Searching for Wayang Golek: Islamic Rod Puppets and Chinese Woodwork in Java

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Abstract

The Wayang golek rod puppet theatre of Sunda in West Java was imported from the coastal (pesisir) area of Java in the nineteenth century. This art uses wooden figures, but in terms of repertoire, is related to the shadow theatre (wayang kulit) of the island. This article describes the construction of puppets and notes the importance of wood/tree as the image of the cosmos via the kayon ("tree of life" puppet). The dance of this tree puppet relates to the banyan tree in traditional thinking. The paper explores the legend of Sunan Kudus, one of the nine wali songo (Islamic "nine saints"), who is accredited with establishing the wooden puppetry in the sixteenth century. The rod puppet art, woodworking, Islamic teaching and Chinese influence are intertwined in early stories of Muslim heritage. Though firm historical data about the rod puppet theatre only began to be recorded in the nineteenth century, families who performed wayang golek in West Java all migrated from the North Coast areas, where Chinese heritage in wood working communities is found and the preference for carved wooden figures was probably affected by the Chinese-Indonesian aesthetics of these enclaves, establishing links between wood puppetry, Islam, and Chinese influence. This study based on anthropological research with puppet masters in West Java, coupled with the history of wood crafting in Java, unpacks metaphors of the banyan tree and redresses the lack of discussion of Chinese contributions to Indonesian wooden puppetry due to Indonesian anti-Siniticism.

Keywords

Wayang golek – banyan – Javanese-Chinese muslims – wooden puppetry
1 Introduction

The dalang (puppet master, customarily male) of the wayang golek rod puppetry of West Java (Indonesia) makes finely carved puppets dance in costumes with the figures’ chests covered with resplendent, intricate beadwork and their hips wrapped in sarongs of bold batik patterns. The figures are, most often, the characters of Indian-derived Mahabharata or Ramayana stories but can also be from the adventures of Amir Hamzah, uncle of the Prophet Mohammed, or other such local legendary or historical personages, such as Panji, a twelfth-century Prince of East Java. Puppets are carved of “puleh” (Alstonia scholaris), “junjing” (Rhodamnia cinerea), “kecape” (Sandoricum kutjape) or other wood species that are light, durable, and not easily ruined by insects. Simple carving hatchets, knives, and chisels made by the local blacksmith are used to hack, incise, and etch. The carver outlines the form on a smooth block, normally using the width of his hand and fingers for measurements, as he sketches body proportions/designs on the block with a pencil. Two fingers width for a lady’s neck and a stretched thumb may yield the curve of the neck for a refined prince. The head is carved first and is the most important part: all the information that is needed to recognize the four main character types (emotionally uncontrolled, strong, semi-refined, refined) is contained in the face (see Fig. 1). Thin eye slits and a gently pointed nose mean a refined figure. Bulging eyes and prominent fangs denote a demon. The identity of the particular character will be clear from the headdress, which corresponds to iconography developed in the hide shadow puppetry (wayang kulit) of the north coast (pasisir) of Java, especially in the areas around the port city of Cirebon, from where wayang golek puppet masters/makers migrated to Highland West Java during the late Dutch colonial era.

After carving the head, the maker works on the torso (hips to shoulders in a single piece) with a hole bored through the center of the body, from the top of the neck down to the bottom. This allows a bamboo rod on which the head-neck is to be mounted to pass through the core of the body. Smaller holes are bored laterally from the neck area, out from each shoulder. Small pieces of wood are carved for the two arms pieces: (1) shoulder to elbow and (2) elbow to fingers. The delicate armbands and bracelets are permanently carved into these arm pieces. The wood is sealed, and figures are carefully painted – today, using store-brought acrylics, but in the past, natural pigments or gold leaf were used for the bodies and faces.

Next, the strings to hold the lower and upper arm pieces together are threaded and then attached to the torso with thin bamboo manipulation rods.
affixed to each hand. The center rod is inserted through the body, forming the “spine,” and the head is mounted on it. The costume and a dance scarf are added. The puppeteer is now ready to perform.

With his third, fourth, and fifth fingers on the spine rod, the puppeteer can make the head swivel gracefully from side to side, and by rotating the trunk around the center rod with thumb and his first finger, he can make the torso and shoulders move in opposition as the character does a graceful walk. The hand rods, in the puppeteer's deft fingers, stretch the arms out to perform graceful swings and dance moves. The doll exudes the illusion of vitality. Adding *gamelan* orchestra music, singing, and story infuse the puppets with life, making them an attraction at important ceremonies – weddings, circumcisions, and village festivals.

