

# RAMAYANA AND ANIMISM IN *WAYANG* PUPPET THEATRE

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**ABSTRACT:** Traditions of *wayang* puppetry in Indonesia realize what Philippe Descola refers to as an «animist ontology». Not only human figures, but also what Tim Ingold calls «nonhuman persons», including personal possessions, landforms, and animals, possess consciousness and interiority. Among *wayang*'s diverse story sources, the Ramayana stands out for its animistic qualities. Episodes depict interactions between humans, ogres, monkeys, deities, and other nonhuman persons, activating the potential of the medium for representing transformation and theatrically mining the suspension of natural laws. This essay, based on ongoing research into the *wayang* collection of Yale University Art Gallery, examines how the characters of the Ramayana reflect shifting theatrical styles and animistic beliefs. Analysis of these historical puppets is followed by an exploration of an experimental 2023 Ramayana production originated at the University of Connecticut hybridizing *wayang* with the *tholpavakoothu* shadow puppet tradition of Kerala, India, in which the epic is retold from the perspective of the trees and wood inhabiting it.

**KEY-WORDS:** Ramayana, *wayang*, animism, *tholpavakoothu*, Indonesia, puppets

**RIASSUNTO:** Le tradizioni delle marionette *wayang* in Indonesia realizzano quella che Philippe Descola definisce come una «animist ontology». Non solo gli esseri umani, ma anche quelle a cui Tim Ingold si riferisce come «persone non umane», compresi gli oggetti, i territori geografici, e gli animali, possiedono coscienza e interiorità. Il Ramayana si distingue tra le diverse fonti narrative del *wayang* per le sue qualità animistiche. Gli episodi descrivono interazioni tra umani, orchi, scimmie, divinità e altre persone non umane, sfruttando la capacità delle marionette di rappresentare la trasformazione ed esplorando teatralmente la sospensione delle leggi naturali. Questo saggio, basato sulla ricerca in corso sulla collezione *wayang* della Yale University Art Gallery, esamina come i personaggi del Ramayana riflettono i mutevoli stili teatrali e le credenze animistiche. L'analisi di queste marionette storiche è seguita dall'esplorazione di una produzione sperimentale ispirata



al Ramayana del 2023 realizzata presso l'Università del Connecticut, che ibrida il *wayang* con la tradizione delle marionette ombra *tholpavakoothu* del Kerala, in India, in cui l'epopea viene raccontata dalla prospettiva degli alberi e dei boschi che lo popolano.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Ramayana, *wayang*, animismo, Indonesia, marionette

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Anthropology in recent decades has made strides in «reclaiming» the concept of animism from the dustbins of evolutionary anthropology.<sup>1</sup> Nineteenth-century European anthropologists, starting with Sir Edward Tylor, considered the belief that objects and animals might have a soul and that life pervades all of nature as an «epistemological failure».<sup>2</sup> In contrast, many anthropologists today, in line with object-oriented-ontology, actor-network-theory, and other theoretical positions that recognize the importance of granting agency to things other than human beings, see an animist worldview as not just a feature of “primitive religion” but as a strategy for achieving reciprocity between the human and non-human world. For the French anthropologist Philippe Descola, animism is «a kind of objectification of nature [which] endows natural beings not only with human dispositions, granting them the status of persons with human emotions and often the ability to talk, but also with social attributes – a hierarchy of positions, behaviours based on kinship, respect for certain norms of conduct».<sup>3</sup> Just as in some legal systems a natural entity such as a river can be recognized as a judicial person in order to protect it against pollution or other forms of degradation, the attribution of feelings and responses to non-humans is not a «pathetic fallacy» but rather a step towards the full recognition of interdependence with the natural world.

In this essay, I propose to consider *wayang*, a raft of puppet theaters and related performance forms originating in the Southeast Asian nation of Indonesia, as a form of animist theatre. While performed in Indonesia by and for Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists,

<sup>1</sup> STENGERS 2012.

<sup>2</sup> BIRD-DAVID 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Descola qtd. INGOLD 2000:106.

and Christians, *wayang* plays present essentially an «animist ontology», braiding entertainment and ritual efficacy.<sup>4</sup> Performances are occasioned by communal celebrations and rites of passages such as planting and harvest festivities, commemoration of ancestors, tooth filings, circumcisions, weddings, birthdays, thanksgiving for fishing, exorcism, completion of building projects, release from vows, pregnancy rites, and rites honoring the first time a baby sets foot on the ground or has a haircut. Performances aim to propitiate spirits, venerate ancestors, retell myths and legends, visualize the demonic and the divine, and remind audiences of their ethical duties, behavioral norms, and spiritual values. As vehicles for summoning unseen forces, the puppets themselves are sacred. The puppet, as what performance theorist Joe Roach calls an «effigy», summons through a process of «surrogation» historical or mythical figures at a remove. The *kayon*, a tree of life figure that opens and closes performances and acts as an all-purpose stage property, is an *axis mundi*, a representation of passage from the chthonic and demonic domain, through the middle world of humans, up to the celestial plane.

