**Global Modernities and Post-Traditional Shadow Puppetry in Contemporary Southeast Asia**

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In the globalizing arts of Southeast Asia, a new configuration of modernity and tradition is emerging which can be described, drawing on the sociological theories of S N Eisenstadt and Anthony Giddens, as a ‘post-traditional’ turn.[[1]](#footnote-1)Post-traditional artists tap into the social and aesthetic forms of inherited art forms. Many indeed come from artist families and have grown up in intimate conversations with the stories, songs, movements and objects of tradition, though sometimes they are alienated from these familial and local traditions through formal education and travel. Post-traditionalists are ‘at home in many homes’ who join cultural efforts *knowingly*, capable of experiencing intimacy with cultural orders while gazing upon them reflexively with the ‘critical look of the outsider’.[[2]](#footnote-2) These inventive artists and their emergent communities of interest are demonstrating capacities to ignore any and all taboos, subvert norms, mix genres, pastiche and fabricate new structures, estranging some audiences while gaining others. The post-traditional is not only an aesthetic development, but also a social, economic, and political transformation. Post-traditionality involves social reconfigurations of performance scenes, new boundaries for art worlds, emerging networks and novel horizons of expectation, and is related to the development of new communication technologies, including text messaging and Facebook.

The post-traditional can be viewed as a political movement to disinter local cultural forms from codified aesthetic frames imposed on them by repressive political regimes to address pressing issues facing local communities and the nation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Though aware of the politics of heritage formation and governmental projects to inventory, preserve, develop and modernize arts and culture, the post-traditional does not easily capitulate to national agendas. Tradition is instead revisited as a site of resistance. The syncretic past is actively recovered to combat the intolerance of diversity, restrictions upon women in the public sphere and challenges to freedom of expression associated with a rising tide of religious fundamentalism.

In the development of their post-traditional praxes, Southeast Asian artists breach colonialist doctrines of authenticity, overturn ‘postcolonial exotic’ preconceptions, and make themselves relevant to diverse global audiences, furthering world culture in their own ways. They are what French curator and art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud has dubbed semionauts: ‘inventors of pathways within the cultural landscape, nomadic sign gatherers’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Their inventiveness, that is to say their capacity to harness existing artistic resources and develop new prospects for creative expression, places them in a long line of practitioners who have contributed to making the arts in Southeast Asia so vital and conscious of both the present moment and capable of crossing boundaries of time and place.[[5]](#footnote-5) But they differ from their predecessors in their criticality and espousal of the modernist credo that one must destroy in order to create. Neither nativists nor Westernizers, they occupy what Homi Bhabha calls the third space, shrugging off restrictive notions of cultural identity in order to play with received symbols and subvert structures of authority.

The current generation of Southeast Asian artists is above all contemporary—that is to say coeval with me, you and other potential commentators and interpreters of their work.[[6]](#footnote-6) Alia Swastika, the curator of Biennale Jogja Sebelas, writes in a FaceBook posting of 7 April 2014:

Actually, it is not a matter of Westernizing or the need to follow global artistic trends. Rather contemporary art is a means by which we might reflect upon, represent, and give value to phenomena around us. One might use a local and traditional form but for me what is important is that it is not used out of nostalgia for the past but in order to be critical of history, looking at past praxis through today’s lenses. So content and context are the principal points of departure and only after that do we select and position the medium. Becoming contemporary means finding a way to become relevant.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Shadow theatre re-invented and re-defined**

A key site for Southeast Asian post-traditional practice and discourse has been one of the region’s major Indic legacies—shadow puppetry. While taking on multiple manifestations in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Cambodia, the core technology is the same, involving the casting of shadows of flat puppets constructed from filigreed animal hide on a tautly-stretched cotton screen.[[8]](#footnote-8) Scholars of Southeast Asia have long considered the region’s varied traditions of shadow puppet theatre to be vehicles for articulating local identities. Performances have been conceptualized as dialogues between performers and sponsors that index community affairs, power dynamics, conceptions of the person, and the relation between humans and the spirit world.[[9]](#footnote-9) The distance and multiple mediations between puppeteer and animated shadow provides the medium’s currency for animating the mythological past and simultaneously for ventriloquizing oblique commentary on pressing current issues.

