



BAGOE WIRYOMARTONO

JAVANESE CULTURE AND THE MEANINGS OF LOCALITY

Studies on the Arts,
Urbanism, Polity, and Society



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Javanese Culture and the Meanings of Locality

To Iya, Cacak, Asun, and Ama

Ojo dumeh.
(Do not be pretentious.)

—Javanese proverb

Preface



Statue of Ganesha of Singasari from 13th century, collection of National Museum, Jakarta Indonesia. Photo by Bagoes Wiryomartono.

This book is a collection of essays on Javanese culture that describes, analyzes, and discusses the manifold features and characteristics of Javanese culture and society comprising aesthetics, the art of living, urban settlement, and political culture. As a whole, the book is searching for the meanings of locality in the context of arts, architecture, polity, and society. It argues that study on Java is a significant contribution to counteract the contemporary global culture; for several centuries, Javanese tradition has been graciously synergizing and integrating foreign influences into its sociocultural system in the sense of syncretism. By exploring the identities and differences of Javanese culture we are able to enrich and enhance our understanding of the importance of diversity. In doing so, globalization does not mean the colonialization of monoculture modernity, but the transmission of multiplicity and intricacy of various cultural sources.

The specific mission of this book is to strengthen cross-disciplinary studies on sustainable culture and societies in Southeast Asia, especially in dealing with their vibrant diversity, economic growth, global communication, and environmental crisis. The data and materials of the study are based on the author's life experience as a native Javanese growing up in Javanese tradition. Until recently, mostly non-Javanese scholars or Western academicians have written scholarly studies and treatments on Javanese culture and tradition. We seldom hear and read studies on Javanese culture and tradition from a Javanese perspective. This book is the author's considerable recollection and critical reflection as a Javanese person about his Javanese world and society. The purpose of this publication is to dismantle and unmask the relationship between local concepts and phenomena of culture that hold up and sustain the hegemony of Javanese influence upon Indonesian society.

The publication of this book is expected to renew, enrich, and enhance the debates and discussions on locality in dealing with global issues in terms of knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics. Undergraduate and graduate students of humanities and social sciences could be the captive market of this publication. Specialists and scholars on Asian studies will be interested in reading this book for deepening and widening a discourse on the importance of local concepts. Furthermore, this book is an effective material of reflection for most scholars and policymakers in Indonesia in understanding their culture and tradition.

The search for the components of Javanese culture in this book is focused on the examinations and expositions of native or local concepts concerning arts, domain, society, polity, custom, tradition, and culture. The sources of data for the study are mainly Javanese texts, spoken language, and collected works in various textual forms, including from dictionaries, Javanese inscriptions, and special collections.

List of Abbreviations

DPR	Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, People's Representatives Assembly
Gerindra	Gerakan Indonesia Raya, Great Indonesia Movement Party
Golkar	Golongan Karya, Functional Group
Golput	Golongan Putih, Non-Voters Group
PAN	Partai Amanat Nasional, National Mandate Party
PDI-P	Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan, Democratic Party of Indonesia for the Struggle
PKB	Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, National Awakening Party
PPP	Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, Development Unity Party

Contents

Preface	ix
List of Abbreviations	xi
1 Aesthetics in Javanese Culture and Tradition	1
2 <i>Pra Kuta Negara</i> : Pre-Islamic States and Formative Urbanism in Java Indonesia	25
3 <i>Kuta Negara</i> : The Javanese Idea of City/State and its Historical Evolution	53
4 Javanese Way of Living	77
5 Javanese Pride, Patronage, and Prophecy: Political Culture in Indonesia	103
References	129
Index	139
About the Author	147

Chapter One

Aesthetics in Javanese Culture and Tradition

What is aesthetics in Javanese culture? Why are aesthetics and ethics in Javanese society interchangeable? This chapter attempts to deal with these questions. In order to understand the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in Javanese tradition, this chapter argues that both have the same foundation and function in Javanese culture and society. In order to do so, the chapter applies a hermeneutical analysis that examines and scrutinizes the meanings of local concepts and their phenomena in works of art. The purpose is to unfold the thought and sensibility of Javanese concepts in dealing with art and beauty. Concepts and phenomena related to aesthetic experience will be examined, scrutinized, and unfolded to divulge the reality of the Javanese world.

