

WAYANG KULIT AND THE GROWTH OF ISLAM IN JAVA

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ABSTRACT

This article intended to examine the circumstance of wayang kulit during the coming of Islam in the Java island of Indonesian archipelago; how it changed and held functions within the Islamisation process of the region. The lack of written materials made this issue was somewhat unclear. In exploring these issues, this article would explain some elements surrounded Javanese wayang, specifically during the Islamisation period of Java. By showing several examples of wayang kulit characters, whether or not wayang had undertaken adaptations during this era and how far was observed. The method of this was from the data collection for that largely originated from academic books and journals from both western and Indonesian scholars, and then some visual examinations would be done upon them. The observation of each object aims to show that while to some extent wayang did undergo some alterations during this Islamisation period, however the core value of wayang performance itself was still largely Javanese, principally and aesthetically.

Keywords: wayang kulit, javanese performance, islamisation process, Islam growth

INTRODUCTION

The term *wayang kulit* consists of two words; they are *wayang* and *kulit*. *Wayang* is derived from the word *baying* that means shadow and the word *kulit* means leather that is exactly the main component in the making of *wayang*. With combining these two words, we will get a depiction of a shadow puppet performance in the form of storytelling. The shadow of the puppets and the masteris called *dalang* who conducts a *wayang* performance. There have been some discourses among the western scholars, such as G.A.J. Hazeu, Brandes, and Rassers, as well as Indonesian scholars, such as Soeroto and K.P.A. Kusumodilogo regarding the origin of the Javanese *wayang* (Mulyono, 1978). To sum up their various opinions, most of the scholars agree that the Javanese *wayang* was originally coming from either indigenous Java or Hindu-Java (Java with Hindu influence) (Mulyono, 1978).

Wayang kulit is perhaps one of the most archaic surviving traditions of storytelling using a shadow play in the Java, Indonesia, and probably in the world. Shadow play theatre is said to have its roots in many places in the world such as India, China, Egypt, Turkey, Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand), and Europe (Dahlan & Ahmad, 2012). However, the origin of Javanese *wayang kulit* itself is largely unknown. *Wayang kulit* has various stories, such as the wars between the good and the bad, some profound philosophies, spirituality and mysticism, some great love stories, comedy, and even political commentaries. It has been educating and entertaining Javanese people throughout centuries. The camaraderie is lasting even today, even when there had been so many shifts of ruling kingdom in the land of Java; from the pre-historic time to the Hindu-Buddhist period, the Islamic period, the Dutch and Japanese colonialism, and now at the time of Indonesian independence.

This article aims to analyse the state of *wayang kulit* during the coming of Islam in Java, how it adapted and how it hold any roles with the Islamisation process of the island. In exploring these

subjects, this article starts by briefly explaining the several elements surrounded Javanese *wayang* in general. It will then gradually move to a more specific period, namely the Islamisation period of Java. Here it will examine whether or not *wayang* has undergone alterations and how far. Intertwining in this part, there will be shown some examples of *wayang kulit* characters to illustrate how they were adjusted to conform to the Islamic traditions and what was remain unchanged despite the alterations. The analysis of each object aims to maintain that even though to some extent *wayang* did experience some transformations during the Islamisation period, however, the whole *wayang* performance itself was still largely Javanese. Indeed, while Islam arguably has made some changes to *wayang kulit*, at the same time they have also unleashed even a greater effort to make themselves fitted into *wayang*. They did so to be able to use *wayang* as a media to spread the teaching of the religion. Meanwhile, the large parts of the *wayang* itself remain unchanged and still hold Javanese fundamental values until today.

