

Cross cultural research: experiences in sundanese *wayang golek* of West Java

Kathy Foley

University of California Santa Cruz (USA)

Abstract: Studying the performing art of *wayang golek* in the late 1970s required learning how to learn a complex art in a local language from village practitioners whose practice did not correspond to the model expounded by the local academic. Language, music, culture, dance, spiritual dimensions, and complex stories needed to be absorbed and became building blocks toward performing this rich art of the Sundanese dalang of West Java.

Keywords: Wayang Golek. Sundanese rod puppetry. Dalang.

At twenty-three I encountered Sundanese *wayang golek*, a rod puppet genre of West Java through a summer program financed by a California philanthropist, Samuel Scripps. Enamored of South and Southeast Asian arts, Scripps funded Center for World Music, a summer school program where major Asian artists taught each class. Dalang Rutjita was a village-based carving master from West Java in Indonesia who dazzled us, his five students, with the lifelike dance of his carefully carved figures. He spoke no English, and just a bit of Dutch. Luckily there was a Dutch student (Klara Braekel) who was fluent in Indonesian and she translated as we worked that summer of 1974, scene by scene, through a single *lakon* (play). We tried to make our puppets emulate the walks specific to each character type (refined, semi-refined, strong, demon). We listened to Pak Rutjita's mood songs (*kekawen*). It was evident to all that this was a rich art. Returning to the University of Massachusetts-Amherst where I was doing an MFA, I did a bibliographic search and found one short article in Dutch and one 1947 English book, translation of a Swedish work by the artist Tyra de Kleen. She had seen *wayang golek* briefly at a tea plantation while traveling in Java in the early twentieth century. Her images were lovely, but the information was minimal.

With the lack of writing on this genre in European languages in the 1970s,¹ I thought it would be a good topic for a PhD thesis. I naively thought

¹ As I finished my dissertation (1979), two related works were published by collectors that dealt with iconography (See Seltmann and Gamper 1980; Buurmann 1980). Subsequently Andrew Weintraub (2004) has published on the musical aspects of *wayang golek* and recently French anthropologist Sarah Andrieu (2012) has published her dissertation. My dissertation (1979) is something which these others have now used. It deals in greater detail with theatre/narrative aspects of the art.

that writing about something no one had written on was ideal. In retrospect I realize that this shows my lack of experience: having materials already created and organized by researchers who went before you saves enormous amounts of time and energy. Becoming part of a larger group discourse makes doing the research and sharing it more understandable. But I, being young and weary of long hours in libraries, selected a genre in a language and culture that I did not know. I had also studied Balinese *wayang kulit* shadow puppetry that 1974 summer, but I left it to Dr. Frits de Boer from Wesleyan University and Larry Reed a film maker who were studying with my same teacher, Suman-dhi; they had started before me and have subsequently have contributed to our understanding of that art. I saw that Javanese *wayang kulit* already had a long literature starting with the Dutch in the late 19th century, and a growing group of American performers and scholars who were documenting it (Mark Hoffman and Roger Long were performing as an American *dalang* in Javanese style, Benedict Anderson (1965) along with James Bandon (1970) who was my dissertation advisor, had published on this complex Central Javanese court tradition. I thought, choosing *wayang golek*, I could do something that had not been done, and I do not regret my choice.

I tried to prepare: I leaned Indonesian and went to classes in Javanese *gamelan* music and dance at the University of Hawai'i with ethnomusicologist Hardjo Susilo. I studied Javanese *wayang* in Hawai'i with Roger Long. Then I was off to West Java hoping to focus on the clown.² While those who do anthropological research are usually primed to hire a research assistant to ease their interface with language and culture, I had been trained only in the arts and accustomed to learning by doing the practice. I was placed in a class that was being developed on *wayang golek* at a High School of the Arts (Sekolah Menengah Karawitan) in Bandung. But I quickly realized that, due to the politics of education, *dalang* (puppetmasters)—who in that period had rarely studied past middle school—were not considered "educated" and therefore were not hired to teach regularly at the school. The people who were teaching were not trained *dalang* and, since much of their own education had come from Central Javanese teachers, they did not reflect Sundanese *wayang golek* practice in any depth, but often repeated Central Javanese truisms. Since a successful puppeteer could make in a single night what a teacher might over five months, no successful *dalang* would have the time or energy to actually

² As I realized this would mean I was writing about political critique against President Suharto's New Order as delivered by this character and my material might endanger puppeteers in a politically fragile period, I shifted the focus of my writing.

teach at a school or really give regular private lessons; major *dalang* at that time performed 8-hours a night and almost every night.