The motions of the puppets bear an uncanny resemblance to the wood mask dance (*topeng*) of the area that uses the same four character types as the faces of the puppets (see Foley 1990a,b, 1991). When I was studying the mask dance, my teacher would complain that I looked “too human” and then pick up one of these dancing dolls to show me what I should do: hips and
torso should move as a unit like the golek puppet. My head should swivel gracefully as if atop the thin spine rod. My arms must extend out completely with the strength of wood and my fingers curving back like the carved hands. As the puppet in dance, strives to appear human, the dancer tries to become the wooden doll. Thus the dancer and the puppet meet each other halfway, creating a shared world of beauty, where movement and voice are essentialized and move beyond the everyday. By making dolls dance as a puppeteer and by doing mask dance movements, emulating dolls’s wooden perfection, I eventually found my way into the world of wayang golek. With their rather small stature (0.45–0.9 m), these figures bring the stories of the great heroes, demons, and gods to life, and in the process show us the eternal potential of a human soul.

This article will discuss both (1) the theoretical implications of the tree in the performances of wayang golek of the highland area, and (2) the preference for wood as the material of puppet-making in West Java. My material shows the importance of trees in local thinking and, while the wayang golek shares features with the better-known leather shadow puppetry (wayang kulit) that reaches an apotheosis in Central Java and Bali (but is found all around the Gulf of Thailand and South China Sea – Malaysia, Kalimantan, Lombok), wayang golek’s preference for wood as material for puppetry is a specific North Coast and West Javanese variation. The preference for the three-dimensional, wood figure creates an aesthetic that is more solid and worldly than the two-dimensional, ethereal images of shadow puppetry. This choice of wood may be derived from the influence of Chinese settlers and their descendants, who became important as patrons and performers; perhaps as early as the fifteenth century, but certainly by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but their importance is often overlooked due to ethnic divides.1

1 Anti-Chinese sentiments were caused by Chinese immigrant economic success in the nineteenth and twentieth century creating animosity that helped foster to mass killings of Chinese Indonesians as alleged communists in 1965–1967. This was followed by suppression of all things Chinese in the Suharto period (ending with his overthrow in 1998). As a result, most contemporary Indonesians ignore the Chinese connections to the early Islamic history. These sentiments are probably augmented by the current Islamic Revival that tends to interpret all things Muslim through a narrow frame of contemporary Sunni ideology that comes from the Middle East.
The Origins of Golek

According to tradition (or perhaps myth), *wayang golek* was created by Sunan Kudus in the sixteenth century (some say he died in 1550, although he is also said to have created *wayang golek* in 1584). While the specifics of his life remain shadowy, he is a venerated Muslim saint who helped convert Java to Islam and, like the other saints (*wali songo*, nine saints), he used the arts for this purpose. He created the rod puppet, it is said, so that puppetry could be performed during the day, in contrast to the shadow figures, which could only be played/seen at night. This lore has little connection to the actual practice, given that *wayang golek* at present and in the past, like all forms of *wayang* (traditional theatre), has its important presentations in all-night performances: this is when people are free and the air is cool, allowing for extended shows. The preference for wood as a major material and the aesthetic of the three-dimensional doll delicately shaped by working wood are the significant features of the *wayang golek*.

*Golek* is said to mean “to search” and, significantly, at the end of many Central Javanese shadow plays, the puppeteer manipulates a *golek* figure, which is a three-dimensional female puppet of a courtesan dancer, whose dance is also called “golek.” The figure’s three-dimensional movements seem lifelike and, via the manipulator’s skill, the doll is conferred with the ability to actually flip the dance scarf (*sampur*) wrapped around her waist (as a human dancer does), making this figure seem more realistic than the shadow puppet. Since performances until the Islamic revival of the last century lasted until sunrise, this *golek* doll dance was also probably more visible in the rays of dawn. The origin of the term “golek,” puppeteers say, connotes “to look for mystical knowledge.” These dolls, in the mind of performers, are related to an Islamic pursuit for union and identification with the divine. The use of a beautiful young figure (female or sometimes young male) may relate to the Sufi trope of the beloved as a metaphor/image of the divine with whom the seeker is in love. This image rises frequently in the poetry of Islamic mystics, as exemplified by Rumi, Nizami, and others. *Wayang* arts existed before the arrival of Islam, but were modified in the eras of conversion. They now have inclinations that seem to resonate with pan-Islamic Sufi or mystical ideas but, of course, are very localized in their manifestations.

The idea of using art to symbolize mystical knowledge via a female dancer/doll will not be explored further here (for this, see Foley 2015). Rather let us start with the tree as both a metaphysical and a physical form in this cultural milieu. A tree puppet appears to open and close every show and is
central to understanding Sundanese and Cirebonese (West Javanese) culture and puppetry.

3 From One to Many: the Tree of Life

In the beginning of the play the puppeteer (dalang) sits behind the kayon, the “tree of life” puppet. Though, in dance dramas (wayang wong, “human wayang”) today, one may see the kayon figures made out of wood; in puppetry it is normally made of the hide of a water buffalo, with a horn-spine/rod going up the center of this two-dimensional figure, heavily incised and painted, and in a roughly triangular or leaf shape. The puppeteer will plant the kayon, at the end of the evening, back in the center of his stage space, which is made up of a horizontal banana log (gebog). The performer sits on the ground behind the raised gebog, his head partly visible behind the figures in the scene. He manipulates all the puppets, delivers all the speeches, which he improvises during his performance according to rules of the genre, sings, narrates, and gives the cue (to his gamelan orchestra musicians and one or more female singers) by using a wooden hammer held in his left hand or between his toes and tapping on metal plates, which hang on the side of the puppet storage box.