JAVANESE CULTURE IN THE INDONESIAN WORLD

Even though Javanese culture is geographically established in Central Java, in which Surakarta and Yogyakarta are the centers, its cultural influence in Indonesia is widespread and predominant. Concerning its dominant populations, the Javanese way of life plays an important role in Indonesian politics and culture. Since aesthetics in society is about ideas, tastes, information, and expressions, studying its phenomena and reality is one of the most effective ways to understand the country's way of life and its values.

A number of scholars (Richter 1994; Jessup 1990; Holt 1967) have presented studies on the arts of Java as part of Indonesian culture. Their works have explored forms, styles, meanings, and historical aspects of arts and crafts in Indonesia that enable us to go further into the question of aesthetics. Indeed, Javanese arts are indivisible from its customs and traditions that nurture and sustain its presence in its society. In this respect, Javanese arts

and aesthetics show their capacity as an integrated part of Indonesian culture, which has been studied profoundly by many scholars (Anderson 2006; Beatty 1999; Sears 1996; Florida 1995; Pamberton 1994; Hefner 1985; van Groenendael 1985; and Geertz 1960). Their works not only show us many insightful aspects of the Javanese culture, but also show that there are many things to be done for further investigations. Among these is the Javanese sense of aesthetics, which has been so far short of coverage. As with many other cultures and traditions, Javanese culture has its specific and particular intentionality that depicts and demonstrates its historical evolution and contextual innovation.

Even though aesthetics is an indispensable outcome of emotion, expression, impression, taste, and feeling, aesthetic experience is, in many ways, inseparable from personal judgment and sentiment as well as part of contextual collective values. However, in social and practical context, aesthetic matters are mostly conditioned by local culture and tradition, in terms of codes, manners, customs, and norms.

Ostensibly observed, showing feeling in Javanese tradition is a shameful conduct or a sign of weakness, even a sin against God (Geertz 1960). Aesthetics in Javanese tradition is likely indivisible from ethics—the value and judgment of good or bad as well as beauty or ugliness have something to do with courtesy and manner. Accordingly, the Javanese tradition seemingly does give a room for common people to express their feelings and thoughts. As a matter of fact, in their daily world, the Javanese people are aptly to uphold self-control for gestures, mimics, and body language with emotional expression or sentimental phrases; this includes handling emotional reactions and anger with perseverance. Despite various turbulences and crises—ranging from politics, to the economy, to the environment—Javanese people are taught by their tradition and culture to be tough and compassionate without showing any emotion or affection. All of this is not expected to happen overnight, but in childhood intensive self-training begins that involves celibacy, fasting, meditation, and other restraints such as from certain food, habits, and pleasures.

As a branch of philosophy for the experience of feeling, aesthetics in Javanese culture is challenged by the question of ethics. In some ways, Javanese aesthetics is probably not too much about bodily pleasure, but more about well-being and good manners. This implies that ethics and aesthetics in Javanese tradition are interchangeable (Hughes-Freeland 2008, p. 83).

This chapter investigates the cultural concepts that represent and work within Javanese culture for growth, beauty, and sustainability. The purpose is to explore Javanese cultural forces and mechanisms that have been resiliently maintaining and developing domination and hegemony over Indonesian po-

litical culture since 1945. This chapter argues that the concept of beauty does not simply affect the definition of a cultural identity and boundary, but also aesthetically in cultivating the sense of being Javanese in peaceful presence. Everything old and new in the world is subject to harmonization toward sustainability, as articulated in the Javanese credo: *laras yektine lestari*.