METHODS

This article deals with the *wayang kulit* shadow play, a living culture that has been crafted and performed for a very long time in the land of Java. However, not until the eighteenth century that western scholar started to put some interest in the subject and observed them academically. That being said, there is a lack of written material from the period of the coming of Islam in Java (around the fourteenth century). Despite the fact that there was just a handful of scholarly information about *wayang*, the data collection for this writing primarily derived from academic books and journals that written by both western and Indonesian scholars. The Arabic letters will be treated as the graphic representation, and some visual examinations will be done upon them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Javanese philosophy can trace back from the prehistoric animist time when the native populations developed the notion of spirits of ancestors, bonding with a single divine being that later acknowledged as *Sang Hyang Tunggal* (Irvine, 1996). Some people believe that initially Javanese *wayang* was heavily related to the ritual worship of ancestral figures (Soerotoas cited in Mulyono, 1978). Before the *dalang* presents the *wayang* performance, he will first incorporate appropriate offerings and some treatments of spreading the smoke of incense over the *wayang* figures since they were perceived as sacred objects. These ritualistic acts are often times preceded with several days of fasting and are still practiced even in today's setting. Another feature of mystic elements is also indicated by the timing preference where the stage is normally performed between sunset and sunrise – a period of time when it is believed that the spirits travel more easily. Moreover, *wayang kulit* both in the past and present times is performed to invoke the blessing from the ancestors on special occasions such as childbirth and wedding. Besides, it helps during the time of sickness or disasters (Ulbricht, 1970). The example of *wayang kulit* performance can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1 *Wayang Kulit* Performance by the *Dalang*

(Source: <http://images.fineartamerica.com/images-medium-large/the-wayang-kulit-of-drama-mario-bennet.jpg>)

For centuries before the coming of Islam to Indonesia, the western part of the Indonesian archipelago was influenced by Hindu belief. This influence was asserted into Java and formed a Hindu-Javanese society and art (Krom N.J. as cited in Josselin de Jong, 1977). These were a long-span period encompassing several big kingdoms such as the Kingdom of Mataram, Kediri, and Majapahit. Applied into *wayang*, these Hindu elements materialized for example in the use of Hindu literature, such as Ramayana and Mahabharata. *Ramayana* in its original form is a Sanskrit poem based on Hindu literature that attributed to the sage Walmiki, while Mahabharata is attributed to the sage Wiyasa (Poedjosoebroto, 1978). Hazeu established an autochthonous ritual that was alive in the Javanese *wayang* and the Hindu elements had mingled together with the indigenous tradition (Josselin de Jong, 1977). The assimilation of the cultures appears among others in the use of Javanese setting and the insertion of some local episodes in those Indian epics (Zoetmuelder as cited in M.C. Ricklefs, 2006a). This early influence was in line with the Orientalist portrayal of Java where the real Javanese faith was depicted as a largely undefined mixture of Hinduism and/or Buddhism expressed in classical dance, the *wayang*, the music (*gamelan*), and numinous sects (Woodward, 2011).

At the time of the fall of Majapahit Kingdom around 1478, there had been many of regional rulers in the Javanese coastal line that had already embraced Islam. One of the most prominent coastal kingdoms that have emerged at that time was Demak Sultanate (1478 – 1548). After the collapse of Majapahit kingdom, Demak Sultanate under the reign of Raden Patah (the son of Prabu Kertabumi of Majapahit) took over all the Majapahit's ceremonial attributes and brought it to Demak, including all the *wayang* equipment (Haryanto, 1988). At this period, Islam widely spreads in the Java Island, through the *da'wah* (teaching) from a group of Islamic leaders called *Walisongo* (literally The nine *Walis*, the Islamic leaders who spread Islam religion to Java).

Since the beginning, there was a significant problem between *wayang* tradition and Islam. There were several *wayang* elements that deemed inappropriate according to Islamic culture. For example, the form of *wayang* that resembles a human figure, some narrations that did not contain Islamic elements, and the tales containing Gods and Goddesses that were counted as idolatry (Poedjosoebroto, 1978). Some sources believed that there had been disunity among the *Walis* (one who is near to God) themselves, making them separated into two groups. These groups are Islam *Putihan* (literally means white) and Islam *Abangan* (literally means red) (Fattah, 1985). Islam *Putihan* is under the leadership of *Sunan Giri* that strictly obeyed Islamic law and therefore utterly rejected the presence of *wayang*. Meanwhile, Islam *Abangan* is under the leadership of *Sunan Kalijaga* that aspired to embrace the current popular tradition including *wayang* and slowly converted Javanese people through subtle changes while imparting Islamic teaching over the time (Fattah 1985: 38-41). Actually, the use of the term *Putihan* and *Abangan* is actually quite problematic since according to Ricklefs

(2006b), there is no evidence of the existence of *Abangan* group before mid-19th century and the clash between the two groups emerged in the mid-19th century.