For the puppeteer, this kayon puppet (also called gunungan or mountain) is full of meaning and serves as a mini mandala. The kayon is a representation of the cosmos and its iconography implies all the diversity of the world, including all the characters and forces that will appear in the play – emotions, elements, directions, etc. In the opening of the performance, as taught to me by Dalang Otong Rasta in lessons in 1978, the puppeteer manipulates this tree figure in a symbolic dance, which marks the playing space with a chakra (+) – to the left, right, and center. After drawing the “+,” he then punches holes at the diagonal points to complete the “eight directions,” and then finally pierces the center. These “nine directions” represent the totality of the world and are correlated with the nine openings in the human body. The puppeteer next traces the name of Allah in Arabic on the banana log with the bottom tip of the spine rod. He bends the top tip of the kayon over his bowed head while visualizing the face of his parents, elder siblings, and teachers, invoking their blessings and powers. Next he holds the tree above his head with the bottom of the manipulation-rod pointing toward his mouth, praying that all power in the universe will stream through the tree puppet and into him, giving him the power to enchant the audience. Finally with a graceful rhythm (used as the characteristic gait for the most refined characters) the tree puppet gently “walks” to the center before
twirling off (the tip of the spine rod revolving in the puppeteers palm). With this final flourish, the “tree of life” leaves the stage.

This tree, as the opening sequence of each wayang golek performance, introduced an important idea of tree as conduit and site for manifestations of power found in most Southeast Asian traditional theatres and correlates to patterns that emerge in other traditional Asian forms (Foley 2002). For example in Japanese noh, the pine tree painted on the back wall of the stage is said to be a remnant from shamanist spirit visitations under a tree at Kasuga Shrine and noh masked plays often depict visitations of iconic beings of another plane. Unpacking the image of the tree as the traditional setting of Asian performance cross-culturally is beyond the scope of this paper, but it seems likely that it is connected to the traditional use of trees and the spaces beneath as the place where audiences gathered for entertaining and ritual performances. The performer’s first task is to honor the space; the tree is a kind of axis mundi, the center of the performance universe. It is a place where the potency of the cosmic can descend and, at least temporarily, connect with our everyday lives.

This kayon tree figure is used later in the play as an all-purpose set piece. Tipped on its side, it can represent a mountain for a character to climb or a throne framing a monarch; planted to the side of the playing space, it may represent a tree for a monkey character to hang from. Sometimes, it flutters as a fiery funeral pyre or is thrust by a character to kill an opponent. As trees themselves take so many forms in our lives, so does the kayon. This figure is also used when the dalang adopts his narrative voice. He holds the tree in front of his face as he speaks; he is the all-knowing storyteller, a role that is also a metaphor for the divine (the dalang represents God) moving humans (who are wayang, mere puppets).

On the front of the kayon (see Fig. 2), one sees a painted tree trunk that rises from a pool of water or garden behind a winged gate. In front of the gate are two ogre-like guards. In the branches of the tree, one often sees monkeys and birds. Above the gate, a water buffalo may be seen in a face-off with a tiger. These animals are significant in local culture, representing the domesticated as well as the wild aspects of nature. At one or more branches of the tree trunk, there is a demonic Kala head. Kala is the demonic god of time. A snake is often seen looped around the trunk. At the very top of the tree is a single lotus blossom. If you hold the kayon up to the human torso, you will see it “fits,” and that the trunk lines up with the spine. Though puppeteers themselves do not use the Indian terminology, I find the snake can be interpreted as the spinal cord with nadi (channels) wherein the kundalini energy rises up for gnosis to occur.
The Kala head(s) is/are generally at places that according to tantric physiology are major chakra points, such as the heart or the throat. The lotus at the top of the trunk is connected to the body exactly where a third eye would be placed – the point which (according to yogic thought), when activated, may lead to enlightenment.

The front side of the puppet is greenish and often full of small animals or birds, while the back is covered with flaming oranges and reds and a large demonic Kala head. Kala is, in actuality, a destructive son of Batara Guru (literally, “Great Teacher,” or Siwa (India’s Shiva)). Later in the play when a weight, a raging fire, or a hurricane wind is needed, the puppeteer will show this reddish side of the tree puppet and use it to smash or sweep characters away. When flipped, the verdant wood becomes the inferno of a forest fire: destruction is the second side of the forest. Of course, in the opening of the play, the lush green-gold side is featured. In the middle of the play, one may see the flame side. However, at the end, the kayon will return to the tree side: a symbol of the green and growing nature of the well-balanced world. This is the tree we cultivate for ourselves every day.
For most members of the audience, the opening kayon dance is just a mark that the performance is beginning. They will listen to the music and glance up now and then. The tree puppet does not demand their attention. It has no narrative to deliver and, to the normal viewer, it merely indicates that the show has begun and, soon, there will be the audience scene in the palace of a king that will let them know in which epic topos (Mahabharata, Ramayana, a chronicle tale) the story will transpire. For most of the performance, the actions of the actual wooden dolls will be featured, and the audience will enjoy their skillful manipulation and appreciate the artistry of the dalang’s story. However, for the puppeteer’s own understanding of life, the tree puppet with its iconography and its attempt to locate the human in relation to the tree is the real story to contemplate. The “tree of life” and its dance serve as a reminder, for the dalang himself, of what it is to be in the world: the relation of the human to things larger – how man is connected to trees, the mountains, and the cosmos. These are the intellectual steps that the performer must take to understand both what it means to be human and to comprehend our relation to nature, earth, and everything that is. The tree will return to the center at the end of the night. The centered kayon with the dalang just behind represents the world returned to balance.