Why are ethics and aesthetics in Javanese tradition indistinguishable? This chapter will deal with the question and argues that both civility and the sense of beauty in Javanese culture have the same source and purpose. In order to understand this, the chapter will examine and scrutinize the relationship between local concepts and its phenomena in various works of art, which are related to and associated with Javanese cultural values and customs.

THE JAVANESE WORLD: BHAWANA

Semaoen probably presents one of the best descriptions of the Javanese world in the modern age in his novel *Hikayat Kadiroen*, the story of Kadiroen, in the chapter “Terjepit” (“Being Squeezed”). The novel was written in 1919 when Semaoen was jailed by the Dutch colonial power because of *persdelict* on his essay in *Sinar Hindia*, containing sympathetic support of the Indonesian nationalist movement (Semaoen 2000; Maier 2004, p. 171). According to Semaoen’s depiction in his only novel, the modern Javanese world has lost its spiritually ordering power. Indeed, as a Javanese person, he is not alone. Previously, Javanese populations pertained their cultural destiny and nation to the prophetic messages of the Kediri Third King, Jayabaya (1135–1157). In the nineteenth century, an influential Javanese poet, R. Ng. Ranggawarsita, told us a similar depiction of the world in his famous poem “Serat Kalatida,” or message from the Dark Age (*jaman kalabendu*). The prophetic message of Ranggawarsita that was believed to be the destiny of Javanese culture still lingers in Javanese populations; the relationship between his message and his personal life remains mysterious and influential today (Andjar 1980; Andjar 1979). Despite the infiltration of the Dutch language and Javanology, Takashi Shiraishi and Andjar Any as quoted by Tsuchiya come to the conclusion that Ranggawarsita and his world continue to live on in the world of the Javanese language (Tsuchiya 1990, p. 108). It is a typically Javanese way of thinking of the world that the heavenly flourishing world is always in the past or in the future, but it hardly deals with the immediate scene of the present.

In contrast to the past realm, the contemporary world is depicted as hell with socially degrading values, spiritually swallowing resources, politically disintegrating leadership, and environmentally triggered disasters. All of these are obviously supportive of the justification of the patrimonial and

prophetic messages of those who are not in power at the time because of their own choice or still in struggle for that. In many ways, the perfect Javanese world is never in present times, but it is high above the horizon of the common people's understanding and is believed to come true someday as the realization of the messianic promise of Javanese myths, legends, poems, and stories since the Stanza of the King Jayabaya from the twelfth century (Florida 1995, p. 273). Most recently, in March 2008, the prominent Javanese Indonesian poet W. S. Rendra in his inauguration speech as Doctor Honoris Causa at the University of Gadjahmada depicted the contemporary world in the Age of Darkness (*kalatida-kalabendu*), toward the Golden Age (*kalasuba*) (Kolese De Britto Yogyakarta 2008). As a poet he affirms that his thought on the world is in alignment with his predecessor, Ranggawarsita.

The idea of the Javanese world is likely indivisible from the myth of *murwakala* (the origin of time), which is commonly used for the opening part of a shadow puppet show (*wayang*). The origin of *kala* is perceived by the Javanese as the beginning of an era that has been liberated from chaos, famine, impurity, disorder, and suffering. The Javanese world, *bhawana* or *jagat*, is believed to be born from this darkness that is known as *suker*, derived from the Sanskrit word *sukerta*, meaning anguish, agony, and torment (Headley 2000, p. 158). In Javanese tradition, *kala* or time is depicted as a monster that is always ready to eat everything including humans, animals, and plants.

Indeed, the birth of *kala* in the Javanese myth does not have to do with any anniversary or special event, but simply to remind people of the perishability of the world that is always in need of *ruwatan*. *Ruwatan* is derived from the word *ruwat*, meaning to liberate from perishability with care for sustainability. The meanings of *ruwatan* are indivisible from the Javanese rites of *slametan*. Clifford Geertz has described in detail how the *slametan* plays an important role in Javanese rites of passage (Geertz 1960, pp. 77–85). His description is still valid today, especially in rural areas of Central and East Java. Accordingly, the rituals are dedicated to the care of unity (*manunggal*), harmony (*rukun*), and of sustainability (*lestari*) of the world with the acceptance (*nrima*) of the destiny of mortality.

