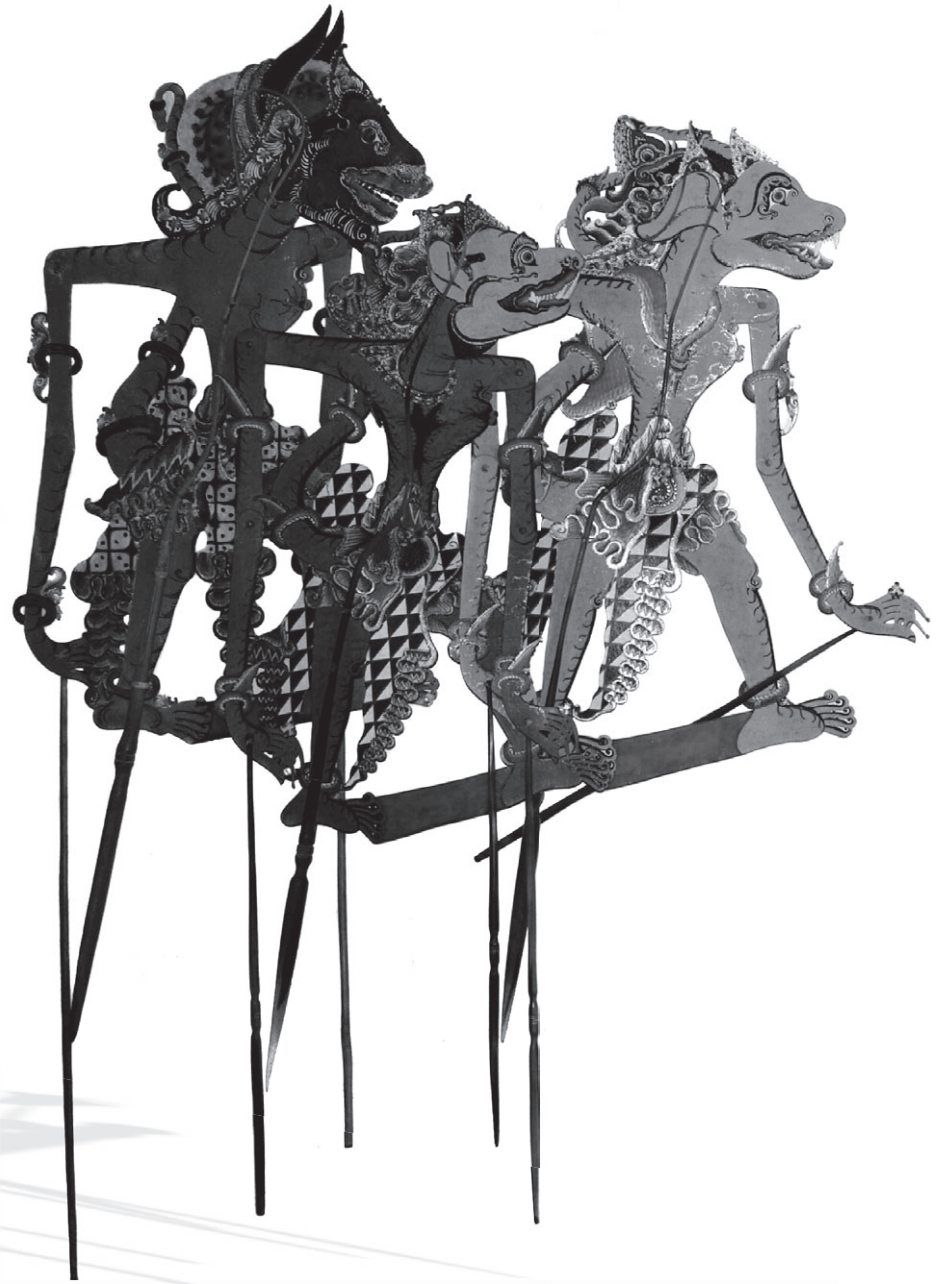


# Floating on water

Indonesia is an interesting country. On the one hand, it tries to maintain its traditional folk culture and arts and is keen on having its cultural assets acknowledged by the international community. It does so by entering proposals to a variety of UNESCO programs and by accepting international funds from donor agencies to preserve its cultural heritage. Its heritage is also an object of keen discussions, especially if Indonesia is convinced that Malaysia is appropriating part of what Indonesia sees as its own national cultural heritage, and not that of Malaysia, despite the large numbers of ethnic Indonesians who have lived in Malaysia for generations.

Dick van der Meij



**Felicia Katz-Harris. 2010.**  
*Inside the Puppet Box: A Performance Collection of Wayang Kulit at the Museum of International Folk Art.* New Mexico/Seattle and London: Museum of International Folk Art in association with University of Washington Press. 200 p, fully illustrated, ISBN: 9780295990743

ON THE OTHER HAND, groups in the country are keen to do away with traditional culture. The Indonesian and international community in Indonesia was shocked to learn a few months ago that hard line Islamic groups disturbed shadow play theater performances (*wayang*) in the outskirts of the town of Sukoharjo, Central Java. It transpired that performances given by less well-known *dhalang* (puppet players) in off-places were threatened. Apparently, these hard line groups shied away from doing the same with famous players who performed in larger venues, but the trend is threatening enough, as it is, to be a cause for alarm. More recent still was the disturbing news that statues portraying *wayang* puppets in the town of Purwakarta, West Java, were destroyed by the towns inhabitants at the instigation of Muslims who want to do away with these pre-Islamic artifices.

