



# Shadows of Empire



## Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales

Laurie J. Sears



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*To the memory of*  
*Bp. Soewondo Hardosoeharso*  
*and*  
*Ki W. Hardjanto Pradjapangarsa*

*Exemplary teachers who led exemplary lives*

## Note on Spelling and

## Translations



I have not italicized the titles of stories and texts that exist in a variety of tellings. This is to indicate the fluid nature of these oral and written textual traditions. Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, or the titles of shadow play stories are thus not italicized. When I refer to the written texts of particular authors, I italicize. When I refer to texts that exist in a variety of inscriptions, I do not.

I have used the spellings for proper names preferred by those who bore them. In the early part of the twentieth century, many Javanese, like Indonesia's first president Soekarno, favored Dutch spellings for their names. There are many inconsistencies in the spellings of Mahabharata and Ramayana characters, texts, and performances; to banish these inconsistencies entirely, I believe, does violence to the nature of these traditions. Because this book argues that Javanese Mahabharata and Ramayana stories are no less "authentic" than Indian ones, and occasionally the Javanese and Indian spellings overlap, it is difficult to maintain a clear separation. An added complication comes with Dutch spellings of these names. Spellings in translated or quoted passages have not been changed. Alternate spellings of names and places from these story-worlds can be found in the glossary at the end of the book.

Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations from Javanese, Indonesian, and Dutch—with all their failings—are my own.





## Preface



When I first came to Java in 1982 to begin my study of the shadow theatre tradition, I always found out about the all-night performances *after* they had happened. Javanese friends and colleagues would regale me with tales of the wonderful plays I had missed and would offer vague promises to inform me of future celebrations. After a year or so in Central Java, I came to know about performances weeks and months before they happened; I began to attend so many performances that I regularly went to bed after my eight-year-old daughter had left for school, to awaken when she returned five hours later. In the summer of 1990, during a month's stay in Solo (Surakarta) in the wedding season, puppeteers invited me to attend performances almost every night.

In fact, it has now become a status symbol among Javanese shadow play puppeteers to have as many foreigners as possible at performances. Some of these mostly American, Australian, Dutch, French, or Japanese visitors to Java are studying Javanese performing arts, and their talents may, on occasion, be blended into the performances of daring puppeteers. Javanese shadow puppeteers are pleased that foreigners can play the difficult instruments of the Javanese *gamelan* ensemble and sing the intricate Javanese poetry, and that the most skilled can perform as shadow puppeteers. I see the incorporation of foreigners into Javanese performance arts in historical terms; the Sultans and Sunans of the Central Javanese courts used to keep albinos, dwarfs, Dutchmen, and other exceptional people around them in the old days, as these unusual beings were considered to have special powers. Today, perhaps, strange-looking foreigners are still thought to have special powers, or at least disposable income.

Becoming aware of this made me realize that I tend to see this complex oral tradition through the eyes of the puppeteers. For the most part, I traveled to performances with the puppeteers, partook of the preperformance and postperformance meals along with the musicians and singers, and often witnessed the subtle struggle between patron and performer over what story was to be chosen for a night's entertainment. Occasionally I traveled to performances with a Javanese friend whose family was spon-

soring the celebration or with a foreign friend as an uninvited guest. Javanese of a certain status would never consider going to a ritual celebration uninvited; only foreigners and *wong cilik* (little people, village people) can get away with such behavior.<sup>1</sup> But each shadow play performance has both an invited and an uninvited audience. The invited guests usually sit in a special place—in older days they sat inside the patron's house and saw the shadows—while the uninvited guests remained outside—usually they stood in back of the musicians and the puppeteer—free to come and go as they chose.<sup>2</sup>

In the last six months of 1984, I became, through the generosity of a Ford Foundation grant to the government-sponsored fine arts academy in Solo (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia or STSI), the patron of a half-dozen performances. I helped to plan three meals for about fifty people for each night's performance, ensure an unending supply of Jasmine tea, coffee, and cigarettes, choose the puppeteers, and decide what story would be presented. Some of the puppeteers, unaware of the Ford Foundation's intervention, thought of me as a very rich woman who was able to sponsor six performances in as many months. This experience let me see the tradition from a new perspective, be more aware of audience reactions to the performance, and realize how much behind-the-scenes female labor

1. Except for Dutch-language passages, foreign words and quotations are Javanese unless they are labeled otherwise. Javanese is spoken at home by most Javanese in Central and East Java, but it is slowly being displaced by Indonesian—Bahasa Indonesia—which is the language of schooling, commerce, most media, and government. Many Javanese words have been absorbed into Indonesian. But, as a language with distinctive hierarchical vocabularies that distinguish power relations in each utterance, Javanese is felt by many to be inimical to the *modern* Indonesian rhetoric of equality. Please refer to the glossary at the end of this book for definitions of frequently used Javanese, Indonesian, and Dutch terms.

2. The gendered nature of seating arrangements at shadow play performances has been a topic of concern for Dutch scholars since the nineteenth century. See J. W. Winter, "Beknopte Beschrijving van het Hof Soerakarta in 1824," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 54 (1902): 15–176, for one of the earliest discussions of seating arrangements at *wayang* performances. The Dutch structuralist W. H. Rassers, writing in the 1930s, argued that shadow theatre originated in special "men's house" rituals, which women were forbidden to see. A curtain was hung for privacy, and women were only allowed to see the shadows of the men's rituals—and thus the shadow theatre was born. Rassers had little actual data on which to base these speculations, but the wives of invited guests at village performances often do sit behind the men or are segregated from them in various ways. See W. H. Rassers, *Panji, the Culture Hero* (1931; The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1959).

## Preface

goes into the preparations for each ritual celebration. From these two different perspectives—of patron and puppeteer—I learned how the puppet masters contour each performance to match their own skills and experiences to the tastes of their audiences.

This study of the Javanese shadow theatre is grounded in research in Holland and Java. It spans the elusive gap between history and ethnography and tries to strike a balance between the two. Dutch sources shed light on how Dutch scholars saw the tradition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and how this way of looking at the shadow theatre influenced not only succeeding generations of scholars but also those of Javanese performers. In Dutch and Javanese libraries there are descriptions of the tradition from the nineteenth century that help create pictures of the shadow theatre's past. All researchers must gratefully acknowledge the rigor and care that went into the compilation and preservation of these materials by Dutch scholars and their Javanese colleagues.

Conversations with puppeteers and scholars in Java complemented the written Dutch sources, giving me an understanding of the tradition as it was heard and passed on to new generations by Javanese puppeteers. I discovered how new methods of transmission contrasted with earlier patterns by attending the courses for shadow puppeteers in Surakarta, both the older-style course taught by teachers associated with the Mangkunagaran palace and the courses offered at the Academy. Most important, of course, was the opportunity to attend over one hundred performances, as many as the season and occasion would permit.

But how should one assess the vast array of performances, conversations, and texts that this work draws together? Historiographical methods urge historians to assess the moral viewpoints of authors and analyze their perspectives to contrast the texts of Europeans writing about Java with Javanese writing about Java and to ask if the Javanese author is an observer of the tradition or a performer of the tradition. But the oral sources presented different problems. Over the past twenty years, oral historiography has come a long way in elevating the credibility of oral sources to equal that of written ones.<sup>3</sup> But critics have questioned the purpose of

3. J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965), and *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

creating historically legitimate oral documents as an end in itself.<sup>4</sup> Reflections on my field experience eventually brought home the realization that the questions raised by oral testimonies—the words of an informant who is speaking or performing—can both enrich and provide a means to interrogate the written texts. Older educated Javanese puppeteers are as likely to have read the Dutch works on the shadow theatre tradition as the foreign researcher, and their testimonies can seem to validate these sources; informants often want to please the researcher by giving the “right” answers, and what seems right is usually what has been documented in written texts. The flows of information tacked back and forth in bewildering ways among patrons, puppeteers, and scholars, producing myriad opinions. Although it would be misleading to equate written texts and oral testimonies, by rubbing each across the other’s grain, new ways of looking at the world can emerge. My own interests and politics of location have been the critical lenses through which these texts and testimonies have been brought momentarily into focus.