Global flows of culture mean that once-localized shadow puppet arts and associated artefacts now have an international reach. They are being re-worked in imaginative permutations in search of new publics in art galleries, the internet, community arts contexts, intermedial collaborations and festivals. Even while cultural conservatives mourn vanishing traditions, a new generation of Southeast Asian shadow puppet artists, many of them both university-educated and the descendants or pupils of traditional practitioners, are seizing the codes of performance culture, inhabiting received forms, and re-making them to speak to both local particularities and global issues. While traditional shadow puppetry as a ‘medium of identity’ sets others apart, post-traditional artists deploy the artform as a platform for cross-cultural dialogue.[[10]](#footnote-10) This mode of repurposing is consonant with what Bourriaud has identified as ‘postproduction’ artistic strategies. Outside of Southeast Asia, artists such as Ken Jacobs, Kara Walker, Christian Boltanski and William Kentridge create shadow performances and installations that trope on the ‘pre-cinematic’ and archaic associations of shadow play. In contrast, Southeast Asian shadow art is inserted into an ever-evolving and contested field of practice articulating with local and national identities, religious beliefs, and political ideologies. Abductions and radical re-interpretations thus stoke debates about cultural identity and patrimony, aesthetic norms and moral values, individual agency and collective creativity, postcolonial exoticism, and the politics of recognition.

The density of practice and the rapidity of aesthetic change on the ground makes a full account of post-traditional shadow puppetry impossible. Instead, I offer below some observations of the development of this field over the last quarter century, with attention to prominent practitioners in three overlapping domains of activity in Southeast Asia – the use of shadow puppets and shadow puppet imagery in contemporary visual art; contemporary shadow puppet performance projects; and shadow puppetry mediated in computer games and animation.

**Shadow puppets and contemporary visual art: Abduction and continuity**

In Yogyakarta, one of Southeast Asia’s major artistic centres, contemporary artists mine traditions of *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theatre) in their paintings, installations, and community projects for political parody, carnivalesque revelry, critique of heritage discourse and questioning of development policies. Yogyakarta is a cosmopolitan city, a university town with students from around Indonesia and the seat of a major royal court. It buzzes with crossovers between art worlds which elsewhere would be compartmentalized and sealed. It is not unusual, for example, to find a dancer from the royal court producing a conceptual art exhibition or editing an academic publication. Wayang kulit in this city is simultaneously an object for touristic consumption, a contemporary arts praxis, a ritual form patronized by traditionalist communities, a symbol of local identity and a meeting place for diverse constituencies.

The best known of the stable of Yogyakarta’s contemporary artists to engage with traditions of shadow puppetry is the painter and installation artist Heri Dono (b. 1960), who in the 1980s broke with dominant European-derived academic painting conventions and established himself as a radical artist by tapping into folk arts and crafts, above all wayang kulit. Though ethnically Javanese, Heri Dono grew up in Jakarta and only became familiar with puppetry when he moved to Yogyakarta to study at the Indonesian Art Institute (Institut Seni Indonesia) in 1980. Dono identified in the semi-improvised and context-contingent traditional wayang kulit a mode of communication that did not look for the ‘essence of nature’ valued by academicians but rather was a ‘search for shared values that do not have to be absolute and eternal’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Dono was entranced by shadow puppetry as collective creation, reacting against the cult of individual genius propagated at art school.

Wayang is owned by the audience, they own Wayang, it isn’t kept by masters. Everyone has a taste for it, it has a high standing, and that makes it important. It’s not a self-conscious expression of identity, it’s an expressive medium, neither traditional nor modern.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Earlier generations of Southeast Asian artists appropriated shadow puppetry to express national identity or referenced its stylized figures in formal experiments far removed from the communities who sponsor and enact performances. The contemplative *nang yai* series of the Los Angeles-based Thai artist Kamol Tassanchalee (b. 1944), for example, asserts the artist’s authorship by working against the pictorial grain ofclassical shadow puppetry. As a privileged mode for representing the story of Rama, nang yai is a sacred art form; puppets are objects of reverence in Thailand. But the calm surfaces of Tassanchalee’s abstractions hint at no violation of nang yai’s sacred aura. Control rods are visible but there is no chance of these these *objets d’art*’s re-use or reappropriation.

