture specifically and Indonesia generally for over a millennium. It must be brought forth that this storytelling technique is not confined to Indonesia only, but is relevant in Southeast Asia where the *wayang* tradition maintains its presence. The versatility and fluidity of both the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics that were manifested in the form of shadow play in its prime days cannot be denied as it has allowed for the adaptation and hybridisation of the epics, which has contributed to the continued presence of the *wayang* characters and its essentials even in today's contemporary art. This raises the question, why is the essence of *wayang* still captured and portrayed by contemporary artists? Why is the

wayang storytelling technique still applicable in today's fast-paced world of communication technology?

From its primal form of *wayang kulit* performances, to Kamasan paintings used in religious and festive ceremonies, to modern works as well as much more contemporary works such as Nasirun's installation, the essence of *wayang* has been used by artists in various ways based on the context of their works. The symbolism in the works provides meaning to the audience/viewer, resulting in them relating, negotiating and comprehending what they see with what they experience in life. After further inquiry, the audience/viewer would also question their position in the higher order of things, and destiny in life, which points towards Javanese mysticism.

Although *wayang* has gone through various transformations, reductions, adaptations and localisations over the centuries, it has inspired the creation of various artistic expressions and art forms. The Javanese mysticism which cloaks *wayang* performances is an assimilation of animistic belief and the Hindu-Buddhist spiritual-religious belief system which has had a strong foothold in the Indonesian archipelago. As such, this mysticism has been embedded in the cultural belief and psyche of the Indonesian people for centuries thus shaping the tradition of art in this region. Although the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics may not be in favour in popular culture as these were born a millennium ago, vital characters, plots, moral values and lessons are very much relevant in the world that we live in today. As such, as long as artists and creatives use *wayang* as their inspiration, the essence of *wayang* will continue to manifest itself in different art forms and creative expressions while breathing new perspectives into it.

Since the post-Dutch colonialism in Indonesia in the 1930s, local artists have been fervent in creating art that reflect their local culture while interluding their artworks with the modernisation that has been taking place locally (Lee, 1996). Along this process, the local culture was never forgotten or excluded from their artistic expression as part of forming the larger identity of Indonesia. Such an assimilation process of combining modern influence from the West while incorporating local culture was distinctly known as the Indonesian style. This practice continues and can be seen in the work of artists who still fall back on mythological themes, spiritual beliefs and life experiences of their culture for inspiration. Attributes or elements from *wayang* are among the most common choices for local artists.

As in the prior discussion of works by Affandi, Sudjojono, Anak Agung Gede Sorbat, Nasirun and Heri Dono, it can be observed that *wayang kulit* is a vital cultural tradition that reflects the socio-cultural, magico-religious beliefs, spirituality and the mystical sphere of the Indonesians, all the while contributing to the development of art forms as well. Although *wayang kulit* and its style have transformed in the works of these artists, the essence of *wayang* has not been lost, as it has been used as a platform to define and contextualise their works. Although these visual artworks are not parallel to a traditional performance of the Javanese *Wayang Kulit Purwa*, nevertheless, symbolism in reference to the *Wayang Kulit Purwa* leather puppets was employed by some of these artists in their works. Just like how symbolism from the traditional *Wayang Kulit Purwa* performance has gone through transformations and changes, likewise the mysticism that enveloped the performances in the olden days are being used by modern

and contemporary artists to relate and question the audience/viewer on social-political issues or contemporary-cultural problems.

The underlying factors for the continued presence and relevance of the essence of *wayang* are its symbolism, participation, negotiation as well as comprehension (mysticism) from the audience. This comes as a result of the familiarity and political safety (Wright, 1994b) of the *wayang* as a storytelling technique. With localisation and adaptation giving leverage to the *wayang* performance, *dalangs* make use of particular characters (from the epics or newly created puppets) to illustrate local socio-political scenarios symbolically without direct reference to political figures. This creates a safe environment to demonstrate and bring awareness regarding the reality of political scenarios to the general public. Despite the emergence of modern technology, various artistic influences and movements in the 20th century, *wayang* continues to inspire artists to produce a multitude of creative expressions and art forms.

Although the application of symbols in *wayang* has gone through transformations and developments over the years, the essence of *wayang* has been somewhat maintained by both modern and contemporary artists. From its aesthetically detailed puppets to more simplified forms, and abstract forms to eventually more radical ones to the extent of losing its delicate features, the core of *wayang* as a medium of communication on the negotiation of the meaning and knowledge of life has remained in works such as those of Nasirun and Heri Dono. The mysticism that is fabricated and deeply intertwined in the socio-cultural realm, as well as the magico-religious beliefs among the Indonesians signifies the knowledge and experience in understanding the reality of life.

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