

Wayang, Ecology and the Sacred Symposium. Yale University, Connecticut.
November 9, 2024.

The article summarizes a single-day symposium on the theme of Wayang, Ecology, and the Sacred organized by Professor Matthew Isaac Cohen with support from the Yale Institute of Sacred Music at Yale University. Participants from a wide range of disciplines, including Theatre, Visual Arts, Puppetry, Ethnomusicology, and Museum Studies, investigated how wayang puppet traditions are both sacred and related to ecological issues.

Rahul Koonathara is currently pursuing graduate studies at the University of Connecticut in the Department of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies under the guidance of Professor Matthew Isaac Cohen. Koonathara actively practices a traditional style of shadow puppetry from India while exploring contemporary puppet productions and conducting academic research on puppet arts. He holds a Master's degree in Comparative Literature & Cultural studies, a Master's degree in Folklore Studies, a Bachelor's degree in physics, and a specialized intensive acting diploma from the National School of Drama, Bangalore.

The "Wayang, Ecology, and the Sacred" symposium explored the profound intersections of Javanese shadow puppetry, ecology, spirituality, and evolving cultural practices. Through a dynamic blend of traditional and contemporary approaches, the symposium illuminated the shifting boundaries of *wayang* as both an artistic and sacred practice in a globalized world. The symposium began with Professor Matthew Isaac Cohen introducing an Indonesian performance context of *wayang kulit* in the style of Cirebon, a cultural area on Java's north coast. The puppeteer (*dalang*) Ki Dalang Drs. Purjadi performed live via Zoom the newly created story of *Kresna Ginugat* based on characters and situations from the *Mahabharata* epic. In this "branch" play (*lakon carangan*) philosophical and ethical issues pose challenges for Lord Kresna. The incorporation of

multiple cameras and the adaptation of performances for diverse venues highlights how traditional shadow puppetry is evolving to embrace technology. This approach not only enhances the accessibility of *wayang* performances but also demonstrates how tradition, spirituality, and virtual elements coexist and adapt to contemporary demands.

Ki Purjadi's forty-minute performance at the symposium's start demonstrated how a multilayered *wayang* performance approaches ecological issues of global import. In the play, Sang Wiku Yitma Hayawani, the guardian of animals and protector of the natural environment, brings charges against Lord Kresna, the God of Humanism. The former accuses Lord Kresna of failing to prevent humanity's exploitative behavior toward animals, treating them as mere commodities. Humans consume their flesh, extract their milk, exploit their labor, and kill those deemed a threat. Due to humanity's cruelty and greed, Lord Kresna is summoned to the world's court, accused of negligence and inability to guide humans toward harmonious coexistence with nature and all of God's creations. This trial challenges Lord Kresna's role as the God of Humanism and questions his responsibility in mitigating the harm caused by human actions.

The performance of *Kresna Ginugat* sparked a lively and thought-provoking discussion, particularly regarding the role of secondary characters in amplifying the story's central themes. In traditional *wayang kulit* performances, characters such as clowns or newly introduced figures often play a critical role in improvisation. They add humor and serve as a reflective lens, offering commentary on the unfolding narrative and connecting it to broader societal and environmental issues. One of the core questions raised in this story is the role of governance in ensuring harmony between humanity and the natural world. The tale presents a moral challenge: how can humanity balance its exploitation of natural resources with its responsibility to preserve the environment? The debate resonates beyond the narrative, urging both rulers and ordinary individuals to reflect on their duties in measuring the level of exploitation and to create a sustainable world. A remarkable feature of this performance is the *dalang's* ability to integrate Hindu mythology with Islamic teachings. As a Muslim *dalang*, Ki Purjadi incorporates references from the Quran to bridge these traditions, offering a unique perspective on

shared moral values. He highlights an alignment between the teachings of the Quran and the Hindu epics, emphasizing harmony, balance, and the sacred responsibility humans bear toward nature.

