

# Dancing as Self-Othering - 2: Javanese Classical Dancing

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*Wayang kulit* has been performed in Java for over a thousand years. There is debate as to whether its origins are Indian or indigeneous,<sup>1</sup> yet it is clear that it is an important model for Javanese dance and theatre.<sup>2</sup> *Wayang topeng*. *Topeng* means mask, so *wayang topeng* is shadow or puppet mask, yet it refers to masked dancing. There is remarkable resemblance of these two art forms. This masked dance theatre form, performed in Java for perhaps a thousand years, preserves the doubling, the intertwining of shadow puppetry. One of the fascinating things about masks is that they are so apparently artificial and unlikelike.<sup>3</sup> This is observable in the rigidity of mask construction, its tendency toward exaggeration of features and design, its simple and crude mechanics, its incompatibility with nature. A mask is not a disguise. A mask is like a puppet manipulated by the wearer. Whereas in *wayang kulit* the puppet representing the outer body (*lahir*) and the shadow representing the inner body (*batin*), in *wayang topeng* this model is turned inside out, while keeping with the motif of intermingling and interpositioning. The mask, like the puppet, is the rigid form, but it is given life, animated, by the sentient human dancer who, behind the mask, is the partially hidden inner body. The identity of the dancer is usually obscured (or partially so), being occluded by the mask; yet, like the puppet, the mask gains its liveliness by its being a distinctive gestural moving occlusion. The entity identified with the mask, rather than the personal identity of the dancer, comes to life by being moved and manipulated in the gestural patterns distinctive to the figure danced by the dancer.<sup>4</sup> The intent is not complete disguise, a total absence of the masker. The power of the masking is in its doubling, in its reversibility. Indeed, the most distinctive aspect of mask is that it hides as it reveals, that it is lifeless yet alive, that it appear alive while so obviously not. I'll return to consider masked dancing again in the section on "Playing."<sup>5</sup>

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1Mantle Hood, "The Enduring Tradition: Music and Theatre in Java and Bali" in *Indonesia* edited by Ruth T. McVey (New Haven, CT: Human Relations Area Files, 1963), p. 447.

2This dependence on *wayang kulit* of dancing is clear in Javanese performance theory (*joged mataram*) where the dance must become the puppet. See Felicia Hughes-Freeland, "Consciousness in Performance: A Javanese Theory," *Social Anthropology* 5:1 (1997): 55-68 and Ben Suharto, "Transformation and Mystical Aspects of Javanese Dance," *UCLA Journal of Dance Ethnology* 14 (1990): 22-25.

3The exception is the lifelike rubber masks—we think of gorillas, US presidents, and celebrities—whatever they might share. And even these are far from lifelike.

4Kathy Foley, "The Dancer and the Danced: Trance Dance and Theatrical Performance in West Java," *Asian Theatre Journal* 2:1 (1085) 28-49, following Jane Belo, offers the idea that the dancer (as the puppet and mask) is an "empty vessel" awaiting "the vital energy of the other to fill it." Foley discusses that the dancer is trained not to reach within her/himself to find the resources for dancing, but to empty her/himself and to execute the movement as a puppet (see especially p. 37). What is important about this is not that the dancer disappears, but that she or he fully experiences otherness, rather than some expression or projection of the self.

<sup>5</sup> Ref lectures "gaps ..."

Javanese trance dancing has even more ancient roots in Java and it continues to be practiced today. In trance dancing, the dancer is understood as being possessed by a spiritual entity. The dancer gives presence and life to this otherwise immaterial being. We see the same doublings here—the spirit outside the dancer possesses or entrances the dancer, a process usually depicted as the spirit entering the body of the dancer. Yet the dancer’s body, in some sense, is inside the manifestation of the spirit who takes physical form by means of the body of the dancer. The two intertwine; the two are reversible, yet incompletely so. I’ll return to this important point when I discuss dancing in terms of “pure depth.”<sup>6</sup>

Javanese classical dancing that does not employ masks retains the structure in the mask-like appearance of the dancer’s face and the puppet-like movement style of the dancer’s body. We commonly consider the face itself a mask especially when it is rigidly set, held in a fixed expression. Javanese classical dancers are trained in this technique. This dancing takes the doubling, what I also refer to as “self-othering,” to greater sophistication. The dancer is no longer hidden by the danced character in any literal sense, yet she or he remains doubled with the character or the dance performed. A spectacular form of dancing that does not use masks is *wayang wong*, or human puppets.<sup>7</sup> Dating from ancient times this form of dance-drama became highly popular in the eighteenth century and has received regular royal support. These dances are direct adaptations of *wayang kulit* to the human realm of dancing. The characters are the same and the costuming and makeup serve to make them appear similar to the puppets, especially when seen in profile. In a fascinating and affective way, classical Javanese dance applies the Javanese philosophy articulated in shadow puppet theatre. The presence of the Sultan during the performance has suggested to the Javanese the idea that the Sultan is the *dalang* or puppeteer of the performance.<sup>8</sup>

The philosophy of Javanese court dancing was codified under the reign of Sri Sultan Hamengku Buwana I who reigned from 1755 to 1792. But it was not until 1976 when dance master B. P. H. Suryobrongto delivered public lectures on dancing that this philosophy was known outside the succession of dance masters. The philosophy is complex and intricate beyond adequate presentation here, yet it is important to mention several fundamental elements. While dancing provides aesthetic pleasure or entertainment, it also, and perhaps more importantly, provides the dancer with models for appropriate behavior (*lahir*) and spiritual growth (*batin*). Javanese court dancing is characterized by total concentration that does not cause inner tenseness (*sewiji*). There must be an inner dynamic that gives life to the dancer’s presence, but which must be carefully controlled to avoid coarseness of expression (*greded*). Dancers must be self-confident yet without arrogance or conceit (*sengguh*). And the dancers must experience freedom, which is understood as the courage to face difficulties, total dedication, and a full sense of responsibility (*ora mingkuh*).<sup>9</sup> What is particularly notable in light of our developing discussion of Javanese arts and philosophy is that each of these key principles requires opposing values or traits to be present in concert. We begin to appreciate how fully the Javanese have developed this very specific

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<sup>6</sup> Ref lecture on pure depth.

<sup>7</sup>Garrett Kam, “Wahang Wong in the Court of Yogyakarta: The Enduring Significance of Javanese Dance Drama,” *Asian Theatre Journal*, 4:1 (1987): 29-51.

<sup>8</sup>See Kam, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup>See Hughes-Freeland and Suharto for dance philosophy.

structural dynamic of joining oppositions without resolution to produce clearly identifiable results, a very distinctive quality they often refer to as “profound tranquility” that stands as the goal for the Javanese character.

In the next lecture I will venture a long way from Java to introduce a philosophical perspective that provides us with a deepening perspective on Javanese dancing, yet more importantly on understanding all dancing in greater depth.