

Wayang Hip Hop: Java's Oldest Performance Tradition Meets Global Youth Culture

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Wayang Hip Hop is a group led by dalang Ki Catur "Benyek" Kuncoro that combines Javanese wayang kulit conventions and hip hop music. This article traces the history of the group in relation to key developments in wayang kontemporer, while exploring controversies in its reception. Wayang Hip Hop is analyzed as an important new version of wayang that has garnered substantial attention from young spectators. Five reasons for the appeal of the performance are identified: (1) its complex musical intersections, (2) the radical adaptation of classical wayang stories to address contemporary problems, (3) the extension of the conventions of the gara-gara comic interlude into a full performance, (4) the adaption of Javanese wisdom to new settings, and (5) the adaptability of the production, which can has been presented in very diverse contexts.

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"Wayang is a cultural performance with artistic, aesthetic and philosophical values. But Wayang Hip Hop is barren, it has no value."

—Sutadi, regional director of Indonesia's Wayang association, PEPADI-Surakarta

"cool cultural event @WayangHipHop!! what do I hear in them? I hear #myCulture"

—A fan, via Twitter

Wayang Hip Hop can be described as *keren*—the Indonesian equivalent of the world "cool." It can also be described with the word *kering*, which means "barren." As the quotes above indicate, these dif-

ferences of opinion depend largely on whom you ask. In order to better appreciate the controversy, a description is in order.

This unusual production is the result of collaboration between *dalang* (master puppeteer) Ki Catur “Benyek” Kuncoro and a host of invited musicians, dancers, and performers. It might be perhaps more accurately described as a performance framework since it is substantially different every time it is performed, although it is always framed in a similar way. The performance framework develops as a mostly unscripted *gara-gara* scene. This is the part of the traditional performance where the jester figures or clown servants, known as *punakawan*, invite guest performers (which include other puppets and live actors) on stage, interact with audience members, and give advice in the form of humor. In contrast to a conventional show accompanied by gamelan music, the *iringan* (accompaniment) of Wayang Hip Hop is provided by digitally crafted music tracks played from a laptop and live singers. The music is a combination of hip hop, *dangdut* popular tunes, and rap musical conventions. The lyrics often include verbatim sections of ancient Javanese poems and traditional Javanese sayings (*mutiara budaya Jawa*—literally “pearls of Javanese culture”). However, this performance framework is not merely a pastiche of *wayang* conventions and modern music. Rather, it is constructed as a deliberate and sophisticated interaction of Javanese heritage and global youth music. As such, its aim is to preserve some aspects of Javanese ethics and aesthetics, adapting them to the beats of the cosmopolitan, urban culture of Yogyakarta and other Javanese cities that are undergoing rapid socio-cultural change.

This article examines the reasons why people might consider this performance “cool.” I will further the argument that its “coolness” is one if its key features, by describing the way the performance works in its cultural context. I will argue that—for better or worse—this kind of performance represents an important development of the tradition in contemporary Java (Fig. 1).

Wayang Hip Hop is the result of a five-hundred-year-old tradition reworked for the contemporary world and is part of a series of performances that can be classified under the term *wayang kontemporer* (contemporary *wayang*). Catur Kuncoro is a third-generation *dalang* who was brought up in a renowned family of artists. He is classically trained but has dedicated his professional career to the exploration of other possibilities of *wayang* by collaborating with visual artists, writers, and musicians from outside the world of traditional arts. The group with which he started developing Wayang Hip Hop began working in 2010 but achieved notoriety only in 2012, when they were invited to numerous national television shows and toured the island of Java.



FIGURE 1. Ki Catur “Benyek” Kuncoro raps and sings dressed in full *kejawen* (traditional Javanese) costume with shades. The hip hop versions of the *wayang* clown figures Bagong, Petruk, and Gareng can be seen planted in the *gedebog* (banana trunk). (Photo: Miguel Escobar Varela)

They are a sensation among young Javanese people living in cities, and this is very unusual for a troupe of *wayang* performers. Although increasingly unpopular with younger generations, *wayang kulit* is a very respected art form. *Wayang* characters and names populate the institutions of Java, and people proudly mention the fact that it was included in UNESCO’s representative list of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003. However, most people would only pay lip service to that respect, abandoning the performances shortly after they begin and secretly confessing to others that enduring an entire show, which lasts up to eight hours, is an impossible battle against boredom. The documentary film *Wayangku [My Wayang] Tries to Find Its Soulmate* (2008) directed by the art collective Komunitas Belajar dan Bermain Anak Tembi (Kobate, Education and Play Community of Tembi Youth) and produced by Kampung Halaman includes interviews with many young people who unashamedly confess little interest in the form (Kobate 2008).

In the city of Yogyakarta, a bustling city of young people that has a wide range of cultural activities on offer, why would young people

“sacrifice” eight hours of their time for a monotonous show they don’t understand? The hustle and bustle of youth culture, exemplified by hip hop, is much more appealing. For the past decade, an active community of hip hop musicians has sprawled and conquered much of the cultural scene. It is precisely in this context that Wayang Hip Hop succeeds in combining these two worlds, extending the line of tradition into the territory where youth and fashionable Yogyakartaans feel at ease.

These reflections are the result of field research during which I followed the Wayang Hip Hop troupe around Java for thirteen months in 2011–2012, witnessing numerous performances and talking to spectators, producers, and artists. I was also traveling with other *wayang* groups at the time and coordinating a documentation project that involved video recording and translating several contemporary *wayang* performances. However, this period was especially active for Wayang Hip Hop, and I was able to see more performances by them than by any other group. My travels with the group included several visits to Jakarta, a tour of all the major cities of Central Java, and several performances in Yogyakarta and neighboring Solo. I watched many of their performances, quietly and surreptitiously sitting among the audience. But more often than not, I was asked to do the lighting design and operate the light console, especially when they performed in bigger venues equipped with professional theatrical fixtures. On some occasions, I was also invited to join them on stage as a guest comedian (a common figure in *wayang* shows), where I would joke (mostly involuntarily, by failing to adhere to Javanese language etiquette) and interact with other guest performers. My role, therefore, could be best described as that of a participant-observer. From that vantage point, I will present my analysis of the five reasons for the perceived coolness of Wayang Hip Hop. But before proceeding to this analysis, I will briefly describe the context in which Wayang Hip Hop was created, describe the work of other artists that use hip hop music in Java, and present an overview of other examples of *wayang kontemporer*.

