

THE PERENNIAL APPEAL OF WAYANG

Shadow-Theatre of Java

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Why does *Wayang* survive? Several reasons can be put forward—because of its aesthetic appeal; because of its recreational value; because of its traditional popularity. All contain elements of truth. Nearer to the heart of the matter is, probably, because *Wayang* mirrors the eternal complexities of human life. It provides national or cultural symbols which are still very much alive for Javanese society and command its allegiance. *Wayang* attempts to explain the universe. Based on the epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, it portrays man's relationship to the natural and to the supernatural orders, to himself and to his fellow men. It has no message; it does not claim to throw the audience into a metaphysical ecstasy; it does not propose to change the world; nor does it hold out a hope of a perfect society. It presents human life in a state of inexorable flux; it portrays a "stable world based on conflict."¹ It creates a tension between permanence and impermanence. As Andersen asks: "If a wheel spins eternally on a fixed axis, is it changing or unchanged?"²

Since *Wayang* portrays human life, it is only natural that there is a vast variety in the *dramatis personae*. In this multiplicity, however, can be bound a clearly marked dichotomy. There is a fundamental division between *Sepuh* and *Nem* (Old and Young) and Kurawa and Pandawa. This can be seen in terms of the basic dualities in the world: male and female; sun and earth; night and day. Both are equally important. Among the dualities, that of good and evil, has been deliberately left out. In *Wayang* philosophy, there cannot be two absolutes of good and evil. They are relative. This concept is underlined by the division on the *Wayang* screen or *kelir*. The conflict between Kurawas and the Pandawas is often taken as a conflict between Evil and Good. This is a superficial interpretation because the left and right division is not absolute. It depends on whether one is watching the puppets or their shadows, left becomes right and right left—it is all in the eye of the beholder.

Another important idea for the understanding of *Wayang* and of Javanese society is the concept of a hierarchical social order. Unlike India, there was no caste system in Java, but the fundamental idea of the Indian caste system with emphasis on function rather than on birth, took firm root in Java. Each section of society has a specific function to perform and is dependent on another for its well being. The head is the king who communicates with the supernatural powers and ensures their blessings for his people; the *brahmanas* perform the rituals and transmit culture to the next generation; the *satryas* are the rulers and the warriors; the traders maintain the economic prosperity; and the artisans construct the material apparatus needed for society.

From the concept of function and interdependence emerges the idea of morality. A man who does his duties to the best of his abilities in his section of society is admirable. A trader, for example who leads a life of asceticism appropriate to a *brahmuna* is not admirable in spite of all the knowledge he may gain. It would be much better for him to be a good trader than to try to do the work of a *brahmuna*. The final goal of human life is absorption into the Infinite. This is possible by acquitting oneself appropriately in the "rank" assigned to oneself.

These two concepts—there being no absolute good or evil, and the importance of "appropriate" behaviour in one's social order—provide a sumptuous array of characters; a wide variety of psychological contrasts; and situation of unmatchable moral pregnancy.

Let us take one example. Wibisana, Rahwana's brother, is considered a wise man, a mystic searching for union with god, symbolized by Rama Wijaya. Superficially, Rama seems to be an ordinary human being but he possesses the powerful weapon, Gunawijaya, the destroyer of passions. He is the incarnation of Wisnu, the source of life. Wibisana tries to persuade Rahwana not to fight with Rama and to return Sita. He feels that only a *satrya* who is right and just can win the war. Rahwana would undoubtedly lose and only succeed in getting notoriety. Wibisana is only abused by Rahwana for his pains. Knowing the danger of annoying his brother, Wibisana speedily joins the forces of Rama.

Now let us consider the example of Kumbakarna. Like Wibisana, he also advises Rahwana against fighting with Rama. He is completely frank with his brother and tells him in no uncertain terms that he considers his brother's action as arrogant, foolhardy and sinful. In spite of this he fights on Rahwana's side and meets a painful death because of his loyalty to his country and to his ancestors.