This does not imply that performing *wayang* should be equated with the worship of nature spirits. These beings – such as Dewi Sri, the rice goddess – do appear in *wayang* plays, but they are generally not revered as deities.<sup>5</sup> Rather, for many Javanese Muslim puppeteers, for example, they are invoked as natural symbols in the service of collective well-being. As one senior puppeteer explained it to me, the ritual drama of *Mapag Sri* ('Greeting Sri') which concerns the rice goddess Sri and the origins of agriculture, sponsored annually by agricultural villages in the Cirebon region of West Java, is a collective search for «goodness, a search for purity, a search for God's blessings. For *mapag* means 'to follow', while *sri* is 'purity'. So with *Mapag Sri* the symbolic goal is for us, as God's creations, to strive for goodness, for peace, for happiness, for salvation».<sup>6</sup>

But in *wayang* mythology, Sri is not only a symbol for the good, she is also a particular kind of being, a *dewi* or *bathari*, who in *wayang* enters into dialogue with other

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. DESCOLA 2013: 129-143.

<sup>5</sup> Even in Bali, a majority Hindu island, the gods and nature spirits are prone to faults.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Sukarta at his home in Bongas, Majalengka on 25 June 2019: «kebecikan, nggayuh kealusan, nggayuh ridhoeng Pengeran. Mapag – nusul, Sri iku alus. Dados Mapag Sri ku tujuane sih dados, 'ayulah, kula sageda makhlukeng Pangeran, ayo nggayuh kebecikan, mamrih keslametan, mamrih kebegjan, mamrih kerahyuan,' simbolnya seperti itu».

beings, human and non-human alike. The classical *wayang kulit* theatre of Java has been famously analyzed by Ben Anderson as a vehicle for inculcating tolerance and recognizing the value of different modes of behavior and associated character types in Javanese society.<sup>7</sup> But *wayang* as a representational system encompasses a far wider gamut of beings – representing not only human figures from the prenatal stages to the moment of death, but also what Tim Ingold calls «nonhuman persons».<sup>8</sup> Gods, ogres, demons, and a variety of spirits feature prominently in many plays, and a whole menagerie of chimerical animals and mythical beasts populate *wayang* plays. Such non-human persons, from humanoids and animals to weapons and even mountains, can be depicted as possessing consciousness and interiority. Owners can have conversations with their weapons, who can act as their envoys or surrogates in some cases. Kresna’s loquacious magical disk Cakra Baswara is one such sentient weapon. A horse can hitch itself to a chariot and rally to rescue its master. There is an understanding that the self and body are not coterminous. Humans can metamorph (*ngalihwarna*) into an animal or flower, or can be possessed (*ngrendhon*) by the living or the dead, or enlarge into fearsome giants when enraged beyond human capacities (*tiwikrama*).

Certain puppets are depicted as being in the process of changing from one state to another. One of these is a variant of Bathara Guru melding into clouds [Figure 1]. This puppet, which appears in *wayang* plays in East Java and Madura when the heavenly teacher (or Shiva to South Asians) descends from his heaven to the earth, models an esoteric practice known as *bhuvanaśarīra* (‘the body-as-world’) associated with Shaivism.<sup>9</sup> The Singaporean scholar and artist Tan Zi Hao has referred to this as an instance of «self-dissolution».<sup>10</sup> Characters upon dying can transform into a rice field or an animal, merge body-and-soul into another character, or reincarnate. Part of the power of the great warrior Gatotkaca, who is of mixed human and ogre descent, is due to the fact that his ogre uncles have all taken up residence in various parts of his body after Gatotkaca defeated them in battle. These uncles are prone to escaping from the confines of Gatotkaca’s body

<sup>7</sup> ANDERSON 1965.

<sup>8</sup> INGOLD 2000: 92.

<sup>9</sup> ACRI 2019: 294.

<sup>10</sup> TAN ZI HAO 2019: 131f.

from time to time, creating havoc for their nephew.

Among the various cycles of plays that make up *wayang*'s core repertoire, animist ideas and scenarios most thoroughly infuse the Ramayana cycle. Examined as a whole, the Ramayana is probably the most popular story source for shadow puppetry throughout South and Southeast Asia, enacted in forms as diverse as *tholpavakoothu*, a ritual shadow theatre performed in temples of Kerala, India; *sbeik thom*, the large-scale shadow theatre of Cambodia; and *wayang Siam*, the folk shadow theatre of the northernmost Malaysian state of Kelantan.

The Ramayana narrates the story of the kidnapping of the princess Sinta by the covetous demon king Rahwana, and the war that Sinta's husband Rama and a simian army wage to retrieve her.<sup>11</sup> The other major story source for *wayang* in Java, Bali, and other Indonesian islands is the Mahabharata, which is at its core a tale about conflict and war in an extended family of humans. The Ramayana, in contrast, narrates tales of interactions between and among humans, ogres, animals, and other nonhuman persons. It activates the potential of the medium for transformation and the suspension of natural laws. In the remainder of this essay, I propose to examine puppet representations of the Ramayana's main characters and character-types to see how they embody an animist ontology, before turning to a recent intercultural experiment that amplifies the Ramayana's animist themes and ideas.



