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The People and the Wayang by Franz Magnis Suseno: Translation and Introduction

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Abstract

This article comprises a translation of the Indonesian original of Franz Magnis Suseno's discussion of the philosophical significance of the Javanese wayang theater and an introduction to the author and the Javanese art form itself. Magnis Suseno is a well-known philosopher and public figure in his adopted homeland Indonesia, and this piece is an example of his commitment to making use of Javanese traditions to frame a particular Javanese kind of humanism which affirms the rootedness of Javanese society in the structure of the cosmos while also critiquing the abuse of this structure in some forms of hierarchy.

Introduction

The Javanese shadow puppet theater or *wayang kulit*¹ is known for its unique adaptations of great Sanskritic narratives, in particular the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata, which have been performed in Java for many centuries. Although unequivocal evidence for the presence of *wayang* performances before the eleventh century is not extant to us, the term *wayang* in the context of literary narratives was already in use in the ninth century (Zoetmulder 1995 [1974]: 208). In Java, the Indian narratives were changed and expanded. The mountains and rivers received Javanese names, and the Pandawa were understood to be the mythical ancestors of Java's ruling class. Furthermore, the plots were furnished with side stories, or *carangan*, and characters that had no basis in the originals. The significance of the *wayang* for cultural life in Java and its influence goes beyond the arts. *Wayang* imagery is omnipresent in Java and provides metaphors not only for daily affairs, but also for political and religious life (Keeler 1987: 15). Magnis Suseno's piece *The People and the Wayang* (1982) is an example of a renegotiation and reinterpretation of myths in a way that responds to the context of Javanese society in the years of Suharto's New Order. The ethics it formulates are primarily addressed to an Indonesian audience at a particular time, but also articulate a kind of humanism with a Javanese stamp. By making it available in English, a text of this very influential Indonesian thinker on ethics in the *wayang* will be accessible to a wider audience for the first time.

Despite its long history and the fact that the *wayang* is considered to be such an important cultural property today, the contemporary *wayang* is a fairly recent invention. As Sears (1996) has shown, the *wayang* as we know it today cannot be separated from

the colonial moment and orientalist scholarship that presented and, indeed, created it as a manifestation of an unchanging essence of 'Javaneseness' that could be uncovered and reconstructed by Europeans (13). The *wayang* as it was constituted in colonial discourses became part of the interlocking apparatuses of Dutch control, part of which was the promotion of a supposedly reconstructed pre-Islamic Javanese tradition at the expense of Islam (15). Both descriptive and constitutive of prevalent power structures, scholarly accounts of the *wayang* not only became part of the colonial Dutch, but also of the post-colonial Indonesian hegemonic political agenda, promoting birth control and five-year plans (Hatley 2005; Cohen 2002: 110). However, as a performative tradition that is constantly re-imagined, the *wayang* can also be and has been used for the subversion of these power structures. Not only does a *dhalang*, the puppeteer, have some discretion in what to present in a given performance and how to present it, but other intellectuals can use the *wayang* as a foil for understanding and identifying social and political ills and for promoting change. Franz Magnis Suseno's essay is an example of such a subversion. Composed in 1982 at the height of the New Order regime, at a time of increasing social inequality, victimization of political and social non-conformists, and in an atmosphere of both fear and complacency,² *The People and the Wayang* formulates an ethics of respect, tolerance, and equality.

Franz Magnis Suseno, born in 1936 in Silesia, is a Jesuit priest and a scholar of philosophy. He joined the Jesuit order in 1955 and moved to Indonesia in 1961. One of his students called him a lover of Javanese culture and of the *wayang* (G.P. Sindhunata 2006: 2). Having lived in Indonesia for more than 15 years, he obtained Indonesian citizenship in 1977. Without being an Indonesian citizen, he reckoned, he would be able to be a philosopher, but he would not be able to identify and address the problems around him (3). He has been teaching at the Driyarkara School of Philosophy in Jakarta and has significantly shaped this institution. He is a prolific writer and a famous and well-liked public figure in Indonesia, who has frequently spoken up for social justice and inter-religious dialogue, which he continues to do.

The People and the Wayang can be seen as an expression of concerns such as tolerance and respect. It is not an attempt to extract timeless Javanese virtues from the *wayang* stories, but is rather an appeal to his fellow Javanese to interpret the narratives of the *wayang* in a way that promotes justice, understanding, and critical self-reflection. As Magnis Suseno, an expert on ethics, knows, ethics are not only prescriptive, but always also descriptive (see Magnis Suseno 1988). They are descriptive as a manifestation of a particular community's world view and values (19), and they are prescriptive as an exhortation to live by the rules that have been identified as normative in that respective community. Ethics, as such, are not static, but their scope and implications have to be renegotiated as a society's contexts change. Rather than essentializing the *wayang*, trying to recover a trans-historical meaning, *The People and the Wayang* speaks to Indonesians about what the *wayang* may be telling them today. Myths such as the *wayang* narratives, in this sense, are always contemporary, because they do not exist in a vacuum. Every re-telling or re-interpretation responds to a contemporary situation. The choice of the *wayang* as a foil for a subversive ethical appeal is no coincidence: The *wayang* is a powerful trope in contemporary Indonesia that people are accustomed to encountering, and that is often used

to advertise or justify a product or action.³ Magnis Suseno's discussion of the *wayang* offers us an example and an avenue for understanding the way contemporary Indonesian intellectuals renegotiate the mythical boundaries of the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana tales, and furthermore shows which virtues are considered pertinent in contemporary Java.

