

Traditional Art, Community and Environmental Discourse: *Wayang* Puppet Theatre in Global Contexts

Double-Panel Proposal for EuroSEAS Berlin 10-13 September 2018

Convener: Professor Matthew Isaac Cohen

Plans for discussion and collaboration

Puppet theatre (*wayang*) in traditional communities of the agrarian societies of western Indonesia has long been a means for evoking, dramatizing, addressing and supplicating supernatural beings associated with the natural environment; disseminating information about best practices and taboos in relation to agriculture, forestry and fishing; and defining and reinforcing bonds of community. Ritual dramas performed annually in villages and propitious sites are participatory rites sponsored and attended by communities.

Due to changes in religious belief and practice (particularly Islamization), education, the industrialization of agriculture and commercial fishing, migration and urbanization, the centrality of these *wayang* ritual dramas and associated local knowledge is etiolating. They are premised on traditional techniques, predictable monsoons and agricultural and fishing seasons – regular patterns thrown into disarray by rapid modernization, climate change and global challenges. *Wayang* is being sponsored by communities no longer defined by geographical proximity but also involve actively members who participate from afar, such as migrant workers in South Korea. Local traditions survive as heritage but are often no longer “in good working order,” in philosopher Alisdair Macintyre’s terms, as they fail to recognise significant changes.

There exists, however, potential in revitalizing these archaic and residual ritual drama forms and associated myths to address the pressing environmental issues confronting western Indonesia today such as coastal erosion, flooding, sinking cities, air and water pollution. This panel, which emerges from a collaborative research project conducted by UK-based and Indonesian researchers, examines the re-definition of *wayang* interpretive communities under globalization; residual and archaic environmental functions of *wayang*; contemporary efforts by coterie of activists, academics, agrarian communities and artists to link *wayang* to environmental causes; and, more generally, the potential of *wayang* to comprehend, communicate and intervene in environmental discourses and other global challenges.

Participants

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Discussant

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