

Localization of the Other in the Indonesian Film “Opera Jawa”: A Case of Telling a Ramayana Story in a Muslim Community¹

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Introduction

Various theories on otherness underscore that the self requires the other to construct its own identity. The constructing of self in turn is achieved not only by differentiating the self from the other but also by readjusting the self by internalizing the other. These two modes of constructing the self are applicable both to an individual and to a society. Recent studies of Asia seem to emphasize the discursive formation in which the West constructs the otherness out of Asian societies. However, from the Asian perspective, it is equally true that Asian societies construct the otherness of the West to build a modern society. The West, as the other, has been either perceived as malevolent (colonization) or as benevolent or at least imitable (modernization and industrialization). What is more interesting is that the other in Asia is not always the West but also another Asian culture, society, or nation. In modern times, a neighboring nation was often seen as the competing other against which the nation had to consolidate and defend itself; a neighboring nation was also seen as a source of inspiration and a model for nation building. These interactions also took place before modern times. For instance, Javanese society in Indonesia was so heavily influenced by Indian culture prior to the introduction of Islam that the influence of Indic elements are still felt. The historical process of the internalization of the Indian other, or “localization,” as the process is often called (Wolters 1999), can be seen as a process of the formation of the Javanese self.

This paper discusses Garin Nugroho’s Indonesian film *Opera Jawa* in light of the localization of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* as the internalized other in the predominantly Muslim Javanese society (Garin Nugroho 2006). The *Ramayana*, an epic story of Indian Hinduism, has fundamentally influenced Javanese culture. The film not only retells the story of the *Ramayana* set in the contemporary Indonesia but also manages to recreate it in a simultaneously modern and traditional form with a fresh interpretation. This paper will focus on the way Javanese come to terms with their Indic cultural legacy in the contemporary Indonesian context, although it also touches upon types of otherness in terms of

ethnicity, gender, and social class.

1. Javanese in Indonesia

The Javanese are the largest ethnic group in Indonesia. With a 96 million, the Javanese account for more than 40 percent of the population of the country. The Javanese traditionally and predominantly reside in the central and eastern parts of the island of Java, but today they are also found in every part of Indonesia. Their native language, Javanese, belongs to the Austronesian family, to which most of the languages in Indonesia, including the national language, Indonesian, belong. In Indonesia, Javanese is often regarded as sophisticated and difficult to master because of the distinction of status levels, ranging from the *ngkoko* (informal) to *krama tinggi* (deferential).

Most of the Javanese are Muslims, although they are deeply influenced by pre-Islamic customs and beliefs. Hinduism and Buddhism in particular made a lasting impact on the Javanese society, when the Indian civilization was introduced to Java in the first millennium. One of the consequences of this impact is innumerable Sanskrit loan words in the Javanese language. Indic kingdoms began to appear in Central Java in the 8th century. In the following century, a version of the *Ramayana*, composed by the Indian poet Bhatti in Sanskrit, was translated with some modification into the Old Javanese language. The *Mahabharata* was also introduced to Javanese society. When a Javanese kingdom conquered the island of Bali in the mid-14th century, the Indic tradition was brought to Bali. Since then, a Javanese-Balinese variety of Hinduism has developed in Bali, and today no less than 90 percent of the Balinese are Hindus.

In Java, the first Islamic kingdom was established in the late 15th or early 16th century. Since then, Islam has become dominant in Java while Bali remains attached to Indic tradition. Nevertheless, despite the conversion to Islam, Javanese society retains its Indic tradition, thus maintaining a certain commonality with Balinese society. The epitome of this common Indic legacy is the theatrical performance of the Hindu epics. Performances of shadow puppet theater and classical dance theater based on episodes of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, accompanied by gamelan orchestra, are very popular in Java and Bali as well. The cities of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, both in the central part of Java, are important Javanese cultural centers because the royal courts of the two former Muslim kingdoms are located there.

As a consequence of complex cultural changes in history, the Javanese society exhibits remarkable diversity. To analyze the diversity of Javanese society, Clifford Geertz (1960) suggests a set of three cultural variants of what he calls "the religion of Java": (1) *Abangan*, who are predominantly peasants and believe in animistic and Hindu-Buddhist ideas; (2) *Santri*, who are predominantly merchants and are orthodox Muslims; and finally (3) *Priyayi*,

who are typically public servants and believe in mystical ideas. There have been a number of critiques of Geertz's trichotomy (Aoyama 2004), but for the purpose of this paper, it is sufficient to mention a revised scheme proposed by Bachtiar (1973).

