

Dancing as Self-Othering - 1: Javanese Wayang Kulit

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Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, Unity in Diversity
-- Indonesia's motto

There is nothing to a shadow. Its being is in its nothingness. A shadow is an absence. Yet we can see it as surely as we can feel the wind.

Java, in the heart of Indonesia, has a fascinating complex of cultures whose ancient shadow play, *wayang kulit*, is the prototype for its life and arts including court-supported classical dancing. Dancing and shadow theatre are based on and illustrate a Javanese philosophy of body and performance.

Java was populated for thousands of years by tribal peoples before Indian influence began to be felt in the eighth and ninth centuries of this era. The extent of Indian influence is evident in the grandness of the religious structures that were built in south central Java during that time. Near present day Jogjakarta, the Hindu Sanjaya dynasty built the vast temple complex, Prambanan, comprised of one hundred fifty six shrines around eight major temples, the dominant structure being the temple of Shiva. At roughly the same time, only thirty kilometers away, the Mahayana Buddhist Sailendra dynasty built the magnificent stupa, Borobudur, including hundreds of Buddha statues and thousands of reliefs illustrating Buddhist literature and stories.¹ Both structures had been long abandoned, buried under ash and dirt, when discovered in the nineteenth century. Since then both have been restored, resurrected from the jungle, by archaeologists and cultural preservationists. Indian influence has remained strong in Java despite half a millennium of Islamic influence. Java has, after all, the largest concentration of Muslims in the world. The stories of classical Indian literature, found in the Mahabharata and Ramayana, adapted to the Javanese world are the foremost influence on the oral tradition and local theatre. These stories hold the heritage and identity of the Javanese.

Wayang kulit,² the shadow puppet theatre found throughout southeast Asia, plays a powerful role in maintaining this vital heritage and in applying it to ongoing life. *Wayang kulit*³ is in many ways, the prototype for the arts, including Javanese classical⁴ dancing. The *dalang* or puppet master sits on one side of an opaque screen. Hundreds of puppets, leaning against the screen with their supporting rods

1John Miksic, *Borobudur: Golden Tales of the Buddhas* (?: Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd., 1990).

2Ward Keeler, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

3According to some sources, *wayang* meaning shadow or sometimes puppet and *kulit* meaning leather, however, this needs to be confirmed.

4Terms such as "classical" need to be used with caution and suspicion. Here I intend only to indicate dance forms that are carefully codified, learned through formal and rigorous training, and that endure, certainly with some modification over time, in a culture for a period spanning multiple generations of dancers.

stuck in green banana logs, flank the *dalang* on both right and left. The *dalang* casts the shadows on the screen by manipulating the chosen puppets in the light from a lamp that hangs above him. Members of the gamelan, the Javanese musical orchestra, sit behind the *dalang* accompanying him⁵ as he sings and chants the stories he enacts by manipulating the puppets. Formerly the women and the invited guests sat on the side of the screen opposite the *dalang*. Only the shadows cast on the opaque material can be seen from this side. The men sat on the same side as the *dalang* where they could see not only the shadows but also the puppets, their manipulator, and the musicians. Today, generally, all guests have the freedom to watch the theatre from wherever they like.

Shadow is a double, a doubling. It is a play of puppet and shadow, of light and darkness, of substance and insubstantiality, of visibility and invisibility, of radiance and occlusion. Shadow play is fascinating. Why? The Javanese puppets, like most puppets in Southeast Asia, are elaborately painted. They are objects of beauty and are often displayed as works of art. The identity of the hundreds of figures is interconnected not only with the outline shape but also with the clothing, facial features, and accessories that are painted on the puppet. Indeed, puppet design involves a remarkably complex system of defined shapes and characteristics. But, as importantly indeed even more so to shadow theatre, the puppet is created and used as an occlusion, as a mass to block the light. It is only with the puppet as an occlusion blocking the light that we can see the shadow figure.

Shadow puppetry is the play of the visible and the invisible. The light, both in its quality of radiance and in its location or position, is vitally important. Shadow cannot exist without light. But the light, in itself, is sheer radiance and lacks distinction apart from the occlusion of the puppet. Only when paired with the shadows whose creation it enables, the dark nothings that are nonetheless present, does light take shape. The shadow is always different from the puppet and cannot exist except in its separation from the puppet. As soon as the puppet is moved away from the screen enough for a shadow to be cast, the shadow cannot possibly exactly replicate the shape of the puppet. Thus the puppet and the shadow can never be simply duplicates, replicates. Among the fascinating characteristics of shadow play is that a broad array of shadow effects are created by moving the puppet closer and farther from the screen and turning the flat puppet in relation to the plane of the screen. These effects produce the illusion of dimension, that is, depth and life, which is all the more fascinating given that the shadow itself is an absence rather than a presence. While electric light bulbs now often replace the oil lamp as a source of light, the Javanese still indicate a preference for the live flame which they say causes the shadow figures to appear to breathe. Where the light is with respect to the puppet and the screen determines not only the location of the shadow, but also its qualities and character.