As a historian, I, in fact, had little preparation for undertaking field research at all. My mentor John Smail had spent time in Bandung in the early 1960s, interviewing people for his study on the Indonesian Revolution, but he, too, never thought about *interviewing*, about the process, as he has recently recounted.<sup>5</sup> I had read all the available anthropological scholarship on Java, but at that time I encountered little discussion about what “participant observation” actually meant. This was just before the explosion of self-reflexive studies in anthropology that would come in the mid-1980s. I did have the advantage of having lived in Solo, the site of the research, for several years in the early 1970s. Thus I had good friends and knew the town, the language, and the environment. In a sense, this was a return that I had been working toward for ten years. I did not feel that I was going to Solo as an observer; rather I felt that I was returning home.

The only information I received about field research came from Jan Vansina, who occupies a chair in history at the University of Wisconsin, although he is a trained linguist. I had the opportunity to study historical methods with Vansina and listen to his informed comments on every

4. R. Rosaldo, “Doing Oral History,” *Social Analysis* 4 (1980): 89–99.

5. Laura Smail, “John Smail: Reflections on an Academic Life,” in *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths: Essays in Honor of John R. W. Smail*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Madison: University of Wisconsin Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).

possible type of historical source, from dumb traces—monuments and other archaeological remains—to the latest anthropological theory. I discovered over the years that about five minutes of Vansina's time provided food for thought for at least a year. He was the one who turned my attention to the transmission of the *wayang* as oral tradition. He also pointed out that there was very little chance of finding sources for the period before the late eighteenth century.

Vansina could also, though an Africanist, listen to my Javanese tapes of shadow plays and tell me things that no one else in Madison could at that time. He said the work of Parry and Lord on oral tradition would be of no use to me, after listening to my tapes for a few minutes, since the *wayang* tradition is not metrical and thus did not fit Lord's pattern for oral epic. Vansina gave me two warnings: never visit the family of one performer with a member of another known performer's family if you want to learn anything. His second comment had to do with questions: never use questionnaires. Be patient, he said, and wait quietly until the performer starts to talk about what he or she believes is important. The last instruction, although a particularly difficult one to pass on to my colleagues at the Academy in Solo, provided this book with many useful insights.

Javanese *dhalang* (puppeteers) are as wise, talented, and inspiring a group of human beings as exist, but proved to be enigmatic informants. They are storytellers, creators, authors, and entertainers. They often want to please people, especially foreign researchers who come to their village and who, through a wave of their magic wand, can invite puppeteers or musicians to America. Here is where Vansina's advice was so useful: depending on whom I was with, I always received different information. If I went to see an older puppeteer with a younger member of his or her family, I was treated as a member of the family and the puppeteer felt free to talk about anything. If I went with a teacher from the Academy, especially one with a high position, the puppeteers might become quite nervous and reticent. If I went with my daughter, then seven or eight years old, everyone would concentrate on her and I could fade into the background. I also learned that in large families of puppeteers, the more puppeteers present, the more formal and less interesting the discussion. Puppeteers were most open when they were alone or among their immediate family.

Lastly, I learned a lot about the Javanese puppeteers when I took

chances like lending money. Some researchers do not believe in lending money; they feel it might compromise the research, or it might lead to embarrassing situations, or they are afraid they will never get it back. I learned that the best way to handle lending money is only to lend what you do not need to get back. I did research in the days before many Javanese discovered that European, American, or Japanese researchers could (should?) be asked to pay for Javanese knowledges. Many of the puppeteers I knew were happy just to have me along, especially at performances. When visiting their homes, I always brought cigarettes, tea, and sugar, the required items when visiting the villages, or European biscuits when visiting in the city. But very few of the puppeteers I knew were wealthy. They lived on the edge. If a child was sick, they needed money for “Western” medicine. Sometimes they had to sell their puppets or their instruments to survive. When times were good, they might be able to buy them back. I learned to give a part of what was asked, a part that I felt good about giving. As I look back, I wish there had been more to give.

This book is about Javanese Ramayana and Mahabharata stories: the former cycle of stories tells of the demon-king Rahwana’s abduction of Rama’s virtuous wife Sita and the latter tells the stories leading up to the fratricidal war between the Pandhawa and Korawa cousins over the rights to the kingdom of Ngastina. In 1991 I organized a symposium at the University of Washington to examine Ramayana stories in India, Malaysia, and Indonesia from several perspectives: as vehicles of aesthetic transmission, as collections of texts in numerous tellings and translations, and as a vast repertoire of performance traditions.<sup>6</sup> Because the Indonesian and Indian scholars and intellectuals I had invited could not attend, predominantly American and European views of Ramayana traditions were expressed. But I did engage a large group of Indonesian and American performers, singers, and musicians, the full complement required to stage a Javanese shadow theatre performance; they, of course, offered a different kind of commentary. The Javanese puppeteer Ki Widiyanto gave a masterful performance supported by several famous Javanese musicians

6. I use the word “tradition” in this book to refer to particular story cycles or performance practices. The symposium referred to above was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Rockefeller Foundation as part of an explanatory program connected with the 1990–91 Festival of Indonesia.

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and a group of American musicians who made up the Lewis and Clark College *gamelan* ensemble in the fall of 1991. Unique to this performance was the presence of an accomplished translator. A. L. Becker worked with the Javanese puppeteer to make the shadow play more accessible to a non-Javanese audience. In original ways, he interspersed his English translations of a long-lived, poetic Old Javanese Ramayana text with the songs and chants of the puppeteer.<sup>7</sup>

In the academic stories that unfolded both before and after the shadow theatre play, the scholars of Malay-Indonesian history tended to equate Ramayana tales with puppet and human performance traditions, while the South Asianists often found more connections with written textual traditions.<sup>8</sup> Toward the end of the symposium, Imam Ahmad, a Javanese intellectual studying anthropology at the University of Washington, accused the American scholars present of reducing the shadow theatre tradition—synonymous, as he explained, with Ramayana and Mahabharata stories—to a series of performances and texts. Although Imam Ahmad is Muslim, the Ramayana and Mahabharata stories conveyed in shadow theatre traditions were still more than texts or performances to him; they were the expression of a unique worldview or epistemology whose existence was becoming less and less important in the intellectual life of many Javanese. Ahmad mourned the passing of what he recognized as a hybrid colonial discourse of social and moral values even as he acknowledged his own position in its construction.

To use Javanese shadow theatre as a metaphor to introduce the terminology of *colonial discourse*, the puppetmaster's lamp, which illuminates the darting shadows enclosed within the carefully fabricated frame, conceals much more than it reveals. In the demystifying light of dawn, as the puppets are returned to their box and audiences disperse, intersections of labor, art, ritual, and power are exposed to show the maintenance of an

7. A. L. Becker is Professor Emeritus of Linguistics and Anthropology at the University of Michigan and a longtime student and scholar of Javanese shadow theatre.