The tree gives shade and protection to our lives, and it is usual that a large banyan would normally grow and spread its shade over the alun-alun (central square) of most villages or towns. The tree/kayon is seen as an element that passes through the three worlds (the underworld of the dead and demonic [ogres at the bottom of the kayon], the world of the living and human civilization [the kayon’s gate/pool] and then rise through the natural world [tree trunk, animals] up towards the divine power [kayon’s lotus, which represents air and sky]): then the banyan drops a new trunk into the ground and rises again. This assimilation – of chthonic, our everyday and cosmic – that which springs up again and again – is represented by the tree puppet and the living tree: the tree is a sign of the whole. The reason the tree puppet is also called a mountain (gunungan) is related to the cycle of life – this moves from lower areas as underworld, through human space as our present reality, and toward heights as touching the divine. On Java most of the peaks that rise above the villages are volcanoes. The top is seen as the catcher of clouds and rains associated with the divine and ancestors. Rain is sent by such forces down the slopes to give life to the villages: the mountain is therefore a symbol, like a tree, of verdant fertility. At the mountain’s base is the ocean, which is seen as a realm of danger, destruction, tsunamis, and earthquakes. The fiery backside of the kayon represents such fearful forces – forest fires, volcanic explosions raining sparks and ash, or lava flow: it is the flipside of the verdant mountain/tree.
In the *kayon*, we correlate with things that we can understand, from the microcosm to the macrocosm. The tree passing from earth to the air, and the mountain, which rises from the sea to the sky, is like the human who contains both positive and evil potentials. This is shown by the *dalang*, who will explore the powerful negative forces (using the lumbering ogre figures on his left hand and his deep voice) and the beneficent figures (smoothly striding, manipulated on his right hand, and speaking in dulcet tones).

4 The Tree as Source

As mentioned earlier, the preeminent tree in Sundanese thinking is the banyan/*waringan*. This tree, which grows tall and yet sends down roots creating new trunks, has an important place in mythology (lore says there is a banyan tree in the moon, which is said to give birth to humans). This banyan helps one think about human propagation. Traditionally, humans were thought to be somehow rebirths of their ancestors, with the ancestor symbolized by the actual afterbirth. This placenta was buried but was thought to return again in the next generation. After death, a person transforms into the life-giving force, bringing new life in the womb of his/her descendent. People in the same lineage were, in the past, believed to be reanimations of their ancestor, with the afterbirth representing the return of that central ancestor. In this cosmology, we are circles of descendants coming down from above, just as the roots of a banyan descend from the central trunk.

As the banyan sends down roots to generate the next circle of new trunks, so do we “drop down” from our ancestors, sending out the next set of roots in and after our own lives. Families are like a giant spreading trees. The protective center trunk emulates how villages ideally grow – children build homes in a circle around the parent’s house; next, their children build around them. This image also influences architecture. The many pillars under the overarching roof of the mosques established by the Islamic saints are an example of this concept. Likewise, the *pendopo* (roofed pavilions) of the palace, with their many pillars, provide us with visual images of these overarching, protective banyan trees. In Java, the concept of the central tree, with rings of secondary and tertiary growth around it, is important for understanding how Javanese culture operates. Like trees, society also comes up from the underworld (death/destruction), reaches up to the sky (death transforming into ethereal ancestor), and then drops down, becoming renewed over and over, albeit always further from the original center. Descendants will take the same journey: they emerge from death as roots in the earth at the time of burial that grow up again, transforming into the divine
ancestor, and then drop down new roots – the descendants from the ancestor are reborn. It is this idea of the tree as a continual circuit, from below-to above-to below that animates the kayon. Though seemingly separable, we are all really outgrowths from one tree. Thus, the kayon is representative of everything – life/death, above/below, male/female, mountain/volcano, and sky/sea – and it represents all the puppets in the puppet chest from demon to divine, which are part of this oneness. Hence, the kayon is the beginning and the end.

The different characters add up to one and have analogs with the parts of the tree. Demons in the show are linked with the ogres at the bottom of the kayon. These figures are dark colored, associated with the south and with fire. Strong characters (gagah) in the show are associated with the middle (water buffalo, tiger, trunk) and they are often in shades of blue or dark orange associated with center and earth. Semi-refined characters are associated with the gate, pool, or the higher branches and are pink or cream faced. Refined characters are associated with the apex, the lotus blossom, and are white or gold faced associated with north and air. The parts of the kayon and the character types stand for: respectively, fire, earth, water, and air/ether. They are different but share an interconnected system. Everything is linked when one sees the big picture (“tree of life”/banyan), though things in daily life may appear to be multitudinous and disconnected.