Dono, in contrast, engaged directly with communities of practice. In the late 1980s, Dono undertook an apprenticeship with Sigit Sukasman, a Yogyakarta puppetmaker who had been modernizing wayang kulitsince the 1960s by creating new figures and producing multi-media spectacles that mixed shadow puppetry with dance. Sukasman called his performances *wayang ukur*, or ‘measured’ puppetry, as he had arrived at their forms and proportions through methodical experimentation.Dono studied shadow puppetry for about a year in 1987-1988 before creating his own modernized version of wayang kulit, which he called *wayang legenda*, based on legendary stories culled from around the archipelago. This was performed in various settings between 1988 and 1992, often with Dono himself as puppeteer. He also created community-based wayang kulit performances in international residencies in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and elsewhere, working as a radicant artist in a rough and ready way with the materials and people at hand to address topical issues and the crossing of cultures.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Wayang kulit’s iconography, its rich font of characters and symbols and dramaturgical principles infuse Dono’s paintings on canvas and his installations. Puppet-like figures pay court to higher ups, fight, make love and fly through the air. Bodies are porous and subject to dissociation: limbs slop off and animals, demons, angels and humans recombine into chimeras. The symmetries of wayang kulit – the balance between left (evil) and right (good); refined and vulgar; demonic and divine; male and female; high and low status – are referenced, but often in an ironic fashion. Jester figures predominate, questioning and mocking all authority. Political allusions are rife. A L Becker, in a canonical essay on wayang kulit epistemology, has contrasted the way that texts are built in Javanese shadow puppet theatre with Aristotelian drama. While Aristotle stressed the need for unity,

in wayang, we might say that Gatsby, Godzilla, Agamemnon, John Wayne, and Charley Chaplin- or their counterparts- do appear in the same plot: and that is what causes the excitement-that clash of conceptual universes is what impels the action.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Dono’s art work is exciting for just this sort of carnivalesque clash of global pop culture and local cultural references, politics, cruelty and humour.

Dono’s appropriation or radical re-interpretation of shadow puppetry has had traction locally. At the same time, his repurposing of cultural heritage has opened him to charges of catering to the international art market’s desire for ‘ethnic’ spectacle. The appearance of Nindityo Adipurnama (b. 1961) at the 2002 Fukuoka Triennial is a sly critique of Dono and other artists who appropriate Javanese folk arts, the curatorial management of difference and the international art market generally. Nindityo, co-founder of the prestigious Yogyakarta gallery Cemeti Art House, is seen in a photograph carrying around a red-and-white backpack (the colours of the Indonesian flag) with a wayang kulit puppet protruding.[[15]](#footnote-15) The puppet is not a prop for a performance but a statement of resistance against the art market’s fetishization of identity. Ethnic culture as defined and delimited by the nation of origin becomes a literal burden the artist must bear. The work questions the artist’s agency-- he is not a puppeteer realizing and expressing intention through the medium, but rather is the puppet’s double, an object to be manipulated by others.

An even more canny commentary on heritage politics comes in *Between Worlds*, a highlight of the Singapore Biennale of 2013, by Yogyakarta-based artist Nasirun (b. 1965). In an 11-tiered stupa installation consciously mirroring the UNESCO world heritage site of Borobudur northwest of Yogyakarta, Nasirun has positioned hundreds of glass bottles and vials, each containing one miniature wayang kulit puppet. The effect is to distance the viewer from the performing art. Puppets are reduced to laboratory specimens or televisual spectacle seen through glass. Wayang kulit has been reordered according to a non-theatrical logic, stripped of dramatic purpose. Nasirun is himself an inveterate puppet collector—with a special interest in contemporary shadow puppets. The work reflexively plays on the seriality of collection, the deadening transformation of living performance tradition into ‘heritage,’ the alienation involved in encountering wayang kulit in a gallery setting.

Wayang kulit is a popular but not altogether secular medium—puppets are still considered sacred objects to many and there are plays that can be performed to exorcise ill fortune, bless rice harvests and expel evil spirits. Indeed, one of the reasons that drew Heri Dono to wayang was that it is ‘a very good medium for considering spiritual issues’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Spirituality is even more explicitly thematized in the shadow puppet installations of contemporary Thai artist Chusak Srikwan (b. 1983). Srikwan hails from the southern Thai district of Songkhla and is himself the son of a puppet maker. In Songkhla and other districts of the south, *nang talung* is a living, popular shadow puppet tradition. Puppeteers, both Muslim and Buddhist, perform lively folk plays about everyday life, usually with rock band accompaniment. Novel puppet are commonly introduced. Though scatological humour predominates in comical sections, nang talungalso conveys religious ideas and moral messages. Srikwan’s puppets are similarly laden with both symbolized Buddhist values and humour. An elephant with three overlapping pools of water in its stomach, suspended upside down from the ceiling by a thick rope when exhibited at the Animamix Biennial in Taipei in 2009-2010, is said to show the weight of sin. The pools symbolize the sins of greed, anger and delusion; the elephant, the weight of these sins on humans; the binding rope, the difficulty in extracting ourselves from turpitude. Other puppets in this same exhibition criticizes the modern culture of consumption, the excesses of capitalism and corruption. A smiling, big-breasted dancer festooned with heavy jewellery is said to be ‘living in the fake life’ and enjoying ‘fake happiness’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Chusak’s work does not abrogate Thai tradition, but rather opens up nang talungto gallery audiences.

