

Wayang, Tolerance and the Internet

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“The highest result of education is tolerance.” – Helen Keller

include N.J. Krom, C. Poensen, and B.H. Goslings. [8]

Abstract

For centuries wayang kulit has played an important role in shaping the world view of the Javanese, including the special kind of tolerance that the Javanese people have. In recent years, however, we have seen an erosion of this sense of tolerance amongst the Javanese. Because of this, a team of researchers from the Soegijapranata Catholic University in Semarang has introduced a portal dedicated to the artists of wayang in Solo and Semarang. It is hoped that this portal will make wayang not only survive, but continue to be able to contribute in the development of a plural, tolerant and multi-cultural Indonesian society.

Keywords

Internet, Multi-Culturalism, Tolerance, Wayang, Wayang Network

I. Introduction

A wayang performance was first documented in sufficient detail in the Kakawin Arjuna Wiwaha, a narrative poems composed by Empu Kanwa in 1030 AD during the reign of King Airlangga in East Java. In stanza 59 Empu Kanwa wrote or Hazeu quoted in [9]:

“Hanonton ringgit manangis asekul muda hidepan, huwus wruh tuwin yan walulang unikir molah angucap, hatur neng wang tresnaning wisaya malaha tan wihikana, ri tat wan ya maya sahana hananing bawa siluman”.

"People who watch the puppets cry, laugh, marvel, and wonder, even though they know that what they see is only leather carved into human forms, made to move and talk. Those who are seeing puppets in such a way are like a man lusting over worldliness, being self-forgetful and not knowing it is just a ghost-like shadow."

Earlier, wayang was already hinted in an inscription dating from 907 AD issued by King Balitung of the Indic Mataram Kingdom in Central Java. The inscription reads:

“... Si Nalu macarita bhima kumaramangigal Kicaka si jaluk macarita ramayana mamirus mabanol si mukmuk si galigi mawayang buat thyang macarita bimma ya kumara...”

“...Si Nalu recited Bhimma Kumara (and) danced as Kicaka, Si Jaluk recited the Ramayana, Si Mukmuk play-acted and clowned, Si Galigi performed wayang for the gods, reciting the story of Bimma Kumara...” [8].

There are two opinions regarding to the origin of wayang. The first one is that wayang originated on the island of Java, specifically in East Java. This opinion is mainly shared by Indonesian scholars as well as Dutch scholars such as L.A. Brandes J. Kats and specially G.A.J. Hazeau who defended this view in his dissertation ‘Bijdrage tot de Kennis van het Javaansche Toneel’ (1897). In 1931 W.H. Rasser wrote a book titled ‘Over de Oorsprong van het Javaansche Toneel’ in which he contested Hazeau’s view. Rasser believes that wayang has its origin in India, and brought to Indonesia along with the Hinduism. Other scholars who support Rasser’s viewpoint

II. Wayang and Tolerance

Whatever the case may be, wayang became an important part of Javanese culture. For more than a thousand years it has developed to become “one of the world’s most complex and dramatic theatrical forms” [2]. Wayang was not merely an entertainment. In the past, the dhalang (puppeteers) were regarded as a person who possessed extraordinary knowledge and power who transmitted moral and aesthetic values through their art.

The words and actions of comic characters (punakawan) representing the “ordinary person” have provided a vehicle for criticizing sensitive social and political issues. It is believed that these are the reasons why wayang has been able to survive over the centuries [10]. Mangkunagara VII in his paper “Over de wajang-koelit (poerwa) in het algemeen en over de daarin voorkomende symbolische en mystieke elementen” published in the journal Djawa [4] pointed out that for the Javanese people wayang had a philosophical, symbolic and mystical significance.

Wayang is usually seen as a conflict between good and evil. However, as Brandon points out [2], the ethical cleavage between good and evil are not absolute. All the main characters (notwithstanding which side they belong to) have their good and bad traits. Therefore, Brandon maintains that in wayang there is no “good” and “evil”, only “better” and “less good.”

In his book “Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese” [1], Benedict R. O’G Anderson affirms the role of wayang as a metaphysical and ethical “system” in shaping the special kind of tolerance that the Javanese people have. But we have to take into account the fact that Anderson proposed his idea based on observations made in 1976. Since then, however, we have seen an erosion of this sense of tolerance amongst the Javanese. As Lindsay points out [3], we now are living in a much less tolerant period in history. This is, incidentally, taking place parallel with the decline of wayang.

Though seemingly still enjoying popularity, wayang performances nowadays tend to accentuate comic scenes at the expense of the story line. Very few dhalangs adhere to wayang as philosophy, oral literature, and food for thought. As a consequence, wayang is no longer, in Anderson’s words “an almost universally accepted religious mythology which commands deep emotional and intellectual adherence”. The question is: Is there any correlation between the shift in the role of wayang, from that of metaphysical and ethical system to a mere entertainment with the decline of tolerance amongst the Javanese?

III. Indonesian Wayang Network

In July 2012 the celebrated comic artist Raden Ahmad Kosasih passed away at the age of 93. He is considered as the father of the art in Indonesia. Kosasih’s first work was published in 1953 and he continued to work till 1993. He is best known for his wayang comics, retelling the great Hindu epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata. For three generations of Indonesian, their first encounter with wayang

was through Kosasih's comic books. Comics in those days were considered a novelty and "modern". The first comics introduced in Indonesia were American comics, such as Tarzan, Rip Kirby, Phantom and Johnny Hazard, which are seen as representing the "modern" West. Through this "modern" medium ancient local stories became available to a wide audience.

Compared to comics, the Internet can reach a much wider audience. So far, there has been no real attempt to use the Internet to disseminate knowledge about wayang to the general public, despite the potentials of the Internet to reach many people, especially the young who are by and large incredibly computer literate.

Young people recognize wayang as being one of Indonesia's iconic art forms and become angry when it is claimed by other countries. However, they actually know very little about it [7].

This is unfortunate because according to Mulyono, quoted in Nurgiyantoro [6], wayang, besides being a sophisticated art form, also contains in the stories conveyed philosophical ideas that are still relevant today.

Mastuti argues that wayang teaches us how to practice tolerance and how to address differences [5]. Many aspects and values of humanism can found in wayang.

With this in mind, a team of researchers from the Soegijapranata Catholic University in Semarang has introduced a portal dedicated the artists of wayang in Solo and Semarang.

The basic concept behind this portal is to train wayang performers and wayang studios on how they can use the Internet as a showcase of their arts, so that more people can learn about wayang and the artists involved. It is hoped that this portal will make wayang not only survive, but continue to be able to contribute in the development of a plural, tolerant and multi-cultural Indonesian society.

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