The repertoire itself, in many ways, operates like the banyan. There are central stories (called pokok or trunk); then branches (carangan) that may share the same hero, but tell of his actions in an invented locale (perhaps winning a new, made-up bride); and finally there are twig (sempalan) stories, which are newly invented by a dalang. If the branch or twig stories become popular and are adopted by other dalang to be performed, over time people will consider these new stories as pokok (trunk). This allows the repertoire, like a banyan tree, to continually grow and generate new centers and new offshoots.

5 Why Wood?

This kayon is made of hide, not wood. This is because this large leaf-like figure would be heavy and not move gracefully, fluttering as the leather kayon can in performances. But for the Sundanese area (highland West Java), wooden puppets are de rigueur for all significant characters. Wayang golek of the highlands of Sunda is historically linked with the north coast. In this pasisir (shore) region, puppet masters used to perform with wooden masks of topeng dance during the day and present shadow figures for shows from the Ramayana and Mahabharata at night. Puppeteers only used wooden puppets for historical
and legendary tales (Panji, Amir Hamzah, etc.) and the latter were generally less popular, though members of the same family might know this repertoire too. Flat wooden puppets (wayang klitik) whose form partly replicates the wayang kulit figures (but with a different repertoire) may have been the first iteration in wood: Raffles, in his *History of Java* (1830), noted that wayang klitik was a popular mode of performance along the north coast for presenting Javanese historical stories and legends in the early nineteenth century. In that same period, Raffles collected figures similar to wayang golek in carving style, but they were sculptures permanently mounted on a base that he ordered for display in Europe and not puppets to manipulate. If the wayang golek indeed existed from the fifteenth/sixteenth century (as the story of Sunan Kudus indicates, but Raffles in his encyclopedic work neglects) then the form must have been largely dormant by the early eighteenth century.

In the ensuing centuries these doll figures became popular in different ways. One way was as the courtesan dancer-doll puppet used in the Central Javanese wayang kulit “Golek” dance presented at the end of each shadow puppet show. A second way was by being included in some repertoires along the north coast. Finally, the doll puppet emerged as a major entertainment form for the masses in the Sundanese highlands around 1850. During this time, puppeteers from the coast migrated inland from *pasisir* cities near Cirebon or Jepara. They began using wood puppets when presenting Hindu epic stories, which on the North coast are still performed with shadow puppets. One can assume that this was a series of innovations made by carver/performers, since traditionally most puppeteers made their own figures.

First, they made flat wooden figures of wayang klitik. These then evolved into more full-bodied figures, allowing for more realistic manipulation. This innovation occurred while puppeteer families were still living in the *pasisir* area, where even today the historical and legendary tales (of Panji, Damar Wulan, Amir Hamzah, etc.) are told with wayang golek in a form called wayang golek or wayang cepak (i.e., *wayang* in Javanese dress). This repertoire overlaps significantly with the one described by Raffles for wayang klitik in the early 1800s. Thus, it seems that wayang klitik performers were extending their first experiments in wooden puppets by carving more elaborate figures and developing more realistic manipulation by emulating the wooden mask dance tradition, which Raffles also noted. The carvers were probably either themselves dalang performers or were born into dalang families.

Next, these puppeteers from the *pasisir*, who now had expertise both in shadow puppetry (for *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*) and three-dimensional wayang cepak (for local legends or Amir Hamzah tales), started migrating to the Sundanese highlands. Some were invited to live near the regent’s (governor)
palaces in the highlands, where they provided entertainment for aristocrats. Others were farmer *dalang* who found time during the dry season to present and hoped for economic rewards for their short performance tours. Until the mid-nineteenth century, puppeteers were still using the Javanese language of the coast and mostly performed using leather puppets. However, as they settled in the highlands, they adopted the Sundanese language and soon performed with only rod puppets, presenting an almost exclusive *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* repertoire that brought them larger audiences. The true popularity of these rod puppets has been observed in the last 175 years in the Sundanese highlands of West Java.

6 Chinese Connections

I believe that the preference for wooden figures developed at least in part due to Chinese influences, especially from south China (Guangdong-Fujian-Zhejiang-Jiangsu-Yangzhou). This region of China has been a source of trade and migration to the north coast of Java since the Tang dynasty (618–907) and an important region for both wood technology and wooden puppetry (marionette, rod, and glove). Early trade with China reached a high point in the beginning of Ming era, when Zheng He and his mariners took multiple voyages to Java (1405–1434). This is when the wooden rod puppet theatre is said to have originated (fifteenth-sixteenth centuries) with Sunan Kudus. In legends, he is linked to the Chinese wood carvers. Indeed, there is evidence in accounts that a number of the *wali songo*, the nine Islamic saints, were ethnically Chinese Muslims.