Hip Hop in Java

There are several dozen hip hop groups in Yogyakarta, and their popularity and number should be factored in if we are to understand the context in which Wayang Hip Hop is appreciated. The oldest and most famous group is Jogja Hip Hop Foundation (JHF), a group that is led by visual artist–cum–hiphopper Marzuki Mohamad, better known as “Kill the DJ.” Marzuki is the same age as Catur, and they have collaborated in the past extensively, with Catur making guest appearances

in *NewYorkarto: Orang Jawa Ngerap di New York* (NewYorkarto: Javanese People Rapping in New York). This musical show, presented in Jakarta in 2012, was a combination of music and storytelling in which the JHF performers reflected in a comical vein on their tour of the United States earlier the same year. Likewise, the JHF crew has appeared in Wayang Hip Hop's performances. Most notably, they shared the stage with visual artist Heri Dono as guest performers in a Wayang Hip Hop show offered in December 2011 to the refugees of the 2010 Mount Merapi volcano eruption.

JHF was formed in 2003 but achieved national notoriety only in 2010. Their song "Jogja Tetap Istimewa" (Jogja Is Still Special) became the unofficial anthem of the struggle against political reforms that intended to turn the Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY), a semi-independent entity in the Indonesian Republic, into an ordinary province. These intended reforms sparked an intense controversy because many people in Yogyakarta feel proud about the city's special status, which is closely linked to its historical participation in the struggle for independence, as I will briefly outline below.

In 1943, when revolutionary fighters were being hunted down by the Dutch army, the sultan of Yogyakarta, Hamengkubuwana IX, offered Sukarno and his troops a temporary safe haven inside the walls of the *kraton* (the sultan's palace). From there, the troops were able to reorganize themselves. Their efforts finally culminated in the declaration of independence in 1945. Sukarno, who became the first president of the republic, honored the support of the sultan in the Amanat 5 September 1945, a document that proclaimed that Yogyakarta would always retain a semi-independent status. This is why, when the politicians of Jakarta initiated a move to withdraw the region's special status, many people flocked to the streets in protest. Several of these demonstrations were organized and supported by artists who held events to support the government of the sultan. Almost every *wayang* performance I saw at that time started with a collective prayer, where the audience was asked to pray for the city's status to remain unchanged. Several artistic parades were organized in the main shopping street of Malioboro, and I even witnessed tattoo artists offering free tattoos of the official insignia of the palace to anyone brave and supportive enough.

In this context, JHF created a song called "Jogja Tetap Istimewa" that proclaimed the importance of the status of the city. The word *istimewa* means both special and extraordinary, so the phrase "*istimewa negerinya, istimewa orangnya!*" could be translated as follows: "A province with special status where the people are extraordinary!" By the end of 2010, the song could be heard everywhere. On one occasion,

when the current sultan of Yogyakarta, Hamengkubuwana X, made a public appearance, the ceremony was presided over by hip hop musicians. The ubiquity of the song in the mass media propelled JHF into national stardom. Shortly afterward, they were invited to tour the United States.

The fame of JHF has been a mixed blessing for many hip hop groups in Yogyakarta. Due to their high profile, more people are aware of Javanese hip hop. On the flip side, many characteristics of their music, which were not unique to them but shared by many groups, are now commonly recognized as their invention. Therefore, other groups that were working in close collaboration with them earlier are now deemed to be mere copycats. But here I wish to underline the fact that, despite sharing some formal similarities, the objectives of the diverse hip hop groups in Yogyakarta are quite unique. Not every group makes songs that have the political subtext of JHF. The musicians of the group The Night Pray are young people interested in socializing Islamic ideas through their music. They use hip hop beats in order to spread conservative Muslim thought, and when they perform, they are dressed up with *kopiah* (a cap worn by Muslim men) and *jilbab* (Islamic headscarves for the women).

Wayang Hip Hop began performing before JHF reached nationwide fame. The occasion for the first Wayang Hip Hop performance was an impromptu invitation to perform at a birthday party in August 2010. Toward the end of the party, the man celebrating his birthday half-jokingly requested his guests to improvise a new *wayang* performance for him. Among the invitees were Kocil, an actor and cultural news reporter; Budi Pramono, a musician; and Catur. Budi is a classically trained gamelan musician who had been experimenting with hip hop beats. He took the invitation for the show seriously and started playing one of his new creations. Catur then responded by improvising a *wayang* show alongside the music, with Kocil acting as a guest comedian. Also present at the party was Rahadian Harie, a producer; soon, he started organizing similar *wayang* performances after the success of this spontaneous performance. Both Kocil and Budi have left the troupe, but Catur and Harie have developed it into a full-fledged performance that has traveled all over Java. What started as spur-of-the-moment entertainment has now grown into one of the most famous contemporary *wayang* performance frameworks in Java.

The hip hop groups described above have a wide range of objectives. This diversity seems to echo the claims made by international scholarship on hip hop, which often describe it as an essentially malleable genre. Bill Osgerby suggests that it is an example of the way “local audiences actively reconfigure ‘global’ commodities, images

and texts,” but he recognizes that the local is a “contested territory, one crossed by a variety of different identities and meanings” (2004: 148, 167). I would subscribe to this point here, suggesting that hip hop as a musical genre has no intrinsic agency. It will not necessarily support one kind of lifestyle or another; neither will it necessarily support political radicalism or undermine the status quo. It all depends on the specific uses that artists make of it.

