

# Ethno-religious heritage in Singapore and the quest



IN A BOOK PROJECT provisionally titled *The crossings of a quest* I have tried to develop such a new understanding of the quest – a cultural one. I explore its significance in its actual material variety, for human beings, through case studies of one quest as it crosses religious cultures. This is the story of Bima's perilous search for the purifying water at the instruction of his *guru* Drona, a classic of Javanese and Balinese literature and shadowplay that is told in other formats too: comic books, television drama, animations, paintings, statues, and more. Bima's adventures culminate in his encounter with the Deity in the ocean, from whom he receives profound teachings.

Owing to their structural properties, quest narratives tend to possess a preterhuman and mystical aura. Bima's quest is no exception. Throughout its six-centuries-long history it has been told in distinctly religious frameworks, such as Mahayana Buddhism, Shaivism, Sufi Islam, Javanism (*kejawen*), even Calvinist Christianity. But this is changing in the postcolonial and postmodern conjuncture. *Dewa Ruci* – as the story is often called after a name of Deity – partakes in the fast, frequent, pervasive, and widespread flows of contemporary global culture. How does this affect its religiosity? What happens when it is transplanted to Hanoi's Young Pioneers Palace, The Arches underneath Glasgow's Central Station ("host to some of Britain's biggest club nights and an eclectic range of gigs"), or Steppenwolf Theater in Chicago? One would think that in the kind of context represented by these spaces – where it does not obviously resonate with established religious mythology – the story must make do with its intrinsic religious qualities or else be areligious, perhaps no more than a work of exotic art.

Or must it? Other sites for tellings of *Dewa Ruci* in recent years have been Peace Pole Park in Byron Bay, the new age capital of Australia, the thirteenth-century Romano-Gothic church in the hamlet of Westerwijtwerd in Groningen, the Netherlands, and the street that leads to Sultan Mosque in the so-called Arab Quarter of Singapore. But while these are sacred places, they too are unconventional venues for a Javanese story of quest. All these performances of *Dewa Ruci* were uncommon also in terms of format. In two cases this involved merging the narrative with a kindred story from a mythology that the audience could be expected to be more familiar with: Dante's *Inferno* in Chicago and other American cities in 1994 and the Celtic myth of Cúchulainn in Glasgow, Scotland, in 2002. While in the other four venues the narrative was relatively unchanged, the visual, dramaturgic, and musical format were innovative nonetheless.

Innovative, but also remarkably alike. Producers with widely different backgrounds, in different countries and circumstances, have in the same period, mostly without awareness of each other's work, made renditions of *Dewa Ruci* that differ from previous ones in like ways and resemble each other in similar ways. These productions were intentionally syncretic, in format only, in narrative as well, or in the way they blended the alien story and format into a local religious setting. They were also individualistic and rooted in the main producer's biography. The performance in Byron Bay presented the story as "a re-telling of Bima's quest to find inner wisdom" – fully resonant with the place's spiritual vibe. For the performance in the village church, stained glass windows showing Bima facing the Deity were specially designed – an age-old Christian visual idiom Javanized, but by a contemporary Dutch cartoonist. And, as a final example, the 1994 American production that merged *Dewa Ruci*, a related Balinese *wayang* play, and Dante's descent into hell, was titled *Visible Religion*.<sup>1</sup> It is in their self-consciously distinctive syncretism, their *idiosyncrasy* as I shall call it (using the term in a special sense), that the religiosity of these productions was concentrated. They juxtaposed, merged, and transcended religious traditions to play on them, with some humour, and they tended to be critical of the local religious heritage.

**'Wayang Dewa Rutji' in Arab Street District, Singapore**  
Most of the performances were held in Christian or post-Christian environments and outside Asia, but not all. Because it took place in front of a mosque in a markedly Muslim district (indeed one marketed as such), a production in Singapore in January 2012 brings out, especially clearly, the dynamics of cross-religious quest-narration in a discursive ambience that circulates globally and involves de-institutionalized spirituality, mobility, and heritagization.<sup>2</sup>

The modern shadowplay *Wayang Dewa Rutji* was presented twice in the evenings of 20 and 21 January 2012 in the open air in Kampong Glam Conservation District, against the backdrop of Sultan Mosque (Fig. 3). It was shadow puppetry with dialogues in Malay, and as such it bore the stamp of tradition, but the narrations between scenes were in English and the puppeteer was a professional modern actor without training or experience in shadowplay. Like her, the sole musician was Malay; he played the Peruvian box-drum called *cajón* and electronic music made with the help of an Akai MPC.