Some efforts to adjust *wayang* to an Islamic culture had been made several times, but the big revamp was made during the Demak Sultanate, a period when both the ruler and the whole nation have embraced Islam as the religion (Poedjosoebroto, 1978). The ruler of Demak Sultanate was known as a *wayang* enthusiast, and at the same time, a pious Moslem. As a wise ruler, he knew that it was not favourable to altogether outlaw *wayang*, which has been greatly loved by his people just because it did not meet with Islamic standards. After all, *wayang* has become part of the folk culture for a long time (Poedjosoebroto, 1978). Therefore, with the advice from the *Wali* sunder *Sunan Kalijaga*, it was decided that the art of *wayang* should be continued with some adaptation to make it acceptable within the Islamic norms.

According to Poedjosoebroto (1978), following this decision, the most immediate change was to alter the shape of the wayang figures that was perceived to resemble human because it is considered haram (prohibited, forbidden, taboos). Islamic teaching outlaws the representation of human and/or animal. The *Walis*, through many discussions, with the “*musyawarah* for *mufakat*” spirit (discussion with the aim to reach one agreement/decision as opposed to voting system, for the goodness of all instead of just one or two parties), tried to modify the shape of the wayang as far as possible from the realistic shape of human body, but still incorporated the distinct features that make them recognisable as a human character. Poedjosoebroto (1978), expressed an interesting point by saying that these changes had reached a point, when it could no longer be more perfect, since the shape of wayang figures themselves is a manifestation of the Arabic word, Allah. In Figure 2 and 4, there is an Arabic word, Allah, which means God and the prophet Muhammad in Figure 3 and 5. When both characters are combined, it will form the face shape of some of wayang figures with good characters, such as the *Pandawa* brothers (the hero from Mahabharata epic, 5 brothers, son of Prabu Pandu, consists of Yudhistira, Bima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sadewa and other good warriors) (Figure 6). On the contrary, the Arabic word *iblis* which literally means devil can be transformed into the shape of the wayang’s evil characters that can be seen in Figure 7 (Poedjosoebroto, 1978).

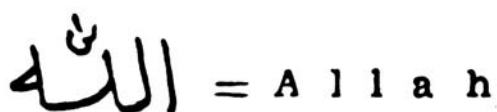
The image shows the Arabic word 'Allah' written in black ink. To its right, the letters 'A l l a h' are written in a simple, spaced-out font, with an equals sign between the word and the letters.

Figure 2 Arabic Word of Allah or God
(Source: Poedjosoebroto,1978)

The image shows the Arabic word 'Muhammad' written in black ink in a cursive style.

Figure 3 Arabic word of the prophet Muhammad
(Source: Poedjosoebroto, 1978)

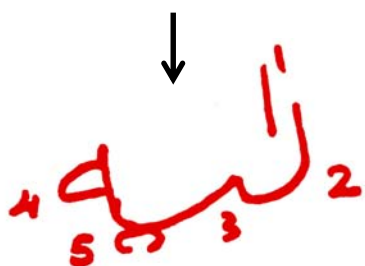
The image shows the Arabic word 'Allah' in red ink. A black arrow points down to the word. The word is broken down into five numbered parts: 1 (the top 'Al'), 2 (the first 'l'), 3 (the second 'l'), 4 (the 'a'), and 5 (the 'h').

Figure 4 Break Down of the Word of Allah
(Source: Poedjosoebroto, 1978)

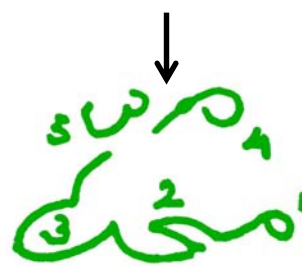
The image shows the Arabic word 'Muhammad' in green ink. A black arrow points down to the word. The word is broken down into five numbered parts: 1 (the top 'Mu'), 2 (the first 'h'), 3 (the 'm'), 4 (the 'd'), and 5 (the 'a').

