

# The paradox of UNESCO's Masterpieces

Cultural heritage is often associated with something from the past, but labelling something from the past as 'heritage' is a way of dealing with the past in the present. Cultural heritage can be seen as a process in which the meaning and value of the past in the present is created and re-created, authorized and re-authorized by those who have the power to do so.<sup>1</sup> Such negotiations often deal with issues of political, national, religious, and ethnic identity issues, linked to local, national and world value systems for culture. These values and meanings of culture are not static, but change over time; the addition of the concept 'intangible' cultural heritage to the heritage vocabulary attests to this.

Sadiyah Boonstra



IN 2001, UNESCO LAUNCHED the project 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' with the objective to encourage the identification, preservation, and promotion of cultural expressions, such as language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture, and other arts, as well as traditional forms of communication and information. As a listing system similar to the World Heritage List, the – at the time – new heritage concept aimed to balance the focus of UNESCO's concept of the 1972 World Heritage Convention on tangible remains from the past, such as monuments and buildings, and to make the heritage concept less Eurocentric and more representative of its member states. The first nineteen Masterpieces were proclaimed in 2001; two years later 28 Masterpieces were added, among which The Wayang Puppet Theater of Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> In the same year UNESCO adopted the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*.

To shed light on how the process of heritage formation developed, this article will discuss the case of the wayang performance tradition, from colonial to postcolonial times in Indonesia. It will discuss the relationship between colonial and postcolonial power structures, legacies of the colonial past and contemporary heritage formation, specifically the concept of intangible cultural heritage in the Masterpiece program.<sup>3</sup>

## Wayang

The word wayang is a general word that is applied to many kinds of traditional theatre in Java, Bali, Lombok, and some other parts of Indonesia and other countries of Southeast Asia. It can mean a (wayang) performance, (wayang) puppet, or (wayang) character. The two most widespread forms are wayang kulit and wayang golek. Wayang kulit is played with carved and painted flat puppets made of water buffalo hide, against a screen that is illuminated by a lamp throwing shadows and is watched from both in front and from behind the screen. Wayang golek uses wooden doll-like rod puppets without a screen.<sup>4</sup> The telling of wayang stories – the most popular being the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* – is supported by music from the gamelan orchestra and singers.

Although wayang can be traced to the tenth century, detailed Javanese, Dutch, and English descriptions of wayang date only from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. According to historian L.J. Sears, "The shadow theater, as it is known today, developed within an atmosphere where 19th century discourses of science and progress were percolating, both contributing to and drawing from Javanese and Dutch intellectual exchanges."<sup>5</sup> The study and development of wayang is thus intertwined with the political context of colonialism and its power relations. Consequently, wayang has been incorporated in a western body of scientific colonial knowledge and has come to refer to an 'authentic' indigenous past. It has become a symbol of Java or Bali or Indonesia or the East Indies. Wayang puppets are depicted on book covers, exhibition posters, on the walls of Indonesian restaurants, and can be found in oriental antique stores and food shops. With the submission and proclamation of the wayang puppet theatre as a UNESCO Masterpiece, both the Indonesian state and UNESCO confirm this essentialist connotation in the context of the nation.

## The Masterpiece candidature file

The national wayang organizations Sena Wangi (*Sekretariat Nasional Pewayangan Indonesia*, or National Wayang Secretariat) and Pepadi (*Persatuan Pedalangan Indonesia*, or the Indonesian Puppeteers/Pedalangan Union) prepared Indonesia's 'candidature file' for wayang, according to the UNESCO *Guidelines for the Submission of the Second Proclamation of Masterpieces in 2002*.<sup>6</sup> The candidature file entitled *WAYANG. The Traditional Puppetry and Drama of Indonesia* comprises the initial file, a later-sent addendum including a five year action plan for the preservation and development of wayang, as well as a ten-minute video. The candidature file describes five forms – *Wayang Bali*, Bali; *Wayang Kulit Purwa*, Central Java; *Wayang Golek Sunda*, West Java; *Wayang Banjar*, South Kalimantan; *Wayang Palembang*; South Sumatra – as a "representative 'self-portrait' to present a glimpse of the growth and development of Indonesian wayang up till this time."<sup>7</sup>



An international jury evaluated the candidature file based on criteria of outstanding cultural value found in either "a high concentration of outstanding intangible cultural heritage or an outstanding value from a historical, artistic, ethnological, sociological, anthropological, linguistic or literary point of view."<sup>8</sup> The candidature file argues for the outstanding value of wayang because "it has succeeded in achieving high artistic quality" as it is "an art which has the qualities of *adiluhung* (very noble) and *edipeni* (very beautiful), or ethical and aesthetic." This argument is strengthened with the statement that "Western culture experts have even admired wayang", and that wayang is "...the most complex and sophisticated theatrical form in the world." The international value of wayang is confirmed with the enumeration of Western scholars who conducted research, indicating that wayang is "very attractive to foreign audiences."<sup>9</sup>

