The Other in Southeast Asian Puppetry

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Abstract: A major antagonist in a classical Javanese/Sundanese wayang was a king of negara sabrangan (overseas kingdom) whose minister and ogre soldiers attack the protagonist. This “other/outside” (non-Javanese) is needed in the plot of a traditional story. It seems likely that negara sabrangan was inspired in part by Bugis and others who threatened trade along the north coast of Java. Sabrangan characters are one version of “other” in this highly diverse geographical region replete with otherness.

This essay notes three kinds of “other” in puppetry around the Gulf of Thailand. First, a simple comic ethnic other. For example, in Thai nang talung, we have the South Indian (kaek) and Chinese (orang cina). This is parallel with genres like karagoz and mobarak, where dialect and cultural stereotyped figures entertain but do not drive plot. Pak Enthus Sumono’s use of Saddam Hussein and George Bush for clown scenes during the Gulf War is an example of other for comic entertainment.

A more substantial “other” is one required by plot structure. Sabrangan/overseas kingdom characters are in this category. They show the positive strength of the Javanized/local hero who defeats them. A variation on this structurally crucial other is found in the Amir Hamzah tales, concerning the uncle of Mohammed where the “other” is the kafir (non-Muslim). Religion and not ethnicity is the source of difference.

A third kind of “outsider” is the internal other, whose body and class signify difference. Characters who seem the most indigenous, the major clowns (punakawan, panasar, talok), are such outsiders, and their often dark skin and grotesque bodies mark them. In West Java, they share iconographical features with the rank-and-file ogres in the overseas kingdom yet are positively positioned. Color, language, and class make them “other” to the protagonist, but this other is accorded unique spiritual power.

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, wayang, clown
Around the Gulf of Thailand where Indo-Malay culture prevails, puppetry (including wayang and nang) is a central art.¹ In performances, the local is depicted positively while the depiction of the outsider, who is sometimes non-Muslim and often deviant is marked as an antagonist. Yet, while such othering exists, the non-conforming or alien figure is also considered empowered and sometimes associated with the sacred.

This complexity, which cuts both ways, most likely emanated from Java, where puppetry has the longest known history in the region. Due to sea links, migrations, and cultural borrowings, flows from Java have created commonalities. Ethnic and linguistic ties across Southeast Asia are historically well known from the days of Sriwijaya (7th-12th centuries) and Majapahit (13th-16th centuries), empires that radiated from Sumatra and Java to mainland Southeast Asia and other islands of the Indonesian archipelago (Ricklefs 1993; Munoz 2006). Javanese ideas create a counterpose between hero and demon, which correlate to “self/insider” and “other/outsider” respectively. Related thinking is attuned to the local ethno-linguistic ideal (Sundanese, Kelantanese, etc.) and may differ a bit from Javanese concepts, but the contrast of refined and coarse is shared across this region. Though one can argue some equivalencies for Thai-Khmer-Burmese puppet/dance traditions (but not the more rural Vietnamese tradition), my discussion will not cover northern peninsular Southeast Asian puppetry. I limit the discussion to the Muslim-influenced Malay-Austronesian cultures on sea routes passing out from the north coast of Java (Pasisir) where, along with goods and people, ideas have traveled freely for over a thousand years. The concepts discussed especially circulated in the colonial period as Sufi-inflected Islam became the predominant religion for many of the areas discussed (Johns 1961). Indeed, for many of the puppet forms—for example in Lombok, Sunda (West Java), and Kelantan (East Malaysia)—oral traditions trace origins of their puppetry to Java with some interlocutors averring that puppetry was the missionizing tool of the Islamic holy man (wali) and puppet master (dalang) Sunan Kalijaga (said

¹ Wayang is Indo-Malay puppet-derived theater, and nang talung is Southern Thai leather puppetry. For a general introduction to Javanese wayang, see Anderson (1965); Arps (2016); Brandon (1970); Emerson (2016); Groenendael (1985); Long (1982); Mrázek (2005); Sears (1996); Varela (2015 and 2016). For Cirebon, see Cohen (1997). For Sundanese wayang golek, see Foley (1979); Weintraub (2004); Andrieu (2014). For Balinese wayang parwa, see Hinzler (1981); Hobart (1987); Sedana (2002); Zurbuchen (1987). For Thai nang talung, see Broman (1996); Dowsey-Magog (2002); Hemmet (1996); Irving (2006); Taweethong (2010); Vandergeest and Chalermpow-Koanantakool (1993). For Malay wayang kelantan, see Matusky (1993); Sweeney (1972a and 1972b); Wright (1981); Yousof (1997). For Lombak, see Harnish (2003).
to have lived from 1463–1513 CE and to have proselytized via puppet shows). The concepts I will speak of are found across different puppet manipulation techniques (leather shadow images [Indonesia kulit; Thai nang], flat wooden figures [klitik], wooden doll rod puppets [golek]). They are shared with picture scroll narration (beber) and human dance drama (wayang wong, “human puppetry”), and even impact processional “giant” parade figures (called ondel-ondel and other names). Though my expertise is wayang golek of the Sundanese-speaking area of West Java, I see similar patterns in puppetry of other linguistic/cultural groups affected by Javanese models, including people of southern Thailand, who share culture and language with Northern Malaysia.