I begin with older evidence of links between Java and China, Islam and the religions of China, and the architecture and arts of the area around the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea in the period of these saints (fifteenth-sixteenth centuries). If indeed *wayang golek* originated then, it seems likely there were Chinese influences involved. However, there is little physical evidence of wooden *golek* puppets from this era. By contrast, there is considerable evidence of the Chinese presence and participation in Indonesian culture throughout the Qing era. Immigrants to Java came from this Southern China region, where woodworking, wooden puppetry, and patronage of the arts for luck and ritual were intertwined. While the earliest period of potential cultural interaction may remain indistinct and speculative, there is little doubt that carving and three-dimensional puppetry received an additional boost from Chinese influences during the Qing migration. This can help explain why doll puppetry blossomed along the coast in this era and in the highlands during
the late colonial period. Given the waves of Chinese going south over many centuries, it seems clear that, as President Abdurrahman Wahid (who came to power after Suharto’s fall in 1998) noted, there is “nobody in Indonesia who is not Chinese” (quoted in Zhuang Wubin 2007/2009).

Connections in Ming Dynasty

Were the walis who converted Java to Islam and reportedly used the arts in proselytizing Indonesians of Chinese heritage? Perhaps – histories sometimes give us Chinese names for these men and some of their lives feature stories of Chinese mothers. These merchants-saints-political rulers who rose in ports along the shore were definitely involved in a trade network that included China, and early reports of Western (Marco Polo) and Chinese (Ma Huan) travelers of the era noted that many of the Chinese who settled in the Sumatra or Javanese port cities were Muslims.

A central wali (saint), Sunan Ampel (Chinese name, Bong Swi Ho, 1401–1481), is said by some chroniclers to have been of Chinese or part-Chinese heritage (though others say Persian descent). Born in Champa (present-day Vietnam), he migrated to the area near Surabaya (Gresik). He became a progenitor and/or teacher of many of the other wali. His daughter married Sunan Ngdung (Chinese name said to be Yap), who was nephew, student, and son-in-law to Sunan Ampel. Ampel’s grandson was Sunan Kudus, wayang golek’s supposed creator. There is indeed perhaps some Persian/Shia connection, as was common for Chinese Muslims of the Ming era: Sunan Kudus’s Arabic name was Ja’far Shadiq, a name borrowed from the sixth Shia Imam (83–148 AH/702–765 CE). To the present, the curtains of Sunan Kudus’ tomb are replaced each 10 Muhharam, the day of mourning for Hussein (the third Shia Imam killed at Karbala on that day in 61 AH /680 CE). Does this mean the first dalang of wayang golek may have been of Chinese Shia descent?

While this may be speculative, there is another clear Sinitic clue in the story – wood working. Sunan Kudus, in addition to studying with the various wali/saints in his family, had an additional teacher who taught him and all others in Kudus both Islam and wood carving. Kyai The Ling Sing (current Indonesian spelling used for Chinese name), according to stories, came with the fleet of Zheng He in 1405 but stayed in Java to teach Islam and wood craft. Other wood working sites along the coast have similar stories of Chinese artists combining woodworking and the teachings of Islam. For example, near Kudus is Jepara, another center for wood puppetry and woodworking on the coast. Here there is a similar story of a Muslim Chinese carver, Tji Wie Gwe (Javanese...
name, Sungging Badar Duwung), the adoptive father of the ruler/founder on Jepara – Prince Kaliyamat (Chinese name Wing Tan/Tjie Bin Thang). The carver and prince-to-be were supposedly shipwrecked on Java and joined the Islamic circle that included Sunan Kudus. Tji Wie Gwe/Sungging Badar Duwung is said to have carved an exact replica of the Majapahit throne used by the last major Hindu-Buddhist ruler of Java (Brawijaya v1) and Raden Pateh, the first Islamic ruler of the area. Raden Pateh (Chinese name, Cek Ko-po) took power after the defeat of Brawijaya v1, the last ruler of Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit, and established the Islamic Kingdom of Demak on the north coast. Demak's mosque was the first one built in Java and it is said that Sunan Kudus' father was the second Imam there.

In these stories, we find some combination of Chinese heritage, Islam, and wood arts interlinked in the era of *wali*. These histories are admittedly limited in detail, yet some physical remains from the period of the *wali* show that Chinese Muslim influences mixed with local traditions in material elements, owing to the emerging Javanese-Muslim culture.

The architecture, pottery, and stories of trips to China or of Chinese wives of Javanese Muslims are frequently part of the *wali* lore. The early mosques and graves of the *wali* along the north coast (Cirebon to Demak) may be related to or descended from structures in Southern China Ming ports. The Chinese settlers around the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea probably brought woodworking and architecture skills; traders supplied pottery from kilns in China; and intermarriage between local women and Chinese was common.