Fig. 1. Bathara Guru melding into clouds, from a set of puppets formerly in the collection of a Buddhist temple in Pamekasan, Madura. Yale University Art Gallery, The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection of Indonesian Puppets.

<sup>11</sup> Rahwana is known as Ravana in South Asia while Sinta is Sita.

## 1. ANOMAN

One of the most impressive and extensive pre-modern visual representations of the Ramayana are the stone reliefs of the ancient state temple of Majapahit known as *Candi Panataran*. This temple, located near the present-day city of Blitar in East Java, was in use and under constant construction between 1197 and 1454 CE.<sup>12</sup> In a sequence of 106 panels carved into the stone walls of the main temple, we encounter several episodes from the Ramayana, mostly representations of the plays known today as *Anoman Duta* ('Anoman, the Envoy') and *Rama Tambak* ('Rama Builds a Causeway').<sup>13</sup> The action takes place in a landscape that is alive, with trees and rock formations sporting demonic faces, a representational style described as «magicism» by Dutch archaeologist Willem Stutterheim.<sup>14</sup> Though Rama is the Ramayana's titular character, it is the sentient ape Anoman, Rama's trusted aide-de-camp and general, who occupies center stage in the reliefs. We marvel at the dexterity of the monkey-warrior in his mission from Rama to ascertain his kidnapped wife's condition. Anoman is shown jumping around, flying through clouds, perching atop a tree, shrinking and expanding in size, uprooting and brandishing a tree to threaten his enemies, Rahwana's demonic hordes. Anoman traverses different domains, undertaking a solo, shaman-like journey into a demonic realm, equally at home beneath the sea and flying the clouds, standing proud on land and swinging adroitly through the trees. Some scholars have speculated about the existence of a cult of Anoman in pre-modern Java that emphasized his role as an «intermediary between humans and the Divine».<sup>15</sup>

Anoman remains a beloved and central character in modern and contemporary Indonesia. Rama and Sinta generally are depicted blandly in *wayang* as paragons of virtue and a symbol of heterosexual love. In contrast, Anoman is often a trickster character, proud and sometimes even arrogant, whose sexual impulses repeatedly cross species boundaries. Some Javanese *dhalang* ('puppeteers') not only include him in Ramayana plays but also find ways to introduce him into Mahabharata plays as well. These *dhalang*

<sup>12</sup> KINNEY 2003: 179-213; STUTTERHEIM 1989: 149-160, plates 105-210.

<sup>13</sup> Anoman is also known as Hanoman or Hanuman.

<sup>14</sup> STUTTERHEIM 1989.

<sup>15</sup> KIEVEN 2010: 229.

tend to be renowned for their dexterous monkey movements and energetic monkey voices and are branded generically as *dhalang kethek* ('monkey puppeteers'). The importance of the character in Indonesia's multiple *wayang* traditions can be seen in the wide variety of Anoman puppets in the Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection of Indonesian Puppets at Yale University Art Gallery.<sup>16</sup>

The popularity of the character of Anoman means that he is represented in the collection in various puppet styles – including dozens of *wayang kulit* ('shadow puppets' [see Figure 2]) and *wayang golek* ('rod puppets'), as well as a smaller number of *wayang krucil* or flat rod puppets. Regardless of the puppet form or regional style, there are some constant features of Anoman as a *wayang* puppet. His face always has simian characteristics – with an extended mouth, sharp teeth or fangs, a snout-like nose. A tail wraps around his body. His skin is white, with black hair in spots. The rest of his features and his costume and accessories are all humanoid. This mixed human-animal iconography is a reflection of Anoman's parentage. In some tellings, he was born from the union of Rama and Sinta when they were cursed for a time to be monkeys. In others, his mother is the part-simian Anjani and his father is none other than Bathara Guru, the Divine Teacher.

One version of Anoman's origin begins with the two sons of the sage Gotama, Guwarsa and Guwarsi, who fight over a locket belonging to their mother Olya.<sup>17</sup> Gotama learns of the conflict and opens the locket only to discover a love letter to Olya from the sun god Surya. Gotama curses Olya and she becomes a statue. He then throws the lock-

<sup>16</sup> The Angst collection was built up over four decades as a study collection – the product of Swiss collector Walter Angst's systematic collecting of puppets representing all the major traditions of puppetry practiced in western Indonesia. Our current estimate is that the collection has in excess of 23,000 puppets: more than 120 full sets of puppets in their original boxes, and thousands more puppets collected individually or in small groups. This is the largest collection of *wayang* in the world and the largest collection of puppets of any sort in the United States. Puppets in the collection are accompanied by detailed notes on their provenance. Most puppets in the collection are identified by character name, regional style, name of the puppeteer who used them, and the rough date of making. For some, we also know the names of the craftsmen who made and designed them. Yale University Art Gallery's generous open access policy means that images of these puppets can be freely shared online or in publications without the need for permission or attribution.