To understand the cultural code of behavior that contrasts the refined (Javanese but which becomes indigenized into “locally appropriate”—i.e., hence Sudanese, Kelantanese, Sasak [Lombokese], etc.)—with the “other” or “inappropriate outsider”, one must understand the concept of “becoming Javanese” (or by extension Sundanese, Sasak, etc.) as something attained rather than a birthright. Children while much loved are emotionally volatile and so said to be durung jawa (“not yet Javanese”), since they have not yet mastered the ideal of self-control and balance needed to operate appropriately in civilized Javanese society. Once mature they should—unlike animals, children, the mentally disabled, and foreigners—always maintain full self-control. While some outsiders see this calm cultural preference as “dissembling,” the Javanese sees direct expression of emotion as uncivilized and crude. Straight talk and looking forthrightly into the face of the other is thought rude.

Thus the “other,” in wayang and nang, is what the encultured refined (Javanese, alus) person (a protagonist) is not—beastly, childish, crazy, and foreign. The other is kasar—direct, crass, alien, low class, and often physically abnormal. While negatively weighted, this other, the outsider, is simultaneously seen as a function of the self that must be controlled to become “Javanese”—a locally encultured adult human.

In puppetry there are three kinds of “others”: 1) aliens, 2) religious others (kafir or non-Muslims), and 3) class or physically differentiated figures.

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1 Some Lombok lore claims that the Islamic saint Sunan Kalijaga brought the art to the island (though others say it was Sunan Prapen, another saint). In Indonesia, Sunan Kalijaga is also called Sheik Malaya, and the story goes that he went to the Southeast Asian mainland to teach Islam using puppetry to convert people. However, current wayang kelantan practitioners instead claim that their art was brought to the area by a local ethnic Chinese woman who studied wayang in Jawa (Foley 2015, 36–38). Thai nang talung is sometimes thought to have derived from entertainments by and for Javanese workers (see Taweethong 2010, 6).
Aliens

Aliens, people whose language, dress, and behavior communicate their otherness, come in two major variations. First is the simple alien who is inset to create comedy via an incongruous look, language, and behavior: This character appears frequently in quick comic episodes often interacting with the main clown figures. Second, there is a threatening other, which I will call the complex alien: This character, in contrast to the simple alien, is part of the narrative and performance structure and is sometimes a major antagonist in a play. For example, the Raja Sabrangan, the “Overseas King” character, is standard in many stories of wayang kulit purwa. This is an alien antagonist that the hero must confront and overcome in battle, thus an important part of the story.

The simple alien itself has two brands: stereotypes and celebrities. Firstly, there are ethnic stereotypes, similar to what we encounter in Turkish karagöz’ multiethnic panoply of characters or early 20th-century America’s vaudeville depictions of the low-class Irishman, Jew, African American, etc. Such figures play to the audiences’ preconceptions about known ethnic groups. Secondly, there are celebrity or portrait figures that represent well-known international personae.

The simple alien ethnic stereotype is seen in Thai nang talung’s representation of the loud-mouthed South Indian (kaek) and opium-smoking Chinese (orang cina) (see Figure 1). Likewise, in wayang golek of the Sundanese area of West Java, the important clown Togog (who serves the antagonist king) is a depicted as an ethnic stereotype—speaking Javanese rather than Sundanese, indicating he is foolish, foreign, and simpering before pompous leaders (reflecting Sundanese perceptions of Javanese behavior). Such culturally stereotyped alien figures garner laughs but seldom drive plot. Indeed, Togog seldom appears in contemporary Sundanese wayang because he is supposed to speak Javanese, which current puppeteers do not.

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1 Wayang kulit purwa plays make up the “ancient” (purwa) repertoire of Javanese shadow puppetry, including stories based on the Indian Mahabharata and Ramayana epics.
Figure 1: *Nang Talung* figures, Southern Thailand, L.-R. Indian and Chinaman. Photo by Kathy Foley.