Other examples from Southeast Asia come to mind that can provide a range of usages of hip hop. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials argues that Cambodian American hip hop artist praCh has used hip hop as a way to memorialize the genocidal history of Cambodia. The content of his lyrics is “haunted by the trauma of the Killing Fields, yet paradoxically uses this trauma as the basis for a Cambodian American form of selfhood” (Schlund-Vials 2008: 22). Singaporean youths, according to Yasser Mattar, use hip hop to “suspend their local identity and adopt a global identity” (2003: 298). Hip hop in Myanmar is said to have a political edge, but it might just be a harmless “release valve for today’s frustrated youth” (Lin 2010:147). Ward Keeler confesses he does not consider Burmese hip hop sufficiently political, seeing it as merely a “commercially extremely successful way to play on people’s existential fears, fantasies, and wishes” (2009: 13).

By bringing these observations into the present discussion, my objective is neither to offer a comprehensive overview of Southeast Asian hip hop nor to critique the positions of the researchers quoted above. Rather, I reproduce their views to exemplify the fact that hip hop can be used (or seen to be used) for a variety of purposes. Even within a place as small as Yogyakarta, different groups of people will have very different motivations for experimenting with this genre, ranging from the political to the religious. I do not intend to theorize the usage of hip hop, but simply stress the fact that it is an increasingly popular musical style that has an important place in the cultural landscape of contemporary Yogyakarta. In this context, the artists of Wayang Hip Hop use it for their own specific purposes: to explore a way of making Java’s oldest performance tradition attractive to young people.

It should be stressed that it is not accidental that such a development would take place in the city of Yogyakarta. The city is a vibrant mixture of tradition and new ideas. Famously, it is one of the cities that showcases the most refined Javanese culture and arts; at the same time, it is the home of some of the most innovative artists of Indonesia. World-traveling visual artists such as Djoko Pekik, Heri Dono, Putu Sutawijaya, Nasirun, Agung Kurniawan, and Eko Nugroho reside (at least during part of the year) in Yogyakarta. The city includes centers of traditional

culture such as the two royal palaces (the Kraton Ngayogyakarta and the Kadipaten Pakualaman) and numerous institutions that promote and sponsor contemporary art production, such as the Langgeng Art Foundation, Kedai Kebun Forum, the Indonesian Visual Arts Archive, and internationally renowned galleries such as Cemeti Art House and Sangkring Art Space. Yogyakarta is both very Javanese and profoundly multiethnic. Its numerous universities make it the student capital of Indonesia, as it attracts students from all over the archipelago. Max Richter (2013: 5) quotes his informants, saying that Maliboro Street, the main shopping street of Yogyakarta, is the “real mini Indonesia” as opposed to the Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, a theme park south of Jakarta that houses examples of architecture and traditions from across Indonesia. Yogyakarta is also an international city that receives thousands of foreign visitors every year. Besides the tourists, many foreigners reside there for longer periods of time; students, researchers, and artists make this place their temporary home, with an increasing number of artistic and research residencies made available through the numerous universities and artistic institutions. All of these factors contribute to the cosmopolitan character of the city, making it a melting pot for combinations of Javanese traditions and conventions from different cultural and geographic origins.

Wayang Kontemporer

Although Wayang Hip Hop is a unique re-elaboration of *wayang kulit*, it shares some characteristics with other works of *wayang kontemporer*. Several *dalang* have explored new possibilities for *wayang*, adapting it to different contexts. The history of new versions is well documented, and the following overview presents some of the works that have described influential contemporary *wayang* works.

Laurie Jo Sears, writing in 1989, identified *wayang padat* as an “aesthetic displacement” of the *wayang* tradition. This type of “condensed” performances never took more than two hours. According to her, this was developed by the Academy of Arts in Solo (Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia, the antecedent of the present-day Indonesian School of the Arts or Institut Seni Indonesia) for pedagogic and touring reasons; students were required to make their own *padat* (compact) version of a famous *lakon* (story) in their final year of study, and these versions were often used for productions touring Europe in the 1980s (Sears 1989: 133–134). However, according to Hardja Susilo, *padat* performances were not necessarily triggered for such reasons. He traced their development back to the 1940s and explained their origin primarily in relation to “cost-saving strategies” (Susilo 2002: 180), although he acknowledged that puppeteers have been using them for other reasons

ever since, such as to let *wayang* keep up with modern conceptions of the value of time, to intensify the dramatic content, or to accommodate the short attention span of tourists.

Tim Byard-Jones, writing a little more than a decade after Sears, had a different perspective and divided the *wayang* universe into “innovators” and “upholders of the great tradition” (2001: 43). Byard-Jones describes the “new genres” of *wayang wahyu*, *wayang kancil*, and *wayang perjuangan*. The first one is a Christian *wayang* that uses gamelan music and puppets inspired by *wayang* to tell stories from the Bible. Polish ethnomusicologist Marzana Poplawska (2004: 200) believes this is “an example of the vitality of traditional arts in Java, which unceasingly find new forms to manifest themselves.” The second type, *wayang kancil*, narrates stories of the mouse-deer, or *kancil*. This genre has been developed by Yogyakarta-based puppeteer Ki Ledjar Subroto, whose objective is to “perform for audiences of young children in order to try to get them interested in *wayang* as an art form and to promote environmental awareness” (Byard-Jones 2001: 49). The third genre, *wayang perjuangan* (“struggle” *wayang*), tells about historical Indonesian figures in the fight for independence against the Dutch.