8. Stuart Blackburn's research on South Indian shadow theatre described a tradition closely connected to written texts. See his "Epic Transmission and Adaptation: A Folk Ramayana in South India," in *Boundaries of the Text: Epic Performances in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. J. B. Flueckiger and L. J. Sears (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1991). But see also W. Doniger [O'Flaherty], "Fluid and Fixed Texts in India," and J. B. Flueckiger, "Literacy and the Changing Concept of Text: Women's Ramayana *Mandali* in Central India," in the same volume.



intricate system of hierarchy and patronage in which everyone knows his or her place. Colonial discourses are similar to artfully constructed shadow plays—as sites of surveillance and resistance—concealing machineries of power as they reveal stories packaged to please particular audiences, even though both performers and patrons know the value, in monetary and symbolic terms, of the labor and goods required to produce the show. This book is an analysis of colonial discourses as they have penetrated the workings of a repertoire of stories transmitted through a variety of older and more contemporary media. The book moves from a discussion of the cultural politics of empire to retellings by local intellectuals and performers that contested colonial and postcolonial categories by enacting allegories of resistance.

The performance mentioned above, which took place at the University of Washington in the fall of 1991, shows how shadow plays serve as allegories of power and patronage, even when displaced from Java to Seattle. When I called Ki Widiyanto, the Javanese puppeteer who was teaching *gamelan* at Berkeley at the time, and asked him what he would need for his performance, he said only a complete Central Javanese *gamelan* ensemble (which meant at least fifteen musicians as well as a set of instruments), a *pesindhen* (female singer), an accomplished drummer, and an expert *gender* player—the performer who must closely follow the words and songs of the *dhalang* and play almost continuously throughout the performance. Fine, I said, as I looked at our meager budget and wondered how in the world I would be able to assemble all those people in Seattle. I enlisted the support of Ragamala, the nonprofit Indian music organization in Seattle, run ever so proficiently by Professor Ramesh Gangolli, head of the Mathematics Department at the University at that time and connoisseur of Indian music. He was familiar with Javanese shadow theatre and thought we could work together. Without Professor Gangolli's support and knowledge, the Seattle shadow play would never have happened.

I began to ask A. L. Becker, with whom I communicate regularly on e-mail, what story would be performed. I was surprised when Becker told me he had no idea about the story and that he would need at least ten days to work with the *dhalang* before the performance so that the story could take shape. He had, in fact, had several months to practice with Widiyanto before the Michigan performance where I had first seen them work together. He said the collaboration was delicate business, and it was difficult

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for Widiyanto to get used to the interruptions that Becker's translations demanded. Ten days was reduced to a week and then to a weekend. A conveniently timed invitation for Becker to lecture at Berkeley helped to bring *dhalang* and translator together. Widiyanto had an accomplished *pesindhen* and a *gender* player in San Francisco, who both agreed to practice for several days before the performance and to come to Seattle. In a final stroke of luck, I remembered that Peggy Choy, who was giving an academic paper at the symposium, was also one of the most accomplished *rebab* players in the country. Everything seemed complete.

Becker believed that he and Widiyanto had decided to perform the story of the burning of the evil kingdom of Langka by Rama's dutiful devotee, the white monkey named Hanuman—Hanuman Obong as the story is known in Javanese. Becker had been busy for weeks translating that episode from the Old Javanese text. A few days before Becker was due to arrive at Berkeley to begin rehearsing, Widiyanto told him that he wanted to perform the story *after* the burning. The story after the burning told of noble Wibisana's parting from his wife when he decides to leave home, family, and country and join Rama because he can no longer tolerate the despicable behavior of his older brother Rahwana, who had stolen Rama's beautiful wife Sita. Becker started madly translating the next episode as he departed for Berkeley. Eerily, he arrived in Berkeley right after the Oakland fires of the fall of 1991—right after the burning. Widiyanto had had to flee his house to save himself from the fires. When they met, Widiyanto said with particular Javanese tact and subtlety to the bemused Becker, "You were so right, Pak<sup>9</sup> Becker, to insist that we do the story after the burning."

They practiced a few times with the *pesindhen* and *gender* player amid the chaos of the devastated Bay area and flew to Portland to rehearse with the Lewis and Clark *gamelan* once before the performance. The next day the entire group of twenty performers filled two minibuses, and they made their way to Seattle, arriving only several hours before the performance. A Thai dinner arrived backstage after the setting up of the instruments and a brief rehearsal, and it worked to revive the tired travelers. The performers ate quickly and began to dress for the performance. All the Lewis and Clark performers had purchased or been supplied with batik

9. *Pak* is a term of respect for older Javanese and Indonesian men.

cloth and short black jackets, their required performance attire. The audience began to arrive. Several hundred people showed up, quite unaware that the translator, who would make the performance understandable to them, was unique to this performance. As a perfect complement to the performance, a friend and *gamelan* aficionado had called to ask if he could bring a Halloween party of children, also in full costume. As children are a welcome part of any audience for Javanese shadow theatre, I gladly acquiesced.

As the performance began, the children were drawn irresistibly to the stage, and the layout of the concert hall allowed the audience to take turns viewing the performance from both the puppet and the shadow side. The children added a Fellini-esque touch to the performance, their costumes and delighted faces glittering along with the brightly colored puppets. Widiyanto moved effortlessly between the pathos of the parting and the humor of the clown scenes, which he performed in English. Although I did not expect it, into this dialogue he wove the tale of the Seattle performance. At only one point did he falter slightly. He knew that I had invited him to come and that I was in the History Department at the University. So, slightly puzzled, he had the Ramayana characters tell the large audience that the History Department had sponsored his visit, to the great enjoyment of Jere Bacharach, chair of the History Department at that time—and to the chagrin of Ramesh Gangolli and me, who had not made it clear enough that Ragamala was sponsoring the performance. As always, audience and patrons entered the performance domain.

The scene where Wibisana takes leave of his wife seemed particularly moving. Later I found out why. Widiyanto was sad; he, too, was being forced to part from his wife for a while because she had to return to Java. And, in the way that skilled Javanese *dhalang* weave together mythical and existential realms, Widiyanto had chosen a story that became an allegory, allowing him to reflect upon his loss. So he had chosen to perform the story after the burning. The Oakland fires, the *dhalang*'s sadness, children in Halloween costumes, the generosity of the sponsors, the visiting musicians and instruments, all were drawn momentarily together, endowed with a fleeting meaning experienced in different ways in the lives of those listening and speaking, anchoring the event in individual memories to be told and retold and finally fixed as a fitting beginning to my history of Javanese stories.

## Acknowledgments



The field research for this book was supported by fellowships from the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies (SSRC-ACLS) and Fulbright Hays. I spent five months in Leiden at the beginning of the research period reading Dutch sources, attending Dr. Stuart Robson's advanced Javanese classes at the State University, and playing in the gamelan group connected to the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. I left for Indonesia in May of 1982 and was settled in the city of Solo in Central Java by June of that year.