According to this revision, two axes may be discerned in the Javanese social structure. One is the vertical axis of social status, where higher status is occupied by *priyayi* (public servant) and lower status by *wong cilik* (small people). The other is the horizontal axis of the dichotomy of unorthodox and orthodox Islam where *abangan* occupies the unorthodox side and *santri* the orthodox side. The advantage of the revised scheme over the original is that *abangan* is not confined to peasants but encompasses all social strata, including *priyayi* and *wong cilik*. The scheme represents more faithfully the cultural characteristics of the Javanese society.

If *abangan* is a dominant group in Javanese society, then questions to be answered in this paper are threefold: To what extent can Hindu-Buddhist culture be influential and creative forces in Java today? How does the film retell the story of the *Ramayana* in the setting of contemporary Indonesia and maintains its relevance. And how does the film challenge the audience to reexamine the other in their own culture from both Muslim and non-Muslim perspectives?

2. *Opera Jawa*

Opera Jawa's director, Garin Nugroho, was born in Yogyakarta in 1961. As a native of Yogyakarta and a son of a local publisher and writer, Nugroho was brought up in a rich traditional cultural background. Since the release of his first feature film *Cinta dalam Sepotong Roti* (Love in a Piece of Bread) in 1991, and in particular the success of *Daun di atas Bantal* (Leaf on a Pillow) in 2008, Nugroho has become internationally recognized as one of the most creative independent filmmakers from Indonesia.

Opera Jawa is one of several films commissioned for the New Crowned Hope Festival held in Austria in 2006 for the 250th anniversary of the birth of Mozart. After the film successfully premiered in Yogyakarta in August 2006, it was shown at the festival in November. Although the film was not commercially successful, it was critically well reviewed and now internationally available in DVD format.

The title of the film, *Opera Jawa*, indicates its formal characteristics. First, it is a kind of opera, or musical, in the sense that all 120 minutes of the dramatic performance, all the dialogue and other text, are sung. Second, the language used is mostly Javanese, with a few exceptions where Indonesian is used in explanatory texts and Latin phrases in the requiem. A traditional Javanese gamelan ensemble accompanies the sung texts and plays other musical pieces. Most of the tunes are traditional but some sound contemporary. The cast of the film also mostly consists of renowned Javanese dancers, although it does include some

notable non-Javanese dancers and actress. The setting is Central Java and includes iconic objects, such as the palace in Surakarta and the Buddhist Plaosan complex.

Thus, the film gives an overall impression of being distinctively Javanese. Nevertheless, because of its musical format and Nugroho's use of highly imaginative visual representations, the Javanese aspects in the film are depicted not as something obvious and natural but as something unsettled and extraordinary. Nugroho succeeds in bringing out the otherness of Java.

When the film was commissioned, one of the prerequisites was to use "requiem" as the theme of the projected film, which is evident in the film's English subtitle, "Requiem from Java". Upon accepting the commission, Nugroho immediately decided that he would make a Javanese-style musical film based on the abduction of Sita from the *Ramayana*. He explained that he chose the *Ramayana* because its story is simple and known by any Javanese and thus can be a suitable material to make a film that allows the audience to have multiple interpretations (Triyanto Triwikoromo 2005).

3. *Ramayana* as told in the film

Due to Nugroho's choice in using the *Ramayana*, the narrative of the film is complex. Three layers of the *Ramayana* can be identified in the narrative of the film: the traditional *Ramayana* story, which is shared by the Javanese audience; the reference to the theatrical performance of the traditional *Ramayana* played by the main characters; and the story narrated in the film in which the courses of action of the main characters roughly correspond to those of the *Ramayana*. The first two are not narrated in the film but only referred to.

The main story of the traditional *Ramayana* consists of the following episodes:

1. Birth of Rama as the incarnation of god Visnu
2. Marriage of Rama and Sita
3. Banishment of Rama and Sita into the forest
4. Abduction of Sita by Ravana
5. Hanuman's reconnaissance for Sita
6. Battle between Rama and Ravana, and Ravana's death
7. Burning of Sita, and her redemption
8. Return of Rama and Sita to the court, and Rama's ascension to the throne

The story narrated in the film corresponds, more or less, to the episodes of the traditional *Ramayana* from the marriage of Rama and Sita to the burning of Sita. However, because the story is narrated from the heroine's point of view and the burning of the heroine results in her death, episodes before her marriage and after her burning are not narrated in the film.

Because of the complexity of the narrative structure and the deviation of the story from



Figure 1. Siti and Setyo.

the traditional *Ramayana*, to fully appreciate the film, the Javanese audience is on the one hand required to be familiar with every nuance of the *Ramayana*, but on the other hand encouraged to give their imagination free rein. Thus, the film challenges the Javanese audience to re-examine what has been perceived as obvious in their own culture.