Figure 5 Break Down of the Word of Muhammad
(Source: Poedjosoebroto, 1978)

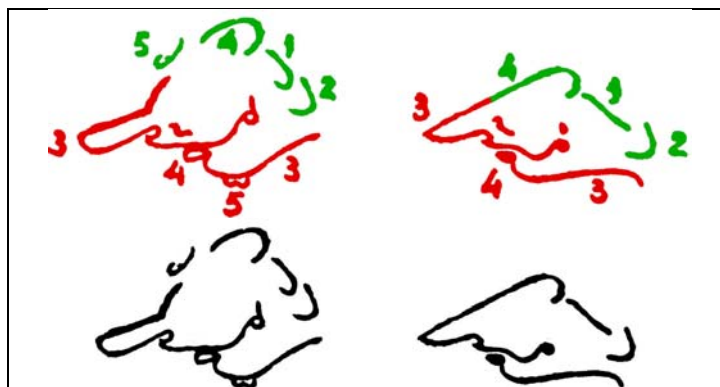


Figure 6 The Combination and Adjustment of the Words Allah and Muhammad Forms the Shape of *Wayang*'s Face Who Has Good Character (Source: Poedjosoebroto, 1978)

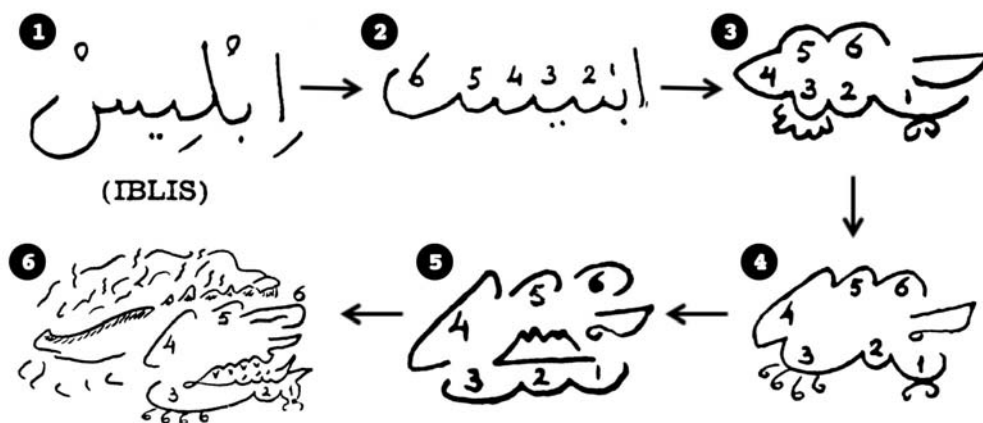


Figure 7 The Transformation from the Arabic Word of *Iblis* (devil) into the Shape of *Wayang*'s Evil Character (Source: Poedjosoebroto, 1978)

This explanation creates a sense of reassurance to the Muslim people and *mualaf* (a person whose learning Islamic teaching and has intention to embrace Islam as his/her religion), who were unsure whether *wayang* is in-line or contradicting with the Islamic teaching. This whole transformation and interpretation matter seems too far-fetched for two different reasons. Firstly, the basic shape of *wayang* is not drastically changed; it was already a similar shape with a final product after the transformations. And secondly, simply by observation, there is a big gap in the alterations from the Arabic calligraphy to the *wayang* shape, which makes one think that the whole idea is a little bit too obscure. Moreover, it is unclear when the conception of this idea. It might have been conceived long after the coming of Islam to Java itself.

Such clarification was very convenient as a justification for the people, who wanted to convert to Islam, but still aspire to see *wayang* performances. We have to remember that at the period of the coming of Islam, *wayang* was a very popular form of entertainment in Java, not just among the common people but also the rulers (Mulyono, 1978). This idea had indeed been created during the first coming of Islam in Java such justification could give best of both worlds for most of the parties involved. Because of that, people could embrace Islam while still enjoyed *wayang* performances, the

Walis could gain an abundant number of new Islamic followers, and the ruler could have his Islamic kingdom strengthened by having his people embraced the same religion as himself.