**Post-traditional shadow puppet performances**

Jan Mrázek describes Javanese shadow puppet theatre as a ‘building-like structure’ assembled anew in each performance using the same basic materials- *gamelan* musical instruments and puppets, verbal formulae, pictorial compositions, puppet movement, sound effects and the like.[[18]](#footnote-18) Post-traditional puppeteers are able to use these same materials for building much more ephemeral structures. With the exception of those working in large-scale Thai and Cambodian shadow puppet forms (*nang yai*, *sbaek thom*), Southeast Asian puppeteers are solo artists and it would seem prima facie not to make good collaborators. This has proved not to be the case. I have seen post-traditional Javanese puppeteers sing a *suluk* (mood song) to accompany a dance improvisation; direct a gamelan ensemble to provide a musical backdrop for a silent German film; silently move puppets as background to a theatre production; provide a voice for a mute actor or dancer; and recite incantations to grant a sacred aura to a piece of live art.

Southeast Asia’s shadow puppet theatres are living traditions, and as such are continually being renewed and modernized. Numerous ‘spin off’ forms with new sets of figures, new repertoires of stories, new dramaturgies and new modes of musical accompaniment have emerged in Java since the 1920s. The sacred nang yai of Thailand formerly was restricted to night-time performance; when daytime shows became possible in the twentieth century, performers began to dance puppets in front as well as behind the shadow screen. Wayang kulit in Bali has been rapidly modernized since the 1990s—with a large new range of trick puppets (typically non-humans such as monkeys, frogs, demons); the expansion of the accompanying musical ensemble expanded from two or four metallophones to a much larger *gambelan* ensemble; electrical lighting and video projection supplanting the traditional coconut oil lamp; hybridization of Javanese puppets and musical pieces with Balinese standards. There were, and are, artists and audiences who protest such developments. Indeed, it was precisely these sorts of popular innovations that were presented to UNESCO as evidence in the candidature file that Indonesia’s puppet traditions required ‘safeguarding’.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Some post-traditional shadow puppet performers are deeply involved in the renovation of their traditional base. But others seem quite content to leave the art form’s development and updating to its traditional practitioners. Post-traditional puppeteers instead operate by making strategic incursions into tradition’s highly sophisticated stock of techniques and methods and bring their highly developed skills to bear in collaborative art making situations, often based on postmodern principles of collage. Through their plethora of ephemeral creations they expand fields of possibility for the medium and renegotiate relations and connections between the local and the global.

The first puppeteer in Java to focus his career on experimental arts praxes was arguably the late Slamet Gundono (1966-2014).[[20]](#footnote-20) Slamet came from a family of traditional puppeteers and studied Western theatre briefly at the art school Institut Kesenian Jakarta before enrolling in the puppetry department of Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) Surakarta, Indonesia’s most important conservatoire for traditional performing arts. He established his reputation nationally with his nostalgic production *Wayang Suket* (Grass Puppetry) at the national puppetry festival Pekan Wayang in Jakarta in 1993.[[21]](#footnote-21) At a festival dominated by flashy puppetry with spectacular acrobatics, flashing lights and immense *gamelan* orchestras with long rows of beautiful female vocalists, Slamet presented a pared-down piece of storytelling without a puppet screen or a full-scale gamelan. He performed with simple puppets made from dried grass of the sort that children once used to play with; told stories about growing up in Tegal, a town on Java’s north coast; sang songs and played ukulele; joked and bantered with his musicians. Capitalizing on preservationist discourse-- *wayang suket* was considered an endangered puppet form as children rarely made or played with such figures anymore—he imagined utopian forms of consociation and subtly subverted the cultural order from within. Gundono became the most adventurous of his generation of puppet artists—intentionally challenging hierarchies and taboos in both small-scale solo work and large community projects he directed, seeking out challenging collaborative configurations and redefining the ‘puppet’ in performance projects such as *Wayang Kondom* (Condom Puppetry), *Wayang Air* (Water Puppetry) and *Wayang Api* (Fire Puppetry).