Professor Sumarsam of Wesleyan University's music department gave a talk on the transformation of modern-day performances, in which he discussed the vibrant *Barongan* performances, which transform traditional storytelling into a dazzling spectacle of light and sound. This hybridized cultural expression was on display in Blora, Central Java, during a two-day festival in 2023. The extravagant performance not only floods the physical stage and surroundings with light but also metaphorically sheds light on societal reflections—shame, pride, and collective identity. The festival raised an intriguing question about the adaptation of Western technology in traditional arts. Is it an offense against authenticity or a creative endeavor that breathes new life into cultural practices? As performers and audiences navigate the integration of external influences, they break boundaries in cross-border cultural exchanges that challenge conventional norms. Sumarsam observed that such performances are a “set of practices normally governed by accepted rules which calculate norms of behavior and imply continuity with the past,” aptly juxtaposing tradition with the constant flux of change in a globalized context.

Professor Kathy Foley explored the themes of sustainability, ecology, and the philosophical insights of *wayang* in a paper titled “Ecology, Entanglement and Wayang: Cracking a Cosmic Egg, Spirit Siblings, and Implications for Environmental Understanding,” contrasting the cosmological dimensions of *wayang* and its ecological and spiritual ethos with Abrahamic traditions. She noted that while Abrahamic religions often place God above and separate from nature, Javanese *wayang* embodies entanglement with the material and spiritual worlds. Within the Abrahamic model, interaction between God and humanity is limited, marked by one-way commandments and few direct encounters. This separation between divinity and the material world has shaped humanity's anthropocentric view of nature, reinforcing the belief in dominion over all living beings, as stated in religious scriptures. The Javanese worldview, in

contrast, acknowledges humans as part of a larger ecological and spiritual web, sharing commonalities with animals and non-human entities. *Wayang* performances, through their stories and symbolic enactments, reflect this harmonious balance between humanity, nature, and divinity.

Wayang performances are deeply rooted in ecological and cosmological ideas; for instance, the puppet of the *kayon* or *gunungan* (tree or mountain-like puppet) is a central element in *wayang* and symbolizes the universe's duality. One side represents a verdant, flourishing garden teeming with life, while the other depicts a flaming demon, symbolizing destruction and chaos. This duality captures the balance between creation and destruction, emphasizing humanity's responsibility to maintain ecological harmony. By marking the four cardinal directions and their quadrants, the puppeteer transforms the stage into a symbolic universe. This act acknowledges the interconnectedness of all energies, animals, and elements within the cosmos. The *kayon* puppet, a representation of cosmic totality, epitomizes this interconnectedness. When flipped, it reveals the demonic within—a reminder of the dualities that exist within human nature. Foley explored the metaphysical journey depicted in *Hanacaraka* scripts, from unity to duality and back to oneness, and the *nyasa* practice, where mantras align the human body with the universe's energies. Foley argues that the worldview expressed in *wayang* offers valuable insights for contemporary ecological discourse.