<sup>17</sup> There is no single authoritative telling of the Ramayana in Indonesia. My account is based primarily on NURIYA nd, a manuscript that has served as an important reference for puppeteers in the Cirebon-Indramayu region where I studied *wayang kulit* for much of the 1990s and early 2000s. Nuriya's son, Taham (1934-2014), was among the best known puppeteers of his generation, and trained dozens of puppeteers in his *sanggar* ('art studio') Mulya Bhakti, founded in 1983.

et away and it transforms into a magical lake. Guwarsa and Guwarsi continue their contest for the locket and dive into the lake, while their sister Anjani follows them and bathes her face, lower arms, and lower legs in the magic waters. Gotama curses them, saying that his children's behavior is fit for monkeys. Guwarsa and Guwarsi transform into monkeys while all the parts of Anjani's body that she washed become simian. The children beg their father to reverse the magic but a sage's word is irrevocable. Gotama advises them to undertake harsh devotions as penance and gives new names to the boys. Guwarsa, renamed Subali, does the devotion of the



*Fig. 2.* Anoman, the white ape from the Kyai Nugroho set of puppets, commissioned from Ki Kertiwanda by Prince Tejakusuma of Yogyakarta circa 1937. Yale University Art Gallery, The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection of Indonesian Puppets, 2018.130.1.20

bat, hanging upside down atop Mount Ronya Pringga and venturing forth for food only at night. Minantara, renamed Sugriwa, conducts the devotion of the deer, which means wandering through the forest and only eating things growing naturally. Anjani conducts the devotions of the frog, half-submerged in water with her mouth always open, eating only flotsam and jetsam.

Flying through the heavens, Bathara Guru catches sight of the naked Anjani meditating in a stream. The Divine Teacher becomes so excited he emits an explosion of lust. The open-mouthed Anjani swallows his seed and she becomes pregnant. She later gives birth to Anoman, the white monkey, who is brought up by Bayu, the god of the wind, and is recognized as Bayu's god son.

Like Bayu and other god sons of Bayu, including Bima, Anoman has extended thumb nails. These razor-sharp nails, Kuku Pancanaka, are both a sign of virility and potent weapons. There are many plays in which the god sons of Bayu band together. In one episode of the Ramayana, Anoman's magical leap or flight to the island nation of Alengka



is interrupted by an excursion to the talking mountain Gunung Maenaka, another incarnation of Bayu. Maenaka cautions Anoman to be aware that Alengka is guarded not only on land but also by creatures in the sea, and so he should not fly too close to the water. The proud Anoman does not heed this advice, leading to an epic fight with the sea monsters off Alengka's coast. Anoman is swallowed alive by one of them and uses his Kuku Pancanaka nails to tear the monster to pieces from within. In some tellings, sticking close to the surf also causes Anoman to be spotted by a beautiful mermaid, leading to one of Anoman's many unions with a non-human being.

Another of Anoman's major powers is to transform his size – shrinking in size when required and becoming a giant or *tiwikrama* when enraged in combat. A set of Ramayana puppets commissioned from the Kediri-based puppet innovator Ki Djoko Langgeng in the 1980s by the well-known puppeteer Ki Gondarman and subsequently acquired by Ki Manteb Soedarsono, one of Java's most popular puppeteers, has both a giant-sized Anoman and a super-giant-sized Anoman. Contemporary renditions of Anoman, such as Djoko Langgeng's, often show him as a redhead. This innovation dates from around 1980 – puppeteers say his red hair is a reminder of the famous scene in which Anoman is bound in Alengka and set afire. He escapes his bonds and with his long tail on fire burns down half of Alengka. Red-haired Anoman puppets were all the rage in Solo in the late 1980s, the time and place where I began my own puppetry studies, and later spread to other parts of Java due to the dominance of Solo-style *wayang* in the mass media. In East Javanese traditions, in contrast, Anoman Tiwikirama puppets feature articulated tails, which can be manipulated in performance to strike down enemies or set buildings afire.

Anoman is so powerful that his life extends well beyond that of other Ramayana characters. In Javanese versions of the Ramayana, after Rama defeats the demon king Rahwana in battle, a sentient mountain named Mount Siyem tells Anoman that he wishes to avenge himself on Rahwana. The mountain was previously a humanoid, the ogrous prime minister Patih Gomuka of the nation of Lokapala, who became a mountain only after he was defeated by Rahwana. But the demon king cannot be killed for he has received a boon from the gods to possess the combined lifespan of 1000 herons, 1000 crows, 1000 doves, 1000 carrion crows, and 1000 *siwalan* birds. Anoman thus picks up the moun-

tain and slams it over Rahwana, entrapping him under its weight for eternity. Anoman becomes a sage and takes on the new name of Resi Mayangkara, establishing a hermitage at the foothills of Mount Siyem, spreading the wisdom he acquired during his years helping Rama and also acting as Rahwana's jailor. Sometimes Rahwana escapes from his mountain jail and it is up to Anoman to capture him. It is believed that Rahwana yet lives, pinned down under the weight of the mountain even today, and that whoever ventures to Mount Siyem should not bring *arak* or other spirits as this will cause the ground to move.