Both the Khmer shadow puppeteer and circus artist Mann Kosal (b. 1961) and Malaysian artist and writer Fahmi Fadzil (b. 1981) both initially aspired to undertake apprenticeships with traditional puppeteers only to be rebuffed. Kosal was essentially self-taught as a puppeteer. He discovered an abandoned set of shadow puppets in a back room of Phnom Penh’s Preah Suramarit National Theatre when he worked there as a *lakhon bassac* performer in the 1990s, but lacked a teacher willing to transmit this sacred and nearly-extinct art. He thus developed his own techniques to make and animate shadow puppets, starting with the small-scale puppets which he used for solo performances, and later, with the collaboration of French circus artist Delphine Kassem, the *sbaek thom*, or large-scale shadow puppet theatre. Some of the innovations of Kosal and Kassem’s company Sovanna Phum are merely technical – such as applying back and front lighting to the screen. Others go deeper—developing new modes of storytelling that allow recognition and exploration of the autobiographical and the recent past. The figures of sbaek thom were and are considered sacrosanct to Cambodians. But Kosal’s temperament, education, and openness to collaboration allowed him to participate in Ong Keng Sen’s celebrated documentary theatre production *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields* (2000) in which, in one scene, sbaek thom puppets are burnt to symbolize the destruction wrought by the Khmer Rouge. It is hard to imagine any Cambodian traditional artist of the past condoning, let alone co-creating, such a destructive performance.

Kosal’s Malaysian contemporary Fahmi Fadzil also found himself also found himself unable to study shadow puppetry with traditional masters, although for a different set of reasons. Fadzil, a core member of the youth division of the Five Arts Centre, was hooked up by a Malaysian wayang kulit expert with a master in rural Kelantan, some 450 kilometers to the north of Kuala Lumpur, but his prospective teacher’s demands for a lengthy traditional apprentice did not work with Fahmi’s commitments in the capital. Instead, Fadzil travelled to Indonesia where he met Slamet Gundhono and other contemporary Javanese puppeteers. Seeing his lack of formal training, Fadzil was encouraged to establish his own relation to the principles behind wayang kulit, rather than purporting to represent tradition, even in a modernized form.

This stimulus resulted in the conceptualization of Projek Wayang in 2006. Fadzil and his Five Arts collaborators replaced the hide puppets of wayang kulit with other objects. Fadzil animates his own hands to tell a story in *Wayang Tangan* and swung around a light bulb to atmospheric electronic music in *Wayang Lampu*. In Fadzil’s *Wayang Buku*, performed in book stores and libraries, texts are animated and brought into dialogue. Performed in Kuala Lumpur, the performing objects were

books — mostly Malaysian titles — who acted out scenes spurred on by questions. For instance, *The Malay Dilemma* might be asked on the current situation in politics. Fahmi explains: ‘We then wait for an answer from the books … which doesn’t really come. Because books don’t talk.’[[22]](#footnote-22)

Such sly performance work not only overturns dominant notions of shadow puppetry as Malay heritage, but also articulates an important political critique. Mahathir bin Mohamad’s talismanic *Malay Dilemma*, the key political text authorizing Malaysia’s race-based politics since its 1970 publication, is performed as mute, unable to engage with current politics, stripped of power, consigned to the past.

**Technologizing shadow puppet theatre: Animation, games, 3D imaging**

Over the last decade, animators, game designers and computer scientists from around Southeast Asia have been drawn to re-invent residual traditions of shadow puppetry in digital milieus. The figures have been re-designed or re-conceptualised for digital puppeteering, performance dynamics re-jigged to suit the rhythms of game play and animation, stories re-imagined to suit the conventional aesthetics of global modernity. Southeast Asian academics engaged this area of are very productive as researchers, attending conferences, publishing in journals, gaining grant support, and are thereby rapidly becoming prominent spokespeople for Southeast Asian shadow puppetry internationally.

One reason for this surge of interest in the digital arena is an earnest desire to create pathways for today’s digitally-oriented youth to access the heritage of shadow puppetry. As Dahlan bin Abdul Ghani, a Malaysian games designer and academic, and his colleague Mohd Sidin bin Ahmad Ishak, write:

Applying technology to Wayang Kulit theater could be beneficial in some respects, providing greater access to users viewing it online and from other video sources. The younger generation might become interested in Wayang Kulit if it’s translated into online games and mobile applications.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Dahlan has published papers on the 3D visualization of shadow puppets; character rigging of digitalized wayang kulit; how to model, texture and animate a wayang kulit figure for the video game *Street Fighter*; and digitalization as a mode of cultural preservation. The work is motivated by a high sense of nationalist pride in local tradition, to the point where Dahlan argues in one article that Walt Disney’s famous twelve principles of animation were derived directly from wayang kulit conventions.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The shadow puppetry research of Gea Parikesit (b. 1978), an Indonesian expert in optics and digital imaging processing at Yogyakarta’s Gadjah Mada University, is motivated by his desire to achieve social relevance for his research and connect with the community in which he lives. While Gea is of Javanese descent, he grew up in Bandung (West Java) outside the Javanese-speaking part of the island and undertook graduate studies and postdoctoral research in The Netherlands. He admits he had nothing to do with wayang kulit before 2013, an art form which he saw as lacking in ‘engineering development’ and in need of modernization. Working together with one of his engineering students who is an amateur puppeteer, he created a stereoscopic setup for casting coloured shadows of wayang kulit puppets and displaying them in 3D using filtered LED Lamps equipped with light absorbers and glasses with red and cyan filters. Audiences in Yogyakarta and elsewhere in Java tend to be more interested in watching wayang kulit performances from the puppet than the shadow side. Unlike in Bali, where flickering oil lamps still create captivating shadows that appear to breathe and pulse, the electric lighting that dominates in Java yields static shadows which are quite often unappealing to watch. Gea hopes that when his technology is adopted by local puppeteers audiences will again flock to see wayang kulit from the shadow side. Initial responses to his setup from Yogyakarta puppeteers and fellow engineers invited to see demonstrations at his laboratory have been positive, though he admits there is still work to be done to alleviate the visual discomfort of 3D and the glare of the lights used. Gea also anticipates future applications in the digital animation field, and experiments with curved screens modelled on Samsung curved televisions.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Thai animator and university lecturer Chanya Hetayothin (b. 1982), in contrast, turned to nang talung in order to expand the possibilities for Thai animation and free it from the hegemony of Disney and Japanese anime. Her short computer graphics animation *Nunui* (2013) uses two clown figures (Nunui and Ai Theng) from the collection of Thai national artist Suchart Subsin which have been scanned and digitised. She retains the puppets’ jointing at elbows and shoulders but adds new joints on the computer at necks, wrists and other key points of articulation. We see the patina of the puppet’s finish, and the crackle of warped paint. Puppets enlarge or shrink to indicate movement, but remain in profile as shadow puppets. She thereby both respects the puppet ontology of her source and extends its expressive potentials. Her short film has sound effects but lacks dialogue and music, and is in some ways the antithesis of the very talky and music-filled nang talung. Narratively, her film more resembles a buddy prison escape movie than a nang talung clown routine.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The animations of Ananto ‘Nanang’ Wicaksono (b. 1985), meanwhile, have largely been created to supplement exhibitions of puppets by his grandfather, the famed Yogyakarta puppet maker and puppeteer Ledjar Subroto (b. 1938), and retain a much closer connection to wayang kulit in performance. Nanang is essentially self-trained as an animator and has been using freeware and a laptop to create a whole raft of *wayang animasi* (animated puppetry) since 2006, including animated realizations of *Wayang Kancil* (Mouse Deer Puppetry, Ledjar’s signature performance form), *Wayang Revolusi* (enacting stories of the Indonesian revolution) and *Willem van Oranje* (a commission from a Dutch museum). Nanang is himself a skilled puppeteer and his animations are not intended to replace live performances, but rather provide background to museum displays and inspire prospective spectators to seek out the bona fide articles.

**Future directions**

The regionally-dispersed Southeast Asian schools and styles of shadow puppetry are in closer conversation with one another than ever before. Practitioners across the region are befriending each other on FaceBook and watching their colleagues’ work on YouTube. The formation of the ASEAN Puppetry Association in 2007 and frequent festivals in Southeast Asia have been opportunities for direct observation and interchange. Researchers are meeting at conferences and citing each other’s publications. One by one, Southeast Asian countries are joining UNIMA, the international puppetry association affiliated with UNESCO, a major node for cultural exchange in the puppet world.[[27]](#footnote-27) International puppetry training and exchange initiatives—such as the Chiang Mai Puppetry Program and Puppets beyond Borders exchange hosted by the Thai arts centre Empty Space Chiangmai—are becoming more common.