The description of wayang in the candidature file can be regarded as a compilation of previous discourses about wayang. Colonial scholars in interaction with the Javanese elite developed a discourse that became the standard or traditional idea of wayang by the end of the 1930s; it was one that emphasized philosophical and mystical elements and focused on wayang's deeper meaning as a mirror of life. This discourse proved to be foundational. Although it acquired new elements under President Sukarno (1945-1966) and President Suharto (1967-1998), they also both re-authorized and reiterated the existing discourse. The discourse developed in colonial times can be found in the candidature file, which calls wayang "*adiluhung* (very noble) and *edipeni* (very beautiful)" and "not simply an entertainment [...] because wayang is an illustration of human life."<sup>10</sup> The file continues by arguing that "The wayang stories and all their paraphernalia effectively express the entirety of human life [...] the wayang performance is an illustration of a spiritual journey to understand the meaning of life and the process of approaching the Supreme God."<sup>11</sup> As such, the discourse in Indonesia's candidature file for wayang can be regarded as another authorization of colonial and postcolonial discourses.

The need for safeguarding and conservation of wayang is emphasized as it is arguably on the verge of extinction. The accompanying preservation plan *Panca Krida* [Five Actions] aims "to revitalize wayang in ways desired by individuals and communities involved in wayang."<sup>12</sup> Measures include Membership Cards for Pepadi members, the establishment of a Code of Ethics for *dalang* [puppeteers] (enforced in 1996), and the exercise of "care and quality control with regards to groups of individuals wishing to perform wayang overseas, both in terms of content of the performances, as well as regarding the artists involved."<sup>13</sup> To guarantee the transmission of wayang skills and knowledge Sena Wangi and Pepadi designed a plan to promote wayang preservation and development at traditional wayang schools, and at formal educational institutions such as ISI Surakarta, Denpasar, and Bandung.<sup>14</sup> The plan furthermore proposes an inventory, documentation and information on classical and new wayang forms; education through training and seminars; development of organizations, and institutions, development of wayang artists, experts and aficionados, and development of a wide range of collaborations with overseas organizations and individual experts.<sup>15</sup>

Above:  
Ki Enthus Susmono,  
Amsterdam 2009.  
Courtesy of  
P. Westerkamp/  
Tropenmuseum.

Right:  
Ki Manteb Soed-  
harsono, Ngawi.  
24 July 2010. Photo  
by Sadiyah Boonstra.

# The case of Wayang

## Heritage paradoxes

However, the real motive behind the safeguarding rhetoric of wayang's nomination is national identity building. "The vision of Sena Wangi is the desire to make wayang one of the pillars of national culture"<sup>16</sup> as "this appreciation is a source of great pride for all those involved in wayang and indeed for the entire Indonesian nation."<sup>17</sup> The proclamation should turn wayang into a pillar of national culture, and should improve Indonesia's image on an international level. Wayang as an expression of Javanese culture is affirmed as national culture, and vice versa, Indonesian national culture is argued to be Javanese culture. This notion of Indonesian culture directly relates to Sukarno's and Suharto's postcolonial nationalist discourses, which entailed that being Javanese was the best way of being Indonesian, which in turn is related to the Javanese cultural nationalist discourse of the early twentieth century. Wayang is framed in the international heritage discourse by its proclamation as a UNESCO Masterpiece, and is used to show the world Indonesia's great cultural achievement. The international acknowledgement is used as an affirmation of Javanese identity on a national level. In other words, the nationalist discourse about wayang acquired backing through international acclaim of Javanese culture. The international heritage discourse thus anchors wayang in a national context. Consequently, the proclamation of wayang as a Masterpiece does not make it part of global heritage, but rather secures it in a national political discourse that finds its roots in colonial and postcolonial power relations.

This means that although UNESCO aims to highlight global cultural diversification, State Parties utilize UNESCO's standard setting policies such as the *Convention for Intangible Heritage* for their nationalist agendas. Although the heritage discourse incorporates all previous discourses of wayang, the proclamation of wayang as a UNESCO Masterpiece in my view further fixes the already entrenched colonial and nationalist discourses. Starting in colonial times, the documentation of wayang inadvertently established guidelines for the performance tradition, by producing texts and other forms of registration, such as cassettes, video's, DVD's and VCD's. In effect, the documentation created tangible forms of what is celebrated as intangible cultural heritage. The candidature file and the following proclamation of wayang is yet another text about wayang, but this time authorized by UNESCO, a standard-setting organization with a global authority in the field of cultural heritage. Consequently, anyone who reads the candidature file will likely evaluate the wayang performance practice based on the text in the file. The effect is that approaches or discourses that fall outside the description in the file might be judged as 'not correct'. This has happened since the start of the wayang documentation. Heritage discourse of wayang thus produces tangible forms of documentation, which function as a frame of reference and at the same time invoke a legitimacy for the preservationist attitude seen earlier in Dutch orientalist scholars, the Javanese courts in the 1920s and 1930s, and the rigid national cultural approach of Suharto's New Order. This stance seems to be driven by an anxiety that old wayang forms are disappearing and nothing new that is worthwhile is replacing them.