In the Javanese myth of the world creation, time as sign and power of perishability is depicted as the son of the Batara Guru and Batari Uma. Even though his character in Javanese tradition is monstrous, rude, bluntly honest, indifferent, and indiscriminately savage to any being, Batara Kala never does violence with bloodshed. The necessity for *ruwatan* is more about anticipatory care for the well-being, unity, and harmony of the world. There are several kinds of the rite of *murwakala* including for personal well-being (*anggara*), for communal well-being (*mageri*), and for avoiding natural disaster (*sengkala*). The world in Javanese cosmogony is perceived as the realm of

beings with the constant threat of perishability and transience that invokes the necessity for continuous awareness of care for well-being (*slamet*) that includes unity (*manunggal*), harmony (*rukun*), and sustainability (*lestari*).

The puppet master (*dhalang*) plays an important role as priest. The priest enunciates and leads the *ruwatan* with *wayang* performance. The Javanese people—from the west to the east part of the island—have practiced this tradition since the pre-Islamic times. Originally, the rite of *murwakala* was performed as part of the opening scene of *wayang purwa* (Moerdowo 1982, pp. 13, 21, 22; Ulbricht 1970, pp. 14–21; Florida 1995, p. 273). Ancient mantras on the myth of world creation are narrated for all age audience. The message of the myth is made clear by certain characters in various power play scenes that the world necessitates liberation from perishability and care for its sustainability. In order to achieve this, collective awareness is evoked and mobilized as moral power.

Despite its nebulous and esoteric conceptualization, the importance of *ruwatan* for the Javanese world lies in the call for the collective care and the awareness of mortality that unity and harmony are not by chance, but the outcome from communal intention and effort. Scholars such as Foley (2001), Headly (2000, pp. 8–9, 91), and van Groenendael (1985) have observed the *murwakala* rite as part of *ruwatan* in many parts of Javanese places from West, Central, and East that the *wayang* performance led by *dhalang* gives the sense of dread and danger in terms of exoticism. The *dhalang* and their *wayang* performances are considered the strategic vehicle of Javanese culture that conveys, disseminates, and sustains ancient Javanese teaching with an entertainment package.

Even though the origin of the *wayang purwa* was probably from the Neolithic Ages the evolution of its content and performance concerning the rite of *murwakala* was inseparable from the assimilation of Indic civilization—such as Ramayana and Mahabharata—and indigenous Javanese culture. For the Javanese the *wayang* tradition is more than just entertainment. Rather, the puppet show is one of the sources of ethics and aesthetics as well as living philosophy.

Sociologically speaking, the *wayang* tradition in Java is also the voice of the ordinary and rural people. However, the effectiveness of *wayang* tradition in Javanese society lies in its artistically entertaining capacity that incorporates ancient messages and modern issues in a lively, attractive performance. Albeit the *wayang* performance as the medium and agent of cultural syncretism has been developing in various forms and styles, the main message of its presentation is clear that it invokes and articulates the Javanese world in the present context; this includes depicting the world with its ideals, dangers, constraints, and opportunities. The *dhalang* and its sponsor usually perform

a specific theme and story of ancient legend, Ramayana or Mahabharata, that is actually in response to the current affairs in their societies, ranging from political, to economic, to social issues. *Murwakala* is one important theme that signifies the care for crises. The most important aspect of the rite of *murwakala* as well as *ruwatan* is to set the identity and boundary of the Javanese world within the historical and collective values of being Javanese, which is conveyed with the performance of shadow puppets.