The stories of the *wayang*, Magnis Suseno writes, represent the ethical ambiguities and dilemmas of real life. As every spectator of the *wayang* knows, humans in their daily interactions are often forced to make up their minds between equally harmful choices, making innocence impossible. Mulyono, another contemporary Javanese expert on the *wayang*, equally emphasizes the significance of an individual's choice when explaining his view of the *wayang* in terms of Kierkegaard's formulation of ethics being constituted by the "either/or": "No matter what choice man makes, it is never a completely right choice; it is never perfect, final, and complete in itself. Man never solves his problems perfectly, and he will always face problems and dilemmas [...] As Kierkegaard said, 'I perceive perfectly that there are two possibilities. One can do either this or that'" (Mulyono 1981: 143). Mulyono is referring to Kierkegaard's theorization of what he calls the ethical life form in his work *Either/Or*, in which one crucial aspect is his observation that it is impossible to answer the question about the good and right course of action as clearly as some of his contemporaries, especially Kantian philosophers, thought. For Kierkegaard, dilemmas are crucial revelatory moments. And just as one of the main objectives of Kierkegaard's works that complicate the idea of ethical purity may have been to trouble some of his contemporaries' religious and ethical complacency (Green 1998), we can also think of Magnis Suseno's and Mulyono's interpretation of the *wayang* as a way to show their Javanese contemporaries at a particular point in time that being moral is not a simple matter, and that rather than blindly following rules for the purpose of being on the right side, it is better to accept the dilemmas as such and to face them as best we can. And like Kierkegaard, who emphasized the revelatory power of moral dilemmas, Magnis Suseno also keeps asking the reader to turn her gaze inward and think what their decisions actually mean.

Ethics are further complicated in the *wayang* because the same course of action might not be equally advisable for everybody. Just as people are different from each other, what counts as moral or immoral may change from person to person, and from situation to situation. This further characterizes the ethics of the *wayang*: its ethics are not an exact science, but are, to a certain degree, contingent on factors that are non-discursive and potentially even ineffable. However, this characterization is not supposed to lead to an ethical relativism, in which anything can be justified by reference to one's particular situation. Instead, Magnis Suseno asks his readers to be tolerant with those who are different, who choose a different course of life and engage in activities that one considers strange or inappropriate. Again, the imperative is to reflect. But while Magnis Suseno sees the need to admonish his contemporary Javanese to be tolerant of one another, he also makes clear that tolerance is only a meaningful concept if it has clear limits. At times, it might be our duty to intervene and to actively change conditions that have become unbearable for ourselves or others, to protect those who need our protection, and to make the world a better place. Magnis

Suseno demands a high moral maturity from his readers, as he consistently asks them to use their own judgment rather than giving them ready-made answers.

Finally, Magnis Suseno's discussion of Semar shows not only that things are not always what they appear to be, but also hints at the fact that the most essential, existentially important things cannot be expressed in a straightforward manner, just as ethics are not simple and unambiguous. At first glance, Semar appears to be a fairly unsophisticated clown, the epitome of crudeness and powerlessness. On the other hand, it is well-known in Java that he is nobler, wiser, and more powerful than any of the warriors he serves. But there is more to Semar than the imperative not to judge a book by its cover and to take the time to discover other people's true strengths. As Magnis Suseno makes clear, Semar is an ambivalent figure. His ambivalence is expressed by means of two irresolvable tensions: first his extraordinary religious authority is in a dialectic relationship with his social or structural inferiority; and second, he is simultaneously unpredictable or even uncanny, and humanity's comforter and sustainer. A person with this particular paradoxical status is sometimes referred to as a trickster in other cultural and literary contexts. A trickster is characterized by a pervasive liminality due to the fact that the paradoxes characterizing him make it impossible to classify him, as is the case for other characters in the *wayang*. Being both holy and lowly, we could also think of Semar as a religious symbol. But religious symbols are epistemically underdetermined, as they point to a transcendent reality that is not intersubjectively accessible in the same way as the physical world or aspects of discursive knowledge. As a trickster, or a religious symbol, Semar would embody a most basic paradox, namely that ethics are on the one hand social, and on the other hand are often justified in a manner that is pre-social, or transcends the phenomenal world. He criticizes existing ethics as being unethical, but without providing a new blueprint. Again, the reader is called to reflect, to examine which norms that are valued in society might be amoral, and to think of ways to change the norms in the spirit of Semar.

In terms of positive ethics, Magnis Suseno's examination of the *wayang* is very modest: its main advice is to reflect on one's own implicit assumptions, judgments, and actions, as well as the moral status of one's society's ethics more generally. Rather than coming up with concrete suggestions about how to live in Indonesia in the early 1980s, suggestions that would be regarded as irrelevant in a society that has different (though nonetheless otherwise problematic) moral norms and values, the imperative to reflect is one that never loses its subversive power. It is relevant in contemporary Indonesia, where, as Magnis Suseno has said more recently, pressing problems include the oppression of some ethnic and religious groups, especially the Shi'a and Ahmadiyya. But it is also relevant everywhere else, anywhere where ethical systems in place privilege some and disenfranchise others. As a kind of humanism with a Javanese stamp, Magnis Suseno's account of the ethics in the *wayang* can encourage people everywhere to critically examine themselves and their society and enable them to accept moral responsibility.

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II Translation⁴

Preface

When Arjuna arrives at the battle field prepared to fight in the Baratayuda war, he suddenly loses all his fervor for the endeavor. His heart is overcome with sadness and he feels that he isn't strong enough to fight his own relatives and teachers, who educated him since childhood. Kresna, however, reminds Arjuna that an honorable warrior must not retreat from the battle field, but is rather obliged to fight arrogance and anger without taking into consideration the bonds of family or friendship. Thus, Arjuna realizes his duty and regains his enthusiasm to fight.

