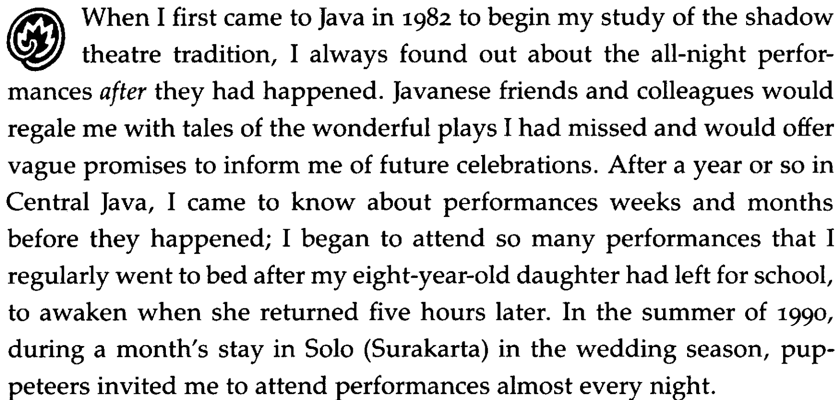
Preface



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-

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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.[1] 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.[2]

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).

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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.[3] 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).

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creating historically legitimate oral documents as an end in itself.[4] 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.[5] 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).

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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

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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.[6] 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.[7]

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.[8] 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 Ramayama 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.

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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[9] 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.

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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.

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