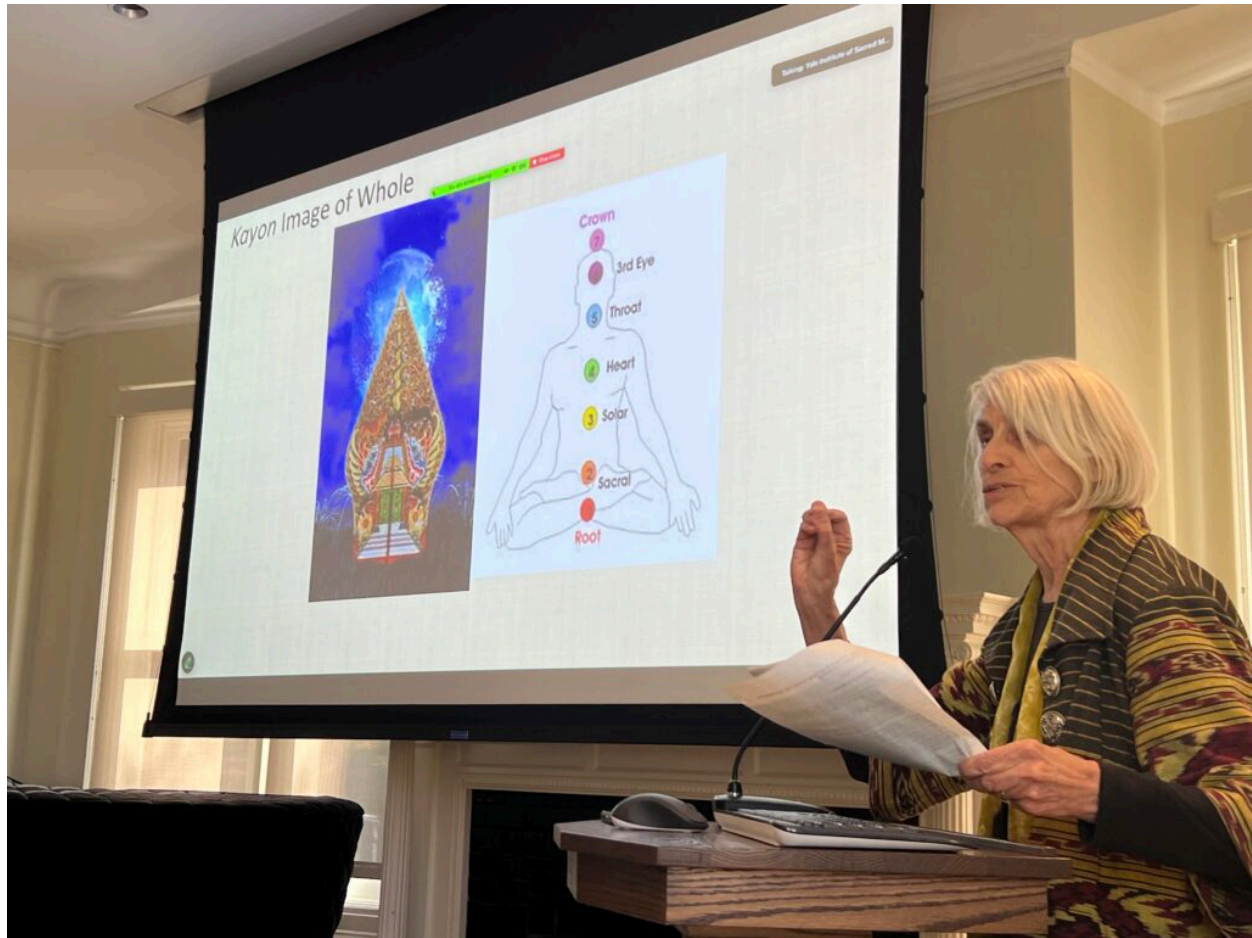


Figure 1. Kathy Foley presenting her work on “Ecology, Entanglement and Wayang: Cracking a Cosmic Egg, Spirit Siblings, and Implications for Environmental Understanding” and explaining the image of the *kayon* as representation of the whole Universe. November 9, 2024. (Photo: Matthew Cohen)

The foundational materials of *wayang* theatre reflect a harmonious relationship with the environment. Puppets were historically crafted by artists using readily available local resources, such as wood, hide, buffalo horn, bamboo, natural dyes, and beads. These figures are durable, often passed down through generations with minor repairs or updates, embodying a sustainable lifecycle approach. Similarly, costumes for *wayang wong* (dance drama) and masks were crafted with simplicity and utility in mind. The concept of type allowed a single puppet or mask to represent multiple characters across narratives, minimizing material requirements while enabling versatility in performances. *Wayang*’s rich musical tradition is also rooted in accessible materials and communal

practices. Early accompaniment likely evolved from the rhythmic sounds of rice pounding, with interlocking patterns inspiring the percussive nature of gamelan music. Over time, simpler bamboo and wood instruments transitioned into more intricate bronze gamelan ensembles. However, these ensembles retained the core principles of shared rhythms and collaborative performance, underscoring resource-efficient innovation. Stages for *wayang* performances were designed for mobility and simplicity. Temporary setups, often in front of homes or community spaces, required minimal infrastructure. Traditional lighting involved coconut oil lamps, later replaced by electric alternatives. The lack of exclusive spaces or elaborate requirements made *wayang* accessible, adaptable, and environmentally friendly.