The second kind of simple alien is the foreigner portrait puppet. These are usually introduced as a quick comic gimmick. Some Sundanese *wayang golek dalang* I saw in the late 1970s might have a Muhammed Ali puppet appear in a clown scene. Dalang Enthus Susmono in the 1990s had George Foreman or a sumo wrestler as quick laugh getters, and Dalang Enthus’ insertion of George Bush and Osama bin Laden, complete with scud missiles, enlivened clowning battles at the time of the Gulf War (Figure 2). Dalang Purbo Asmoro introduced Joe Biden and Kamala Harris in a clown scene during a *wayang* for the American president’s inauguration in January 2021, another example of celebrity “simple aliens.”

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This quick joke alien, too, applies to some characters in Dalang Enthus Susmono’s sci-fi wayang planet where literal aliens appear (Figure 3). Inserting international celebrities does not affect the narrative, they drop into the play as if they had just beamed down from another planet, usually coming only in clown scenes or comic battles. Such figures are gimmicks to evoke laughter and do not drive the show.
Figure 3: Dalang Enthus Susmono’s 1990s sci-fi wayang planet had actual aliens with the clown servants (here Bagong) as Teletubbies. Figures from The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angest Collection of Indonesian Puppets at Yale University Art Gallery. Photo by Kathy Foley.

A more substantial alien is one required by plot structure. New types of wayang, such as the 2012 wayang kelantan Malaysian Star Wars (Perperangan Bintang) of Pak Muhammed Dain, Tintoy Chuo, and The Take Huat, have a relatively straightforward borrowing of a foreign plot with western sci-fi figures adapted into local character types in a way not dissimilar to the way Hindu Mahabharata and Ramayana figures were probably originally fitted into more indigenous concepts of refined human/ancestral protector/god image versus devious demon. In Perperangan Bintang, the Darth Vader is performed with the characteristic features of the Rawana figure (Maharaja Wana) from the Ramayana while Princess Leila is modeled on Lady Sita (Sita Dewi), the heroine and wife of Prince Rama (see Figure 4).
A much more significant alien other is the Raja Sabrangan/the Overseas King character (see Figure 5). He, with his ogre-like men, represents the epitome of non-approved behavior and iconography (loud, coarse voices, aggressive intentions, fangs, large and hairy bodies, staring eyes) and contrasts with the soft-spoken, refined, down-cast gazing, and fine-boned hero who will win with mind over matter. The Javanized/localized hero will defeat this boasting outsider (whose name changes from story to story while the persona remains the same). The Raja Sabrangan has some of the behaviors we associate with the Kurawa in the antagonist cousins of the heroes of the Mahabharata, but unlike the Kurawa who are part of the imported Indian mythos, the Raj Sabrangan as a type found only in Javanese stories and is not a character in the original Indian epics.
Where does this “other” come from? If the tale followed the standard Indian narrative, it should ordinarily be a contest between refined Pandawa brothers and those less refined Kurawa cousins (or Prince Rama and the forces of the Sri Lankan King Rawana), but this third party *sabrang* kingdom (*negara sabrangan*) is introduced, usually led by the demonic and often red-faced king. The figure’s iconography compares to the worst antagonists of the Indian epics (Dursasana of the *Mahabharata*, Rawana of the *Ramayana*). But, given that there are already such fully antagonistic figures in the Indian “source” narrative, it seems this Raja Sabrangan should be superfluous. Where do he and his coarse crew come from? Does he represent some pre-Hindu world of the demons and

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5 See also Wiratama (2021).
the dead, or is he a literal alien from Java’s historical antagonisms—a Buginese marauder from
Sulawesi (the Celebes), a group known in the colonial era for seafaring and war skills whose
reputation as pirates, attacks on shipping, and incursions into coastal Java were part of the regional
dynamics? Buginese invaders sometimes succeeded in creating overseas kingdoms and becoming
elites, as in Johor, Malaysia, where 2017 political brouhahas exploded when a political leader of
Buginese descent (former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak) was called out by opponents as a
“Buginese Pirate.” This historical outsider, the Bugis (whom some think gave rise to the English
term Bogey man), surely contributed to the sabrangan mythos.

This antagonist king was, ideologically, the opposing other in many of the semi-historical
tales that became the story source for wayang golek rod puppetry and wayang klitik flat wooden
puppets. Panji is always saving his beloved Candra Kirana from such a red-faced outsider (Klana
[“Wanderer”] is the generic name for such a king) who always attacks from outside the core
kingdom, the central Javanese heartland (Kediri and Jengala are the kingdoms attacked in Panji
stories). Similarly, Menak Jingga (see Figure 6), in Damar Wulan stories, is another out-of-control
king character whom the eponymous hero must vanquish to save Kencana Wunggu, the Majapahit
Queen. Menak Jingga’s misshapen body connotes his misbegotten soul. Greedy, lascivious, and
club-footed, he is the outsider from the kingdom Blambangan (the furthermost point of the East
Java where people were perceived to be almost as wild as the wild Balinese, Buginese, or
Makasarese).