In early 1983, with the encouragement of Dr. Terry Bigalke, a program officer with the Ford Foundation in Jakarta, I served as the coordinator for the Lakon Carangan Documentation Project sponsored by the Ford Foundation and the Academy of Performing Arts in Solo [Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia (STSI)]. The intent of the project was the documentation of branch stories (*lakon carangan*) of the Solonese shadow theatre (*wayang purwa*) repertoire. Branch stories are those considered to be among the most fleeting in the repertoire, although our research overturned this definition. I was active in the design and research stage of this project. Worried that our efforts might standardize as well as document the tradition, I made sure that the emphasis of the research would be the collection of numerous tellings of particular stories. During the period in which I worked on the Branch Story Documentation Project, about fifty interviews were carried out, eight performances were sponsored, and a conference was organized and held. Of the eight performances, five were different tellings of the same story and three were tellings of another story. When I had to leave Java in the summer of 1984, the data was turned over to Alan Feinstein who had agreed to oversee the editing of these materials. In turn, Dr. Mary Zurbuchen had taken over the Ford Foundation supervision of the project, and she has remained a supportive friend and critical colleague. After two years of painstaking work, the results of this project were published under the direction of Alan Feinstein by the Academy in Solo.<sup>1</sup>

1. See Alan Feinstein et al., eds., *Lakon Carangan*, vols. 1–3 (Surakarta: Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia, 1986).

## Acknowledgments

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I am very grateful to the Indonesian organizations that assisted me during the years of my field research. The Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) and the Academy in Solo were always responsive to my needs as a foreign researcher.

Most important to this research were the many Javanese puppeteers who shared their knowledge with me. In particular I would like to thank Ki Naryacarito, the late R. Soetrisno, Nyi Kenyacarita, the late Ki Sukasno, Ki Sindhu, Ki Narto Sindhu, Ki Bambang Suwarno, and Ki Widiyanto S. Putro. The late director of the Academy, Bp. "Gendon" Humardhani, was both supportive and demanding. The Academy instructors who were my colleagues on the Lakon Carangan Documentation Project—Bambang Murtiyasa, Suratno, and Kuwato—were enthusiastic, efficient, and patient with my concerns about standardizing the oral tradition. Other Javanese teachers and friends include the late Ki Martopangrawit and the late Bp. Suranto Atmosaputro. Ki W. Hardjanto Pradjapangarsa and Bp. Suwondo—friends and teachers for over twenty years—supported my work in innumerable ways. Putu Wijaya—novelist, playwright, and director—and his wife Dewi became dear friends and important influences on my thinking about Indonesian theatre and performing arts.

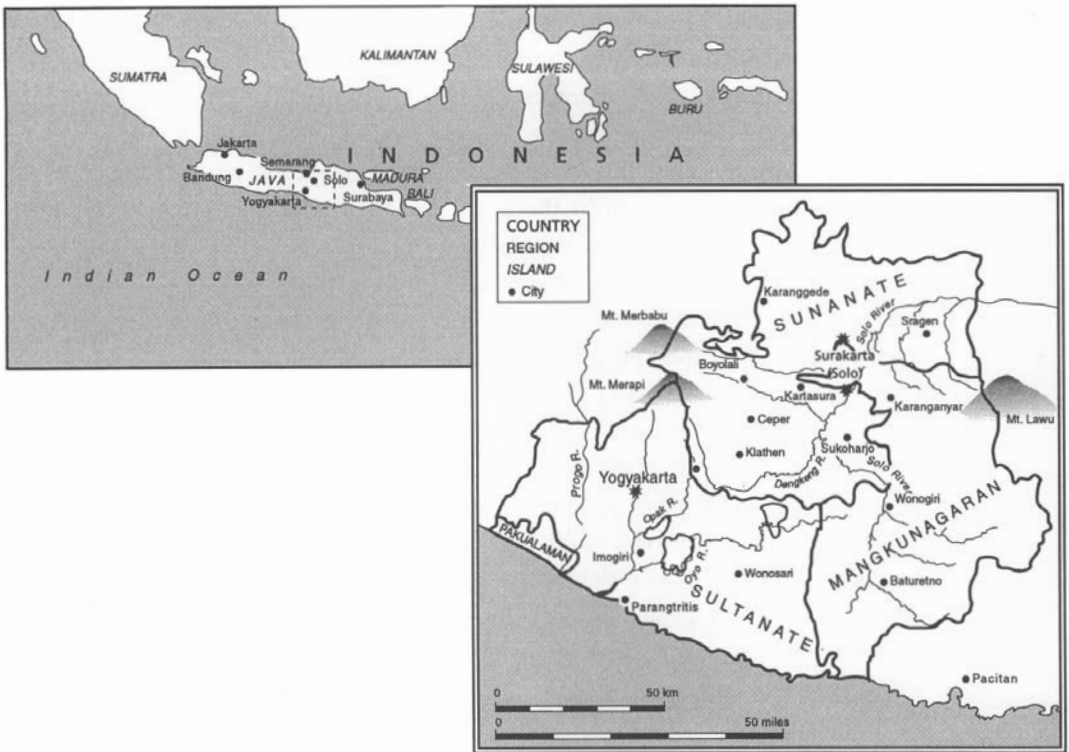
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I must not forget to acknowledge my daughter Tikka who never failed to distract me in delightful ways from this work. She spent half of first grade in a Dutch-language school in Holland, second and third grade in an Indonesian-medium school in Solo, has made several other trips to Java and Bali, and remains productively confused about her own ethnic and religious identity.



*Map of Principalities of Surakarta and Yogyakarta with borders of Sunanate, Sultanate, Mangkunagaran, and Pakualaman.*

# Introduction   Histories, Mythologies, and Javanese Tales

In this sense, no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling—and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text. In India and Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* for the first time. The stories are there, “always already.”<sup>1</sup>—A. K. Ramanujan

Thus the traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel.<sup>2</sup>—W. Benjamin



Ramayana and Mahabharata tales have often been compared with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of ancient Greece. But Ramayana and Mahabharata stories are much more alive in India and Indonesia today than the stories of Homer are in Europe or America. The stories of the former are not only performed in human and puppet theatres to celebrate national and regional holidays, but they are read avidly in novels, romances, and comic books, and the characters appear in creative and commercial guises in radio and television programming. Tales of Rama's battle to regain his wife Sita from the demon king Rahwana (Ramayana) or the great conflict and war between the Pandhawa and Korawa cousins (Mahabharata) were already traveling to Java along the trade routes from the Indian subcontinent by the first centuries C.E. and possibly much earlier.<sup>3</sup> By the tenth and eleventh centuries, the stories were sung in Old

1. A. K. Ramanujan, “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples of Three Thoughts on Translation,” in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 46. Following the late A. K. Ramanujan (*ibid.*, p. 24), in this book I use the term *tellings* rather than *versions* or *variants* to indicate that there are no original or primary texts that underpin the stories or the story cycles.

2. W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 92.

3. This book focuses on Java, one of the major islands that today make up the nation of Indonesia, which proclaimed independence from the Dutch in 1945 and gained it in 1949. Densely populated, Java is home to over half of Indonesia's 190 million people. The Javanese are the dominant ethnic group on the island but there are Sundanese peoples in the western part and Madurese peoples in the eastern part. Chinese minorities in the urban centers of Java wield significant economic power. The dominant religion of Java is Islam, which is observed in various ways. This forms a point of tension



Javanese poetic meters and performed as shadow plays, continually changing as they interacted with various elements of Javanese religion and belief. Just as Ramayana and Mahabharata tales have attracted the attention of non-Javanese scholars and travelers for hundreds of years, they have continued to engage Javanese audiences.