Jan Mrázek’s anthology *Puppet Theatre in Contemporary Indonesia* (2002) includes discussions on the work of innovative *dalang* such as Enthus Susmono and Sukasman. Enthus Susmono, probably the most highly paid *dalang* in Java, also known as the “*dalang* superstar,” is famous for combining Islamic proselytism and images from popular culture. Mrázek relates how Enthus enthusiastically spoke to him in an interview “about attracting high and powerful sponsors, speaking for the little people, and making his *wayang* explicitly Islamic.” Enthus is, according to him, “more than most *dalang*, interested in politics and in making both politics and Islam part of his performances. More than most *dalang*, he openly talks about *wayang* as a commercial enterprise” (Mrázek 2002: 20). Enthus is a very controversial figure in Java, both for his performances and for his political career. At the time of this writing, he is running for office in the upcoming 2014 local elections in the Tegal district in West Java.

Ki Sigit Sukasman created *wayang ukur*, which literally means “measured *wayang*” and can be considered “a fine art presentation by an individual artist” (Susilo 2002: 179). Sukasman, who passed away in 2009, was an expert puppet maker who traveled to the United States and Europe and was inspired to incorporate modern art ideas into *wayang*. In a *wayang ukur* show, the audience was expected to sit quietly, as they would do in a Western-style theatre. Three *dalang* simultaneously manipulated the puppets from different sides of the screen, and their

combined efforts allowed for a wide variety of visual effects, as dancers were also interspersed with puppets. Sukasman did not control the puppets directly, but rather instructed the three *dalang* and controlled the lighting. His role was probably comparable to that of a contemporary theatre director (Susilo 2002: 179–188).

Visual artist Heri Dono studied puppet making under Sukasman. Besides creating numerous installations that include references to *wayang*, he has also developed his *wayang* shows such as *Wayang Legenda* and *PhARTy Semar*. The latter is described by Tim Behrend (1999) in an article about this installation-performance, which commented on politics, the art market, and the turn of the millennium using the complex character of the *wayang* character Semar, the central clown, as a starting point. This performance was not based in a *wayang* story: “In fact there was no plot at all, no representation of events, no mimetic conjuring and abjuring of evil. The characters presented in *wayang* umbrage were wholly decontextualized in this presentation, but their familiar roles, types, and identities were relied upon to construct the theatrical platform on which the overall ritual import of the performance could then be erected” (Behrend 1999: 217).

Matthew Isaac Cohen has written the most comprehensive overview of *wayang kontemporer* experimentations to date (Cohen 2007), providing a history of innovations carried out by foreigners and Indonesians using *wayang kulit* from Java and Bali, and describing in detail the work of Sukasman, Enthus Susmono, Slamet Gundono, Nanang Hape, and Sujiwo Tejo. His discussion of the works of Javanese *dalang* frames their innovations in a new context:

Radical innovators have probably always existed within Javanese and Balinese *wayang* traditions [. . .] The difference is that today’s innovators operate in a globalized marketplace of ideas, techniques, and technologies [. . .] Contemporary *wayang* artists such as Sujiwo Tejo, Heri Dono, and Slamet Gundono create new work with national and international audiences in mind, cultivate networks of international patronage, benefit from professional development outside Indonesia, and readily collaborate with artists from around the world. (Cohen 2007: 362)

Catur Kuncoro’s work is also placed within these global contexts. He has also collaborated with artists from different countries and creates internationally-minded pieces. Besides creating *Wayang Hip Hop*, he has also developed other works of *wayang kontemporer*. The best known of these works is perhaps *Wayang Bocor*, a series of collaborations with the visual artist Eko Nugroho. These performances often included collaborations with artists from other disciplines and

backgrounds, such as the *dalang* Matthew Cohen, the playwright Gunawan “Cindil” Maryanto, and the experimental musician Yennu Ariendra.

The rest of this article examines five reasons why Wayang Hip Hop might be considered appealing to younger generations of spectators in Indonesia. Through the following sections, I examine several salient features that set Wayang Hip Hop apart from other radical versions of *wayang*. However, this performance should also be understood as being profoundly influenced by the contexts and histories outlined above: the development of hip hop in Java, the specific setting of Yogyakarta, and the long history of innovations within contemporary *wayang* within and outside of Indonesia.

Reason 1: Musical Intersections

The first reason behind the appeal of Wayang Hip Hop performances is the way in which musical styles are interwoven. As mentioned above, this is not just a mash-up of its constitutive elements but a sophisticated net of cultural references, a complex interlacing of aesthetic conventions that speaks to a broad audienceship. There are many ways in which the worlds of tradition and modernity come together in the musical accompaniment of Wayang Hip Hop, but here I will only describe their usage of *suluk*, or “high poetry,” one of the many ways in which songs are used within traditional performances to carry the story forward.

In a Wayang Hip Hop show, the *lagu pembuka* (opening song) begins with a *suluk* sung by the *dalang* in ancient poetic Javanese:

*Anjrah ingkang puspita rum,
Patiuping samirana mring
Sekar gadung kongas gandanya.*

The fragrance of the flowers has spread,
The wind blows and it allows,
The aroma of the *gandung* flower to be carried away.

This specific song is often used after the opening scene of traditional *wayang* shows; it announces the introduction of the main “problem” or “issue” (*perkara*) that will drive the performance throughout the night. After the largely formulaic small talk of the first scene is completed, the *dalang* interrupts the *pocapan* or dialogue and sings a *suluk* like the one above to signal the introduction of the main problem. After this song is over, those at the court discuss the problem that will become the main issue of the night’s performance. Therefore, the *suluk* can be interpreted in different levels. On a narrative level, this

easily recognizable song tells the viewers and listeners that the main problem is about to be introduced. However, the content of the song itself can be understood differently. This particular song suggests that beauty will be spread through the performance. It is indeed a Javanese belief that performances “beautify the world” (*memayuning hayuning buwana*) in a similar way to flowers. In this sense, it has no direct connection to the narrative of the *lakon* (story) chosen for the night. A. L. Becker suggests that this is a defining characteristic of Javanese narrative techniques, which do not work in an Aristotelian fashion but rather through intersections between distant echoes from the past (in the form of songs) and the present of the performance being developed. He describes this as the production of “thick texture,” which is preferred to what he describes as Aristotelian forward moving plots (Becker 1995: 30–37).