Other change happened to all *wayang* episodes with the sacred elements in it. *Wayang* performance should be revised to remove its idolatrous content or in conjunction and the newly stories had written to have an Islamic flavour in it (Poedjosoebroto, 1978). They also gave a new set of interpretation of the *wayang*'s stories, characters, and musical instrument according to Islamic values. It included the creation of new characters and the roles, which suited to Islamic teaching. One example of these characters' alteration was Batara Shiva that derived from Hindu origin. In one of the version of Javanese *wayang*, Batara Shiva was either transformed into Batara Guru that can be seen in Figure 8. Batara Shiva or Batara Guru is often called *Sang Hyang Pramesti Guru*, *Sang Hyang Giri Nata*, *Sang Hyang Jagad Nata*. Other interpretations are visualizing Batara Guru as the elder brother of Shiva, which gave him the key position among the deities (Ulbricht, 1970). His names also hold new meaning, for example *Pramesti Guru* was derived from the words *parama* (important, noble), *esti* (intention), and *guru* (new transformation) and when it put together will have meaning "a new transformation with a noble intention". To reflect this new significance, the character Batara Guru was given a new attribute in the form of white cloth as his iconography, to give emphasize to his noble status. Figure 8 shows the depiction of Batara Guru from Central Java that rides the cow Nandini. The body material of it is water buffalo leather that has three sticks. The main stick is in light water buffalo horn, while the other two are in the dark buffalo horn. The body size of Batara Guru is 47 cm with the total size is 69 cm.



Figure 8 Batara Guru
(Source: <http://www.maskedart.com/products/batara-guru>)

It is such a pity that after all of the major changes on the Batara Guru character, many people do not aware of the reason behind these alterations and just accepts Batara Guru as the character dressed in white (Poedjosoebroto, 1978). It is essential for the people to understand the reasoning behind these alterations because by recognizing what is right and what is wrong (idolatrous) according to Islamic law so that they can learn what is deemed for a good Muslim. Without this realization, the whole alterations seem to be vain. Ulbricht (1970) has pointed out that the transformation of Batara Guru is somewhat lukewarm, because he still retains his four arms and is accompanied by the presence of his cow. The presence of an animal is something that is not endorsed by Islamic teaching. This signifies how Islam struggled to appropriate it into the popular culture, but in this case, it is less successful in making a complete Islamic transformation.

Ulbricht (1970) has said that during the Islamic period, the ruler tries to develop a standardization of *wayang* based on their type of face and postural frames into three types that can be seen in Figure 10 and 11. Arjuna in Figure 9 is the third son of Prabu Pandu and one of the Pandawa brothers. He is placed in the highest position even though he has diminutive size. He puts together amongst the group of a small, slender and spiritualized *wayang* with almost closed eyes (Figure 10a). The other two groups were the middle-sized, athletic, round eyes *wayang* (Figure 10b), and the giant, huge and discourteous *wayang* with stout eyes and fangs (Figure 10c). This categorisation is not just a coincidence, but that is by the Javanese values as has been previously mentioned. Islam teaches good manner for its followers, however, long before Islam came to Java, the art of conversation and the practice of refined etiquette has been an integral part of Javanese tradition, and it has little or nothing to do with the coming of Islam.