Narrative is accepted as central to the representation of experience in a variety of disciplines, ranging from sociology and philosophy to history. A fascinating narrative pattern in this connection is 'the quest'. Its focus on an individual with a strong sense of purpose, its structure of layered progression, and its promise of revelatory closure give the quest an especially solid architecture and have it exemplify familiar ideals. The quest in western mythology and literature has been much studied. Theoretical perspectives rooted in Jungian psychoanalysis have dominated since the 1950s, with plenty of academic remakes and retakes in the same vein. Oddly and disappointingly, however, this emphasis is not counterbalanced with *cultural* study. Quests pop up everywhere around and in people – in videogames and pilgrimage, self-perception and national histories – but this ubiquity and the quest's presumed psychological universality have not triggered empirical research into the social aspects of its presence, its variability, and the political uses to which it is put.

Bernard Arps



Fig. 1 (top): Puppets during a rehearsal.  
Fig. 2 (right): Agnes Christina with one of her puppets.

Like in most of the *Dewa Ruci* performances I have mentioned, the core creative role was played by a single individual. This was Agnes Christina (born 1987), an Indonesian national who began acting while attending junior college in Singapore and extended her artistic career to scriptwriting and directing at university, also in Singapore, where she studied engineering. She composed the initial Indonesian-language script for *Dewa Rutji* which the puppeteer then rewrote in more idiomatic Malay and improvised upon in performance. Agnes also directed, and she had designed the puppets (Fig. 2).

The performances were sponsored by the Malay Heritage Centre, an institution that is, as formulated in its publicity material, “under the management of the National Heritage Board in partnership with the Malay Heritage Foundation.” The former, “the custodian of Singapore’s heritage,” is a government institution with the mission to “foster nationhood, promote identity building, and champion the development of a vibrant cultural and heritage sector in Singapore.” The latter cooperates with “various segments of the Malay and Singapore community, government agencies, philanthropists and entrepreneurs” to “promote the study and research, and the public’s understanding and knowledge of, the historical and socio-cultural development of the Malay community in Singapore [...]” The performances belonged to a series of monthly Neighbourhood Sketches or *Sejenak di Kampong Gelam* [Moments in Kampong Gelam] that were organized in the run-up to the reopening of the Malay Heritage Centre, scheduled for later in 2012.<sup>3</sup> Bussorah Mall, the now pedestrian street where the performances took place, is represented as the Malay heartland of Singapore.

The idiosyncratic of this work of story-telling – idiosyncratic from the perspective of *wayang* and its genre conventions – lay in four realms. Most conspicuous were the puppets. Agnes was inspired by the style of Javanese *wayang kulit*, but reduced them to what she considered the bare essentials. She did away with legs and feet, as these cannot move anyway, and modelled the puppets after the kris (*keris*), the ceremonial dagger that is iconic of Malay culture (and Javanese and other Indonesian cultures too) (Fig. 1). The musical accompaniment was equally unconventional. Agnes had engaged this particular musician because she wanted the puppeteer’s speech to be punctuated by the *cajón*, his trade-mark instrument. In the first rehearsal it turned out he was also competent with an electronic instrument that could produce atmospheric music. There were no gamelan-like sounds whatsoever in *Wayang Dewa Rutji*. Thirdly, the performances were conceived in the terms of modern, that is western-style, drama. Explaining the construction of her play, Agnes referred to the well-known tripartite plot structure with its ‘problem’, ‘climax’, and ‘resolution’, and also to ‘pace’ and ‘blocking’, and of course to ‘character’ (in the double sense of personage and individual nature) and ‘character development’. These concepts are either lacking in traditional *wayang* theories or conceived from quite other vantage points.