The question arises, who is right and who is wrong between Wibisana

and Kumbakarna. Both paths seem equally heroic. The choice is difficult. Choosing to serve one's country means being disloyal to truth and being loyal to truth means betraying one's country. Of course, strictly speaking Wibisana makes the right choice—he chooses absolute right over the lesser virtue of defending his country—but, nevertheless, the dilemma is an intense one. This however, is life—full of hesitations, conflicting loyalties and dreadful decisions and this is what *Wayang* seeks to portray.

Wayang, however, is changing like everything else. With the breakdown of the hierarchical system, the rise of commercial urbanism, and with emphasis on nationalism the old values are being threatened. This, coupled with a faster pace of life, is turning *Wayang* into mere entertainment from education. Further, the majority among the audience today are not interested in facing the complex moral problems that *Wayang* presents. They, therefore, simplify the conflict presented as one between Good and Evil.

Second, the influence of cinema and a liking for the sensational often tends to reduce a *Wayang* performance to a series of battle scenes interlinked with banal jokes and shoddy sentimentalism. This influence is also seen in the attempt to shorten the traditional night-long performance into two or three hours.

Third, there is an increasing criticism of the *dalang's* philosophizing. His philosophy, in any case, is often considered feudal and out of date. The same psychology can be seen in attempts to rationalise sexual relations according to the prevalent sexual ethics and to explain away the supernatural elements with pseudo-scientific explanations.

Fourth, the one truly contemporary element of *Wayang*—its anachronistic humour with political overtones has been progressively done away with because of censorship. The result is naturally a deterioration and a hypersensitive response to healthy criticism.

Fifth, the changing values of society are also bringing about a change in the attitude towards the various *Wayang* heroes. Judistira's aloof meditateness is held less and less in esteem. Arjuna's sexual prowess is emphasized. Kresna's diplomacy is taken in isolation and regarded as a justification for Machievellism. Kumbakarna's patriotism is often seen as more heroic than Wibisana's piety which is considered as suspect.

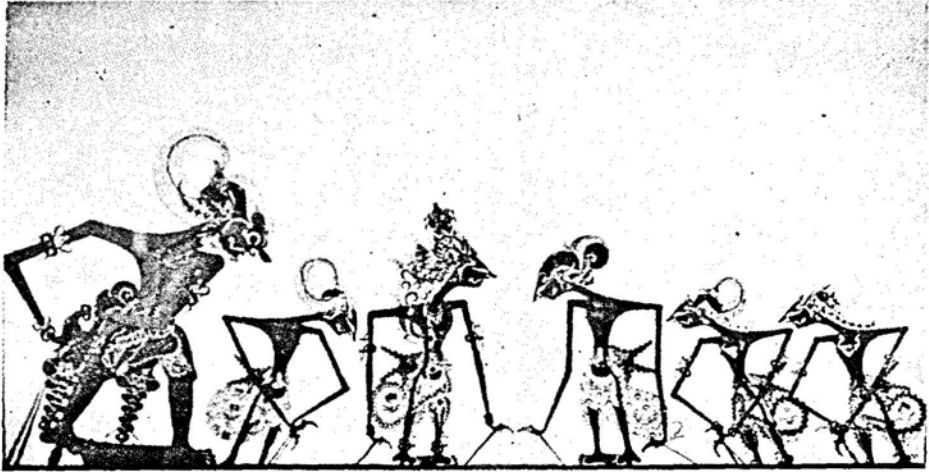
The question arises, in spite of the changing values, will *Wayang* survive? The answer is yes. Like Tragedy, *Wayang* portrays human dilemmas involving conflicting loyalties. Choice is an inextricable part of the human

life and it is questions of "choice" that *Wayang* embraces. The superficial aspects may change but the underlying fundamental concept will not.

NOTES

1. Quoted by Benedict R.O.G Anderson in his monograph *Mythology And the Tolerance of the Javanese*. Submitted to Coevell University, Ithaca, New York, 1965 p. 5,
2. Ibid; p. 6.