This stressful scene in the beginning of the Baratayuda war never fails to make a profound impression on the *wayang* spectators: What if Arjuna had refused to participate in the war? What if the Baratayuda war, with its horrifying death toll, in which all the Kurawa are killed, could have been avoided at the last moment? Is what Arjuna suggests wrong, namely, that control over a state does not justify the sacrifice of the great number of victims? What is surprising in this scene is that these questions cannot be given a theoretical answer. We are only told that Arjuna - without further discussion - rises and joins the fighting. In fact, this ethical question is never satisfactorily addressed. As a result, we will never know if it would have been better if this great war had never happened. Isn't real life like this as well: we are confronted with a situation in which we have to make a decision, we are hesitant, we don't know what is right or wrong, and in the end we are forced to decide, likely based on a friend's advice. We choose one alternative over the other, and so we will never know what the outcome would have been if we had chosen the other alternative.

It is precisely for this reason that the *wayang* so closely resembles real lives. In the *wayang*, we do not encounter general theories, but rather models of life and human behavior. These models display very clearly the problems of our existence, but they never provide a complete certainty; therefore, they can never completely remove the uncertainties that exist in our lives. What is presented in the *wayang* can leave an impression on us without forcing us in one direction or another. We are presented with several possibilities of action in life, but none that we can simply imitate. The stories of the *wayang* allow us to consider the unlimited consequences of our decisions, but still allow us to be free to be responsible for our own actions. Thus, we always have to adopt a standpoint and make a decision on our own. If, for example, I were in Arjuna's situation today, would I have followed Kresna's advice or not? And would Kresna give the same advice to me? The *wayang* does not give us answers, but rather draws our attention to the outcome and the consequences of our decisions, whatever they may be.

The above example illustrates something important: the morality of the *wayang* is a concrete morality, and as such, is a complex morality. Speaking metaphorically, the *wayang* opens up numerous possibilities of human behavior for us, but it doesn't offer any simple answers. It lets the questions reverberate. The morals of the *wayang* stories provide us with an understanding of the diversity of human existence and the weight of responsibility implicit in each of our actions, but they don't make any decisions for us. We each have to find what our own duty is.

Kumbakarna and Wibisana

Let us consider another example, namely the one of the two younger siblings of Rahwana, Kumbakarna and Wibisana. Neither one of them agrees with their older

brother's behavior, both of them know that Rahwana would not win against Rama, the reincarnation of Visnu, and that Rahwana is on the side of evil. However, the two of them draw opposite conclusions from the situation. Wibisana, the younger one, feels that it is his duty to fight on the righteous side, and so he joins Rama's troops. Apparently, this behavior is considered good: he is regarded as a magnanimous warrior. Kumbakarna, on the other hand, feels that it is his duty to remain loyal to his older brother and king because, as a commander, it is his duty to defend the kingdom. He wears white clothing as used in a funeral ritual, and goes to the battle field where he falls like a true warrior. Although Kumbakarna looks like a terrifying giant monster, he is one of the most beloved *wayang* figures and his tragic death is heartbreaking for the audience. So, which of the brothers behaved in the right way, Wibisana or Kumbakarna?

The same conflict arises also in the beginning of the Baratayuda war, when Kresna and Karna appear before Dewi Kunti. Kresna tries to persuade Karna to join the Pandawa. He argues that Karna is really the oldest brother of the Pandawa and that truth is on the side of the Pandawa. And also Karna's mother, Dewi Kunti, gives him the same advice. Although Karna refuses to listen, he does not deny that truth lies on the side of the Pandawa. He clearly knows that the Kurawa will lose in the end, but still feels that it is his duty to choose their side because he is indebted to Suyudana, who has given him the kingdom of Ngawangga, and thus he has pledged his loyalty to him. The opposite is the case with Sanjaya: he sides with the Pandawa. Both Karna and Sanjaya fall in the Baratayuda war. We, the spectators, are left asking, was it right for Karna to remain loyal to Suyudana? Shouldn't a warrior choose the side of truth and justice? But on the other hand, can a noble warrior withdraw his loyalty toward his commander? Is he allowed to forget his pledge of loyalty?

From these examples, we can see the unique characteristics of the ethics of the *wayang*. The *wayang* does not want to lecture us, it doesn't want to give us all sorts of advice and norms. The *wayang* is not moralistic, which means that the problems are not presented in a simple manner, in black and white, divided into what is good and what is bad. Instead, the *wayang* presents the breadth of problems that humanity encounters, the complexities of life, and the ambiguities that we often have to bear.

When watching the *wayang*, we become aware of the extent of our responsibilities, at the same time it is as though we were discovering what the concrete purpose and goal of human life really is. The question about the meaning of life is not answered in a one-dimensional manner. Instead, it is grounded in life's ambiguities without being pressured into giving a particular answer. The *wayang* exposes us to deeper dimension of reality. This will become clear when we compare several aspects of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.⁵

Ramayana and Mahabharata

At first glance, there are many similarities between the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Both of them are centered around the tension between two opposing sides, a tension that culminates in a terrible war which ends in the victory of one side and the annihilation of the other. In the Ramayana, Rama and his friends and allies confront the side of Rahwana, and in the Mahabharata the five Pandawa brothers confront the ninety-nine Kurawa siblings. However, the similarities end with this first impression.