#### The religiosity of ‘Wayang Dewa Rutji’

Agnes Christina also took an idiosyncratic approach to the story. Raised a Christian in a Chinese-Indonesian family, she became interested in Javanese mystical thought in Singapore after 2010, when she helped to organize an Indonesian arts festival there. On the agenda was a traditional-style *wayang* performance by a Javanese puppeteer; the play turned out to be *Dewa Ruci*. The puppeteer framed it as a “journey of self-discovery” in which Bima “eventually discovered spiritual fulfillment and found his own, true self.” This event triggered Agnes’s interest in Javanism. The story-line of *Wayang Dewa Rutji* was furthermore inspired by a book published in Indonesia in 2010, which contains an Indonesian translation of an eighteenth-century poetic version in Javanese and an analysis of this work according to the tenets of Islamic mysticism, which is rather different from Javanist interpretations.

Agnes added an episode and somewhat changed the order of scenes, but like the classical poem and most *wayang* renditions, her version ends with Bima meeting the Deity, entering His body through His ear, and being taught a mystical doctrine there. Still her script did not make reference, explicit or veiled, to specific religious traditions. She explained to me that she did not consider the narrative as bound to one or more particular religions (*agama*), but rather as a story of enlightenment. (She used the English term.) She regarded Bima’s quest as an individual exploration of religiosity. This kind of understanding was also alluded to by a staff member of the Malay Heritage Centre who sat in on a rehearsal. Criticizing the characterization of Bima, he warned that a certain and meant-to-be comical way of speaking “makes his journey very trivial” and urged the performers to “try to find out what Bima’s journey is for you.”



Fig. 3 (above): The modern shadowplay *Wayang Dewa Rutji* presented in the open air in Kampong Glam Conservation District, against the backdrop of Sultan Mosque.

Motifs like the water of life (*air kehidupan*), belief (*percaya*), passions (*nafsu*), and light (*cahaya*), which were thematized in Agnes’s rendition, appear in the mythologies and doctrines of several major world religions. There was justification for the performance publicity that described the narrative as “featur[ing] elements found within the three faiths of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam.” This characterization came from the Malay Heritage Centre, not from Agnes, and as I learned it was a considered statement. It told the mosque and its people that although this was *wayang* and as such seemingly heathen, in historical fact it was Islamic. At the same time, like certain other Neighbourhood Sketches had done, it made the point that the site is not exclusively dedicated to Islam.

#### Bima’s quest as Malay heritage

This was not an unusual way to describe the religious affiliations of *Dewa Ruci* in the international performance circuit, although in the context of Malay heritage it was. Malayness is Islamic, and indeed the setting did provide more circumscribed interpretive guidance to the spectators. A mosque was undeniably there, and not just any mosque, but the most prominent one of Singapore, located right in the heart of the Malay district. The performances were organized by the Malay Heritage Centre, as was clear from the publicity, including on-site posters. The discursive ambience, therefore, promoted an understanding of *Wayang Dewa Rutji* in the terms of local Islamic heritage.

Although fundamental properties of the performances were in fact innovative, they were cast in the light of traditionality. A news item on the Malay television channel of Singapore, Suria, described the production as “given a modern touch” although “it still maintains its traditional features” (“*diberi sentuhan modern*”, “*masih mengekalkan ciri-ciri tradisionalnya*”). A further dimension of this traditionality can be illustrated with an idea that was considered as the Neighbourhood Sketches were being prepared. The proposed performance site was the neglected plot of land where the *Pondok Jawa* [Javanese lodging-house] used to stand. Architectural historian Imran bin Tajudeen describes it as “the community and cultural hall of Javanese immigrants situated close to the Istana” (i.e., the palace) and as a “cultural and community hall, where *wayang wong* (classical opera), music, and shadow theater were staged.”<sup>5</sup> In the late 1980s the Urban Redevelopment Authority had entertained the idea of having a “community house at the former Pondok Jawa.”<sup>6</sup> But it was not to be. To the chagrin of conservationists and Malay organizations alike, the building was demolished in

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2004.<sup>7</sup> It would have been ideologically highly meaningful if the Neighbourhood Sketches had been located there. In connection with *Wayang Dewa Rutji* this would have singled out Singapore’s Malays of Javanese descent, undermining the myth of ethnic homogeneity that continues to do the rounds in conservative Malay circles. It would also have drawn attention to the state’s sometimes drastic, irrevocable, and unexplained interventions in heritage initiatives. Reputedly, however, the site would present technical difficulties. Bussorah Mall was chosen instead.