The internationalization of Southeast Asain shadow puppetry has generated new praxes. One of the reasons for the rapid development of *wayang kulit* in Bali since the 1990s has been the experience of prominent Balinese practitioners in teaching and performing shadow puppetry abroad, and collaborating with non-Balinese artists. They have brought back to Bali new performance techniques, new kinds of puppets and new attitudes towards women studying puppetry.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In 2014, Adjjima Na Patalung (b. 1972), a Thai theatre director and producer who divides her time between Bangkok and London, initiated the multi-staged Nang Yai Project to explore new possibilities for the medium. Working with two expert dancer-puppeteers from Bangkok’s College of Dramatic Arts and two commissioned traditional puppets of Thotsakan and Hanuman, the multicultural creative team she assembled in London began by familiarizing themselves with the defining features of the tradition—the Ramakien narrative and its characters, the screen, narration, the duality of puppets and puppeteer-dancers, lights, gestures, movements, hierarchy and conflict. This was followed by a research and development phase in which London-based dancers were invited to a ‘meeting’ with nang yai without being told the rules or regulations of the form. The dancers familiarized themselves physically with the traditional puppets-- size, weight, texture, pattern. They observed how the puppets balanced on the floor and how they collapsed, threw them about, thrust out control rods like weapons and draped them around their bodies like capes or masks. Working in London, but drawing on the immaculate skills of Thai performers and performance-quality puppets, has allowed Ajjimas to sidestep the many taboos attached to nang yai in Thailand without sacrificing quality to ‘keep our roots and push on with it.’[[29]](#footnote-29) Workshops have explored themes of conflict, war and current world affairs; shared understandings of identity and experiences of foreignness; and the differences between bodies and puppets in what Adjjima calls a ‘Siamized zone.’ With the performance phase still ahead at the time of this writing, it is not clear yet where these improvisations will lead; the Ramakien might be re-introduced as narrative material, but there are other structuring principles that might work equally well.

Another critical development in Southeast Asia has been the emergence of new strains of practice outside performance and exhibition. In a trip to Java in autumn 2015, I met two practitioners who are creating shadow puppets for use in workshops. Nanang Rakhmat Hidayat (b. 1966), a Yogyakarta-based designer and lecturer, has created a set of shadow puppets he calls *wayang pulau*, or ‘island puppetry,’ which he uses to promote tolerance and understanding among Indonesians from different islands of the archipelago. Each of the puppets takes the shape of a different islands each in the official *pakaian adat* (traditional dress) associated with them. The island of Borneo, for example, resembles the classical wayang kulit clown-servant Semar but is outfitted in traditional Dayak costume with a feather headdress, sleeveless vest, beads and *parang* (curved dagger). Java, resented by some Indonesians for its dominance in national politics, is depicted as a woman with a crown lying on her side, a cunning commentary on Javanese self-importance and lack of initiative. Nanang describes how Indonesians playing with his puppets locate themselves in them—sometime literally pointing to the parts of the islands from which they hail. The puppets empower workshop participants to speak as representatives of particular ethnicities and enter into dialogues about interethnic relations. They also offer a bridge to wayang kulit, an art form which many Indonesians view as an exclusively Javanese possession.

In his workshops with children, Muhammad Tavip (b. 1965), a stage designer and lecturer from South Sumatra (Indonesia) who lives outside of Bandung, makes shadow puppets out of recycled plastic water bottles. This not only allows participants to develop a more personal relation with wayang kulit, as they can create figures coming out of their own imagination, but also instils environmental awareness through both the process of making and performing stories with environmental themes. The materials traditionally used to make quality shadow puppets—the hides and horns of young Sulawesi water buffalos—are in scarce supply in Indonesia and puppet makers are increasingly turning to synthetic substitutes. Tavip’s workshops might thus be taken as a next step in wayang kulit. He is open about his process of making, responsive to issues in the world around him, attentive to documenting his practice (through photographs, videos, a YouTube channel, academic writing): in a word, contemporary.