Drawing on our experience of making shadow figures by our occluding hands, we are reminded that, in some sense, we lose our hands in the forms we create. Our hand manipulations become tacit as we “attend to” the shadow forms. Michael Polanyi’s notion of the tacit dimension⁶ is relevant. He holds that we know more than we can say. That is, when we focus on some object about which we seek knowledge we are attending to that object. However, at the same time and inevitable to the process is

5Javanese dalangs are male.

6Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1983).

that we must also “attend from” a whole body of tacit knowledge and assumptions—all our former experience, our array of categories, the tacit rules that underlie grammar and so on. We cannot articulate all that is known in this tacit dimension—it is hidden to us though we know it is there and certainly depend upon it.⁷ Our hands, or the puppets, become tools we use to affect the world. Yet as Leroi-Gourhan showed us, while the hands or puppets themselves tend to disappear in the puppet shows, it is the gestural patterns that create the illusion of presence and life for the figures who have no physical reality at all, who exist as gestural illusions. The revelation here is that the world is known only through a process of doubling, through the pairing of the known and the tacit, the visible and the invisible, the conscious and the unconscious, the symbolic and the real. Understanding this relationship shows the folly of attempting to reduce the world to singularity, to truth or reality, the most common strategy of Western philosophy.⁸ The metaphor, the analogy, of shadow play, both our innocent playing and the formal Javanese shadow theatre, powerfully articulate and illustrate that the interactivity of gesture, even the hiddenness that is inherent to it, must be embraced and celebrated.

While our bodies are seemingly lost in the menagerie of shadows we create, there is a hinge in the making of these shadows that allows us to experience our own aliveness. The doubling is no simple mutually exclusive dualism. The making and perception of these shadow figures is inseparable from the gestural movement of our bodies, or the bodies of the puppets. Occlusion reveals depth and suggests that life is inseparable from movement. The shadows dance and come to life, become of interest to us, as our bodies move and gesture to make them. Our oddly entwined hands look like nothing but a knot of fingers until we see the moving shadow they cast. The doubling is the key. The play of the two is what intrigues. The play depends on gestural movement. What we see is not a simple literal presentation. It is a seduction—an appearance, a promise of something always unfulfilled—that invites comparison to facets of our human existence. The Javanese, who for centuries have done this so profoundly, offer a model.

The Javanese recognize a gradient of values delineating the range of possibilities of the human character.⁹ The ideal of refinement, *alus (halus)*, has its origins in the *prijaji* or gentry who, in pre-Muslim days, were royalty. *Kasar*, designating the crude or rough, is the opposite of *alus*. Refinement is exemplified in the ubiquitous arts of dancing, poetry, batik, and shadow puppetry. The refined

⁷Polanyi’s tacit dimension, I believe, refers to the same thing that Lakoff and Johnson, [Philosophy book I think] point to as that large part of our cognitive processes that are unconscious. Polanyi, like Lakoff and Johnson, shows that were we to focus our attention on this body of assumptions that are normally tacit, thus making them focal or explicit, we would merely shift the object of attention and we would still depend on a vast body of tacit knowledge.

⁸I have recently been struck by what, to me, is the folly of attempting to isolate reality or truth, capital letters would be appropriate here. Both reality and illusion, both truth and falsehood or lies or myth, must be pre-conditions to this endeavor. Thus, the existence of the not real, the false, are the only existants that can possibly vitalize and signify truth and reality. Much more interesting than isolating or discerning reality and truth, it seems to me, is the consideration of how these terms (and the referents associated with them) and their seeming opposites not only interconnect, overlap, and interplay, but how they even exchange valences.

⁹Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960).

demeanor of royalty sets the etiquette of much of city culture.¹⁰ Following the royal example, the general citizenry routinely practices politeness and civility in its speech, dress, and action. Poor and homeless bicycle rickshaw drivers, shop keepers, and waiters are reserved and polite. Even street touts are refined. One common scam is for them to encourage tourists to visit what they describe as an exhibit of fine batiks. They insist that it is a batik show of Javanese masters and that, not to worry, nothing is for sale. Invariably the show is closing that very day, so you learn that this is your last chance to see it. If you go, and of course you do, they treat you to a cup of tea and chat about the last time they visited your home country or about an uncle that lives in your home state. They show you the batiks and introduce you to one of the artists. They leave you alone to enjoy the “fine art” and allow you to eventually, and we always do, ask if anything is for sale. This request seems to take them by surprise, brilliant actors they are, and they appear reluctant to suggest a price. The art is not for sale, they will remind you. Yet, for the sake of the opportunity to share their art with people in other parts of the world, they reluctantly agree to consider selling it. They name a price. When you try to bargain for a better price, as we know we are supposed to do, they do rapid calculations on a notebook that has suddenly appeared. They assure you that any reduction of price would be inappropriate to the quality of the art, yet, because it is the last day of the showing and it would save them efforts in transporting the works to another city, they agree to make some adjustments. Only later, of course, do you learn that the whole thing is a scam and that the vendors would have been thrilled to get a small fraction of what you paid. Though you rationalize the price as including a cultural experience, it is still difficult to see as much beauty in a work of art that is now a folded-up piece of cloth fitting neatly in a shirt pocket.