The architecture of China's Guanzhou Huaisheng Mosque, rebuilt in 1695 after a fire, may still reflect in part the architecture of its predecessor, the first mosque in China, which was built in the Tang era. It has the kind of layered roof that we see in the oldest Javanese mosques. Legend has it that the Grand Mosque of Demak was built in a single night with Sunan Ampel, his son Sunan Bonang, Sunan Gunung Jati, and Sunan Kalijaga each making one of the four major pillars with the help of the other *wali songo* in 1477. The mosque in Cirebon is likewise credited to *wali songo* carpentry and is reported to have been built in 1489. Architecture of the oldest mosques on the sea routes around the Gulf of Thailand resembles these two Javanese models, such as the oldest mosque in Kelantan, Malaysia at Kampung Laut (fifteenth century, but restored in the eighteenth) (Bougas 1992), and Patani, Thailand at Surau Aur (seventeenth century). These old mosques are part of a circum-Gulf of Thailand Islamic architecture style, which seems to be a mixture of Sinitic and indigenous features that required carpentry skills perhaps honed in coastal China. The building implies that Islam in this region may be more affected by Chinese models and did not take the domed mosques from the Middle East.
Chinese expertise in woodworking was considerable during the era of Islamization. We know, for example, that the Chinese Muslim mariner general Zheng He (1371–1433/1435) took his treasure ships to Java in the early fifteenth century. His chronicler Ma Huan reported large Chinese Muslim populations in the Surabaya area and other ports visited – approximately one thousand families for each port. Chinese shipbuilding was at that time more advanced than anywhere else in the world. Zheng He’s vessels were 122 m long, 49 m wide, double hulled, and several stories high, with nine masts, many sails, and luxurious staterooms complete with balconies (Gronewald 2009). The accounts and stories of Sinitic woodworkers who taught Islam and helped forge Islamic kingdoms on Java are quite likely rooted in Ming immigration to Indonesia.

Decorative features of buildings and other applied arts are evidence of both trade and cultural cross-fertilization. Chinese plates adorn the walls of the wali’s tombs and Chinese jars are used for ablutions at, for example, the grave of Sunan Gunung Jati (1448–1468), the founder of Cirebon. For his annual remembrance during Mulud (Birthday of the Prophet) in Cirebon, the Panjang Jimat which are “Heirloom Treasures” are brought out. These large Ming-era plates and dishes, which hold triangular rice “mountains” (linked to kayon/gunungan imagery) are used for annual ceremonies. These Chinese artifacts are said to be the legacy (pininggalan) of the wali. Today Javanese Muslims fight for a few grains from these rice mountains for blessings and good luck for the coming year.

In addition, wali and other figures of early Islam on Java are said to have married Chinese women; for example, Cirebon’s ruler the saint Sunan Gunung Jati married a Chinese consort, which Javanese claim to be the Chinese Princess Ong Tien Nio, Emperor Hongxi’s daughter.² While the chronology of the nine saints is imperfect, demographic, and cultural patterns repeat patterns of Chinese ethnicity, woodworking, and Islamization. Chinese architecture, artifacts, and Chinese interpretations of Islam were part of the cultural formation of the north coast of Java in the period of Islamization and may have helped paved the way for the wooden puppet tradition.

² Admittedly, dates of Sunan Gunung Jati’s storied visit to teach Islam in China and his marriage date to Ong Tien (1481) do not line up with the dates of Hongxi who died in 1425. It seems likely this “Chinese Princess” was just from an aristocratic Champa Chinese family. Her tomb in Cirebon is a special site of pilgrimage for Chinese-Indonesian Muslims. The story says Gunung Jati took Islam to China, but history tells us that was already there. In the stories they say that Gunung Jati converted Ong Tien through his magical powers. For example, reportedly Ong Tien became miraculously pregnant when Gunung Jati said that she was with child. This caused her to fall in love with him and follow him to Java.
8 Connections in the Colonial Era

Clearer Chinese connections existed from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onwards. During the late Ching period, many Chinese people settled in Java for economic advancement, inter-married, and became the acculturated Peranakan Chinese of the region. These assimilated Chinese married local women, spoke Javanese, and engaged in Javanese life and culture. In the Chinese communities throughout south China around Fujian from where they came, wood is favored for marionette, rod, and hand puppetry. Arriving in Indonesia and other places in Southeast Asia, these were migrants from the coastal regions of Southern China, some of them being skilled wood workers. Tales like *Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, or *Investiture of the Gods* were done with the bag rod puppets (known as *hun krabok* in Thailand, Laos) or glove puppets (*budaixi*, known as *po the hee* in Malaya and Dutch East Indies). Shows were performed for Chinese temple festival performances for Hungry Ghost Festivals throughout Nanyang as Southeast Asia was known to Chinese (Purwoseputro 2014; Fushiki & Ruisendaal 2016). This repertoire remained part of such Chinese Indonesian festivities in Indonesia until the late 1960s, when Suharto banned these performances and all other manifestations of Chinese culture (but these have been revived since 2000, when the ban was lifted). Both immigrants and traveling groups from Fujian used wooden marionettes for Daoist rituals and glove-and-rod puppets for entertainments in their Southeast Asian communities. But soon immigrants were blending their traditions and arts of the older Chinese diaspora as tastes in arts morphed. At present, there are many dancers, *dalang*, and visual artists who (when the political atmosphere is not too volatile) acknowledge their Chinese ancestry. Perhaps temple performances related to Buddhist activities have remained conservative, keeping to Chinese stories in their repertoire, but as the immigrant groups grew more Indonesian, especially as they moved out of the coastal enclaves with large Chinese Indonesian populations, entertainment for life cycle events became localized and more diverse. With easier transportation around Java on roads built by the colonial government, the talented puppeteers could tour widely and soon Chinese Indonesians, like the general population, preferred the more elongated figures of *wayang* and the robust stories of the Hindu-Buddhist or local culture.