The heroine of the story, Siti, is married to a humble potter, Setyo, in a quiet Javanese rural village (Figure 1). Setyo often uses an ox cart to sell his products in town, leaving Siti alone with his trusted servant Sura (corresponding to Rama’s younger brother Laksmana in the *Ramayana*). Arrogant and powerful Ludiro, who runs an abattoir, controls the town with violence. These three characters share the same past, being members of a traditional theatrical group who performed the *Ramayana*. Setyo, Siti, and Ludiro played Rama, Sita, and Ravana, respectively. Ludiro, who secretly desires Siti, cannot give her up after she is married to Setyo. Siti on the other hand is frustrated with her quiet but lifeless existence after she no longer plays Sita. When Ludiro sends a letter to Siti to invite her to dance again as Sita, she feels tempted to the possibility of another life. The story gains momentum.

The name of each character has a meaning in Javanese. Siti means “earth”, Setyo “sincere”, and Ludiro “blood”, reflecting the trait of each character. The name Siti suggests—as Sita in the *Ramayana*—that she will return to the earth in the end. It also hints at her husband, a potter, who shapes the elastic clay according to his own will and bakes it into rigid earthenware. This is a metaphor for the relationship between Siti and Setyo. Setyo is deeply in love with Siti, but his inflexible sincerity forces her into the mold of an obedient and submissive wife. Against this background, Ludiro’s obstinate attempt to seduce Sita eventually leads to a bloody and tragic end for all the parties involved (Figure 2). In a nutshell, the *Opera Jawa* retells the *Ramayana* in a love triangle.

The story also deviates from the traditional *Ramayana* at several points. The story is



Figure 2. Ludiro attempts to seduce Siti.

narrated from the heroine's point of view, and thus the development of the story is driven by Siti, not Rama, and the story ends tragically. Siti is attracted to Ludiro, who is arrogant but curiously elegant and masculine, but in her final confrontation with him, she rejects him on account of his insensitivity to her own aspirations. Siti, however, does not return to Setyo either. She walks away from Setyo, who literally tries to shape her like clay on a potter's wheel. Enraged with jealousy, Setyo fights with Ludiro. Meanwhile, Siti puts on a dance costume of Sita kept in a drawer and destroys Setyo's pottery; she leaves home.

After killing Ludiro, Setyo meets Siti in burning flame, represented by a yellow conic installation set in a barren field (Figure 3). In the traditional *Ramayana* the burning of Sita results in her redemption. In *Opera Jawa* Siti's burning has ironic and tragic consequences. The dance costume she wears symbolizes Siti's desire to live her own life. Ludiro is the catalyst that enables Siti to become aware that her real desire is to liberate herself from Setyo's protection and enable her to choose her own life. Having understood Siti is not coming back to him, Setyo kills her. Setyo is arrested for murdering Ludiro and Siti; thus, all three main characters leave the stage.

As a version of the *Ramayana*, *Opera Jawa* offers a new interpretation of this classic story. Most importantly, the story is told from the point of view of Siti, instead of Setyo, and she is depicted as the person who decides her own destiny for better or worse. The story is told as a typical love triangle set in contemporary Java. Nevertheless, the connection to the traditional *Ramayana* is never lost in the narrative. It is then understood that a new interpretation of the *Ramayana* is possible only because the story is completely internalized in Javanese society. Even though most of the Javanese are Muslims, the story and significance of the *Ramayana* is never forgotten in Javanese society. *Opera Jawa* has succeeded in re-creating the story and taking it to a new level.



Figure 3. Siti waits Setyo in burning flame.

4. Requiem

What makes *Opera Jawa* more interesting is the final episode after the exit of the three main characters. The episode depicts the theme of requiem, accounting for the film’s English subtitle. The scene starts with Ludiro’s mother Sukesi in mourning, singing the requiem lyric in Latin, accompanied by Javanese gamelan music. In the traditional *Ramayana*, she is also named Sukesi (corresponding to Kaikeyi in Sanskrit). Although she is a minor character, Sukesi is known as the person who seeks the ultimate truth of the universe. In *Opera Jawa* she plays the central role in the final episode. She is the one who understands Ludiro’s desire for Siti and invariably supports his attempt to seduce Siti. She is in fact an accomplice in this tragic story and at least partly responsible for the tragic end of the characters. Those who survived are not totally innocent. The final scene is not only a rite of requiem for the deceased but an act of reconciliation between those who have survived.

The choice of the place for the final scene is significant. It is a sandy beach on the seashore facing the Indian Ocean, which is a well-known place for the sultan of the Yogyakarta palace to conduct the *labuhan* ritual, in which he makes offerings to the goddess of the southern sea, Nyai Loro Kidul, to ensure her protection of the sultanate. The solemn procession led by Sukesi and Sura includes those who carry an urn, which may contain the ashes of those who died, and a portable shrine called a *gunungan*, another feature of a ritual by the Sultan; these follow the style of the rite of *labuhan* (Figure 4).