Things were further complicated by the fact that *wayang* is an art which evolved concepts of secrecy. This culture of reticence comes from a variety of sources—tantric traditions of the arts, personal protection, political complications, etc. In part it is designed to keep power (which is both ritual and economic) in families. For example one of the individuals who eventually became my teacher (Abah Abeng Sunarya) claimed to have 300 students—however it was clear that important mantra for rituals (*ruwatan*³ or "making safe" performances) were shared only with sons. And he differentiated among his sons. His eldest son Ade whose temperament he considered steady and serious was given more. Some of his younger sons (then Asep Sunandar and Iden Subasrana) only worked with his actual mantra book when they sat down with me in 1978 after their father decided to share some (not all) of these texts which he generally read *sotto voce* during a performance.

There is more to this tradition of "secrecy" which I believe links to many of the patterns of teacher (*guru*)-student (*murid*, *siswa*) relationships that are part of Asian traditional performance genres and linked to tantric traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, or mystical (Sufi) strains of Islam. These patterns of secrecy are found in puppetry, dance and music from Japanese *bunraku* and *noh*, to Indian *tolpavakuttu* (leather puppets) and *kathakali* in Kerala. It certainly exists in Indonesian *wayang* (puppetry) and *topen g* (mask dance). In such arts the expectation is that the student must be hyper-active in seeking, intuiting, watching. When the student knows to ask the right questions, the teacher is then there to affirm if the student is on the right track. Much of this sense of seeking is built into *wayang golek*. *Dalang* talk about through the 5 "S"s "sinder (speaking obliquely when criticizing), *silib* (analogy), *siloka* (metaphor), *sasmita* (sign), and *simbul* (symbol). The *dalang* reveals all, but only the initiated/perceptive fully receive. Indeed indirection is part of politeness and good deportment in Sundanese thinking. Messages are delivered obliquely. Movement is beautiful when it is curved. The only thing that moves in straight lines is demons. The American custom of looking people directly in the eye and speaking without circumlocution or giving knowledge directly to people who are unprepared to understand is *kasar* (rough, low class). In *wayang* only the ogres and sometimes the clowns speak and act straightforwardly. Real knowledge is more nuanced and refined (*alus*) people move and communicate through indirection. Knowledge

³ See my translation of a *ruwatan* (Foley 2001) and discussion of the story (Foley 2006) for more information on this performance.

that is easy is worth little. Additionally, during the Suharto period (1965-98) *dalang* were especially careful, since many puppetmasters and other artists had been killed, arrested, or banned from performance due to their having been somehow associated with the Indonesian communist party (PKI) prior to 1965, a party that was actually often favored by the previous government. *Dalang* protected knowledge and themselves.

Nor were the written materials without problems. This was an oral tradition. While the government academy was busy printing lists of characters and potential *lakon* (stories) for *wayang*, their material which was part of their academic training and which they used for advancement within the educational structure through publications, needed to be used with care since it was often a reworking of teaching materials or ideas from Central Java, and did not correspond to the practice of the Sundanese puppeteers I was seeing. For example, the academic literature would talk about "*patet*" (changing the dominant note on which songs started) as the evening progressed in a tri-partite structure. This modal change is part of Central Java's *wayang*, but was not practiced in Sunda and the *dalang* I knew did not remember it ever being used. However, the academic discussions pretended it was standard practice. I realized the literature continually needed to be tested against practice.

I had much to learn. Any local who came to study *wayang* should already be well versed in music of the *gamelan* (gong chime orchestra), and able to dance with an understanding of how the drumbeats interfaced with the movement of dancer/puppet. They would have internalized cues for starting and stopping the orchestra. Additionally one should have some affinity with Old Javanese (Kawi), which often supplied the root words of lyrics that were used in the mantra that were felt to have the most ritual potency. *Dalang* themselves do not understand these passages fully and have learned from hearing words frequently in performance. Very few will attempt a direct translation of these important passages, though sometimes they will give approximations as they understand them. And of course I soon realized that Sundanese language was the key: if I only used Indonesian, the national language, I would never come near.