‘The quest’ not only provided the plot-type of the play and should inspire the performers, but was also expected to appeal to the audience. This is not as self-evident as it seems. Besides, of course, by resonating with the spectators’ personal religiosities, it was hoped to appeal to a central category among the intended audience because the very reason they reside in Singapore is a quest. When Agnes Christina proposed the performances to the Malay Heritage Centre in 2011, she wrote:

*Dewa Rutji* Story was chosen because this story is about spiritual journey. In the past, a lot of Javanese came to Singapore in transit before they headed for their Hajj Pilgrimage. This story of a spiritual journey illustrates the journey of the Javanese from Java to Singapore and then to Mecca.

Some came back to Singapore. Bima’s quest had to interest their descendants, as the story allegorizes their very own history. This line of reasoning made ‘heritage’ an important ideology attached to the narrative in *Wayang Dewa Rutji*.

#### Heritage as quest

The analogy must be taken even further. To the extent that heritage is a process, it too is like a quest. The search for and performance of Malay-Singaporean heritage is temporalized; it happens not once and for all. It unfolds in space and involves movement, with Singapore as the hub and end-point. It is animated by confrontations with ill-willed obstacles that are readily personified, such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority or more generally ‘the *gahmen*’ as it is called in Singlish. The heritagization has as yet unachieved and unknown, but clearly rewarding, goals: recognition, appreciation, prosperity, authority.

The quest, this mode of narrative representation of actions and events, was operative on multiple levels in and around *Wayang Dewa Rutji*. The correspondence across dimensions gave a remarkable coherence and purposiveness to the entire enterprise – a coherence and purposiveness that were not only formal, but also ideological, and quite centrally religious.

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#### Notes

- 1 I cannot elaborate on these performances any further here. They are treated in my forthcoming study of the inflections of the *Dewa Ruci* story crossing religions.
- 2 I was able to attend one of the performances and several rehearsals thanks to the kindness of playwright-director Agnes Christina. I am grateful also to staff members of the Malay Heritage Centre (who must remain unnamed) for their willingness to exchange thoughts with me about the performances and their political context.
- 3 The Malay Heritage Centre, located since 2004 in a palace built by the Sultan of Johor in the early 19th century, was closed for refurbishment in 2011 and reopened on 1 September 2012 by Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loon. As stated in the media release, “Based on positive public and participant feedback, MHC will continue to organise programmes such as the popular *Neighbourhood Sketches* which showcase traditional Malay art forms along the streets of Kampong Gelam.”
- 4 No English translation of this work has been published. A Dutch version is Bernard Arps (intro. and transl.), “*Déwa Rutji: avontuur en wijsheid in een Javaans verhaal*”, in Harry Poeze (ed.), *Oosterse omzwervingen: klassieke teksten over Indonesië uit Oost en West* (Leiden: KITLV Uitgeverij, 2000). The Indonesian study that inspired Agnes is Imam Musbikin, *Serat Dewa Ruci (misteri air kehidupan)* (Jogjakarta: Diva Press, 2010).
- 5 Imran bin Tajudeen. 2007. “State constructs of ethnicity in the reinvention of Malay-Indonesian heritage in Singapore”, *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 18.2:7–27, pp.10 and 18, respectively.
- 6 Yeoh, Brenda S. A. & Shirlena Huang. 1996. “The conservation–redevelopment dilemma in Singapore: the case of the Kampong Glam historic district”, *Cities* 13:411–422, p.418.
- 7 As noted by Imran bin Tajudeen (2007:11,18).