## 2. WANARA AND THE "LITTLE MONKEYS"

The monkey society depicted in the Ramayana adheres, as in pre-modern Java, to a strict class system. Anoman, Subali, Sugriwa, and the officers in Rama's army are all classed in Java as *wanara* [Figure 3]. While they have monkey-like faces, tails, and sometimes monkey-like hands and feet, they wear human clothes and accessories and speak in the manner of other humanoid characters. In combat, *wanara* can fight either as humans, punching with a hand or kicking with their feet, or they can switch into monkey mode and bite, scratch, and jump on their opponents as they howl and screech like monkeys.

Human characters in *wayang* are distinguished from each other by the shape of their eyes and noses, facial hair, the tilt of their heads, and costumes. In contrast, *wanara* are identified by having different skin colors, or additional animal-like features. Anila (from the Sanskrit word *nila*, meaning 'dark blue') has blue skin, while other *wanara* have the features of a fighting cock, tiger, or dragon. In Bali, the status of the *wanara* as being somewhere in-between human and non-human is emphasized by the attachment of bells of different pitches to the puppets. This allows the puppeteer to play the puppets like musical instruments, alternating between differently-pitched figures.

The underlings of Rama's forces, in contrast, are much closer in iconographic style and expression in performance to the familiar monkeys of the natural world. These are generally referred to as *kethkek* or *munyuk* in Java or *bojog* in Bali, and are much simpler in build, smaller in size, simply carved and often without secondary control rods or moving arms. The lower-class monkeys are the ones that drive the chariots that the monkey kings



Fig. 3. King Sugirwa addressing his *wanara* troops. From the Kyai Nugroho set of puppets, commissioned from Ki Kertiwanda by Prince Tejakusuma of Yogyakarta circa 1937. Yale University Art Gallery, The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection of Indonesian Puppets.

Subali and Sugriwa ride. The little monkeys are the servants who hold the *pusaka* or emblems of state and accompany Sugriwa and Subali when they appear in royal audiences. They are the grunts who do the hard work of uprooting trees and carrying boulders to build the causeway to

Alengka that allows Rama's armies to invade [figure 4]. They appear en masse, tend not to be identified by name, and "speak" in squawks and squeals instead of words. Some wear loincloths while others are completely naked. Those who do wear clothes do so for comic effect. There are few set models for how to depict the little monkey characters, and so there is much room for expressing individual artistry and visual humor in their realization.

One of the most awe-inspiring *wayang* puppets depicts the gigantic Kumbakarna, the gargantuan brother of Rahwana who begrudgingly enters the battle against Rama

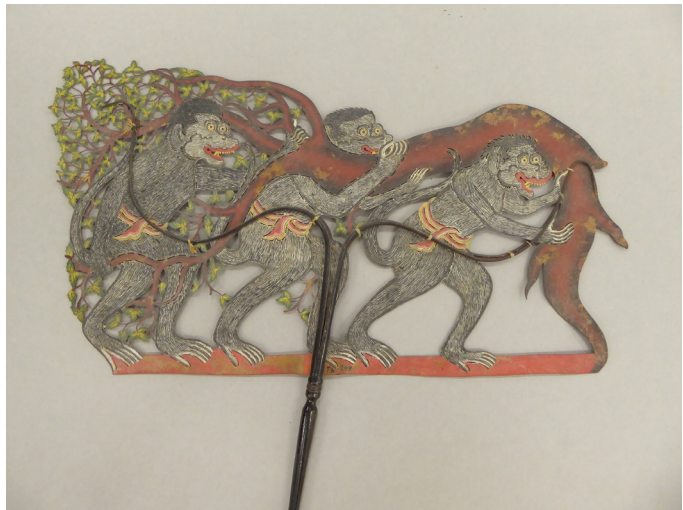


Fig. 4. Rampogan kethek – a tableau of "little monkeys" showing them carrying a tree. This puppet is typically used in the play *Rama Tambak*, in the scene in which Sugriwa's monkey army constructs a causeway to the island of Alengka. Designed and carved by Ki Kertiwanda of Yogyakarta circa 1900. Yale University Art Gallery, The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection of Indonesian Puppets.

and his army not out of loyalty to his king but for the sake of preserving his homeland. In Kumbakarna's final moments, the monkey army swarms over him, biting, grabbing, pulling, in a concerted effort to bring the giant down. Monkeys in this scene function collectively as a horde, losing all signs of individual sentience in their combined effort to overwhelm the mighty Kumbakarna.