What is prominent in the Ramayana is the clear line that divides the good from the evil; Rama and his allies constitute the side of good, Rahwana the side of evil. There is no uncertainty about this. Rama is a magnanimous person. He renounces his right to the kingdom because he does not want to complicate his father Dasurata's position: his father has created an irresolvable dilemma for himself because he has promised the same kingdom to both Rama, his oldest son, and to Branta, the son of his second wife, Kekayi. Rama truly displays an attitude of *sepi ing pamrih*.⁶ Together with his wife, Dewi Sinta, and his younger brother Lesmana, Rama goes into the forest. Rahwana, on the other hand, is a personification of evil, which becomes particularly clear when he abducts Dewi Sinta. The remainder of the story is straightforward and after some heavy fighting, good triumphs over evil. The happy ending that everybody hoped for comes about: Rama returns to Ayudya with his wife, whose chastity has been proven through a trial of fire.

The Ramayana is characterized by crystal clear moral positions; there is no uncertainty or ambiguity.⁷ From the beginning we know who is good and who is evil, and we simply wait to see how the good will win. In this respect, the Ramayana is similar to classical cowboy stories, in which there is also only good and evil, and the complexity of human problems is not presented. Like the Ramayana, cowboy stories usually begin with the good guy having to flee because he is pursued by the villain, but after a number of trials, the good cowboy triumphs over evil, reinstating peace and order.

In cowboy films it is always clear who is good and who is bad. Similarly, in the Ramayana we can easily identify ourselves with Rama, Dewi Sinta, Lesmana, Jatayu, Sugriwa and Anoman; we certainly do not empathize the side of Rahwana and Sarpakenaka. In the Ramayana, at the most, it is only Kumbakarna who shows any conflict like the ones in the Mahabharata, but the conflict is not as serious because there is no doubt at all about Rahwana's evilness, and the only question is the old one: Do we have to be loyal even to evil people? In other words, from an ethical standpoint, the Ramayana presents a black and white picture without any complexities.

The situation of the Mahabharata is completely different. In the Mahabharata, one finds that the story is not presented in black and white terms. The opposition between the two sides, the Pandawa and the Kurawa, is a lot more complex and bewildering, and cannot be explained by a simple schema. Although the Pandawa have a *budi luhur*⁸ while the Kurawa represent the pernicious side in the Mahabharata, the two sides cannot simply be identified with good and evil. The Kurawa mustn't be assumed to be the evil party. There is no room in the Mahabharata for a cheap moralism that quickly divides everything into good and bad. The Kurawa are also human, they are Javanese royalty, like the Pandawa. In the beginning of the Baratayuda war, the moral standing of the two parties is more or less equal. What is clearly evident is that the Kurawa are the inferior warriors: they are greedy and power hungry, they have no self-control and are ill-mannered; and apparently they are blind to signs from the gods.

But the Pandawas are also not above criticism. King Yudistira is indeed very courteous, but he likes to gamble and because of this, he brings ruin down on both himself and his siblings. Bima is coarse and bloodthirsty. Kresna, the powerful comrade of the Pandawa and the reincarnation of the god Wisnu, who through his counsel ensures the victory of the Pandawa, has no qualms about giving advice that goes against the ethical code of the noble warrior, recommending deceit (e.g. the deception of Druna, Bima's

attack on Suyudana's thigh, and other similar incidents) as long as it is advantageous for the Pandawa.

It is interesting to note that the moral high ground in the Mahabharata is given to the Pandawa. When Durna orders Bima to look for the water of life in order to destroy it, this act is considered deceitful, whereas the comparable advice of Kresna is given approval because it benefits the Pandawa. As Brandon notes,⁹ it appears that the Pandawa are given more flexibility in their ability to choose the means of securing their victory than the Kurawa, which means that they are allowed to do more things, and this is only based on the fact that they are the Pandawa who have already been established by the gods as the winners.

In the Ramayana there is only one individual with a noble personality who remains on Rahwana's side, namely Kumbakarna. In the Mahabharata, things look different for the Kurawa. In the Kurawa camp, there are many individuals whom we admire: Resi Bisma and Resi Durna, Adipati Karna,¹⁰ but also Prince Suyudana himself, a noble and impressive warrior. Even among the gods there are some that side with the Kurawa, even Baladewa tends to do so. It is clear that in the Mahabharata, that which is good and that which is bad are not divided in a one-sided manner: there are those who are more and those who are less noble in character, but there is no one who is completely evil, and even the most noble in character have moral weaknesses. In contrast with the Ramayana, the Mahabharata is pluralistic and anti-moralistic. In the Mahabharata, people aren't quickly judged and pigeonholed, but are rather portrayed with all the complexities and ambiguities of their characters. The Mahabharata offers numerous life paths, from the noblest to the most modest, and in every path good and bad are found. In this respect, the Mahabharata is more in line with the realities of human life, where we can never draw a clear line between good and evil people, but where the good and the bad usually coexist in the heart of every person. The Mahabharata is characterized by its tolerance for a diverse set of life paths.

Considering this difference between the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, it is an interesting fact that the Ramayana stories are compelling for the Javanese despite the fact that the Javanese don't really like the black and white outlook on the world that is simplistic and moralistic. The way the Javanese see human life seems to be better accommodated in the Mahabharata, with its refined and sharp perception of the multidimensional sides of human existence, where that which looks simple is really not simple, that which looks good at first glance is not necessarily good, and that which looks bad is not necessarily bad. The Javanese realize through the performances of the Mahabharata that the virtue or depravity of a person cannot easily be determined, because humans often find themselves entangled in all sorts of problems; that one must be cautious when judging other people; that we shouldn't quickly embrace the moralistic brokers who want to divide society into two parts, the good and the bad; that we must be introspective, putting ourselves in the other's place, and thus being aware of our own limitations. For example, perhaps we judge Sengkuni to be deceitful because he uses all his cunning tricks to keep the Kurawa from compromising with the Pandawa. But if we already know that the Kurawa will have to lose - on the side of the Pandawa it is Kresna who frustrates all attempts to make peace with the Kurawa - doesn't the behavior of Sengkuni equally show his loyalty to the Kurawa, and isn't loyalty a sign of the noble warrior?