Krishna and the five Pandavas



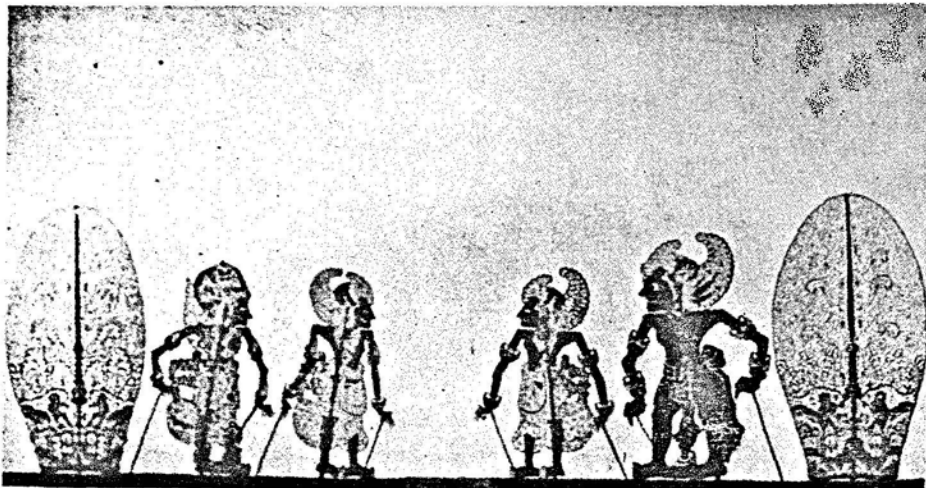
Krishna, Baladeva and the young Pandavas