### 3. RAHWANA AND HIS DEMON ARMIES

Rahwana, also known as Dasamuka (the 'ten-faced'), the principal protagonist of the Ramayana, takes on a variety of forms in his *wayang* representations. He is regularly shown with a snarl and red face, indicating that he is quick to anger, but can appear to be much like any other powerful king. In Bali and in the archaic, bug-eyed *wanda belis* variant of the Javanese Rahwana [Figure 5], he tends to be portrayed a bit more demonically, with tell-tale fangs. Rahwana's demonic aspects, as noted above, signal his origins.

In the standard Javanese telling, Rahwana is the son of a star-crossed union. The story goes that the ogre king of Alengka, Sumali, is possessed by a desire to become human. He thus commands his beautiful daughter Sukesih to require of any suitor the revelation of the magical spell *Sastra Jendra Hayudiningrat*, which has the power to transform ogres into humans and make humans divine. The sage Wisrawa pays suit on behalf of his son, King Danaraja, and instructs Sukesih in the requisite secret knowledge. The gods are infuriated by this unauthorized revelation and mete out a punishment. The chief god Bathara Guru possesses Wisrawa and Guru's consort Uma possesses Sukesih. The possessed Wisrawa then betrays his son's trust and sleeps with the possessed Sukesih. From this sullied union are born four children. Rahwana, the eldest, is born in the forest as a clump of blood (Thus his name: *rah*, meaning 'blood', and *wana*, meaning 'forest'). Wisrawa recites an incantation and the clump becomes an ogre, similar in form to his grandfather Sumali. Rahwana is then sent to do harsh devotions on Mount Arcamanik. The second-born is Kumbakarna, an ogre of monstrous proportions, who is sent to meditate on Mount Gokarna. The third is an ogress, Sarpakenaka, who is raised by Sumali. Fourth comes Wibisana, who has a more-or-less human form – though

his ogre heritage can be glimpsed in his monstrous lips in the Yogyakarta tradition – and is taken by Wisrawa to be raised by the gods.

In some versions of Rahwana's origin story, he is born with ten heads. Rahwana lops off nine of his heads, one at a time as a sign of his devotion to the gods. He is about to lop off the tenth, and thus commit ritual suicide, but the gods intervene and grant him a boon of immortality. Among the puppets of the Angst collection there are a fair number of Rahwana puppets with multiple heads and arms. Different puppet traditions bring out different aspects of Rahwana's personality in their puppet designs. Sometimes these heads are decorative elements of a head-dress and signifiers of his power, while other multi-headed puppets are used when Anoman becomes enraged and takes on a giant form (*tiwikrama*) that betrays his monstrous character. Rahwana puppets regularly have only one mobile arm – this is a feature also of sages, kings, and other figures of authority. But some puppeteers interpret this lack of mobility as a result of an injury Rahwana sustained in the rebellion against his half-brother



Fig. 5. Rahwana, the demon king of Alengka, in a two-eyed *wanda belis* variant. This puppet is from East Java and is dated August 1, 1927. Yale University Art Gallery, The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection of Indonesian Puppets.

Danaraja – Rahwana successfully wrested the throne away from him but sustained a crippling injury in the battle. Some puppets show Rahwana to be a great ascetic, a scholar who has mastered all sorts of ascetic knowledge. This is indicated by having him wear a sage's sash across his chest. Others depict him as a fun-seeker who enjoys singing and dancing. In the Cirebon tradition, which I have been studying since 1993, Dasamuka regularly indulges in a dance at his first appearance on screen. To show their appreciation, audience members throw coins mixed with rice (*sawer*) at the dancing puppet. The accompanying gamelan players immediately cease playing as they scramble to retrieve the coins.

Just as Anoman's leap across Alengka is memorialized in a single-use puppet, there is also a puppet of Rahwana in chains that captures a key moment of Rahwana's story. This moment occurs at the conclusion of the *Lokapala* cycle of plays that immediately precedes the Ramayana proper. Having established himself as king of Alengka, Rahwana wages war against the nation of Maespati as he desires the wife of its king, whom Rahwana recognizes as an incarnation of the rice goddess Sri. Rahwana is defeated by Maespati's king, Arjunasrabau, who like Rama is an incarnation of the god Wisnu, but not before he has devoured Arjunasrabau's beloved vizier Patih Suwanda. As punishment, Arjunasrabau enchains Rahwana and drags him from the back of his chariot until only his bones are left. In a comic twist, an old rag-and-bone man, actually Rahwana's father Sumali in disguise, requests the remains of Rahwana in order (he claims) to make a percussion instrument, and subsequently uses powerful magic to restore Rahwana to health, showing again that death is not absolute in *wayang's* animist world.