Toward the end of the *suluk* fragment of the *lagu pembuka*, an electronic hip hop beat slowly fades in and it takes over the song completely. The “issue” or reason for the performance is introduced through the next fragment of the *lagu pembuka*, namely, the chorus (in the Western pop music sense), which is sung in Indonesian:

*Yo, ayo, yo marilah kemari
bersama kami, ungkapkan ekspresi
bangga dan cinta akan seni tradisi
Hip hop? Yo Wayang Hip Hop.*

Hey! Come here with us!
and express yourselves
proud and loving of tradition
Hip hop? Yes! Wayang Hip Hop.

According to its creators, the objective of Wayang Hip Hop is to make *wayang* appealing to newer generations of spectators by combining elements from a globalized contemporary youth culture and from the *wayang* tradition. What is at stake here is expressed in the song’s chorus. The *perkara* is therefore introduced in a way that is analogous to the structure of a traditional show, namely, after the *suluk* described above is sung. This example illustrates the way in which different musical styles converge in meaningful ways as the structure of the song elaborates on Javanese storytelling and musical conventions.

Shortly afterward, there is another verse worth commenting on: “*jika salah, maafkan kami, ini hanya hiburan belaka*” (if you feel wronged, well please forgive us). This is indicative of a cultural custom, where asking forgiveness for one’s mistakes is important. Indeed, when presented with compliments, *dalang* would sometimes say “*kula nyuwun*

pangapunten menawi wonten kelepatan,” which translates as “forgive me for my mistakes.” This, or a similar phrase, could also be uttered before the performance and it is often repeated in written and oral form, in anything from book introductions to expert interviews.

Hip hop lyrics elsewhere in the world are often characterized by a more aggressive attitude, and this apologetic hint might strike some as odd. This difference should alert us to the fact that this is a complex blend of *wayang* music and Javanese *wayang* conventions with a “global” genre. The coolness is not entirely an imported feature, but rather the result of combining expressive means of different origins.

As Jeremy Wallach (2008: 257) notes, Indonesia’s popular music genres such as hip hop “combine and hybridize musical forms in order to create music that is simultaneously local, national, and global.” These practices represent “a kind of modernity that is recognizably Indonesian and contest the notion that cultural modernization must be synonymous with an uncompromising westernization” (p. 257).

Reason 2: *Wayang* Stories to Address Contemporary Problems

In this performance framework, the stories of *wayang* are reworked to address topical issues, always in a parodic or comical vein. In one performance, there was a dialogue between two characters of the *Mahabharata*, Werkudara (a great hero-warrior of the epic) and his son Gatotkaca (both played by the rappers). Werkudara felt his son had been neglecting his duties and did not want to speak to him.

GATOTKACA: Father, thus far I have done my tasks as well as possible.

However you always think I am wrong. Why, father? Don’t tell me I’m adopted! That’s not it, is it? You behave like a kid. Please . . . my father, handsome Werkudara, I, Gatotkaca, ask you to show me my mistakes. Father! I see you are angry because you feel threatened by your own son. Is that so? Please don’t behave like a child. Be a good sport. Father . . .

WERKUDARA: Don’t talk to me. (*He moves away.*)

GATOTKACA: What is this? He walks away when I only want to talk.

(*To the audience*) Ladies and gentleman, these are the signs of those who are becoming old. They need more distance when they read and less distance when they pee. Earlier, they would sleep facing their wives. Now they both sleep with their backs to each other. Before, they would use perfume before leaving. Now they only use medicinal ointments. And, worst of all . . . Previously, they would reproach the old. They would call them old-fashioned villagers. Now, they reproach the young. They say: “You don’t follow the rules. You don’t know the traditions. You are ignoring

the *wayang* rules.” Ladies and gentlemen . . . this is what my father has become.

WERKUDARA: Shut up!¹

This fragment perfectly captures the intergenerational conflict that is a topical issue in Java, using the normally respectful Gatotkaca in surprising ways. *Wayang Hip Hop* is itself caught up in this conflict, as the self-reflexive joke about the *wayang* rules indicates. By using recognizable and respected characters of the *wayang* world, they are not merely being critical, but engaging with the tradition as well. In doing so, their performances strike a chord with many contemporary viewers, attracting both criticism and enthusiastic responses.

The importance of conveying criticism through well-known stories and characters is that this engages different kinds of spectators. Criticism delivered through performances that have no traditional grounding can be easily dismissed as irrelevant copies of foreign forms. However, when the site of the criticism is the most respected tradition, issues are brought squarely under public scrutiny, allowing more extensive debates among interest groups with opposed views on these issues. As Tim Byard-Jones (2001: 47) notes, “There are plenty of avant-garde artists in Indonesia whose work introduces new ideas but because they use media from outside traditional Javanese culture, the impact that this has is less than that of a new idea presented through *wayang*.”

The fragment of dialogue above questions normative familial relations. Several commentators suggest that the “family” can be understood as a metaphor of the way in which power is structured in Indonesia. As Saya Shiraishi (1997: 11) notes: “The relation between the school teacher and his pupils, the military leader and his troops, and the President and his nation are thus made isomorphic to each other. All the relationships are guided by the same principles and are couched in the familial language referring to father/mother (*bapak/ibu*) and child (*anak*). And this familial language is underpinned by the notion of family, *keluarga*, which identifies the school as family, [. . .] the Armed Forces as family, the nation as family.” Obedience is an important aspect of this family philosophy, in which the children do not question their elders. As Shiraishi (p. 163) also remarks, “One proves his maturity when he learns not to make his own decisions and insightfully accepts the right answer without being told it.” Although these arguments were originally formulated within the context of the New Order of Suharto’s now fallen regime, they still describe the relationship between familial ties and Indonesian institutions. Therefore, Gatotkaca’s rebellious attitude toward Werkudara suggests a deeper confrontation.