Hence, as a young researcher I found myself in a complex form with a tradition of secret knowledge, which seldom corresponded exactly to what the literature about it said. It was an art with a huge complexity of repertoire performed in a time of changing practices with modernization and political complexity. And it was in a language I did not know.

What to do: I moved as soon as I could from the city where people spoke primarily Indonesian to the village where everyone spoke Sundanese. I found lessons that missionaries had developed started learning the language. I worked

daily with a woman, abandon when her husband took a second wife, as my language teacher and laboriously, word-by-word, we translated Sundanese books on puppetry, transcribed and translated performances I taped. There were no Sundanese-English dictionaries, so I went from Sundanese to Indonesian and then to English. I took up dance lessons, in hopes that, by doing the moves in my own body, I could figure how to translate them to the puppet and then analyze them. I arranged to study *wayang cepak* (an unpopular and hence rarely performed genre) with Dalang Otong Rasta. Because of the "unpopular" nature of his art, he had time to give private lessons and willingness to share information (which he felt might otherwise vanish for lack of interested students).

I gained insights that could also be translated over to the more popular *wayang golek purwa*. In all these endeavors, I tried to give teachers a fee that was not profligate but was generous, my student stipend was often more than villagers normally earned. I also tried to show the loyalty teachers expected. This loyalty and trustworthiness need to be displayed and the obligation toward the *guru* is a lifelong commitment. You only pay it back by teaching someone else. I found it important to explain to teachers that I would remain respectful, but, for the sake of understanding the big picture, I would need to see performances by other *dalang* and do interviews with them. Of course such behavior is not normally valued in *aguru-murid* relationship. But, as an international researcher, I was lucky that my teachers gave me latitude.

When I was not doing lessons, I was travelling with the puppet troupes all over West Java in the large trucks sent for the troupe. I travelled mostly with the troupe of an emerging dalang Asep Sunandar Sunarya (1955-2014). He was soon to become a "superstar" dalang, and today many Youtube videos document his shows with, for example, "Wayang Golek Bobordoran [Comedy of] Asep Sunandar Sunarya-Cepot Cawokah" having, 981, 078 hits by Jan. 4, 2016. But at that time was just emerging. The musicians would teach me a song enroute to a performance and then when the clown scene came that night I would be "on call" to sing. I sat on the stage next to the female singers, sometimes played gong (as troupe members teasingly tried to get me to hit it at the wrong time), sang or chatted with the puppets as needed in clown scene. Because I was at that time a student at the University of Hawai'i a hula chant was soon part of the show. I soon found myself receiving fan mail from across West Java with certain songs regularly requested as part of my "specialty" (*kostim*).

Going to performances was usually an all day and all night activity. With an afternoon show by an apprentice 2 pm-5 pm and then the main event, starting at 9 pm-5 am. I took notes on about a hundred shows, saw puppetry festivals, did formal interviews with about ninety performers, critics, and cultural officials

hoping that this would widen my understanding past the particularities of my teachers of *wayang golek cepak* (Dalang Otong Rasta) and *wayang golek purwa* (Abah Abeng Sunarya). I read what I could find and tested it against practices and listened to many radio broadcasts and many audio cassettes of *wayang golek* shows. Before I left Indonesia I did a performance of *wayang golek cepak* for a circumcision ceremony that my teacher Dalang Otong Rasta was having for his family. The audience was strangely silent to hear my performance in Sundanese. The next day as I drove off on my motorcycle all the children were yelling: "Ibu Dalang (Mrs. Dalang)! Ibu Dalang!"

I read what I could find and tested it against practices and listened to many radio broadcasts and many audio cassettes of *wayang golek* shows. Before I left Indonesia I did a performance of *wayang golek cepak* for a circumcision ceremony that my teacher Dalang Otong Rasta was having for his family. The audience was strangely silent to hear my performance in Sundanese. The next day as I drove off on my motorcycle all the children were yelling: "Ibu Dalang (Mrs. Dalang)! Ibu Dalang!"

The final feedback was: "Not bad for a woman." I realized that while I thought that people would comment that I was a foreigner, the fact that I was female performing *wayang golek* was the greatest oddity.