The Javanese language used in *wayang kulit* has a complex and elaborate system with at least three different levels of address. This constructs three different sets of vocabularies with various ways of mixing those sets according to the dialogue context that resulted in a complex way of conversing (Van Ness, 1980). By a correct usage, it is possible to define the social status of the characters and his/her relations with the other characters in which they engage, whether they have a higher, lower, or equal social status (Van Ness, 1980). Javanese people idolize Arjuna as their hero, not merely because of his physical dexterity, but because of his intelligence, versatile feeling, and refinement that capture the heart of the people (Ulbricht, 1970). In Javanese *wayang*, the large physique is not one of the benchmark requirements for the heroic character. On the contrary, heroic figures tend to be presented in the form of small *wayang*, because it signifies humbleness of heart, the quality that is highly regarded by the Javanese. Arjuna is not a character without any blemishes because among others he does in fact have a reputation as a womanizer. However, Javanese people seem to discard away his weaknesses because of his one distinct quality, which is *alus* (Van Ness, 1980). *Alus* is a Javanese word which signifies various connotations, for example it could be applied for a sophisticated courtesy, act modestly, gentlemanlike, respectful and never speaking unpleasant toward others. Besides, according to the Figure 9, the body material of Arjuna is water buffalo leather with 49 cm body size and 69 cm total size.

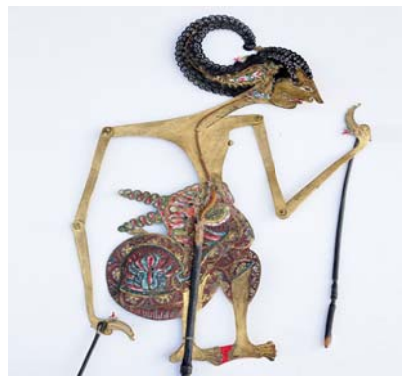


Figure 9 Raden Arjuna
(Source: <http://www.maskedart.com/products/arjuna>)

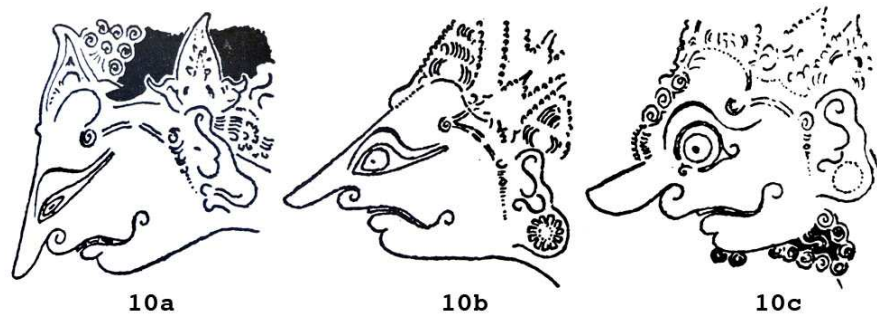


Figure 10 Three Main Types of *Wayang* Faces
(Source: Ulbricht, 1970)



Figure 11 The Size Comparison Between *Wayang Kulit*
(Source: <http://www.topholidaysbali.com/archives/wayang-kulit>)

For the Javanese people, *Pandawas* brothers are equally important with the clown servant characters that were known as *Punakawan* (clown servant characters, consists of Semar, Petruk, Gareng, and Bagong). These characters are purely of Javanese origin, as there is no discernible South Asian equivalent for them (Woodward, 1989). It consists of several characters with Semar is the oldest one. He has the complex personality represented in Javanese *wayang*. He is full of ambivalences and acts both as Arjuna's servant and teacher or mystical guide. Semar is a male with short and ugly figure combines male and female physiognomies (Woodward, 1989). The presence of Semar can be seen in Figure 12 with 38 x 36 cm body size and total height 60 cm. The total opposite of refined Arjuna, Semar is very crude. Being one of the peasantry, he represents the 'real' Javanese culture as opposed to the artificial courtesy of a nobleman, he speaks in *Ngoko Lugu* (Low Javanese language, used by the lowest strata of the Javanese people), and he farts, burps, and makes rough jokes. But behind all of that he never strays from the path of truth and responsibility (Woodward, 1989). Such kind of determination is highly regarded in the Javanese perception. Semar holds a unique spot in Javanese mysticism based on the fact that he surpassed the social order, which is perceived as an intact part of the mystical path (Woodward, 1989). Indeed, the Islamic authority has struggled to legitimize its presence in the Semar character. One of the justification attempts is once again by combining the calligraphic letters of Allah, Prophet Muhammad, and five pillars of Islam to form Semar's body that can be seen in Figure 13 (Poedjosoebroto, 1978). While the *Walis* try to construct the external forms of the Muslim faith, Semar is dealt solely with its inner (*batin*) sense (Woodward, 1989). Semar is a classic example of how Islamic authority becomes powerless in imposing its restriction. His character shows that real Javanese values held by the people, and it stands independently without any influence from any religion.