Within the Indonesian context, this questioning of family val-

ues is thus more than just an aesthetic provocation, and it suggests an important challenge to dominant ethical paradigms. Following Hildred Geertz, Franz Magnis-Suseno (1981: 42–71) identifies two central ethical maxims in the Javanese context. They are *kerukunan* (the avoidance of conflict) and respect (in the sense of “knowing one’s place”). In the short excerpt reproduced above, both principles are brought under question. Gatotkaca seeks outright conflict and does not behave according to the proper linguistic etiquette with which a young man should address his father. Youth culture, in this sense, is more than just an exploration of other formats and genres within *wayang*. Wayang Hip Hop’s youth culture is a philosophical challenge to the culture of the elders. Besides being “cool,” this performance poses a fundamental challenge to dominant models of ethical behavior and, if we agree with Shiraishi’s line of thinking, to larger sociopolitical power formations.

Reason 3: Comedy Reworked

Another way in which Wayang Hip Hop is a *keren* version of the tradition is the fact that it constitutes an extension of the most well-liked part of the traditional show, the *gara-gara* scene (literally, “the big upheaval”). This is a comic interlude that takes place in the middle of the performance. Often, people would leave a show immediately after this part of the performance is over. Children who might have fallen asleep before this point are woken up so they can watch this section. So, what is so interesting about it? It is funny and accessible. Full of jokes, this scene recontextualizes the story few people have understood (or paid attention to) so far. Through humor, the *punakawan* or clown servants find similarities between the main story and the everyday lives of the spectators. Semar and his sons Petruk, Gareng, and Bagong are more relatable to the audience than the idealized warriors. This is true for their personalities as well as for the language they use. They tend to speak to one another in *ngoko*, the everyday register of the Javanese language one reserves for close friends. Semar, a fat and old character, embodies a unity of contradictions: he is both coarse and holy, and he farts as he delivers the most poetic gems of Javanese wisdom. The *gara-gara* scene is also easier to follow since it is rather short—it usually does not last more than two hours. In a way, Wayang Hip Hop can be described as a self-contained *gara-gara* scene.

Jan Mrázek (2005: 453) suggests that in many contemporary performances “the whole *wayang* performance is becoming comedy, and all the characters clowns.” This is especially true in the case of this production, where there is no other scene. Elements from other scenes, if any, all get subsumed into a clown scene format. Wayang Hip Hop is a series of interactions between the *punakawan* characters in which they

discuss topical issues, ranging from jokes about intimate relationships to criticism of the Indonesian government. The duration of the show is usually between sixty and ninety minutes. In between dialogues, the rappers and singers present songs. This is reminiscent of the traditional *wayang's gara-gara*, where the dialogues among the *punakawan* are also interspersed with songs. Although Wayang Hip Hop is a new creation, much of the dialogue among the *punakawan* is indistinguishable from a *gara-gara* scene within a traditional show.

The difference is that here the *gara-gara* scenes constitute the entire show, and it often has an overarching narrative (as detailed in the next section of this essay). In a particular instance of this performance framework, Bagong tried illegal drugs and was dragged into an underworld of drug trafficking (Fig. 2). Petruk and Gareng found out and captured the people who convinced him to try the drugs. Puzzled as to how to deal with their brother, they brought him to Semar.

PETRUK: Bagong is your son and our brother. So what shall we do?

SEMAR: This is the thing, kid. Those who have broken the law need to be punished in a way that is proportional to their crimes. It doesn't matter whether they are our friends, children or brothers. They need to face justice [. . .] I will not protect Bagong from the fact that he made a mistake [. . .] Uphold the law in as fair a way as possible. That is my message for you.

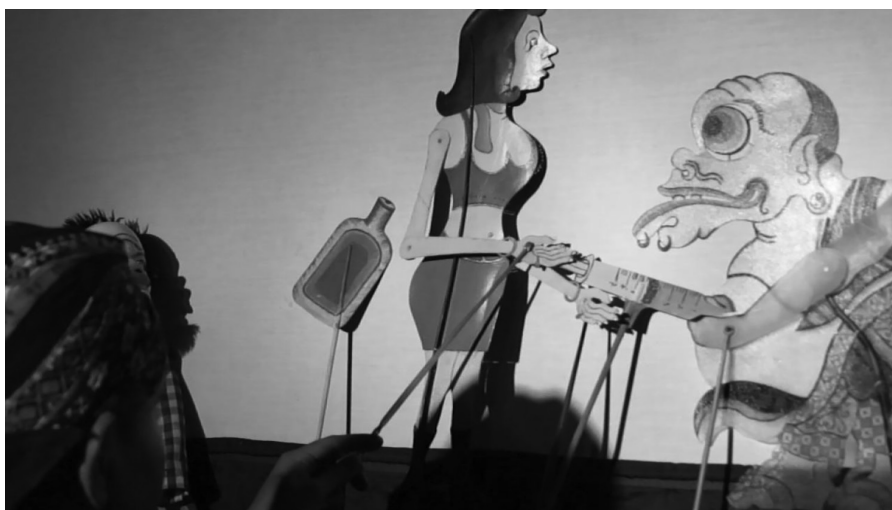


FIGURE 2. Scene from Wayang Hip Hop depicting Bagong (right) dragged into an underworld of drug trafficking, with a scantily clad female companion (left). (Photo: Miguel Escobar Varela)

This passage shows that they are not blindly encouraging rebellion. In a way that evokes more traditional shows, Semar offers father-knows-best advice. Semar often advises both his sons and the Pandhawa heroes of the *Mahabharata* in traditional *lakon* (story). By adhering to these conventions, the comic scene is developed into a stand-alone performance. Attention to the way the shows are constituted thus reveals they are innovative and traditional at the same time.