As a preliminary conclusion, perhaps we can say that, unlike the Ramayana, the Mahabharata portrays humans as complex creatures, Black and white interpretations of them will certainly fall short of their objectives. They call for multiple layers of interpretation that are always deeper than the simple slogans, revealing them as individuals full of riddles who have desires, purposes, and objectives which are nonetheless never free from prior forces that regulate them. The correct human attitude is always self-reflective.¹¹

Pandawa and Kurawa

Another interesting aspect in the Mahabharata is that without the Kurawa, the Pandawa would not be able to exist in this world. The tension and dynamism throughout the Mahabharata is based on the conflict between the Pandawa and the Kurawa. Both sides are needed to guarantee the stability and harmony of the entire cosmos. So unlike in the Ramayana, where one side is annihilated for the other side to be happy, the annihilation of the Kurawa and the creation of a peaceful world without the Kurawa cannot possibly be an appropriate correct goal. Precisely because of this, the stories of the Baratayuda war are full of tragedy and are regarded as potentially dangerous and explosive for society if they are performed in the wrong place or at the wrong time.¹² This is true not only for the deaths of figures on the Pandawa side, such as Abimanyu and Gatotkaca, but just as true for the characters from the Kurawa side such as Karna and Suyudana. In fact, when the war is over, Yudistira, the oldest of the Pandawa brothers, is not happy but instead feels sad. Although in the end Astina¹³ has been won, much of the country has been destroyed. Furthermore, although the Baratayuda war has ended, Aswatama still succeeds in killing all the descendants of the Pandawa with the exception of Parikesit, and in so doing has snatched victory from the hands of the Pandawa.

But the Mahabharata does not end there. There is still an aftermath. What is striking is that there are no episodes that take place after the time of the Baratayuda war. After the death of the ninety nine Kurawa siblings, the vital energy of the Pandawa seems to be gone also. Indeed, they reign for another few years in Astina, but their glory is broken. The Mahabharata ends with the retreat of the Pandawa to Mount Mahameru. On the way, they all die because of their exhaustion, except for Yudistira and his dog. Thus at the end of the great war, even the Pandawa have lost all their vitality. After having destroyed the Kurawa, they are devastated as well. In this context it is interesting to note that in the Kurawasrama, a text from the fifteenth century, the Kurawa are reincarnated after the end of the war and the fighting begins again; because “how is it possible (that the world) can be well ordered when there are no Kurawa and Pandawa? They are the essence of the world.”¹⁴

From this, we can draw the conclusion that the Pandawa cannot survive without the Kurawa. Both are needed to keep the world in balance because it is precisely with this tension that the world is kept in balance. In the world of the Mahabharata, the good and the bad, the right and the left are both needed. This tension has to be maintained, it must not be destroyed by taking out one of the two opposing parties. The tragedy of the Mahabharata lies precisely in the defeat of the Kurawa, because as a result the Pandawa themselves cannot be victorious. In fact, the scenes of the great Baratayuda

war represent the war of the eschaton, similar to the ancient German mythology of “Götterdämmerung”. This is probably why these scenes are rarely performed and are considered to be powerful and dangerous.

In this connection, we can surmise why the main scenes are eventually almost completely pushed out by *carangan*¹⁵ scenes¹⁶ that depart from the classical myth. The ‘carangan’ scenes follow the main theme of the Mahabharata, but they are not related to the original narrative. All of these additional scenes take place in the year in which the Pandawa enjoy control over Amarta without being challenged too much by the Kurawa from Astina. These additional scenes make the conflict between the Pandawa and the Kurawa fade into the background while their main confrontations occur with giant monsters, because occasionally the audience needs to watch scenes that are not as sad and tragic as the main scenes. Here, the audience can enjoy the bravery of their beloved Pandawa without always being reminded of the cosmic conflicts, whose reality they are aware of in their own lives. What is made prominent here is the appearance of the giant monsters. They are not found in the Indian Mahabharata, thus, they have been created in Java and they are most prominent in the *carangan* stories. They are rough and uncivilized creatures from a distant land (the other side of the earth), who usually fight the Pandawa (and sometimes even the Kurawa) and will certainly be killed. They are in stark contrast with the noble warrior.

As far as I know, Brandon¹⁷ was the first one to point out the surprising fact that these giant monsters don’t have ordinary names (their names such as ‘Peg’ or ‘Eggplant’ only characterize their external features; the same external features that appear in different scenes with different names); they don’t even have their own kingdom or a recorded genealogy. Whenever a Kurawa dies, he will be dead for the remainder of the Mahabharata, whereas giants that have been killed in one scene will re-appear in the next one. They do not have an identity or a biography; they are simply empty figures that always do the same thing and always end up being killed. They are not given a place in Javanese mythology, their only functions is to fill out particular scenes in a *wayang* performance.

Since the death of a Kurawa is a moving scene, the main function of the giant monsters is to be killed off after an exciting fight. Apparently the scenes with the giant monsters, just like all of the types of *carangan* scenes, are performed in order to divert audience attention from the dark tragedy of the Mahabharata. By creating the giants as foreign creatures that are not human, who therefore are not part of the Javanese world, and by implication, human culture, they serve the function of showing the virtues of the Javanese. Here, there is no cosmic polarity, as found between the Pandawa and Kurawa. The giants are not part of the Javanese world, and therefore they can be killed without any qualms. Perhaps what is intended here is a symbolic purification of human culture from the chaotic and wild forces of nature.

