Laurie Margot Ross, *The Encoded Cirebon Mask: Materiality, Flow, and Meaning Along Java's Islamic Northwest Coast*. Leiden / Boston: Brill. [Studies on Performing Arts & Literature of the Islamic World 2], 2016, xvii + 374 pp. ISBN: 9789004311374, price: EUR 103.00 (hardcover); 9789004315211, EUR 103.00 (ebook).

Topeng Cirebon is a masked dance tradition of West Java. It is a popular symbol of local identity today, but in the second half of the twentieth century it went from being an important form of entertainment and ritual to nearly dying out. Laurie Ross's detailed study explores these shifts in fortune through an engrossing narrative that takes us far beyond emblematic culture and delves into the complex histories and meanings of Topeng. This book speaks not only to the study of the performing arts, but also to Islam and the social history of Indonesia. Ross firmly imbeds her history of Topeng in Cirebon's complex *mestizo* culture, which includes Javanese, Chinese, and Arabic elements, along with European colonial influences. A wealth of information is catalogued and multiple paths explored. Tropes of flow, confluence, and hybridity inform the work as she traces threads of performance practice, cultural meanings, mask forms, Sufi practices, commerce, and politics. She shows how traces of these connections remain in Topeng practice even as it changes. These paths extend through complex networks from Cirebon to other parts of Indonesia, Asia, and across the globe. This exploration ultimately provides insights into how contemporary performance practice remains grounded in place, time, and society.

Of the many topics covered in this book, two major themes are the mystical and the political. Ross explores aspects of Sufi or *tasawwuf* practice, in particular *dzikir*—the use of breath, song, and memory to fix God in one's heart—finding many parallels with Topeng practice. The experience of wearing the masks aligns with *tasawwuf* principles, in particular 'a rigorous adherence to navigating the world while sustaining the inward journey' (p. 141). Restricted sight and holding the mask by biting on a tab combine to make a dancer intensely aware of their body, their surroundings, and the breath that connects them. This experiential aspect of Topeng performance links to *tasawwuf* awareness of one's place in and relation to the world. This in turn, precludes a trance state, unlike some other masked dance traditions. One older dancer, Miska, said in relation to the most refined character, 'Panji is the stillness of our heart, he teaches us how to live among the noise of life through internal stability' (p. 139). As Ross points out, this is clearly in sync with Sufi ideas of 'solitude within society.' One physical locus of both mystical and demographic flows is the cape, which, especially for those from familial dance lineages, is often an antique silk batik scarf with a distinctive animal and floral motif known as

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

© MICHAEL C. EWING, 2019 | DOI:10.1163/22134379-17501014

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the prevailing CC-BY-NC license at the time of publication.

lokcan. While batik is a Javanese craft, the motif is distinctly Chinese and the use of this cloth in Topeng can be traced to Chinese patronage in the nineteenth century. At the same time, Ross points out parallels with Sufism, likening the old cape to a Sufi rag garment. She even evokes resonances with the American Blues, due to the indigo dye often used for the cloth. As with other themes in this book, the discussion of mysticism contains an array of topics, locations, times, and side journeys. Many of these excursions are quite convincing in their connection to Topeng, particularly those based directly on historical record or observations by performers themselves. Other connections are more ephemeral, sometimes suggestive of possibilities rather than establishing them. While it could be noted that many of the mystical allusions may also be attributable to other religious practices that have informed Javanese belief, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, the point Ross emphasizes is the constant reimagining of Topeng by its practitioners for the contemporary world in which they find themselves.

Ross documents the profound effects on Topeng of political upheavals throughout Indonesia's history. For example, during the Sukarno era, many dancers were sponsored both by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and the separatist Islamic group Darul Islam. Such association made them suspect to people from all parts of the political spectrum and after the rise of Suharto and the eradication of the PKI many dancers were unemployable. Tight government control saw restrictions on travel and busking, reduction in other performance opportunities and the rise of more modernist forms of religious practice, all of which weakened familial transmission to the next generation. Moreover, as Topeng is now taught in art conservatories and valorized as an emblem of Cirebon culture, it has taken on a more standardized format and for many performers it has lost some of its virtuosic and esoteric qualities.

The power of the Cirebon mask shifts between ritual object, commercial product, and cultural icon. The book title references the encoded mask, an allusion to the history of ideas which give meaning to these masks, in particular those stemming from the flow of religion and commerce through Cirebon over the centuries. This encoding is not statically hardwired into the masks, but emerges through how they are used, viewed, and passed on from generation to generation. The particular value of this book is the breadth and depth of information that Ross has collected and curated for us—touching on nearly every aspect of the Topeng tradition to convey the convergence of cultures and ideas that informs past and current meanings of this tradition. Interpretative resonances emerge from her insightful arrangement of the material, that which she has gleaned from nineteenth and early twentieth century sources and, crucially, what she has recorded of the knowledge still accessible from

the late twentieth century. This knowledge is now quickly shifting toward new understandings—new ways in which practitioners are encoding the Cirebon mask for the twenty-first century.

Michael C. Ewing

The University of Melbourne

mce@unimelb.edu.au