Reason 4: Javanese Wisdom for New Contexts

Wayang Hip Hop explores contemporary problems that are more relatable to the spectators than the spiritual quests of the princes of traditional *wayang*. However, it still relies on the cultural knowledge of the spectators. In order to fully enjoy it, spectators need some level of cultural competency. Many of the jokes have to do with linguistic puns: an example is the constant usage of a trope called *kereta basa*.

Traditional *dalang* often make use of this trope, which is described by Ward Keeler (1987: 251) as “a system of linguistic glossing” that illustrates “the tendency to assert meaning by imposing associations on and among words quite arbitrarily.” This consists of offering an etymology of a word, an activity carried out by the *dalang* at different moments of the show. A. L. Becker relates how, as a trained linguist, he was often annoyed by these “false” or “incorrect” etymologies. But, as he understood more about *wayang* conventions and the Javanese culture, he realized that these etymologies are not meant to be expressions of truth, but rather of creativity and humor (Becker 1995: 42). Following his insights, I will refer to this activity as “creative etymologizing” and give an example of how it is used in a Wayang Hip Hop performance, once more to convey ethical teachings to the audience.

The fragment I reproduce below corresponds to a show presented at the headquarters of the local newspaper *Kedaulatan Rakyat* (People’s Sovereignty) on 22 January 2012. At that time, Kocil was still part of the group. However, since he did not always perform with them, he was not as familiar with the lyrics as the rest of the musicians. He is also in his late fifties and therefore considerably older than the rest of the singers, but this did not prevent him from enthusiastically taking part. However, his shortcomings were evident when he kept on repeating the chorus of the *lagu pembuka* even after it had ended, showing that he did not know it by heart. This was the occasion for some jokes from one of the other performers (Rio) and some creative etymologizing by the *dalang*:

RIO: Oh, too late! How come the old guy finished late? Oldy here should be in front of us, not behind! You’re always late.

KOCIL: Well, I might be already old but I was on time, I was on time!

RIO: This all started at the rehearsals, where the illustrious grandpa always arrived late.

KOCIL: I was on time; you were the one who didn't come when you should have!

DALANG: Yes, our brother "the youngest" always arrived late.

KOCIL: Come on people, I'm barely seventeen years old here.

CATUR: Actually there is a meaning to the word old [*tuwa*]. "If an old person goes out, he should carry something. This means that if he speaks, his speech should be meaningful."

The *ngoko* word for "old" has two sounds: *tu* and *wa* (pronounced "wo"). They are explained by the *dalang* as a shortened version of the phrase *nek metu, kudu nggawa* (pronounced "nggowo"). This translates to: "If he goes out, he should carry [something]." This is later explained by the *dalang* as *nek omong kudu mentes*. This literally means that "his speech should contain a rice grain." In Javanese, there are many words to refer to rice and the process of rice harvesting. The plants in the fields or *gabah* can be either *gabuk* (empty), or *mentes* (containing a rice grain). Both words are used to describe people's actions as well as their speech. What people say can be either empty talk or meaningful utterance. Therefore, the phrase "his speech should contain a rice grain" means that what he says should be meaningful.

Subsequently, the *dalang* offered a different etymology. He said the word *tuwa* can also mean *gelis metune nyawa*, "quick to give up the soul," hinting of course that old people can pass away at any moment. The *dalang* rejoiced in this joke:

DALANG: Quick to give up the soul. One more week at the latest!

KOCIL: Yeah, well, I'm in no hurry. If you want to go ahead, be my guest. I am taking my time.

DALANG: Well, that which we call life is only a short walk.

At this moment there was a brief silence as the humor suddenly subsided and allowed for a moment of gravity. The sentence uttered by the *dalang* is a re-elaboration of the Javanese saying *wrip mung mampir ngombe*, "Life is only stopping by for a drink," which is often repeated by people in Java as a reminder of life's frailty and brevity, regardless of age. In such a way, a Javanese attitude to life, creative etymologizing, and humor are brought together in Wayang Hip Hop.

Reason 5: Adaptability

Another reason for Wayang Hip Hop's appeal is its adaptability to many performance contexts. Sometimes, though not always, it

is presented as a theatrical show with an overarching narrative, which is not the case in the conventional *gara-gara* scene. This performance perhaps cannot be really conceptualized as a theatre play or a performance in the normative Western sense of the word. This is the reason why, earlier, I suggested that Wayang Hip Hop could be better appreciated if understood as a performance framework, with a set of elements that interact in different ways depending on the specific occasion of the performance. These elements are the songs, the dialogues among the *punakawan*, and the rappers and musicians. We can describe the different performances of Wayang Hip Hop as different iterations of the performance framework placed on a continuum, with highly structured performances with an overarching narrative on one end and less structured performances with more room for improvisation at the other end of the spectrum. The diagram intends to represent this visually:

	STRUCTURED	↔	UNSTRUCTURED
Narrative	Cohesive narrative, overarching story line.		Series of dialogues with no thematic relationship.
Music	Explicit connection between song lyrics and the story.		Songs played in an order that bears no thematic relationship to the dialogues
Role of rappers	They double up as actors.		They only appear when they need to sing a song.
Preparation	Extended rehearsal process based on a full script.		Briefing before the show, with multiple unscripted changes as the performance develops.

In order to understand how Wayang Hip Hop functions in its cultural context, it is important not to underestimate either end of the spectrum. Wayang Hip Hop is able to adapt itself to a variety of performance settings and to connect to a broad audience due to the artists' capacity for recasting the performance framework in both structured and unstructured formats (Fig. 3). An example of a structured format would be a performance that I described earlier, in which Bagong becomes involved with drug dealers at the instigation of his uncle Bilung. One of his reasons for this is that he wants to make some money on the side. The song "Dilarang Miskin" (Forbidden to Be Poor) was used to explain the reason Bilung's joined the drug dealers—namely, to escape poverty.