Reconsiderations

In order to understand this kind of morality, we will experience difficulties if we are committed to general and absolute norms that are valid for everybody at all times, norms that say each person has to respond to his/her responsibilities by orienting his/her behavior according to rules of conduct in agreement with these norms. In the

wayang, we see that every group - the gods, the brahmans, the warriors, the servants, and others - has its own norms. In addition, every individual, whether he be Bima, Kresna, Karna, Bisma, Destarata or Sengkuni, has his or her own duties that have been determined by the gods. All of them play their role, whether it be honorable or not, because this is precisely what maintains the social and cosmic balance. Thus, what is praised for Kresna may be criticized for Sengkuni, and what is allowed for the Pandawa is forbidden for the Kurawa, and each fulfills his responsibility by playing a particular role.

Such a morality on the one hand implies relativity of general norms. It is impossible to measure all all people using the same standards. Of course, this understanding will foster tolerance and self-awareness. Tolerance because people will be willing to accept the fact that things that appear to be strange, extraordinary, uncivilized or forbidden may play a role in the big picture and because of this they have to be accepted and approved. Self-awareness, because in this situation the wisest attitude is not to quickly judge or to correct other people, but instead to be devoted to one's own task. On the other hand, tolerance and self-awareness can be misunderstood as if we were not responsible for the things that happen outside the scope of our own action, making us satisfied to just mind our own business, reluctant to be responsible for a wider domain., reluctant to oppose certain conditions. We are tempted to limit ourselves to the role of the spectator, we let anything happen because it is already on-going and it is none of our business. Perhaps we close our eyes so that we won't need to intervene and we call this self-awareness. Actually, this kind of behavior is not right when seen from the understanding of morality in the *wayang*. For example, Kresna never neglects his responsibilities for the whole, thus it is he who always reminds the Pandawa of their real duties if they get too overwhelmed with their specific problems and considerations. However, people also easily misinterpret the reality of *wayang* stories when they think that the fate and the duties of all figures have already been determined. The truth is that fate simply cannot be known because it is as though it is decided behind the stage. Therefore, the attitude of surrender to all conditions is actually wrong - and is not justified in the *wayang*. It is precisely by assuming responsibility for the things around us that we encounter what has been determined for us, we find our own duties by behaving in a way that is appropriate for whatever it is our responsibilities demand from us.¹⁸ One person who never gets tired of accompanying the Pandawa warriors into their fields of responsibility is Kiai Lurah Semar.

Semar

At first glance, Semar and his children do not play a central role in the *wayang*.¹⁹ The function of the Punakawan²⁰ seems to be limited to clowning around and relieving the tension that climaxes in the *gara-gara*²¹ scenes. However, this is only the first impression. Actually the task of Semar and his children in all scenes is to safely lead the principal warrior through all the dangers until he has reached his destination. Whenever a warrior is in trouble, Semar advises him. Whenever he is too aggressive or emotional, he is slowed down by Semar and prevented from taking steps that haven't been thought through well. Whenever he is sad, the Punakawan will make him happy with their humor. Whenever he feels lonely, they will accompany him. And whenever he is in danger, they will also occasionally save him. As the audience can tell from their

appearance and behavioral characteristics, the Punakawan are the servants of the good warrior, whom they greet in high Javanese. But Semar is simultaneously the guide and the guardian of the warrior whom he leads. Whoever is accompanied by Semar never fails in his duties or loses a battle. That the Pandawa cannot be defeated is actually not because of their own strength, but rather because they are led by Semar. If Semar were to leave the Pandawa, they would certainly be destroyed.

Who, then, is Semar? Even though Semar looks like the common people, all spectators know that he is really a god that cannot be defeated. Semar's power surpasses the power of all other gods. The gods are greeted in low Javanese. Whenever Semar is angry, the gods tremble, and whatever Semar wishes occurs. Every attempt of Batara Guru in one of his incarnations to control the world, in particular to prevent the Baratayuda war and the defeat of the Kurawa, is thwarted by Semar. Semar is the guardian of the Pandawa, and because the Pandawa are the ancestors of the Javanese kings, Semar is actually the caretaker and guardian of the island of Java and the entire world.

Semar's presence adds a new dimension and deepens the ethics of the wayang. As has been noted by Clifford Geertz, the existence of Semar and his children implies a relativization of the values of the aristocratic class regarding the cultured warrior who is noble inside and out,²² as embodied particularly by Arjuna. For the *priyayi*,²³ a refined exterior guarantees that one's internal character is also refined, whereas a coarse exterior is often perceived as a sign that the internal character is also coarse. This assumption is destroyed because it clashes with the reality of Semar. No matter how much people would like to have a refined exterior, in reality for the Javanese there is no direct correlation between the exterior and the interior. Even though the refined characters are usually good from a moral standpoint and the disreputable ones are often portrayed as crude, this model cannot be reversed. As Brandon²⁴ has emphasized, one can never draw a direct conclusion about a person's true nature from his appearance. The physical appearance of Semar is not beautiful, he frequently passes gas, but his interior is very noble, more sensitive, better and more honorable than the good-looking warriors. Another example is Kumbakarna, the younger brother of Rahwana: even though he looks so crude and frightening, he has a noble spirit and a responsible character, and he is much beloved and is thought of as having the spirit of a true warrior. Hence the presence of Semar in the Javanese wayang shows a deep understanding of what really is of value for humanity: it is not one's appearance, carriage or polite manners, nor one's command of the rules of etiquette that determine the degree of one's humanity, but rather it is one's inner nature.