The demonic hordes of Alengka take on a variety of puppet forms. Indrajit, Rahwana's beloved son who wields the fearsome magical arrows – the poisonous Nagapasa and the immobilizing Senjatarante – has a humanoid appearance, though like his father he often sports fangs. But in standard Javanese tellings, he was actually created from a cloud (thus his name Megananda) by Rahwana's brother Wibiksana, who switched out Rahwana's newborn beautiful daughter with this magical creation, as he feared that the beauty of his offspring would result in Rahwana committing incest (the daughter is raised by the king of Mantili and grows up to become Sinta).

Other principles in Rahwana's army have fearsome appearances that match their awesome powers. Some have the power to transform themselves – like Marica, who takes on the form of a golden deer in order to draw Rama away from Sinta so that Rahwana can kidnap her. So varied are they in form that there is even a demon who has a superficial resemblance to a monkey and is able thereby to infiltrate Rama's army as a spy.

#### 4. MODERNIZATION AND THE RETURN TO ANIMISM

The animist dimensions of Ramayana stories and of *wayang* more generally persist in Indonesia, but with the modernization of *wayang* there have also been systematic efforts – on the part of both cultural bureaucrats and puppeteers themselves – to tone these down and emphasize humanistic values over the supernatural and the non-human. Writing in 1929, Dutch philologist Th. Pigeaud opined that *wayang* avoided the expression of tragedy as it was rooted in a world view in which everyone and everything had a fixed place.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the influential Javanese arts theorist and administrator Gendhon Humardani and his followers interpreted the actions of *wayang* as being due to human desires, rather than the working out of fate. Thus, in a modernized play from the *Lokapala* cycle, Wisrawa and Sukesih do not have intercourse because they are possessed by the gods who want to punish them for the revelation of secret knowledge, but because Wisrawa and Sukesih fall in love.<sup>19</sup> For modernizers like Humardhani, *wayang* needed to unshackle from ritual, magic, and irrational beliefs if it was to speak to contemporary audiences. Codified stylization and supernatural storylines were permissible, but the core values were to be humanist and plots were to be driven by human emotions and desires.<sup>20</sup>

The Ramayana in modern tellings does not emphasize the reciprocity of people and nature but instead the human conquest of the non-human world. Pancawati, the home that Rama, Sinta, and Laksamana make while in their forest exile, is not a simple hut but a grand palace with all the conveniences of royal life. Sinta does not send Rama to chase after a golden deer because she is enchanted by its beauty but because she wants to add it to a menagerie she is building.<sup>21</sup> The building of the causeway from the mainland to Alengka is figured as a state-sponsored development project.<sup>22</sup> There is little or no explanation about the interdependence of the noble giant bird Jatayu and Rama's father King Dasarata, and thus the reason why Jatayu might sacrifice himself in an effort to save Sinta

<sup>18</sup> PIGEAUD 1929.

<sup>19</sup> SOEMANTO 1980.

<sup>20</sup> RUSTOPO 1991: *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, HADITJAROKO 1988.

<sup>22</sup> On the Ramayana as an inspiration for modernization, including authorizing five-year development plans, see RESINK 1975.

when she is abducted by Rahwana, and use his last breath to tell Rama about Rahwana's dastardly scheme, becomes obscure.

Marshall Clark, in a fascinating article on literary appropriations of Ramayana during the New Order dictatorship, recounts an official state project launched in January 1998 to get Java's top *dbalang* to perform the play *Rama Tambak*, in the heat of the IMF-induced financial crisis, with regular protests on Jakarta's streets against rising food prices.<sup>23</sup> The organizers of this series of performances recognized the play's magical powers – Indonesia's first president Sukarno had sponsored performances of the same play to deal with collective crises. But audiences were not pleased by the performances of these elite puppeteers, many of whom were out of step with the genuine needs and desires of the people. One magazine critic was particularly unhappy with the enactment by Manteb Soedharsono, Java's top puppeteer in 1998, which focused on intrigue in Rama's court. This emphasis on the actions of political elites over the agency of the common people was out of step with the aspirational democratic values espoused in this moment of political crisis.<sup>24</sup>

In the decades following the downfall of the Soeharto dictatorship, the ideologies informing these modern departures away from *wayang*'s animist ontology have been questioned and challenged by coalitions of environmental activists and traditional artists. There is a new appreciation of the potential of *wayang* to inform the public about ecological issues and current and future challenges related to climate change, pollution, and environmental degradation. As discussed at length in the recent volume *Wayang sebagai Media Ekologi: Buku Pintar Kreativitas pada Masa Perubahan Iklim* ('*Wayang as an Ecological Medium: A Reader in Creativity in a Time of Climate Change*'), this entails the excavation and highlighting of environmental themes in the traditional repertoire, the creation of "green" *wayang* forms that address pertinent environmental challenges impacting communities and ecological systems, and alliances between activists and artists.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> CLARK 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Ivi: 169.

<sup>25</sup> WAYANG 2020.