## Conclusion

This is in my view a deficient way of thinking and denotes a deep pessimism about culture and the creative ability of dalang. Wayang is far more dynamic in real life than reflected in official heritage discourse and policies. While authorized discourse, such as the candidature file, functions as a controlling force that establishes guidelines and rules for wayang, individual dalang adapt and bend them to their individual interests. Superstar dalang juggle politics, commerce, and audience appreciation, and apply different strategies to deal with official heritage discourse. Some dalang, such as Ki [The Honorable] Purbo Asmoro (b.1966), support and reinforce official discourse with the performance of academic standards, and are increasingly popular. Ki Manteb Soedharsono's (b.1948) performance practice became representative of the dominant wayang style as a result of the authoritative force of commerce. Others, such as Ki Enthus Susmono (b.1966), choose a more subversive stance and challenge dominant discourse with the creation of new wayang genres, such as *Wayang Santri*, that prove to be instantly popular with new audiences. Seen from this perspective, heritage discourse appears to be only of limited influence on wayang performance practice and is just one element with which dalang have to deal. They utilize it when needed or when it offers them something, but otherwise it is ignored.<sup>18</sup>

**Sadiah Boonstra is currently an independent historian and curator. Her research interests include cultural heritage and contemporary Indonesian history.**

## References

- 1 Smith, L. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge.
- 2 The proclamation of wayang as a Masterpiece for Indonesia was followed with the proclamation of the *keris* as one of 43 Masterpieces in 2005. In 2008 another list was created to accompany the ICHC - the *Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*. The Masterpieces proclaimed in 2001 (19 masterpieces), 2003 (28 masterpieces) and 2005 (43 Masterpieces) were added to the newly established list for *Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding* in November 2008, when the Masterpiece program was abandoned. In 2009 batik, in 2010 angklung, in 2011 *Saman* dance, and in 2012 *Noken* were inscribed on the Representative list.
- 3 Part of this article will appear in the forthcoming book chapter 'Defining wayang as heritage: standardization, codification, and institutionalization' in *Sites, Bodies and Stories. Local heritage, colonial legacies and historical narrative between the Indonesian state and society*, edited by S. Legêne, B. Purwanto, and H. Schulte Nordholt. NUS Press, Singapore.
- 4 Other forms are wayang wong, with actors instead of puppets and wayang beber, which makes use of painted scrolls. Even cinema has been called wayang hidup, and various other closely related theatre genres exist that are not called wayang, such as kethoprak. See Mrázek, J. (2002). *Puppet theater in contemporary Indonesia: new approaches to performance events*, Ann Arbor: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, pp.1-8
- 5 Sears, L.J. 1996. *Shadows of empire: colonial discourse and Javanese tales*, Durham NC: New York University Press, p.13
- 6 Interview Sulebar, 11 May 2010.
- 7 *Wayang. The Traditional Puppetry and Drama of Indonesia*, 2002 candidature file of the Republic of Indonesia for Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in May 2003. Summary research report. Jakarta: Sena Wangi (p.10)
- 8 *Guide for the Presentation of Candidature Files*, Paris: UNESCO, Art. 21
- 9 *Candidature File 2002*, p.13.
- 10 *ibid.*, p.14
- 11 *ibid.*, pp.13-14
- 12 *Addendum to Wayang. The Traditional Puppetry and Drama of Indonesia*, 2002 Candidature File of the Republic of Indonesia for Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in May 2003. Summary research report, Jakarta: Sena Wangi (p.18)
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 *ibid.*, p.19
- 15 *ibid.*, pp.21-22
- 16 *The Development of Wayang Indonesia as a Humanistic Cultural Heritage*, Exhibition Catalogue. Jakarta: GRAMEDIA Printing Group: 2004 (p.34)
- 17 *Candidature File*, p.7
- 18 During this research, which took place between 2009 and 2011, several superstar dalang allowed me to follow them and were willing to talk to me about their performance practice and views on wayang.

Above: Ki Manteb Soedharsono, Semarang. 30 October 2010. Photo by Sadiah Boonstra.