There is another popular view, especially among the *priyayi*, that is demolished by Semar: the greater a person's sacred power, the higher is his position in society. Semar only has the position of a servant, but his sacred powers surpass the power of all the gods, and it is only thanks to his protection that the Pandawa are able to win the Baratayuda war. In this way, Semar also refutes the idea that equates education and wisdom. Semar has no education at all, he only has the intelligence of the common people, yet he is the wisest of all.

In the wayang, Semar and the other Panakawan symbolize the Javanese people. Presumably, with Semar there emerges a deep-seated understanding among the Javanese, even though this understanding is rarely stated, namely that, in contrast to outward

impressions, it is the common people and not the elite of the Sultan's palace that constitute the source of strength, prosperity, and wisdom of Javanese society. Just as the Panakawan are content to become the lowly servants of their illustrious masters, because they know that they are not educated and that their coarse manners sometimes embarrass their masters, so too the Javanese are content with their simple positions. But as the Pandawa are struck by catastrophes whenever they forget how much they are indebted to the Panakawan, so too the Javanese people hope that their leaders do not forget whose sacrifice actually has allowed them to enjoy their positions. This also shows the multi-dimensionality of the conceptualization of the world in Javanese society: from the higher level, everything looks as though it is focused on the Sultan's palace. The king is the administrator of all divine power and the magical center of the entire state, from which peace, security, prosperity, and justice emanate into the villages.²⁵ But from the lower level, all of this is put into perspective: the common people are aware that in the end it is they who actually hold divine and cosmic power, they are the source of all the strength that can be found in society.

In the person of Semar, society expresses its appreciation of a number of important virtues which, in the world of the warriors and noblemen, are sometimes pushed into the background, but which mean a lot in the lives of the peasants in the villages, in their struggles with nature, in their jointly bearing the burdens of natural disasters, and in their celebrations of feasts: the virtues of helping each other, humanitarian behavior, generosity, loyalty when offering services without expecting anything in return. These are the values of a wise life. Semar embodies perfectly the attitudes of *sepi ing pamrih* and *ramai ing gawe*.²⁶ As a servant, he is completely free of self-interest, his whole life is dedicated to his duty, which is to accompany and to protect the Pandawa on their journeys. Semar does not expect anything in return, and he is content to remain in the background and along the way to be considered stupid by various people. His loyalty and dedication are unlimited. He calmly performs his dharma, which is to be a loyal servant, and he is content with his social position, ensuring harmony in the entire cosmos, as it becomes visible and concrete in every wayang performance. Whenever the *Punakawan* appear during a *gara-gara* scene, the troubled world becomes calm again.

There is no doubt that Semar's role promotes respect for that which looks modest, ludicrous, or that which can be ignored by official authorities. This underlines what has already been said about the multi-dimensionality of the Javanese philosophy of life. Even though the Javanese admire and cultivate that which is noble and refined, they also hope for the divine, the truly powerful which may appear in strange or even grotesque forms, which we see, for example, with Narada.

There is still another distinctive aspect of Semar that completes the ethics of the *wayang*. In the Javanese tradition, a person achieves perfection and holiness through meditation and asceticism, as we observe in the Arjuna Wiwaha story. By following this path, humans are expected to probe the depths of themselves, and by so doing obtain *ngelmu makrifat kasampurnaning ngaurip*,²⁷ and consequently achieve *manunggaling kawula gusti*,²⁸ a state in which both servant and master vanish so a level can be reached about which we can say "*Ingsung Dzating Gusti kang Asifat Esa, angliputi ing kawulaningsung, tunggal dadi sakahanan, sampurna saka ing kodritangsun*".^{29,30} The mystical endeavor seems to be based on the strength of humans alone (even though in the story of Dewaruci, Bima only achieves *manunggaling kawula gusti* with the help of

the teacher, Dewaruci.)³¹ Who knows if the endeavor will be successful or not, yet it seems that it cannot be denied that the endeavor carries with it the danger of arrogance and unreasonable self-confidence. Semar offers a very different emphasis. Because in the end the noble warriors such as Arjuna, win, not because of their own sacred powers, but rather because they are accompanied by their guardian Kiai Lurah Semar. Thus, the audience members realize that in reality we need a guardian on our life journey. It is not our own strength that saves us and brings us closer to God, but rather the guidance that comes from God himself. We do not need to search our own nature for strength that really - and deep down we know this - we do not possess. It is only then when we admit that on our own, based on our own strength, we are completely powerless, that we can be helped and guided.

Thus, the figure of Semar can help us destroy the danger of elitism in the endeavor of finding unity with God based on our own strength. Semar gives rise to the awareness that all of us are actually weak and need protection - haven't we always felt this way deep down? - that we need each other, that we cannot force God, but that we can ask for his protection and guidance. We are aware that our strength is not only derived from ourselves, that we both need and are needed by one another, that without God's guidance we would lose our way, but that guidance can be expected. The understanding that is expressed in the figure of Semar is an important supplement in the development of truly humane attitudes.

Endnotes

¹The Javanese word *wayang*, or also *bayang*, means shadow, since the shadow of the puppets are cast on a screen in the performance. *Kulit* means leather, the material from which puppets in the shadow puppet theater are made.

²New Order economic policies substantially improved the provision of basic material needs for a large proportion of the Indonesian population and facilitated the emergence of an affluent urban middle class. The New Order presented itself as saving Indonesia from the Communist threat and continued to victimize those who were associated with communism. New Order political rhetoric furthermore emphasized stability as a special feature of its rule. Dissent was discouraged and often criminalized (see Heryanto 2006).