The shadow theatre, above all a storytelling medium, has been one of the major vehicles for the transmission of Ramayana and Mahabharata tales in Java. The stories may be religious, exorcistic, political, or purely entertaining, but puppet masters consistently turn *crita* (story) into *lakon* (formulaic plot) in oral performances. Puppeteers may do this with or without puppets, in the comfort of their sitting rooms or under the *blencong* (oil lamp or electric lightbulb) that illuminates the leather puppets on the white cotton screen and produces the fleeting shadows throughout each nine-hour performance.<sup>4</sup> While there are various dramatic traditions in Java using leather puppets, wooden puppets, and human actors, this book is concerned with the Solonese theatrical tradition known as *wayang kulit* or *wayang purwa* (leather shadows or ancient shadows), based on the association of certain leather shadow puppets with a particular repertoire of stories and a particular musical ensemble.<sup>5</sup> Some of these stories derive

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between those who interpret Islamic doctrine strictly, those who lean toward more secular worldviews, and those who see themselves as Muslims but still follow local village practices and beliefs. Most Javanese and Sundanese, and many Chinese in Java, have some familiarity with the heroes and heroines of Ramayana and Mahabharata stories.

4. Geertz's description of the skills and talents of the Javanese shadow puppeteer (*dhalang*) is excellent: "He imitates all the voices called for, sings when singing is appropriate, kicks an iron clapper with his foot to keep the rhythm and to symbolize the sounds of war, and, as he has only the bare outline of the story given to him by tradition, makes up most of the details of the plot as he goes along, particularly in the comic scenes, which often contain elements of contemporary social criticism. He does this the whole night long, sitting until dawn with his feet folded inwards in the formal Javanese sitting posture, performing with a dexterity, a fertility of invention, and a physical endurance which are altogether remarkable." C. Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (1960; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 263. See also W. Keeler, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 3–14.

5. This study concentrates on the shadow theatre traditions of Solo (Surakarta) and the surrounding villages, whose artistic traditions were sometimes influenced by one of the court traditions of Solo, i.e. the Kraton Solo or the Mangkunagaran. I do not include the equally important shadow theatre traditions of Yogyakarta, which have their own history, style, and development.



*The puppeteer becomes a shadow as he sits in front of the clown puppets (left) and the refined hero.*

from Indian oral and written Ramayana and Mahabharata plots, although the Javanese feel and believe the stories to be their own.<sup>6</sup> Most of the stories are Javanese creations, using the Indic heroes and heroines but painting them in Javanese hues.

In this book I avoid the use of the word *epic* when I refer to Javanese Ramayana and Mahabharata stories. This decision signals my reluctance to apply the European genre of “epic” to Javanese—or Indian—textual repertoires.<sup>7</sup> Not only is the epic a European category, but the frequently used term “Indian epics” obscures rather than clarifies what it means to talk about Ramayana or Mahabharata stories in Java. There is no Javanese word for epic, although *epik* is now found in Indonesian dictionaries.

6. See A. Sweeney, “Literacy and Epic in the Malay World,” in Flueckiger and Sears, *Boundaries of the Text*, for a lucid and cogent analysis of the imposition of European categories on Malay and Indonesian literary genres, and the essays in A. Appadurai, F. Korom, and M. Mills, eds., *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

7. See Flueckiger and Sears, eds., *Boundaries of the Text*, and S. Blackburn et al., *Oral Epics in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), for various discussions about what it means to talk about epics in India, Malaysia, Java, and Bali.

Puppeteers speak of *crita wayang*, or *wayang* stories, to refer to the ocean of stories from which they derive the plots or *lakon* for particular performances.

Often puppeteers connect these stories of Rama and Sita and Pandhawa and Korawa with the idea of *sejarah*, a word of Arabic origin. As with the Arabic *sihjarah*, in Javanese *sejarah* means genealogy; in Indonesian *sejarah* means history. Genealogy is a critical concept when puppeteers speak about their art, for puppeteers must remember the intricate genealogies of hundreds of characters, and the puppeteer's own genealogy is quite important for establishing his or her place in the *wayang* world. In a recent essay, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, the famous Javanese author, defined the Mahabharata as "a monstrous construction consisting of philosophical and ethical stories, religious references and, it goes without saying, social and political proscriptions."<sup>8</sup> As this book argues, Javanese definitions of Mahabharata and Ramayana stories changed over time, and it is most useful to use the terms Ramayana and Mahabharata to mark specific genres within Javanese story-worlds rather than trying to fit the stories into imported categories. Although a tenth-century Old Javanese Ramayana text is one of the oldest and most respected pieces of Javanese literature, *dhalang* (puppeteers) in Java today often refer to Rama stories as *lakon kethek*, or monkey plots, because the tales of Rama have many monkey characters whose movements are considered undignified to perform. In the following chapters, I use "cycles of stories" interchangeably with *wayang* stories or *wayang* tales, terms that only hint at the richness and complexity of these story-worlds. I argue that the abiding appeal of the shadow theatre lies in the ability of the puppeteers consistently to create new stories with the materials at hand, to recombine and re-present old and new elements.<sup>9</sup>

Shadow play performances have been held in connection with religious events and life-cycle rites for centuries. Weddings, births, circumcisions,

8. "Ma'af, Atas Nama Pengalaman," *Kabar Seberang*, no. 23 (1992): 1–9 at p. 1. This essay was brought to my attention by Alex G. Bardsley, a graduate student at Cornell University. I have slightly modified Bardsley's translation.

9. I thank A. L. Becker, Nancy Florida, and Amin Sweeney for discussing these naming problems with me at length. Becker prefers *fable* over *story* or *epic*; Florida rightly cautions that my choice of *story* or *tale* rather than *epic* may not convey the importance of these "epic" stories in Javanese thought-worlds; and Sweeney prefers *tales* in his work on Malay shadow theatre.

vows, and the commemoration of deaths are all suitable occasions for performances. In addition, certain families or villages occasionally hold performances for exorcistic purposes, to cleanse the members of a family or village and protect them from future harm. Patrons almost always pay puppeteers for their services, and delicate bargaining takes place weeks or months before performances.<sup>10</sup> Today performances are also held to celebrate national and religious holidays; in the past, puppeteers were often called to the palaces to associate their voices with court ceremonies.

In addition to ritual purposes, the shadow theatre has been a vehicle of social teachings. Scholars have long noted that proper behavior, manners, and important points of Javanese history and mythology are all emphasized in performances. Yet Javanese aficionados of the *wayang* delight in the puppeteers who can cleverly reproduce unacceptable behavior in humorous ways: the stuttering of Citraksi, the incorrect grammar and coarse language of Dursasana, and the flatulence of Semar seem more important to Javanese audiences than the virtuous behavior or elegant speech of the more refined characters. When they do appear, didactic elements are usually balanced with humor, and the most sought-after puppeteers are celebrated for their caustic or coarse wit.

Although scattered phrases of Old Javanese poetry and prose document the existence of shadow theatre performances as far back as the tenth century, detailed Javanese, Dutch, and English descriptions date only from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>11</sup> Various

10. Sometimes the puppeteer is paid a lump sum that includes the cost of hiring musicians and singers. Puppeteers who are in demand often have their own troupe of musicians and singers. Only very wealthy puppeteers can afford to transport their own puppets and selected instruments, and most villages have access to puppets, musicians, and the musical instruments needed for performances.