The woodworking skills that first gave life to the present *wayang golek* complex in the Sundanese highlands came from this *pasisir* region where, as seen above, Chinese influence has since the time of the *wali* been important and closely linked with wood carving. Carver-*dalang* artists along the north coast borrowed leather puppet iconography and applied it to wooden puppet
performance. The use of figures’ legs seems to resemble Chinese techniques. The emotionally-uninhibited king Kelana and the important clown Lam Si Jang often have a dangling leg which hangs beneath their sarong when not needed but can be extended to make a dance pose in a manner reminiscent of the manipulation of legs in *budaixi*.

It is to be noted that the *wayang golek* as we now know it, was not popularized in a day. First came flat wooden figures of *wayang klitik*, telling stories from local legends; it was confined to the coastal areas. Then came the rounder figures of *wayang cepak* that retained the *wayang klitik* story repertory. When *dalang*, who possessed carving and performance skills, migrated from the coast to the highlands of Sunda in the nineteenth century, the Sundanese tradition of *wayang golek* was born. This highland area was previously known for solo storytelling but had at the time no puppet/mask/figural tradition of its own. As artists moved into the mountain areas, puppeteers shifted to the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* narratives and copied the iconography from the shadow figures when they carved the figures.

9 Conclusion

This report merely begins exploration of the South China-*pasisir*-Sunda (West Java) connection in puppetry and wood arts. In searching for and researching *golek*, I would assert that Chinese-Indonesian woodworking helped create this form *wayang*. The three dimensional, more realistic figures that appealed to audiences of South China were further refined along the coast of Java. With an Indian epic repertoire, these figures were imported by *dalang* to the highlands and embraced by the Sundanese speaking population of the highlands of West Java. This mixture of indigenous and immigrant-settler aesthetics created the important art of Sundanese *wayang golek* (Fig. 3) which, until the beginning of the twentieth-first century, was the pre-eminent theatre genre of West Java. Important puppeteers were universally known, the way pop stars are known today in the USA or Europe.

When I undertook research on this paper in 2017, I asked Dalang Iden Sunarya, the oldest living member of the Sunarya family that provided the world with the greatest Sundanese puppetry stars from 1950s to the present, about possible Chinese roots and his family’s migration from the *pasisir* to the highland four generations ago. He pointed to his eye fold and said in a low voice, “Sebetulnya keturunan cina” (In truth, we are of Chinese descent). The populist tone of his father, Dalang Abeng Sunarya, was a hallmark of the post WW II era. Dalang Iden and his brother Dalang Asep Sunandar had
told me in 1978 of the night anti-PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia, Indonesian Communist Party) mobsters had threatened their father’s life in 1967. Now it all made sense. They said that those who were accusing their father of being “PKI” had slunk away, when the gun the shooter had pointed at Abah just clicked and failed to fire. This was, they explained, because of Abah’s spiritual power. This family of dalang was Chinese-Indonesian, so of course they had been suspected.
In the time of Cold War in the late 1960s, as the red-orange side of the *kayon* shows, violence was pervasive in Java and nothing was sure. But the power that Abah had attained by playing the *wayang*, by dancing the *kayon*, had saved him and his family in that crucial hour. The *dalang* is supposed always to be able to control and flip the orange side of the *kayon* back to green. The *dalang* Abah Sunarya protected himself and his family by the understanding he got from performing *wayang*, his understanding of the “tree of life” (Fig. 4).

As I left the house after this 2017 interview, I walked the lane from the puppeteer’s compound, past the grave of Dalang Johari, Abah’s own father. I remembered the Mulud celebration of the Prophet’s birthday when Abah had taken me along with his sons and other *wayang* students to the grave of Dalang Johari, who I was told had migrated as a child with his own *dalang* father from *pasisir*, the north coast. That day, in 1978, I saw a tree growing from the grave, right where the heart of the dead puppet master would have been. Abah took water and poured it at tree base. Each of us, eldest to youngest, bent down and cupped our hand, and drank some of the water pooled at the roots. We all knew this ceremony was to make us better puppet carvers and
performers who truly understood the puppet art. Looking at the tree I thought of the *kayon*. Rejoining the circle of living puppeteers/descendants circled round the ancestor-teacher's grave, I thought of the banyan tree, dropping down roots from above, rooting, and then growing up once more in a looping of life. By studying *wayang golek* I had become part of this interconnected tree of life.

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**References**