The scene shows a striking contrast between the blue sky above, the white sand beach beneath with the procession, and the blue ocean behind. In this scene, it seems that three natural elements converge symbolically in one place: heaven as transcendent being, ocean as the abode of the goddess who is an autochthonous being, and earth as the symbol of Siti and



Figure 4. The procession in the final episode.

female fertility. At the end of the film, the audience sees that there is still hope in the form of rice seedlings that appear where Siti's blood stains the earth. According to Javanese belief, the goddess Sri, who is associated with Visnu's consort Laksmi, is the goddess of rice and fertility. Because Siti is the incarnation of Laksimi, it is logical to assume that after her death, Siti returns to the earth and incarnates in the form of rice. In this way, the final episode of the film becomes a visual blending of multiple Javanese beliefs.

The final text states in Indonesian that "this film is a requiem for the victims of violence and natural disaster throughout the world, especially for those in Yogyakarta and Central Java." The natural disaster mentioned in the text is the May 2006 Java earthquake, which caused more than 5,000 deaths. Because the earthquake occurred at the end of production, such a requiem message was natural for Nugroho. Yet the victims in this film are not only victims of natural disaster but of violence—both imagined and real.

In *Opera Jawa*, there are many representations of conflict that eventually result in violence. The female and male gender is represented in Siti's confrontation with both Setyo and Ludiro. The opposition between those who have power and those who do not is represented by Setyo's challenge to the powerful Ludiro; Setyo champions the powerless. These conflicts have violent and tragic consequences and expose the otherness in the social fabric. Furthermore, in recent history, Indonesia has experienced many violent incidents on account of ethnic, religious, and other differences, most notably the massacres of 1965-1966 and the May 1998 riots. The impact of the incidents is so deep that emotional repercussions are still unsettled in society. The incidents also divided the unity of the society, which still calls for reconciliation. The final episode of *Opera Jawa* apparently refers to these violent incidents. It is appropriate that the final scene is not only a requiem for the victims but also an act of reconciliation for those who have survived.

5. Hindu Balinese on *Opera Jawa*

How the film was received by Indonesians is revealed in an interesting series of events. When the film was being edited in 2005, the World Hindu Youth Organization, a fundamental Hindu Balinese organization established in Bali one year earlier, accused Nugroho of desecrating Hinduism by making a film using sacred characters of the *Ramayana*, one of the sacred scripts of Hinduism. They demanded that the director make the content adhere to the original *Ramayana*, and to apologize to the Hindu community.

Nugroho firmly rebutted the accusation, stating that his film was not about the characters of the Hindu epic but human beings who have played in the *Ramayana* theater even though the story was inspired by the *Ramayana* (Suara Merdeka Cybernews 2005). The official organization of Balinese Hinduism, Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia, also promptly intervened in the dispute (Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia 2005). They issued a statement about the film in support of Nugroho, in which they remarked that the *Ramayana* is a Hindu legacy, and the development of the *Ramayana* in Indonesia, especially in Java, has its own tradition with local and non-Hindu influences, and this tradition still exists and develops in people's lives. This statement is significant in that the official Balinese Hindu organization recognizes the Hindu influence in Javanese culture and its tradition.

The Javanese people are not followers of Hinduism. Yet they do maintain and develop the traditions of Indic legacy. The *Ramayana* is no exception. This means the *Ramayana* has been completely internalized in Javanese society in such a way that it can be retold in a creative way. The accusation made by a Balinese Hindu organization ironically proved this point.

Conclusion

As an accomplished work of art, the film *Opera Jawa* can be interpreted in different ways. It shows multiple aspects of otherness. The relationship between self and the other is expressed in terms of gender, class, and other aspects. The film testifies that Indic otherness has been completely internalized in Javanese society. The film shows the internalization of the Indic other through the process of localization. This is more apparent if we compare the film with another famous film adaptation of a Hindu epic. Peter Brook's adaptation of the *Mahabharata* was originally produced as a nine-hour stage play in 1985 and made into a film in 1989. Although it faithfully follows the story of the *Mahabharata*, this version attempts to retell the *Mahabharata* as a story about all humankind. Thus, if we say Nugroho's work is the localization of Indic otherness, it is more about the generalization of Indic otherness.

It has been argued in studies of pre-modern history of Southeast Asia that the localization of Indian cultural tradition, in particular that of Hinduism and Buddhism, played a critical role in the formation of the culture of the Southeast. This paper suggests that the process of localization still remains to be relevant and does produce an artistically creative

representation.

Notes

- 1 An early version of this paper was laid out in Aoyama (2010).

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