At the other end of the spectrum we can refer to a series of performances that were part of the Ramadan tour *Kalam dan Salam*



FIGURE 3. In Wayang Hip Hop, rappers and pop singers dressed in a mix of traditional dance costume and global youth fashion collide with shadow and rod puppets, new and old. (Photo: Miguel Escobar Varela)

(Discourse and Greetings) to fifteen cities across Central Java. This show featured Gus Miftah, a well-known Islamic *ustadz* (preacher) who is appreciated for his humorous way of talking about religion. It also included a *shalawat* (a type of Islamic singing) competition in which the winners were awarded a sum of money.

The context of these performances did not allow for an overarching narrative to be developed. The *dalang* and rappers improvised constantly in a dialogue with Gus Miftah and in interactions with the audience. The show consisted of a series of short dialogues between the *punakawan*, interspersed with songs, contests, and Gus Miftah's short lectures. Sometimes the sponsors requested particular scenes to be shortened or extended, and they would give instructions to the artists during the show. These performances also abounded with musical interactions, used conventional *wayang* characters to address topical issues, and made extensive use of Javanese philosophical values contained in traditional sayings.

During the thirteen months I followed Wayang Hip Hop, they performed in a variety of contexts, which included the opening of an exclusive art fair in Jakarta, a New Year's Eve party at a five-star hotel, the government-sponsored anniversary of the founding of the city of Yogyakarta, the closing ceremony of an international film festival, film screenings, a traditional circumcision ceremony for a young boy, and numerous performances in small villages. Not all these settings

allowed for structured versions of the show with overarching narratives. The sound systems, lighting equipment, and size of the venue varied greatly—as did the honorariums of the artists. The artists had to adjust their show to the specific conditions of the events at which they were performing. However, the essential aspects described above remained constant. In this sense, the adaptability of the show enhances its appeal, since it can be presented in a wide variety of places, engaging different kinds of audiences. The flexibility and fluidity of this performance framework is perfectly in line with tradition. Traditional *wayang* is also presented in a variety of contexts, ranging from official government functions to weddings, circumcisions, and traditional village cleansing rituals, called *bersih desa*.

Conclusion

The reasons exposed above—musical interactions, extended humorous scenes, Javanese philosophy for new contexts, stories reworked to address topical issues, and adaptability—account for the coolness and appeal of these performances in contemporary Java. However, not everyone is convinced of the artistic strategies of Wayang Hip Hop, and criticism comes from many fronts. Older *dalang* are not happy with the innovations of Wayang Hip Hop. After a performance at a *wayang* festival in Solo, the local director of Indonesia's *wayang* association was quoted by a local newspaper saying: "The *wayang* characters are in a high spiritual sphere, but when they are represented with hip hop . . . there is no beauty and there are no moral values." The director was especially angered by the dialogue that I quoted above, where Gatokaca challenges Werkudara. "The father and the son speak to each other impolitely. And this conveys no moral message" (Rahayu 2012). Perhaps the problem is not so much the lack of a message, but the fact that the moral message is that of rebellion. As explained earlier, the show does encourage young people to playfully question aesthetic and ethical norms that might not be relevant to contemporary life anymore.

Another criticism states that this shortened version does away with much of the richness of *wayang*. A teacher from a conservatory, who does not wish to be identified by name, described their performances as shallow and as "brutal mutilations" of the form when we talked together on 26 May 2012. When asked about this, the *dalang*, Catur, says that he agrees with this criticism. Indeed, in order to attract newer audiences, he has purposefully chosen to keep certain aspects and boldly changed others. He believes he is doing this in order to safeguard the tradition. At least in this way some aspects will be saved, he suggests. If the traditional performance is left intact, everything will

be lost since nobody will watch it. This compromise, however, is not enough for many *wayang* lovers who are terrified by the thought of seeing their beloved art form replaced by audacious hybrids. Perhaps they would rather see *wayang* die out completely than morph into youth culture. However, Catur also believes that Wayang Hip Hop acts as a hook, and that it gets young people interested in traditional art. When I talked to Catur on 26 May 2012, he said Wayang Hip Hop is not in competition with traditional *wayang*, since it helps bring more audiences to traditional shows.

Criticism has always accompanied similar musical styles, in Indonesia and elsewhere. In the early 2000s then president Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie criticized several rap musicians for destroying Indonesian culture. However, as Michael Bodden points out, these artists addressed many concerns that needed to be expressed at the time. The story of Wayang Hip Hop is, in some ways, reminiscent of the story of these rap musicians: "It is a story in which particular aspects of global commercial culture, although certainly displacing elements of previous traditions, may also be seized upon and deployed in specifically local struggles" (Bodden 2005: 1).

Some people might dislike it, but one thing is certain. Wayang Hip Hop appeals to a large sector of the Javanese society. Its fan base and much of its audience consist of young, university-educated Indonesians living in cities. They are interested in finding artworks that suit their modern lifestyles and the dynamic times they are living in, embracing influences from abroad in a number of ways. However, they are not willing to rid themselves entirely of their rich cultural heritage, and they feel proud of being Javanese. They are constantly looking for balanced and innovative combinations, which are to be found in many different cultural products, ranging from food to architecture, and from television soap operas to visual art exhibitions. Wayang Hip Hop articulates the ever present urge to recombine and recreate Javanese culture by interweaving the most respected performance tradition with the trendiest expression of youth culture that has taken Java by storm.

However, those who are afraid this will deliver a death blow to traditional culture need not worry. Wayang Hip Hop speaks to those who are not ready to dismiss entirely the rules and teachings of the previous generations, but are also not willing to apply them unquestioningly. If this millenary form is to survive as a vibrant, enjoyable, and meaningful cultural force, it will probably do so in the guise of hip hop music rather than as calcified conventional performances. Through its adaptability, its humor, and its re-elaboration of Javanese philosophy, Wayang Hip Hop is recreating tradition for the new stages in which Javanese life is taking place.

NOTE

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of dialogues and lyrics reproduced here are mine.

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