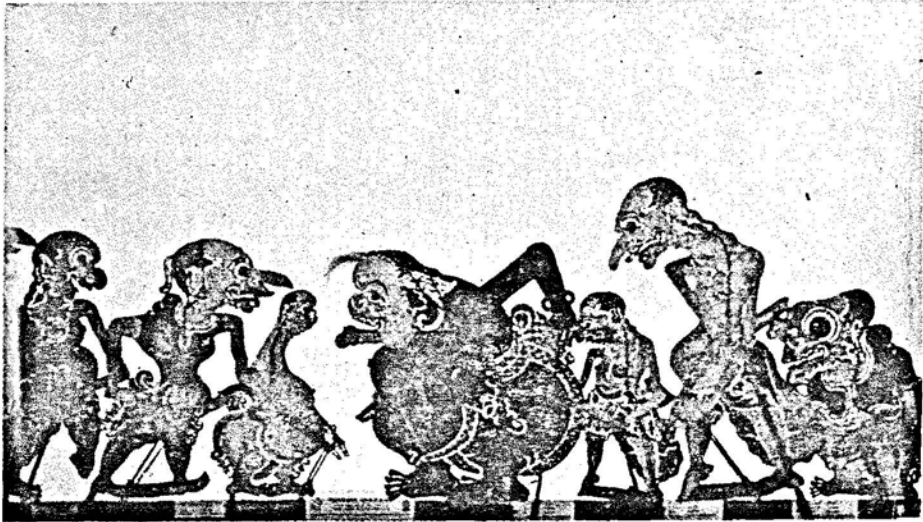
Ram, Sita, Sesmana and Hanuman



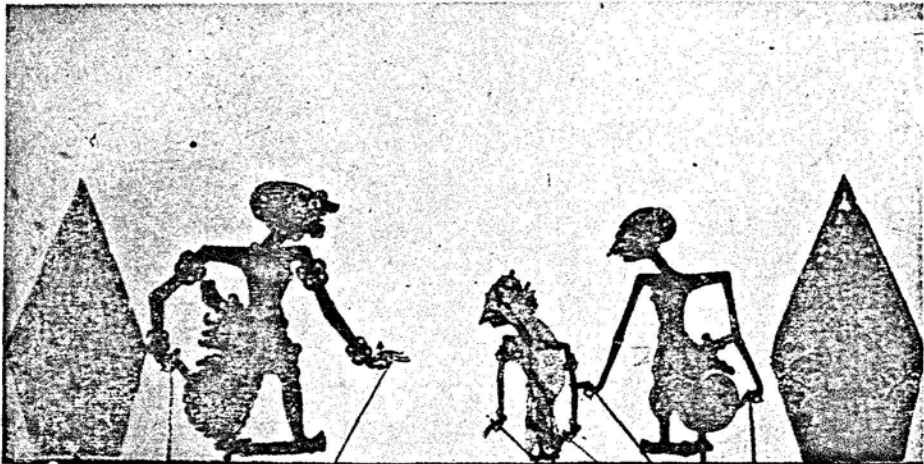
Krishna, Arjuna, Yudhistir and Bhima

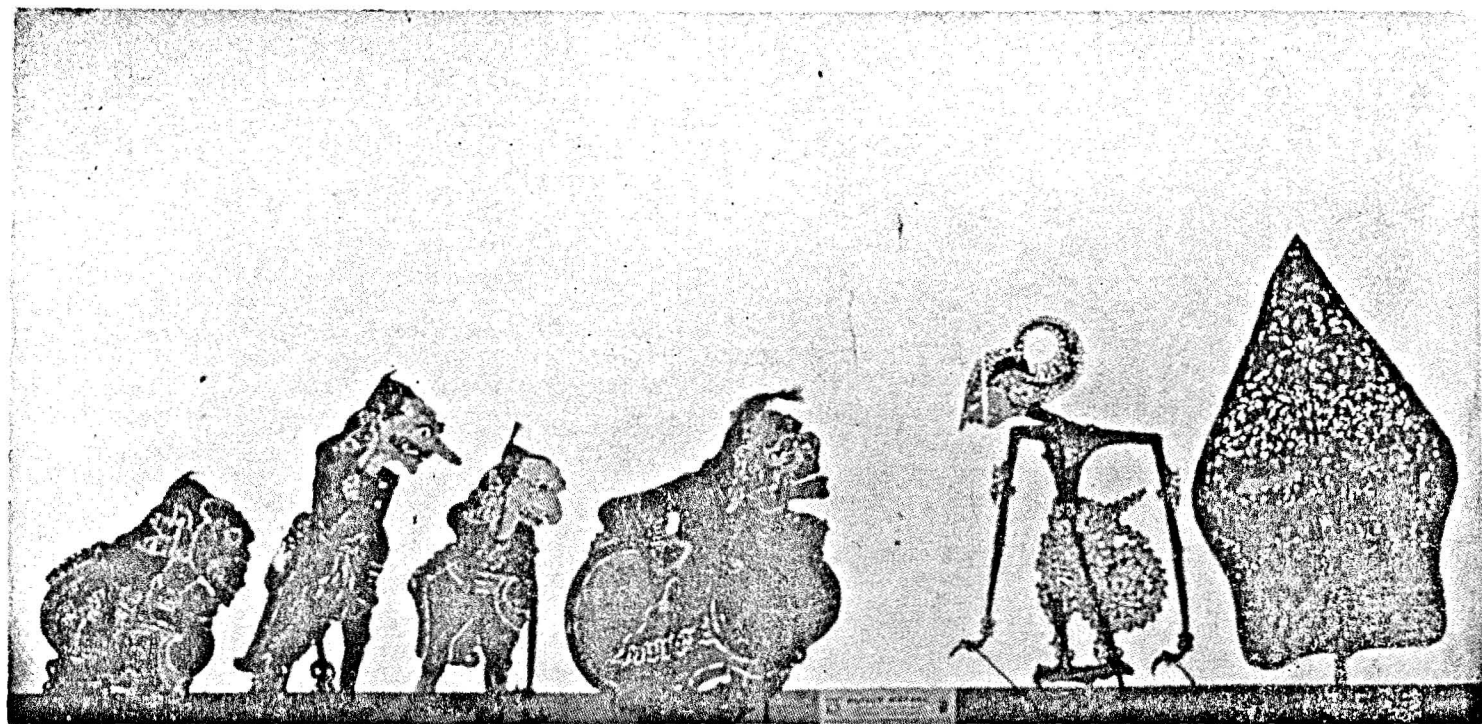


The 'Comic Servants . Wali Sanga



Wayang Kulit susale from the Isle of Sombole based on Islamic Stories—King, Queen and Prime Minister





Four Clowns with Arjuna