³From Suharto's SUPERSEMAR to the Pandawa taxi group, figures from the *wayang* are meant to convey legitimacy and popularity.

⁴In the following, all footnotes added by the translator will be marked as such. Unmarked footnotes are part of Magnis Suseno's original piece.

⁵The Ramayana and the Mahabharata referred to in this essay are always the forms found in the traditional Javanese wayang, rather than their original Indian versions.

⁶All Javanese phrases, many of which have proverbial status, will remain untranslated in the main text and translated or explained in the footnotes. *Sepi ing pamrih* is a well-known Javanese phrase expressing a virtue that can be translated as unselfish or disinterested, or, more literally, as slow in expecting rewards. [Transl.]

⁷If I were to rewrite this piece, my analysis of the Ramayana would be more carefully worded. In the Ramayana, there are more complex issues: for example the relationship between Rama and Lesmana, Rama's demand of Sinta's trial by fire (in the Indian Ramayana there is no happy end), etc.

⁸Another expression describing a virtuous person, *berbudi luhur* means having a noble spirit or a magnanimous personality. [Transl.]

⁹Brandon, 70.

¹⁰Resi and Adipati are titles given to holy people or saints, and leaders respectively. [Transl.]

¹¹G.J. Resink ("From the Old Mahabharata - to the New Ramayana-Order", in: *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land en Volkenkunde*, 131 (1975), 213-235) says that during the New Order, the Ramayana appeared to be more popular than the Mahabharata. For me, this raises the question does this betray a tendency to look at society in a black-and-white fashion, all too easily identifying oneself with Rama or with the good side, in order to pigeonhole anyone who doesn't share our opinion as on the wrong side? So in this manner we become immune to criticism that even we are not always pure, holy, and right? If the tendency observed by Resink is indeed true, there is not one correct destination for the direction of the development of public awareness. In my opinion, precisely in our day and age, we shouldn't abandon the open-minded perspective of Indonesian culture that is always ready to relativize the opposition between good and evil and thereby to show itself willing to adopt an attitude that is open, multidimensional, and tolerant.

¹²See Sri Mulyono 1975, 240 f.: for examples, see M. Hood 1963: "The Enduring Tradition: Music and Theater in Java and Bali", in R.T. McVey (ed.) 1967, *Indonesia*, New Haven, Conn., 444 f.; N. Mulder 1978, *Mysticism and Everyday Life in Contemporary Java, Cultural Persistence and Change*, Singapore, 32.

¹³Astina is the land that is contested in the Baratayuda, while Amarta is the home of the Pandawa brothers. [Transl.]

¹⁴W. Stöhr/P. Zoetmulder 1965, *Die Hochreligionen Indonesiens*, Stuttgart, 278.

¹⁵*Carangan* scenes or "branch"-scenes are the scenes that, unlike the *pokok* or "trunk"-scenes, were not originally part of the epic and are made up by the puppeteer. [Transl.]

¹⁶Of the 149 scenes from the Pandawa cycle mentioned by J. Kats (*Het Javaansche tooneel*, Weltevreden 1923, 446) only 32 belong to the trunk scenes, whereas 94 other scenes are later additions, Brandon 12.

¹⁷Brandon 27-29.

¹⁸Regarding this problem, see also Mulyono 1979, 139-156.

¹⁹The following considerations are greatly indebted to the analysis of Poedjawijatna 1975, 53 f. and Sri Mulyono 1978. In particular this paragraph and the following one are direct quotations from a work of mine that was published in the journal *Orientasi. Pustaka Filsafat dan Teologi*, XII (1980), p. 103.

²⁰The *Punakawan* are Semar and his adopted sons Gareng and Petruk, who are sometimes joined by a third adopted son, Bagong. [Transl.]

²¹A *gara-gara* is a moment of chaos and turmoil in the *wayang*, represented by the trembling of mountains. [Transl.]

²²C. Geertz 1969, *The Religion of Java*, 275-278.

²³The *priyayi* are the traditional cultured elite of Java that can often be found in the proximity of the Sultan's palace. [Transl.]

²⁴Brandon, 41.

²⁵See R. Heine-Geldern 1963, *Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia*, Ithaca, N.Y.; Moertono Soemarsaid 1968, *State and Statecraft in Old Java: A Study of*

the Later Mataram Period, 16th to 19th Century, Ithaca, N.Y.; B.R.O'G. Anderson, "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture", in: C. Holt (ed.) 1972, *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1-69.

²⁶As indicated above, *sepi ing pamrih* means unselfish. The expression *sepi ing pamrih* is often followed or preceded by *ramai ing gawe*, a virtue that is complementary to unselfishness in Java, and which can be translated as being busily engaged in one's designated task or duty. [Transl.]

²⁷*Ngelmu makrifat kasampurnaning ngaurip* is the knowledge, in particular the mystical knowledge, that perfects life. [Transl.]

²⁸In this context, *manunggaling kawula gusti* or the unification of master and servant is the goal of mystical monism, in which the identity between believer and God is realized. [Transl.]

²⁹This sentence translates from the Javanese as follows: I am the essence of the One God, everything is and will be one with me, perfect according to my nature. [Transl.]

³⁰R. Ng. Ranggawarsita 1966, *Wirid Hidajat-Djati*, kabangun R. Tanojo, Surabaya, 12.

³¹See J.B. Banawiratma 1977, *Yesus Sang Guru, Pertemuan Kejawen dengan Injil*, Yogyakarta, 55 f.

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interest.

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