11. In the middle of the ninth century the word *arringgit* (*ringgit* = *wayang*) is mentioned in a Javanese inscription along with other words connected with dramatic performances and with "servants of the inner apartments" who came from Campa (Champa), Kalinga, Aryya, Singha (Ceylon), Gauda (Bengal), Cola, Malyala (Malabar), Karnataka, Reman (Pegu), and Kmir (Cambodia)—various regions of India and mainland Southeast Asia. See H. B. Sarkar, *Corpus of the Inscriptions of Java, up to 928 A. D.*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1971), pp. 76–99. Sarkar notes that J.L.A. Brandes, "Pararaton (Ken Arok) Tweede druk bewerkt door N. J. Krom," *Verhandelingen van het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* 62 (1920): 112–16, considered this inscription to be a fifteenth-century production. Sarkar and L. C. Damais think that it is a copy of a ninth-century original. L. C. Damais, "Études d'épigraphie indonésienne, III Liste des principales inscriptions datées de l'Indonésie," *Bulletin de l'Ecole*

aesthetic, political, and religious visions were represented in shadow theatre traditions both before and after Javanese encounters with European ideas and customs. The meeting of Javanese and non-Javanese intellectual worlds was often reenacted on the stage of the Javanese shadow theatre, illuminating and interweaving mythical and political discourses. While the Javanese shadow theatre has remained an oral performance tradition, written texts have influenced as well as documented it.

Preoccupation with distinctions between oral and written traditions was a characteristic of nineteenth-century ethnography, in particular as European and American social scientists attempted to interpret the varied oral literatures of peoples in Asia, Africa, and the Americas whom their governments colonized or incorporated into their nation-states. The ethnographers included the oral/written dichotomy in a series of similar dichotomies: they distinguished the savage from the civilized, myth from history, and magic from science. In positing each of these oppositions, nineteenth-century Europeans saw their status as scientific, historical, civilized peoples superior to the uncivilized, magic, and mythical "natives."

Distinctions between the oral and the written fade in light of the complex intersections of mythical and historical discourses that kept Javanese shadow theatre traditions alive. If art is both the reflection and distortion of daily happenings, as I believe it is, then artistic expressions serve to communicate how people feel, think, embrace, or resist the forces that impinge upon their lives. In this sense, shadow play performances reenact power relations in order to negotiate the terms under which those relations are recorded in memory. In the words of Walter Benjamin, "*Memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation.*"<sup>12</sup> Tradition, in this case, includes the written, spoken, and performed stories that puppeteers continually combine and rearrange in response to the tastes of audiences and patrons. This focus on power relations moves away from a rehearsing of developmental stages that ultimately privileges European culture toward an analysis of how stories

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*Française d'Extrême Orient* 46 (1952): 11. If it is not an original ninth-century document, that means that the shadow theatre would be dated a half-century later. In c. E. 907, another Javanese inscription mentions Ramayana and Mahabharata characters and stories and the word *wayang*; see Sarkar, *Inscriptions of Java*, 2:96.

12. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 98.

captured in texts and performances are ways of recording, transmitting, and interpreting human experience.<sup>13</sup>

### Colonial Allegories

Many Javanese shadow play stories ask what in the present, believed to be real, can be explicated by the past. This technique is elaborated in the Javanese use of the term *pasemon*.<sup>14</sup> *Pasemon* comes from the Javanese root *semu*, “to seem like” or “to be colored by.”<sup>15</sup> In Javanese performance traditions, *pasemon* can refer to the use of a story as a subtle caricature of reality; thus, the technique of *pasemon* serves to bring the observer/hearer’s attention to those domains which often lie outside the boundaries of any particular story. By commenting on the present through the past, the allegorical nature of *pasemon* technique sets up a special relationship between the author and certain people in the audience. The events that *pasemon* stories represent can be as grand as the fall of an empire or as simple as the philandering ways of the patron of a play. In fact, elements of *pasemon* can be found in most of the performances of any good Javanese puppeteer. Today, puppeteers—if they are not already familiar with the

13. See the essays and the introduction to Flueckiger and Sears, eds., *Boundaries of the Text*, for a brief summary of the oral/written dichotomy, and Johannes Fabian, “Keep Listening: Ethnography and Reading,” in *The Ethnography of Reading*, ed. J. Boyarin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), for a new look at practices of constructing and reading texts. In his important work on Central Javanese perceptions of self and other, *Javanese Shadow Plays*, Ward Keeler examines power struggles between patrons and performers of shadow play to support his analyses of Central Javanese family, village, and societal structures. Of major importance in Keeler’s work is his focus on village rather than court shadow theatre traditions.

14. *Pasemon* can refer to the use to which a story—or any part of a story—can be put, that is, as an allusion to something else. As one Javanese scholar explained the word: “*pasemon* is real-life drama, drawn as if it were in a *wayang* for performance. Thus the origin lies in the reality of true human dramas, not just stories adapted for the performance.” R. M. Sajid, *Bauwarna Kawruh Wayang* (Surakarta: “Widya Duta,” 1971), p. 56. Thus Mahabharata and Ramayana tales inscribed in court poetry can either serve as or be the result of *pasemon*. Following Nancy Florida, *Javanese Literature in Surakarta Manuscripts*, vol. 1 (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Press, 1993), pp. 15 and 24, I use the word *inscription* to refer to the fixing of ideas in Javanese texts because those who produce the ideas may be different from those who inscribe the words in manuscripts.

15. Poerwadarminta, *Baoesastra Djawa* (Batavia: J. B. Wolters, 1937), p. 555.

foibles of their host—are often told information about the family sponsoring the shadow play before or on the way to the performance, and the puppeteer is expected to make humorous or edifying references to the family of the host through the story. In the same way, puppeteers will often mock and make caricatures of their musicians and singers when they perform, keeping them awake and laughing, or miffed and embarrassed, in the wee hours of the night by comparing them to the heroes and heroines of the past. Thus the Ramayana and Mahabharata characters serve as a standard against which to measure the behavior of living people.

The late Javanese scholar Moertono translated *pasemon* as “covered information,” and he mentioned the necessity for this type of communication in a colonial society like Java where subtle insinuation was preferred to direct articulation.<sup>16</sup> Thus the Javanese Mahabharata and Ramayana stories that came closest to European notions of truth approached verisimilitude cautiously. If historical observations needed to be clothed in allegory in Javanese colonial society, then ephemeral performances and sung court poetry may have been more fitting vehicles than written chronicles.<sup>17</sup> Court chronicles in Java were intended to express only the most desirable pasts, and they needed to be rewritten constantly as new court rulers required different pasts to effect desired changes in the future. In contrast to written historical genres, most tellings of shadow tales could only be captured in memory; the shadow puppeteers, respected for their ability to remember—stories, genealogies, and characters—could, perhaps, be bolder than others, as Dutch power penetrated deeper into Javanese life after 1830, because they knew that their ephemeral words were difficult to reproduce.<sup>18</sup> But, by the early twentieth century, Dutch

16. S. Moertono, *State and Statecraft in Old Java: A Study of the Later Mataram Period, 16th to 19th Century* (1968; Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1981), p. 19.

17. See M. C. Ricklefs, *Jogjakarta under Sultan Mangkubumi 1749–1792* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 188–90, for a discussion of Javanese written texts as historical allegories. See also J. J. Ras, “The Historical Development of the Javanese Shadow Theatre,” *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Studies* 10 (1976): 50–76, at p. 65, where Ras discusses “lakon pasemon” as systematic allusion. J. Kats mentions a story that mirrored the abdication of the Sultan of Yogya in 1921 in *Het Javaansche Tooneel I, De Wajang Poerwa*, vol. 1 (Weltevreden: Commissie voor de Volkslectuur, 1923), pp. 110–11.