*Wayang*, or Shadow Play Theater is an iconic Indonesian traditional art form. It is just as Indonesian as the tulip is Dutch and the Eifel Tower is French. It is inconceivable that this art is threatened as it does in no way contravene Islamic practices. Time and again, scholars and performers point to the fact that the same values are at the basis of both Islam and *wayang* and that, therefore, both are compatible rather than in opposition. As things stand today, the *wayang* art is already under threat by the ongoing onslaught of modernization. Also in Java, many young people – and I have the impression also their parents – seem to be more and more interested in cellular phones and iPods than in night-long *wayang* performances, in difficult and high Javanese at that.

Although *wayang* is apparently under threat in Java itself, it is by no means out of the limelight abroad. Just as there are nowadays more gamelan orchestras in the US than in present-day Java, attention to Javanese *wayang* is probably more to be found in the west than in its region of origin. Just a few years ago, for instance, the Swiss Walter Angst published an amazing book on the various styles of *wayang* puppets and we need

only glance at Victoria Clara van Groenendael's bibliography of *wayang* studies to see that *wayang* has been at the center of scholarly attention for more than 125 years. I hasten to say that right at this moment, also in bookshops in Indonesia a variety of books on *wayang* may be purchased, usually explaining the characters of puppets and presenting their pictures. Nevertheless, this being so, systematic studies of *wayang* puppets, presenting large numbers of photographs of these puppets, has not been done very often. Angst is an exception and *Inside the Puppet Box* is another. While Angst presented puppets stemming from different places and different times, some dating back more than 200 years, this book presents the puppets of one puppet master with only few exceptions from other artists. Interestingly, the author presents modern puppets dating back only 15 years, and sometimes even much less.

The book is beautifully produced (unfortunately not bound) and offers a lot of information that someone not versed in the art needs to know as a start. The descriptions of the puppets, how they are made, performed and staged, is well written and the attention paid to puppeteers and puppet makers interesting. The presentation of the puppets is also novel and apt. During a performance, at the left and right hand side of the puppeteer many puppets are displayed neatly standing in rows from large to big starting at the center (*simpingan*). This approach is very good and earlier works should have been presented like this. Many aspects that are usually overlooked are now clearly explained in lucid language. The book includes much attention to details, such as how the sticks, used by the puppeteer (*dhalang*) to manipulate his puppets, are made. It thus presents most of the range of aspects in connection with *wayang kulit* shadow play.

The museum collection contains about 230 puppets from this collection and some from Ki Enthus Susmono, a very modern *wayang* performer from Tegal on Java's north coast, including puppets of George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein (of which hundreds are rumored to have been made and were eagerly sold to Americans). A few puppets of other famous *dhalang* complete the collection.

It is pity that the author has not used Angst's book to enable her to say something of the quality of the puppets in the collection of the museum. Virtually all of them were collected by or made for one *dhalang*, Ki Purbo Asmoro from Surakarta, Central Java. Ki Purbo is a puppeteer and a teacher at the Surakarta branch of the Arts Institute of Indonesia. In this role, he is instrumental and influential in the sustainability of *wayang* in Central Java.

Reading the book I could not help but wonder why Ki Purbo Asmoro saw fit to sell his collection. Apart from being able to make a new set, he did do away with beautiful old ones and that might have been considered a pity. Moreover, if complete collections are so important for the sustainability of the art one would think that he might have preserved them for his instructional tasks at the institute where he works. Something else that I found increasingly annoying is that from reading the book I got the impression that *wayang* is something that was just recently discovered. This is, of course, entirely not the case. It has been studied for a long time and a library of studies, in a variety of languages, has been published over the years. The list of references is therefore much too short and may give the impression that we are dealing with something very out of the ordinary, which it really isn't.

Some mistakes might have been prevented. Her explanation of *Cikarini* (one particular verse form of the Old Javanese *kakawin* poetic tradition) is completely incomprehensible and wrong. It is not an ancient Javanese song and a *pupuh* (verse form, meter) is not a collection of stanzas from 'song lyrics that form sentences' (whatever that means). The *dhudahan* does not consist of puppets that the puppeteer needs "to have at arms' reach during a performance" (p. 56). If that were the case, we would have very funny performances with strange stories. She corrects herself later and more accurately states that these groups usually contain ogres, clown figures, servants and miscellaneous types (p. 142) and gods, monkey soldiers, animals, armies, weapons (p. 170) and not the ubiquitous heroes almost every story presents during performances, such as *Arjuna* and *Kresna*.

The first two sentences of the Preface I found curious and a bit unnerving. It says: "In the world's eyes, Indonesia is one of the richest countries for artistic and cultural works. In this era of global competition, the arts are one of Indonesia's most important treasures." Undoubtedly, Indonesia has a wealth of cultures, but the way many people in this country deal with their arts is rather the opposite of what she implies in these two sentences. I therefore think that these sentences do not reflect Indonesian daily reality at all, but perhaps more those circles familiar to the author. Many people with an inclination for arts and cultures find themselves in a desert, or perhaps the simile should be, dying of thirst while floating on water.

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Above left: Puppet maker Riyadi Dwi Susanto, one of Felicia Katz-Harris' informants (Photograph by Dick van der Meij, Yogyakarta, 26 September 2011).

Above right: *Wayang* puppets, from private collection Dick van der Meij.