## 5. RAMAYANA: A TALE OF TREES AND WOOD

In the spring semester of 2023, I had the opportunity to collaborate with Rahul Koonathara, a twelfth-generation shadow puppeteer from Kerala, India, and a group of University of Connecticut students to experiment with how the animism underpinning the Ramayana might be pushed even further, inspired by recent trends in ecologically-attuned *wayang* in Indonesia. Primary aims were to hybridize the Kerala tradition of *tholpavakoothu* with *wayang kulit* and restore the Ramayana's imagining of interdependence with the natural world. In line with post-humanist theory, and particularly inspired by Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from A Secret World* (2015), we took a tree-centric view of the epic, examining and questioning the participation and agency of trees in key episodes.

The production, entitled *Ramayana: A Tale of Trees and Wood*, asks what it means to see the contest for Sinta's hand from the perspective of the bow which Rama bends and breaks or the burning of Sita from the perspective of the firewood which feeds the pyre. The tree which Rama hides behind when he surreptitiously kills Subali rightly complains in a «mon-o-log» about empty claims of valor and the discrepancy between the *kesatriya* or «knightly» ethos and Rama's actual behavior: «And did he ask my permission? No! Not even a "by your leave"».

The exile in the forest of Dendaka involves not only a deepening of the attachments between the protagonists Rama, Sinta, and Laksmana, but a growing relationship to the natural environment. Riffing off David Abram (1999) on the more-than-human world, Rama and Sita dialogue:

RAMA: We have lived in the forest of Dendaka for nearly twelve years and it feels more home than Ayodya ever did. I find it strange that the locals think of us as shamans.

SITA: That is because, like shamans, our forest exile has brought us into contact with the more-than-human world. The forest tells us where there is water to be found. We attend to the wind to know when the weather will shift. The chirping of insects alerts us to the presence of game. Through observing the grazing of forest animals, we know which plants are nutritional and medicinal, and which are poisonous. The locals call us magicians, but in truth we are but wide-awake people in a world of dreamers.

In our telling, Anoman's decision to leave Rama to become a sage is a form of protest and a recognition that the burning of Alengka and the building of the causeway were acts of environmental degradation with catastrophic impact on a garden city, the waters, and coastal forest. Anoman confronts Rama for his indifference to plants: «In past incarnations, you have been a fish, a tortoise, a boar, a lion. But what have your many incarnations and your years of exile in the forest taught you about the plant world? I worship you but cannot remain at your side».

Such an approach to the epic breathes new life into old stories and provides new opportunities for performers. The Ramayana, in the words of one spectator, becomes a “bleak” cautionary tale about single-minded obsession and ecological disengagement. But the production, if not the content, has a hopeful intention for the future of the art forms concerned. By finding common ground for the *wayang* tradition and *tholpavakoothu* we hope to surpass the inherited limitations of both forms and develop a platform for collaboration across cultures for future generations of performers.

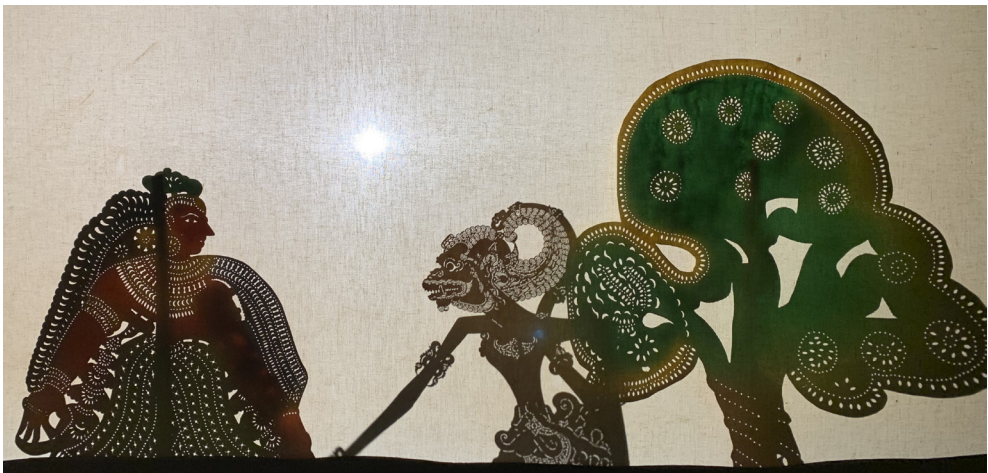


Fig. 6. Anoman (a Javanese figure in Solo style) meets Sita (a Tholpavakoothu figure) in the production *Ramayana: A Tale of Trees and Wood* (2023).

As the Indian scholar and poet A. K. Ramanujan underlines in an oft-cited essay on the variety of «tellings» of Ramayana, the epic is always «always already»: nobody in South or Southeast Asia confronts it for the first time. At the same time, the best tellings

are evergreen, cherished, and savored for differences from previous redactions.<sup>26</sup> The embedded animism of the Ramayana makes it more than just a mirror of past beliefs – it gives it currency and perspective on our troubled planet’s future.

<sup>26</sup> RAMANUJAN 2004: 157-158.

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