Figure 12 Semar
 (Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wayang_Kulit_of_Semar.jpg)



Figure 13 Semar Calligraphic Representation
 (Source: Poedjosoebroto, 1978)

The transformations of *wayang* in conforming to Islamic values are not just limited to the material culture but also apply to the whole procession leading up to the *wayang* performance. This procession is purposely made to introduce Islamic culture (Fattah, 1985). One of the first account of the use of *wayang* performance as a *da'wah* event happened at the celebration of *Maulud Nabi Muhammad* on the veranda of the Demak Mosque (Fattah, 1985). People who wanted to join the occasion had to pass through an archway structure called *gapura* just in front of the Mosque. Before entering this *gapura* (archway gate), they had to cleanse their body with *wudlu* (the customary of cleansing certain body-parts according to Islamic teaching before starting the daily prayer or *shalat*) water so that they were physically spotless. Entering this *gapura* was deemed as a symbolical gesture to entering Islam and to be pardoned from all previous iniquities (Fattah, 1985). Instead of the admission ticket, they were required to recite the Islamic *Syahadat* (two sentences of Islamic vow which should be said out loud as well as inside the heart and mind, as a confession to be converted into Islam), which practically converted them into Muslim follower (Fattah, 1985). After that, they could finally enjoy the *wayang* performance with the ones that newly arranged to contain the Islamic values. This method of *da'wah* was repeatedly held in the daily basis and over time the Javanese people were gradually converted into Islam (Fattah, 1985).

This is the smartest and the most suitable approach from the *Walis* by using *wayang* as a media to spread Islam in Java. Although the Javanese highly regard courtesan mannerism, at the same time, they are very persistent never to do anything against their will. Their initial motivation in coming to the Mosque is to be entertained by *wayang* performance and to fulfill their intention they were willing to perform the Islamic rituals without any outside force. This is aligned with J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong's remark regarding the basic personalities of the people of the Archipelago. They appeared remarkably resilience and defied any cultural stimulus from outside (Van Dijk, 1998). History has recorded that each time some foreign influence infiltrated Java, it is always followed with re-'Javanization' afterward. It happens at the period of Hindu-Buddhism, and it is recurring again following the coming of Islam (Van Dijk, 1998).

Moving forward several centuries to today where the Javanese people mostly embrace Islam, the *dalang's* ritual leading of a *wayang* performance is still prevalent. At the same time, while *wayang kulit* gradually lost its popularity among the younger Javanese generations, it does not mean the evolution of *wayang kulit* is stopped. We can still witness *wayang's* encirclement with the modern culture, creating a contemporary performance (such as *wayang hip hop*). But it still reserves its Javanese principles and aesthetics in some way (Varela, 2014). These are all indicative of the strong indigenous values held by the Javanese people.

CONCLUSIONS

Those who have lived and studied the Javanese people will notice that the Javanese tradition has its own magnet that readily pulled foreign cultures, which often resulted in a cultural syncretism. However, after some period, this syncretic culture would eventually revert to its original Javanese roots. This also applied in *wayang kulit*, as one of Javanese culture. Throughout the centuries, *wayang kulit* has evolved, with no exception during the period of Islamic development in Java. These transformations happen both ways. It was not just the *wayang* which adapted itself to Islamic norms, but also the other way around that Islam also customized its teaching so that it fits with the Javanese *wayang* tradition. All of the examples are presented, the character Batara Guru, Arjuna, and Semar show that in some extent Javanese values are still lingering, stronger than any previous foreign stimulus, including Islam. This research testifies to the strength and resiliency of the Javanese tradition. However, *wayang kulit* remains a living tradition in Javanese society, and therefore, it can still change in the future as any new stimulus is absorbed.

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