Sulanjana is another tale from Javanese mythology that encapsulates humanity's intricate relationship with plants, animals, and the divine. From these different narratives, Foley shows that *wayang* revolves around celestial and earthly struggles to bring forth rice, the staple food, while reflecting on the balance between fertility, gender dynamics, and cosmic forces. The narrative highlights connections between mythic beings, environmental elements, and agricultural practices, offering profound insights into Javanese cosmology and culture.

The *Sanghyang Rancasan* story in *wayang golek* narrates the breaking of a cosmic egg, symbolizing the origins of creation. Similar to the cosmology of Chinese Daoism, the story emphasizes the egg as the beginning of life. From the egg born of *Sanghyang Tunggal* (the Holy Unitary One), four divine siblings emerge. Sanghyang Ismaya/Semar is the egg white, representing the righteous, linked to white, right, and the east. Sanghyang Antaga/Togog is the shell, representing the demonic, associated with yellow, left, and the west. Sanghyang Jagatnata/Batara Guru/Siwa is the yolk, symbolizing divine leadership, connected to black, north, and up. Sanghyang Rancasan is the red dot that initiates the cracking, representing rebellion, tied to red, south, and down. When Batara Guru is chosen to rule heaven, Rancasan rebels. In attempting to subdue him, Ismaya and Antaga accidentally tear him apart. From Rancasan's head drops the *jimat layang jamus kalimasadah*, a sacred heirloom

linked to the Islamic *kalimat sahadat* ("There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His Prophet").

Foley concluded her presentation by stating that while modernization has introduced resource-intensive elements such as lighting effects and amplified sound, *wayang* remains fundamentally eco-friendly. Stripping performances to their essence—puppets, basic percussion, and the *dalang* (puppeteer)—retains the art form's sustainable spirit. *Wayang's* blend of minimalism, adaptability, and ecological themes serve as an enduring example of sustainable art. It not only preserves cultural heritage but also offers practical lessons for modern sustainable practices in material use and performance arts. *Wayang* performances are not mere entertainment; they serve as a space for self-reflection and spiritual balancing. The tradition of *dulur papat kalima pancer*—acknowledging four spiritual siblings (placenta, blood, umbilical cord, and amniotic fluid)—reflects the Javanese view of interconnectedness with non-human entities.

In response to Foley's statement with regard to the four siblings—if you forget them, they will forget you—one attendee asked how these ideas impacted her own practice. Foley replied that, when studying at age 25 with an old *dalang*, she was often asked to do seemingly strange tasks without immediate explanation. Over time, through repetition of mantras and dance, she came to understand their purpose: to open oneself to the wider community and bring blessings into the world. In some traditions, like those in Hawaii, there is a belief in the connection with the placenta, symbolizing *twoness*: male and female, good and bad. Embracing this androgynous balance fosters harmony and reminds us that equilibrium is always possible.

Professor Nyoman Sedana explored the ecological and anthropological dimensions of *wayang* through his paper, "Theo-Eco-Anthro Aesthetics in *Wayang Aswamedha Yadnya*." Sedana argued that the conceptual framework of Theo-Eco-Anthro aesthetics balances world-nature-culture "*Eka Buana Hita*," (*One Universe Harmony*, literally, divinity-nature-human in harmony) which may be traced to holy scriptures like *Dharma*

Pewayangan (DP). Performances expand the traditional *pakem* (guidelines) to incorporate themes of environmental degradation and spiritual redemption. A new narrative created by Sedana centered on Baruna, a sacred being angered by the misuse of oceans as graveyards after the Bharatayuda war that concludes the main sections of the *Mahabharata*.