Javanese body theory is intertwined with this valuation of the human character. The body is distinguished in terms of an inner and an outer aspect, *batin* and *lahir*. *Lahir* is the bodily realm of human behavior including motion, posture, and speech. *Batin* is the inner realm of experience including feelings, emotions, and imagination. Both are conceived as aspects of the body; they are, like the inner and outer sides of flesh itself, interdependent and inseparable. The Javanese consider *lahir*, the outer aspect, the more easily directed and controlled, that is, the more easily refined. By practicing *alus* behavior one comes to experience refined feelings and emotions; in other words, refining *lahir* is accompanied by the refinement of *batin*. Put simply, how one moves affects how one feels; and, of course, the opposite also pertains. Javanese culture is defined in terms of highly prescribed gesture and posture.

Wayang kulit is a complex representation and enactment of this gestural body theory. The shadow, in its insubstantiality may be considered, this is my construct, to represent *batin*, the inner body, while the puppet in its physical substantiality represents *lahir*, the outer body. The characters in the stories portray the full range of values from *alus* to *kasar* in both their physical forms and in their gestural/postural behaviors. The refinement of the characters of the dramas played in puppets and

¹⁰For example, the sultan, who lives with his family in the palace in Jogjakarta in Southern Java, serves in the current times as an overseer of the city and surrounding areas. Far more important than his powers of governance is the example of refinement he sets for all in his domain. Not only does he present this example in his own physical appearance and demeanor, but in his sponsoring the daily performances of music and the arts (dance, gamelan, and wayang kulit) held in pavilions that exude the spirit of peace and tranquility.

shadows is easily recognized by their physical traits (posture) and movement patterns (gestures). The stories (*lakons*) drawn from the Javanese versions of classical Indian literature, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, reinforce the character valuations in the consequences they enjoy or suffer resulting from their actions. Illustrating that the outer affects the inner, the *dalang* moves the physical puppet, the correspondent of *lahir*, the outer body. The *dalang* cannot manipulate the shadow except by moving the puppet. Yet, the *dalang's* attention is primarily on the shadow effect,¹¹ the correspondent of the inner body, as he manipulates the substantive puppet. The shadow is at once completely separate and yet inseparable from the puppet; it cannot be without there being both.

The Javanese understanding of the Indian *rasa* is consistent with their gestural body theory.¹² In Sanskrit *rasa* has two roots, one referring to hidden significance or ultimate meaning,¹³ the other referring to tactile sensations, taste. For the Javanese the five senses are seeing, hearing, talking, smelling, and feeling. As feeling, *rasa* is a sense that includes touch on the body, taste on the tongue, and emotional feelings like sadness and happiness. It refers to feeling from without as well as within. As meaning, *rasa* refers to something like deep significance, subtle or allusive meaning. The Javanese have a fondness for the artful use of language, for poetry, for verbal etiquette. They both blend and hold separate the two meanings of *rasa* resulting in the distinction, identification, and interplay of the inside feeling with outside sensation and with meaning, the subjective and objective, one's behavior in the world and one's character. Refinement is directed toward achieving the ultimate *rasa*, the fullest realization¹⁴ of this complex relationship, though it is often expressed as the union of inner feeling with outer action, the full concert of feeling and meaning. We can gain some insight by the Javanese belief that the awareness that happiness and unhappiness are interlinked, for example, allowing one to move beyond the distinction, to experience a certain tranquility in the midst of intense polarity. Evidence of this tranquility can be seen and experienced in the countenance and comportment, a kind of remote or detached presence, of the royal family and members of court. It can also be experienced in the court's dance pavilion, the still center of the universe quickened by the presence of dancing.

11Some disagreement here, see >>>>

12See Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, p. ???.

13It is of interest that ultimate meaning and hidden significance are equated with *rasa*, suggesting not only the importance of occlusion but also that in its inaccessibility, there is seduction involved with ultimate meaning.

14There is the issue of what constitutes this fullness of realization. I think it best not to use the notion of union (though even in union separation may still be implied), but rather taking inspiration from Frederick Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1967 [1793]), I suggest the use of the word "concert."