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See, for example, https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2017/11/02/malaysian-royals-angry-over-mahathir-
As the Dutch arrived, they were, of course, incorporated into wayang, and they fit this sabrangan stereotype of loud and hairy in stories that would glorify the local heroes of the babad (historical chronicles), telling of the struggles of the colonial period—refined Javanese versus demonic Dutch (see Figure 7). More recent development includes wayang pakuan, which tell historical tales of the Sundanese highlands. In these tales, the Dutch and Chinese serve as coarse antagonists with whom the local Sundanese heroes struggle in the eternal war of the local alus (refined) against the kasar (coarse) outsider.
Thus, the concept of the local heroic refined (Indonesian/Malay alus) and the non-socialized outsider-other (kasar) has had an impact on puppetry that developed around the gulf of Thailand. It can be seen in figures and behavior, heard in the rhythm and pitch of character voices, and observed in the good versus bad behavior of each group in the narrative. While the uncouth kasar type may have started early, and, in an original incarnation, been a spirit or forest demon, certainly through the colonial period it was framed as cultural alien and added into Ramayana and Mahabharata tales, since the character suited an indigenous sense of what threatened the order of the world.

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7 We find rough and distorted mask genres in outer island areas (i.e., Sumatra and Kalimantan) that might support this hypothesis. See, for example, Thomas (2013).
Religious Others (*Kafir* or non-Muslims)

A variation on this outsider is found in the Amir Hamzah tales, concerning the uncle of Mohammed, where the “other” is not really the non-local figure but instead the *kafir* (non-Muslim). Here, religion, and not ethnicity, is the source of difference. Muslims are correlated with refined (thus Javanized) and non-Muslims (if they do not convert) will be coarse and aggressive. The *wayang menak*, found in Sunda, Central Java, the North Coast (Pasisir), and Lombok, tells the story of the uncle of Mohammed, Amir Hamzah. We encounter kingdoms from Greece through Ceylon as Amir Hamzah makes the world safe for Islam (see Figure 8).

![Figure 8: From right to left, the clowns Sabda Palon and Lamsijan, and Prime Minister Umar Maya serve the white-faced King Amir Hamzah as he overcomes the evil red-faced King Jobin of Kos, King Nursiwan of Persia (Medayin), and his Prime Minister Patih Betak). Figures from The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angest Collection of Indonesian Puppets at Yale University Art Gallery. Photo by Kathy Foley.](image)

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Petersen (1994) notes, “The identity of the *kafir* is constructed to represent selfish passions and worldly designs … an inability to recognize one’s position in relation to superiors and inferiors” (273).
Class or Physically Differentiated Figures

A final kind of “outsider” is the internal other, whose body and class signify difference. Characters who seem the most indigenous, the major clowns (punakawan [Java, Sunda], panasar [Lombok], talok [Thai]) are such outsiders, and their often dark skin and grotesque bodies remind us of low-class demons (see Figure 9). In West Java, they certainly share iconographic features, such as bumps on the back of the neck, with the rank-and-file ogres (buta balad) from the sabrangan kingdom, yet these clowns are positively positioned. Color, language, and class make them “other” to the refined protagonist, but this particular other is accorded unique spiritual power. This is true wherever we look: from wayang kelantan (Pak Dogel and Wak Long) through Sunda, Java, Bali, to Lombok. For example, the chief clown Semar in Sunda is seen to be the elder brother of the high god of the universe (Batara Guru/Siwa) and the first being to emerge from the cosmic egg as the universe began. The Indonesian figures have their equivalent in Thai nang talung, where they are seen as spiritually potent but lack the divine mythos. Johnson (2006) notes their protruding bellies and distended navels, exaggerated hips and corpulent buttocks, faces that resemble animals such as Ai Dik’s duck bill, Yod Thong’s crocodilian face, Nunui’s bovine countenance, and Luuk Mi’s bear-like features (15).
These clown-servant characters often have physical peculiarities, fat stomachs, protruding belly buttons, limps, and other features that remind us of low-class demons that serve the Raja Sabrangan, but clowns are not “evil.” These characters evoke the little guy pragmatic view of history and myth where comedy is a survival mechanism, yet part of their strangeness derives from their heavenly or sacred origin. Some see the dark bodies and say they might represent the dark-bodied pre-Austronesians present in Southeast Asia before the Malayo-Polynesian Austronesians started sailing down from Taiwan. In such an interpretation, the “other” would be the alus, and light-skinned Austronesians who took over the indigenous Melanesian land in early “settler colonialism” that made Melanesian locals the uncultured, the underclass, the ruled.