18. Often scholars have assumed that the clown dialogues were the site of most political commentary. In creating *pasemon*, however, the puppeteer can fill the clown

scholars and Javanese intellectuals were engaged in a subtle struggle to control shadow theatre repertoires and the puppeteers who kept those repertoires alive.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, mentioned above, poignantly expressed the growing Javanese ambivalence toward and Dutch celebration of the shadow theatre in the final novel of his historical quartet on the first decades of the twentieth century and the rise of Indonesian national consciousness.<sup>19</sup> The main character in the fourth novel is a Menadonese police official, raised in France and married to a French woman. When the story opens in the Indies in 1912, we learn that the Menadonese policeman has become skilled at helping the colonial government understand the constitution of various Indies peoples as subjects of a rising national consciousness. Early in the novel, his Dutch archivist friend asks the Menadonese man if he has ever seen an entire *wayang purwa* play, and he replies no. The would-be Dutch scholar then goes on to explain to this non-Javanese Indies man the meaning of the shadow theatre.

It takes time indeed to study the major lines of thought in the *wayang*. To understand *wayang* is to understand the history of a philosophy of life and the worldview of the Javanese people. To master the study of *wayang* as a subject, Sir, means to master the Javanese people. This is one essential element for becoming an expert on the colonial Indies. If there were a Javanese person who was able to master it as a subject, who was able to free himself from the grip of that *wayang* world, it would still be a long haul to remake himself, Sir. This *wayang* world is a unique structure that is unable to be touched by modern ideas. Whether the Javanese person is Christian or Muslim, or has no religion at all, they are all sucked into it just like Prapanca and Tantular envisioned.<sup>20</sup>

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scenes with slapstick jokes and still make pointed political statements through his/her characterization and rendering of plot.

19. Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Rumah Kaca* (Kuala Lumpur: Wira Karya, 1990), p. 78.

20. Prapanca and Tantular were poets who wrote in Old Javanese hundreds of years ago. They were among the first to describe the syncretic nature of Javanist Shaivite and Buddhist thought that Pramoedya's Dutch archivist blames for the failure of the Javanese to resist the Dutch. Ruth McVey succinctly describes the perceived relationship between shadow theatre and Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic beliefs in Java: "For this amalgam—the Agama Jawa, or the Religion of Java—*wayang* was the supreme expression." Ruth McVey, "The Wayang Controversy in Indonesian Communism," in *Context, Meaning, and Power in Southeast Asia*, ed. M. Hobart and R. Taylor (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Publications, 1986), p. 22.



There is no element of chance in Pramoedya's ironic decision to have the Dutch scholar lecture the Menadonese policeman about the *wayang*. As a Javanese himself, Pramoedya sees the web of *wayang* stories as an intoxicating veil that mystifies the Javanese, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. And he sees, too, the ways in which the *wayang* was constituted in colonial discourses as a significant part of the interlocking apparatuses of Dutch control.<sup>21</sup> In Pramoedya's view, to begin to become objective about the *wayang*, to be able to see the *wayang* as a subject of study, was to free oneself from the power of colonial constructions of Java. To show how Javanese Ramayana and Mahabharata tales became the shadows of empire, this book explores Dutch and postcolonial Indonesian government efforts to use the *wayang* as a means of control. It also examines the several generations of Javanese who, as they constituted themselves and saw themselves constituted as Indonesians, learned to use the *wayang* for their own purposes.

During the 1960s, when many aspects of Javanese—and Indonesian—life were politicized, shadow plays were used to convey Marxist, Islamic, and nationalist messages. Both before and after the fall of the Soekarno government, the fate of Soekarno and his colleagues might be announced through analogies with the characters on the shadow play screen.<sup>22</sup> The technique of *pasemon* allows puppeteers to insert veiled political allusions and commentary into performances. Thus the political critiques embed-

21. Pramoedya told me this in July of 1990 when I visited him in Jakarta, where he was still under tacit house arrest. It is worth noting also that Pramoedya does not identify the *wayang* with religion—all Javanese are subject to its power until they can master it as a subject. The term *colonial discourse*, in this book, shows how Dutch scholars, administrators, and missionaries chose to speak about Java and the Javanese and the ways in which these images that were produced for European consumption circulated among the Javanese. Other recent definitions of colonial discourse, based on the work of theorists like Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, can be found in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), and David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). Williams and Chrisman and Spurr all distinguish between colonialism and imperialism in their discussions of colonial discourse. Although the colonial era has ended, the politics of empire have not disappeared.

22. See C. J. Koch's historical novel, *The Year of Living Dangerously* (New York: Penguin, 1983) for one description of the shadow plays held at Soekarno's palace in Bogor. See also Benedict Anderson's "Languages of Indonesian Politics," reprinted in *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 123–51.

ded in shadow theatre performances often appear as allegories, unintelligible to those who are not intimately familiar with the tradition.<sup>23</sup> The use of Javanese Mahabharata and Ramayana tales as a metalanguage for politics, village gossip, commentary on court intrigue, and entertaining repartee is stressed in several chapters of this book. Because the stories can be used to comment on the vicissitudes of daily life, and this commentary changes with each telling, it becomes increasingly difficult to fix the “meaning” of any story. Each story has the potential to be renewed in each telling, and each new telling leaves its traces on the story told. The persistent ability of stories both to charge and change past and present marks the constitution and celebration of these stories as allegories. But the power of allegory lies in its very ambiguity: “Thus in allegory an ambivalence occurs between the power to lend meaning to things on the one hand, and the inability to fix this meaning essentially on the other.”<sup>24</sup>

Although the shadow theatre of Java served as a transmitter and preserver of Ramayana and Mahabharata stories and as a vehicle for texts and performances to travel through the centuries, this book questions whether it ever was the dominant expression of a Javanese philosophy, religion, or “worldview.” Certainly foreign scholars and travelers perceived the shadow theatre as the emblem of exotic, impenetrable, and mystically rich “Java.”<sup>25</sup> To argue that *wayang purwa* theatre<sup>26</sup> and its stories were more

23. In his biography of the late President Soekarno, both in its structure and focus, Bernhard Dahm illustrates how Soekarno used these stories as a subversive political discourse. See B. Dahm, *Sukarno and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence*, trans. Mary F. Somers Heidhues (1966; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).

24. This comment on allegory comes from Lislotte Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1973), p. 58. It was quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. 426 n. 68.

25. One of the earliest sources to mention shadow theatre in Java is the Malay *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* dated perhaps to the fourteenth century. See A. H. Hill, “Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai,” *Journal of the Malay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 33, no. 2 (1960): 161. Rijklof van Goens mentions shadow theatre in his memoirs of his visits to the court of Mataram in the mid-seventeenth century. See J. J. de Graaf, *De Vijf Gezantschapsreizen van Rijklof van Goens naar het Hof van Mataram 1648–1654* (s’ Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1956). Detailed descriptions appear in the works of British scholars and administrators. See T. S. Raffles, *The History of Java* (1817; 2d ed. [2 vols.], London: John Murray, 1830), and J. Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1820).

26. The *wayang purwa* is distinguished from other Javanese shadow theatre traditions by its use of Ramayana and Mahabharata tales for its main repertoire.

than a shifting assemblage of puppets, performers, and plots held together by repeated voicings of Ramayana and Mahabharata stories, I ask what powers and purposes were served by the preservation of the storyrealms these characters inhabited. To discern why the Ramayana and Mahabharata characters were nurtured for several hundred years in the Islamic communities of Central Java, I examine how the stories came to life not only in shadow play performances but also in chronicles, manuscripts, scholarly journals, romances, and novels. These media mixed older ideas with contemporary ones, and Javanese ideas with Dutch, in order to meet the needs of new constituencies. But, if Ramayana and Mahabharata tales have survived in Java because they continued to engage Javanese audiences, the categories of knowledge maintained by these stories have also created tensions among Javanese intellectuals. Like Pramoedya, intellectuals since the first decade of the century have attempted to extricate themselves from their “exotic” and “mystical” past and position themselves within a more Indonesian future.<sup>27</sup> Chapters 3 and 4 of this book address the changing thought-worlds of urban and rural Javanese intelligentsias in the twentieth century to show how these intellectuals used the shadow theatre to construct both ethnic and national identities. Shadow play stories serve as allegories rather than myths or “tradition” because allegory became a necessary strategy for historical survival and social critique in Javanese colonial and postcolonial society.