Unlike other traditional cultures in the archipelago, the Javanese ancient tradition continues to live on today through the *wayang* performance. Since Islamic influence was in effect in Javanese societies, the role and function of the ancient priests (*mpu*, *pandita*) had been transformed and entrusted to the puppet master (*dhalang*). Such continuity is not the case in South Nias and Tana Toraja. The indigenous priests in both regions (*ere* and *to mina*) have been gradually dysfunctional and disappearing since the European missionaries established their Christian churches in their villages. In Java, indigenous traditions have been prevailing up until today through their performance arts such as *wayang* and *gamelan* that work as an artistically entertaining vehicle of the ancient world.

ARTISTIC PRINCIPLES AND ARTISTS IN THE JAVANESE TRADITION

In Javanese culture, unity is achieved with the principle of identity between the creator and the creation that is expressed with the concept of *manunggal*; the unity itself is a central symbol of power (Anderson 2007, p. 36). The need for unity and harmony as well as sustainability lies in the fact that life (*hurip*) in the Javanese beliefs system is the synergy of dualistic characters and phenomena of nature. The reality of life and the world for the Javanese is unconceivable without the accord and wholeness of sky and earth, male and female, form and content, as well as outside and inside (Yumarma 1996). Accordingly, the task of a work of art is the act of bringing everything different together toward unity, harmony, and sustainability. The fear of disintegration and disarray urges the necessity for unity, harmony, and sustainability. In return, every being has to have their proper place with unique and particular function and contribution to the Javanese world. Accordingly, there is no concept of otherness but the unknown or beyond the boundary of the Javanese world and language.

Being an artist in the Javanese world is being in the proper position according to seniority, education, experience, maturity, and community service. The room for creative innovation and improvisation is to comply with the prin-

ciple of harmony within the community. It implies that in the traditional way, individual freedom is likely out of question (Mulder 2005, p. 70).

Javanese animism believes that every being is a container (*wadah*) containing cosmic power (*Jiwa* or *isi*). Respect (*ngajeni*) to other beings is demonstrated with offering (*sajen, sesajen*), a bunch of flowers and foods at periodic times within five days of the Javanese calendar. Burning incense is part of the ritual for such offerings. Such a practice pertains to ancient and pre-Hindu rituals, as a sign of respect to the ancestors and the invisible power in the cosmos. They believe in the wholeness that human work is nothing unless it is imbued with the power of nature that flows into the form (*lair*) as its content (*bathin*).

Making things is conceived to work together with others, including the invisible. Being able to create and compose something from the earth is not to see humans as the master of being. The Javanese people believe that man-made things are indispensable from the transfer of energy from cosmos to the form. Consequently, the transfer needs to be handled with care and respect. This is not because of moral consideration. Naturally, it is about the awareness of being and remembering called *eling*. The state of *eling* is considered as the mental state of being able to listen to and to act according to respect (*hormat, ngajeni*) and dignity (*praja, kaprajan*). The Javanese people were trained from their childhood to realize that the way to be safe and healthy is not only to be loyal (*mituhu*) and sincere (*jujur*), but also to develop the sense of inner strength (*mantep bathin*). The training is exercised with fasting (*pasa*) and modest living (*prihatin*). All this is to improve the capacity for self-control of nourishment and want. Being able to know the difference between need and want is central for Javanese cultural training. In many cases, the outcome of this training is to lead people to be less assertive and not spontaneous.

Shying away from expressing their feelings and thoughts is a common phenomenon found among the Javanese people. Here, something good and beautiful in terms of human conduct is about subtlety. Foreigners get the impression that Javanese people are apathetic because they are too polite and sometimes misunderstand it. There is, of course, a way to invoke participation for Javanese people if they are asked personally.

Culturally, Javanese tradition has been developed with the concept of what being Javanese is; that is, ethically humble (*andah asor*), respective of others (*ngajeni*), and culturally cultivated (*alus*) (Sutton 1991, p. 21; Hughes-Freeland 2008, p. 82). Succinctly, being Javanese is being human in respect to other beings, either tangible or intangible. Thus, any determination concerning being in time is conceived as the way toward being somewhat ethically civilized based on polite comportment and respectful language. It is