Ultimately, though we can interpret the foreigner/sabrangan as an outsider opponent, it is more to the point of wayang philosophy to see this figure as a part of the self/society to be both...
understood and controlled. I see the clowns as linked to the concept of spirit siblings. The individual’s afterbirth and, on Java-Bali, the umbilicus, bloody show, and “water” or vernix caseosa on the skin of the newborn are considered four spirit siblings that can protect or harm the individual depending on one’s attention to these spirit siblings. While some areas emphasize only the afterbirth (perhaps the inspiration for the bloated body of the main clown Semar) and the umbilicus (which is often kept in a bag and used in healing childhood ills), in Java, Sunda, and Bali, all four birth brothers/sisters get attention in local thinking. I find the idea of two or four oddly shaped companion protector-advisors to the hero may come from early thoughts of these spiritual inside-outsiders accompanying each child. The pattern of the hero with, or sometimes at odds with, his spirit siblings is a frequent feature of older puppet plays. A hero is, narratively, rather often at war with or needing reconciliation with him or herself. We see this in the two-handedness of wayang—one performer divided against him or herself; the right hand holds the refined/alus/white prince while the left hand attacks with the coarse/kasar/red Klana/Raja Sabrangan. The philosophy of spirit siblings takes over tales like the Amir Hamzah story Rengganis, where a female sprite, Rengganis, saves the ailing Islamic king, Amir Hamzah, with her magic arrow that transforms opponents into their “real” beings. Amir Hamzah cannot win against the red-faced Klana character, since (as the arrow reveals) the Raja Sabrangan, Klana, is really the hero’s afterbirth, which Amir Hamzah has failed to acknowledge!

This old spirit (other-yet-self) lurks under wayang stories and might have been behind the idea of potency in wayang in times past. Coarse clowns accompany the refined hero just as the saudara empat (four siblings) watch over the life of a person (see Figure 10): four ogres attack the white-faced hero in the “flower battle” (perang kembang) of a standard Javanese play, just as saudara empat can turn on us the individual who fails to honor these spirit others who gave him or her life (see Figure 11). They may explain why the fiveness of the Pandawa heroes (Arjuna in the middle with four siblings) “fits” the cultural requirements of the Austronesian world. This may explain why the Sabrangan characters, while not in the Indian versions of purwa stories, are such important attackers who were inserted into the narratives and why the ogre-like and sometimes red-faced Klana, while seemingly an antagonist, is also considered a most important and holy character. As he danced, audiences of wayang cepak in the 1970s, would sawer (throw money). If your coin hit the dancing puppet, you got blessings. Is Klana our worst nightmare, our dark side as represented by

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the afterbirth coming after our misbehaving ego? Such ideas, while far from current urban thinking, remain alive in popular performance and perhaps communicate village thinking of times past.

Figure 10. The four clowns protect and accompany the hero in a way that traditional culture affirmed that spirit siblings were always close: Semar (white face) and his three sons Gareng (gold faced, club-foot), bug-eyed Bagong (pink), and Petruk (gold face, long nose) here accompany the refined hero Arjuna (right). Figures from The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angest Collection of Indonesian Puppets at Yale University Art Gallery. Photo by Kathy Foley.
So, who is this ultimate other? The other is both alien (foreign, demon, low class, deformed, comic) and an integral aspect of the self and being in the world (an ancestral, sacred enforcer). Protective power comes from facing this truth. Historical dynamics may change how we name or depict this antagonist—but he has always been part of the local cosmology (for Javanese, Sundanese, Sasak, Balinese, Kelantanese, etc.). Understanding how to harness and control the “other” within one is the key to controlling the self. The outsider, demonic, and comic are within, and a puppet show is a lesson in how building the self is simultaneously building a just and peaceful society.
References


About the Author

**Kathy Foley** is a Distinguished Professor Emerita of Theatre Arts at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is the current President of UNIMA-USA and serves on the UNIMA-International Research Commission and Publications and Writing Commission. She edited *Asian Theatre Journal* from 2005–2018 and was one of the first non-Indonesians to perform in the Indonesia National Wayang Festival as a dalang of *wayang golek sunda*. She studied with Dalang Otong Rasta and Dalang Abah Sunarya in Bandung, Jabar, Indonesia.