### Shadow Theatre and Orientalism

For the purposes of this book, I have avoided positing a past time of tradition that has been overcome by modernity. As I see it, “tradition” and “modernity” both come into focus at the same time, and scholars can only recognize tradition in the light of modernity. My discussions of Javanese shadow theatre as a point of entry to Dutch colonial discourses suggest

27. As Ben Anderson perceptively notes: “For the fact is that the Javanese language and Javanese culture have for almost a century now been much more of a problem to the Javanese themselves than to anyone else: a problem that cannot be resolved by any obvious or easy means, since it involves and implicates almost all sectors of Javanese society.” B.R.O’G. Anderson, “*Sembah-Sumpah: The Politics of Language and Javanese Culture*” [1984], in *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 235.

that these ways of speaking are a product of Dutch-Javanese encounters that began in the early seventeenth century. In the Napoleonic period, Java and other Dutch colonial possessions were taken away from the Dutch and put, albeit briefly, in British hands. Sir Stamford Raffles, discussed in chapter 1, held power in the Indies in those years and attempted a radical reconstruction of the colony. Raffles promoted the study of Javanese "culture" on orientalist terms that discounted Javanese Islam, and when he departed, the Dutch were left to face the repercussions of his actions.

What is known as the Javanese shadow theatre comes into focus in this moment of the Dutch-Javanese confrontation. The shadow theatre existed before the early nineteenth century, but little is known of its contours, its performance practices, its role or position in Javanese communities. The shadow theatre cannot be separated from the colonial moment and posited as an essential, unchanging part of Java waiting for Europeans to uncover, interpret, document, or eventually reconstruct it. The shadow theatre, as it is known today, developed within an atmosphere where nineteenth-century discourses of science and progress were percolating, both contributing to and drawing from Javanese and Dutch intellectual exchanges. This book contributes to a reenvisioning of European histories that show the influence of Asian, African, and New World knowledges on the constitution of European mentalities.

Edward Said's work *Orientalism* has been immensely influential in challenging scholarly thinking about representations of the Middle East and South Asia by Europeans and Americans, most effectively in the modern period. Said suggested that the Orient was not allowed to represent itself; it was always already represented as the Occident's "other."<sup>28</sup> This representation was not innocent: colonial and postcolonial scholars were implicated in the production of the "Orient" as much as were colonial administrators, travelers, merchants, and artists. The Orient was exoticized and feminized in European literary and scholarly representations and thus was both dominated and relegated to an inferior status. Said's work has

28. Said states: "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident.'" And again: "Orientalism assumed an unchanging Orient, absolutely different (the reasons change from epoch to epoch) from the West." E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), pp. 2, 98.

provoked a wide range of scholarly debate with critiques from both ends of the political spectrum.<sup>29</sup> Said's identification of orientalist discourses has distinguished, in acknowledged Foucaultian fashion, ways in which the Orient and, more importantly, Islam have been presented to European and American audiences. Said focuses mainly on British, French, and American imperial attitudes, but his arguments can be extended to include Dutch behavior in the Indies and especially Dutch attitudes toward Islam. This book shows a particular example of orientalist discourse in the tensions of empire that influenced both European and Javanese representations of Javanese literary and historical traditions. In this light, one reaction to Said's ideas is pertinent.

A notable feature of Orientalism is that it examines the history of Western textualities about the non-West quite in isolation from how those textualities might have been received, accepted, modified, challenged, overthrown or reproduced by the intelligentsias of the colonized countries: not as an undifferentiated mass but as situated social agents impelled by our own conflicts, contradictions, distinct social and political locations of class, gender, region, religious affiliation, and so on. . . .<sup>30</sup>

Although inadequate as a criticism of Said's work on English literature, this observation cogently captures the intent of my project.<sup>31</sup> I do present Dutch discourses about Java and Javanese traditions, but I am equally interested in showing how the actions of local intelligentsias, "as situated

29. See, for example, the "Review Symposium," in the *Journal of Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (May 1980): 481–518; James Clifford's "On Orientalism," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Bernard Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism," *New York Review of Books*, 24 June 1982. One recent and controversial critique appears in the work of Aijaz Ahmad. Ahmad suggests that Said has essentialized both Orient and Occident by following the same master narratives—what Ahmad calls "Auerbachian High Humanism"—that he critiques in the work of others. See Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Literatures, Nations* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 167. Some scholars have felt the need to defend Said's work against Ahmad's criticisms, as illustrated by the essays in *Public Culture* (December 1993).

30. Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory*, p. 172.

31. Said clearly states that his purpose is to show how the Orient has been produced in European and American texts. Had Said's *Orientalism* not focused on European discourses, it is doubtful whether it would have received the attention that it did. In effect, his work presents a clear challenge to Asians and Middle Easterners, and those who write about them with empathy, to explore the reception of and resistance to the discursive formations of Orientalism.

social agents," were impelled by their own logics and needs and how these activities intersected, obstructed, or occasionally meshed with Dutch efforts to represent and control Javanese literary and historical productions.

Dutch attitudes toward and representations of Javanese Mahabharata and Ramayana traditions also illuminate the ways in which Dutch scholars promoted these traditions at the expense of Islam. I do not mean to say that the Dutch in any sense "created" Javanese shadow theatre traditions. In fact, the number of Dutch scholars or administrators who could even understand these traditions was quantitatively insignificant even while the influence of those who could was qualitatively profound. Rather, Javanese patrons, authors, and performers of Javanese Mahabharata and Ramayana stories chose to write or perform their texts in ways that would allow them to accrue cultural capital according to the tastes and styles of the time.

In the 1920s and 1930s, for example, this meant that Javanese authors and patrons sought to show that shadow theatre and the stories it conveyed were intrinsically mystical because of the values that were placed on mysticism by groups of Javanese and Dutch intellectuals influenced by Theosophical thought.<sup>32</sup> The key representation of shadow theatre in the 1930s was, in fact, written in Dutch by the noted scholar, military officer, businessman, and ruler Mangkunagara VII, head of the minor court in Solo. The prince, greatly influenced by the ideas of Dutch Theosophists, suggested that every Javanese shadow play was a reenactment of a spiritual search for mystical knowledge.<sup>33</sup> He offered these ideas with mixed intent in a learned lecture to a gathering of Dutch and Indies intellectuals: the prince realized that his audience of Dutch scholars and spiritual seekers placed value on mystical knowledge, and the mystical world was one realm in the era of high colonialism where Javanese could be superior or at least equal to the Dutch. This interpretation suggests that the Javanese prince was impelled by his own conflicts and contradictions, but it also

32. Theosophy was an eclectic religious movement that began in America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and quickly spread to Europe and the colonies. The movement attempted to combine aspects of the various world religions and to posit a mystical essentialism that they all shared. I discuss Theosophy and its impact on Javanese intellectuals at length in chapter 4.

33. Mangkunagara VII, *On the Wayang Kulit (Purwa) and Its Symbolic and Mystical Elements*, trans. Claire Holt, Data Paper no. 27 (1933; Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1957).