I have continued to visit West Java and perform and write on this important genre as well as for other types of Asian puppetry. I perform with Sundanese or American musicians in Sundanese style when an Anglophone dalang is needed⁴. More recently I have done research on Wayang Kelantan on the east coast of Malaysia, a genre that has been banned by the local Islamist government since 1991 as "*syrik*" (worshipping a divinity other than Allah) because of some of its animistic opening ceremony and the use of characters from the *Ramayana*.

My advice for researchers working cross-culturally is to prepare yourself in advance as best you can, but be ready to throw away your expectations as you reach your research site. What the books say may be written by people who do not really know your genre/subject so check that the practice actually does correspond. Do not expect teachers to know how to teach you their art: you do not have the background to ask normal questions. You must teach yourself to hear (the method in the music, the subtext of what your teacher says, and the unstated intents of what is going on in the show), to see (how the puppet dance is broken down, who the particular figures signify, what are the exoteric

⁴ See for example a performance from the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. in 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDiH8ktqZu8>

and even the esoteric meanings), and to understand (political, social, material, and spiritual dynamics). Take careful notes, but leave your real analysis in abeyance until you know the politics, cultural, and class dynamics. Some topics may be impossible to approach until you are part of the family and some answers may require decades to come forth. Only after the fall of President Suharto in 1998 were some of my informants comfortable talk about issues of the communist purges of 1965 or their having Chinese blood. And even now those conversations can be tense.

Do whatever you can. But realize understanding another culture is rather like beginning as a baby again—learning to talk, dance, hear, and see differently. Daily practice and discipline help. Theory can help eventual analysis—but often the theories generated by the Judeo-Christian frame or the secular Western university do not easily apply to the realities of mystical Islam or a village culture on the other side of the globe. Let theory rise from and be linked to the puppet/people practice.

As I stayed longer in Sunda people would start realize I could indeed "eat rice", they would say approvingly with time that my skin was getting darker and my nose flatter. Fellow apprentice *dalang* advised me to "sleep little, fast often, and meditate" to comprehend the art—these are part of the spiritual regimen for an apprentice puppeteer. Even today, as I think about the art that dictum holds for getting to the core of *wayang* or maybe any research topic. You must open everything—your eyes, ears, senses, heart, mind. If you can do that, you start to understand. And by the time you have finished, you will find this is no longer the art of the "Other", it has remade into someone different—a *dalang*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ANDRIEU, Sarah Anais. *Corps de bois Souffle Huamain: Le Theatre de Marionnettes Wayang Golek de Java Ouest*. Rennes: Press Universitaires, 2012.
- ANDERSON, Benedict O. 1965. *Mythology and Tolerance of the Javanese*. Ithaca: Cornell [Modern Indonesia Project], 1965.
- BRANDON, James R. *On the Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970.
- BUURMAN, Peter. *Wayang Golek: De Fascinerende wereld van het klassieke West-Javaanise poppenspel*. Alphen an Rhein: Sijthoffthe, 1980.
- BUURMAN, Peter. *Wayang Golek: Entrancing World of Javanese Puppet Theatre*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- De KLEEN, Tyra. *Wayang (Javanese Theatre)*. 2nd ed. Stockholm: Gothia, 1947 [1937, in Swedish].

- FOLEY, Kathy. *Wayang Golek Sunda: Rod Puppet Theatre of West Java*. PhD, Univ. of Hawai'i, 1979.
- FOLEY, Kathy, The Origin of Kala: A Sundanese Wayang Golek Purwa Play by Abah Sunarya and Gamelan Giri Harja I *Asian Theatre Journal* 18, 1 (Spring 2001):1-58 DOI: 10.1353/atj.2001.0002.
- FOLEY, Kathy. Mastering the Macrocosm: Indonesian Wayang and the Origin of Kala. In *Puck N. 14 - Les mythes de la marionnette*. Charleville-Mézières: Institut Internationale de la Marionnette, 2006.
- WEINTRAUB, Andrew. *Power Plays: Wayang Golek Puppet Theater of West Java*. Athens: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 2004.
- SELTMANN, Friedrich and Werner GAMPER. *Stabpuppenspiel auf Java: Wayang Golek*. Zurich: no publisher, 1980.