1. See particularly S N Eisenstadt, ‘Post-Traditional Societies and the Continuity and Reconstruction of Tradition,’ *Daedalus* vol 102 no 1, 1973, 1–27 and Anthony Giddens, ‘Living in a Post-Traditional Society,’ in *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp 56-109 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Zymunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, p 207 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A pivotal moment in Indonesian post-traditional performance was the *Ruwatan Bumi* (*Cleaning of the Earth*) of 1998, a series of some 170 performance events organized in one month by artists and activists. *Ruwatan Bumi* used the Javanese idiom of ritual exorcism with shadow puppets (*ruwatan*) to generate social cohesion during the chaos surrounding the fall of President Soeharto. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, James Gussen and Lili Porten, trans, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2009, p 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Matthew Isaac Cohen, *Inventing the Performing Arts: Modernity and Tradition in Colonial Indonesia*, University of Hawai’i Press, Honolulu, Hawai’i, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On coevalness, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Author’s translation from the Indonesian. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A set of 60 goatskin shadow puppets from Singapore in the Pitts-Rivers Museum dating from 1899 and a set of 10 paper shadow puppets from Laos in the Weltmuseum Wien from 1907 testify to the past existence of shadow puppetry in these Southeast Asian countries as well. There is also evidence of pre-modern shadow puppetry in the Philippines, though no figures seem to have survived. For general reflections on shadows in performance, see Matthew Isaac Cohen, ‘Playing with Shadows in the Dark: Shadow Puppet Theatre and Performance in Flux,’ in *Theatre in the Dark: Shadow, Gloom and Blackout in Contemporary Theatre,* Adam Alston and Martin Welton, eds. Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Exemplary studies of Southeast Asian shadow puppetry that take this approach include Benedict R O’G Anderson, *Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese*, Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, Ithaca, New York, 1965 and Ward Keeler, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1987 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf Giddens, ‘Living in a Post-Traditional Society,’ op cit, p 80 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dono quoted in Jim Supangkat, ‘Upside-Down Mind: The Art of Heri Dono,’ *Prince Claus Fund Journal 10a*, 2003, p 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Dono quoted in Tim Martin, ‘Heri Dono Interview,’ in *Heri Dono*, David Elliott and Gilane Tawadros, eds, Institute of International Visual Arts, London, 1996, p 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a detailed account of one of Dono’s Australian community performances, see T E Behrend, ‘The Millennial Esc(h)atology of Heri Dono: “Semar Farts” First in Auckland, New Zealand,’ *Indonesia and the Malay World* vol 27, no 79, 1999, pp 208–224. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A L Becker, ‘Text-Building, Epistemology, and Aesthetics in Javanese Shadow Theatre,’ *Dispositio* vol 5, no 13/14, 1980, p 151 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Susan Ingham, ‘The Chosen Image: Indonesian Artists and the International Circuit,’ <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/mai/files/2012/07/sueingham.pdf>, 2012, p 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Heri Dono quoted in Martin, ‘Heri Dono Interview,’ op cit, p 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Chusak Srikwan by MOCA Taipei, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srAe5zOgb3I> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jan Mrázek, *Phenomenology of a Puppet Theatre: Contemplations on the Art of Javanese Wayang Kulit*, KITLV Press, Leiden, The Netherlands, 2005, p 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sadiah Boonstra, *Changing Wayang Scenes: Heritage Formation and Wayang Performance Practice in Colonial and Postcolonial Indonesia*, PhD thesis, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2014, p 126 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For insight into Slamet Gundono’s practice, see Miguel Escobar Varela,

    ‘Heirlooms of the Everyday: The Material Performances of Slamet Gundono.’ *Theatre Research International* vol 41 no 1, 2016, 53-69 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Wayang suket* was in fact not programmed in the public part of the festival but embedded within the congress, which offered both a safe environment for experimental work and insured that key delegates would see his work. Slamet was still an ISI student in 1993, and ISI’s official backing certainly help attract attention to his work. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Nick Choo, ‘Wayang Ways,’ [www.thenutgraph.com/wayang-ways](http://www.thenutgraph.com/wayang-ways), 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Dahlan Abdul Ghani and Mohd Sidin Bin Ahmad Ishak, ‘Preserving Wayang Kulit for Future Generations,’ *IEEE Multimedia* vol 18, no 4, 2011, p 73 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Dahlan Abdul Ghani and Mohd Sidin bin Ahmad Ishak, ‘Relationship between the Art of Wayang Kulit and Disney’s Twelve Principles of Animation,’ *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala* 37, 2012, 162–179 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Gea Oswa Fatwah Parikesit, ‘3D Wayang Kulit: traditional shadow puppetry meets modern display technology,’ *International Journal of Arts and Technology* vol 9, no 2, 2016, 162-172; interview with the author, Yogyakarta, 8 September 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See *Nunui* (Chanya Hetayothin, 2013) at https://vimeo.com/68848648. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The Philippines and Vietnam have long been members of UNIMA. Indonesia joined in 2009; Cambodia, Malaysia and Vietnam were nominated to join in 2013; and Thailand was nominated in 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. On this last point, see Jennifer Goodlander, ‘Gender, Power, and Puppets: Two Early Women Dalangs in Bali,’ *Asian Theatre Journal* vol 29, no 1, 2012, 54-77. Balinese puppeteers with significant international experience include I Nyoman Sumandhi, I Wayan Wija, I Made Sidia, I Nyoman Catra, I Nyoman Sedana and I Gusti Sudarta. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Adjjima Na Patalung, ‘The Nang Yai Project,’ Lecture at the Trading of Traditions panel, SEA ArtsFest 2015, SOAS, University of London, 8 November 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)