Baruna transforms human corpses into demonic entities, creating Kala Preta Buta Dengen, an ogre who seeks the divine heirloom Kalimasada. Through a narrative of loss, restoration, and divine intervention, the story critiques humanity's disregard for ecological balance. Sedana emphasized the role of the *dalang* as a mediator between the divine, human, and natural worlds. Drawing from the sacred triad of gut instinct (Sanghyang Guru Reka, God of aesthetic beauty), learning (Saraswati), and creativity, the *dalang* bridges realms while crafting holy water rituals and narrating complex ecological entanglements. We can see parallels across Asian puppet traditions. Theo-aesthetics in the sacred realm manifests when the *dalang* incorporates the gods every time s/he chants "Om" or "Ong" at the start of a mantra and dedicates a *puja* (worship) offering at a puppet show. Eco-aesthetics or ecology manifests when the *dalang* incorporates the earth, fauna, and flora into the narrative. Anthro-aesthetics in the human realm manifests when the *dalang* incorporates humans and ogres on earth. Puppeteers who offer sacred performances dedicated to the gods make the deity happy and, in return, they believe that the enlightened *dalang* is protected by three powerful gods, Tri Purusa (Three Powers) or Tri Wisesa (Three Eternals). Inherent aesthetic intuition is built into every child by the god Sanghyang Guru Reka (God of Aesthetic Beauty). This is developed in the ecological system of Sanghyang Aji Saraswati (Goddess of Learning), while Sanghyang Kawi Swara (God of Sounding) manifests in creative artistic skill and productions. Sedana gives a theoretical framework in support or validation of traditional ritual practices of *wayang*.

Intuitive theory *TRI WISESA* in Wayang “*Aswamedha*”

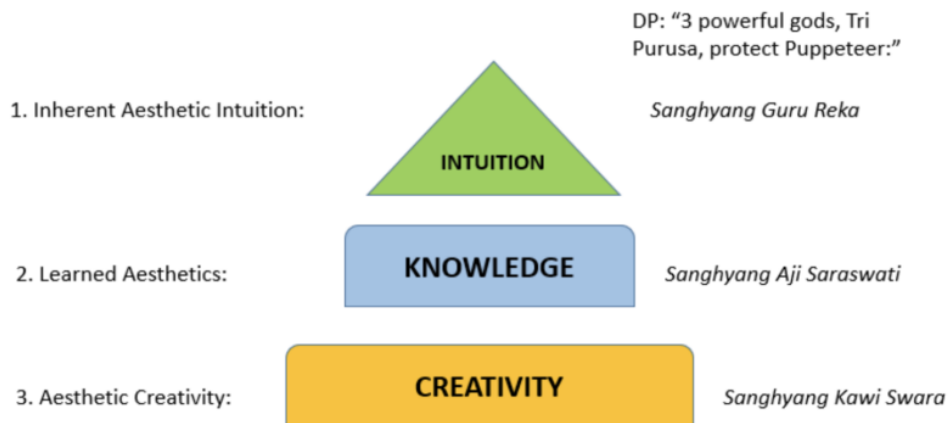


Figure 2. Presentation slide from Nyoman Sedana explaining Intuitive Theory.
November 9, 2024. (Photo: Courtesy of Nyoman Sedana)

Professor Ron Jenkins’ paper, “Sacred Alphabets: Aksara as Sources of Wisdom in Balinese Performance,” discussed the *panakawan*, the four divine servants of Bali—who are integral to the *dalang* as the *dalang* embodies them. These figures, namely Twalen (a transformation of Ismaya or Siwa), Merdah (Brahma and fiery), Delem (fiery), and Sanggut (Wisnu), represent the balance of the macrocosm and microcosm. Each is connected to different parts of the body. They serve as intermediaries between the divine and the human realms. For example, Sanggut is associated with the north and represents water, cooling the fires of his counterpart Delem. The *gedebong* (banana log) manifests the earth, while the flame of a coconut oil lamp symbolizes the sun. The screen used in *wayang* performances is a metaphor for the tissues of a face, and the nails securing it represent teeth. These metaphors connect the sacred and natural worlds, deeply embedded in the *lontar* manuscripts, which preserve wisdom. The *Aji Saraswati* concept in the *lontar* highlights the study of divine revelation through *aksara* (sacred alphabets). The shapes of *aksara* are closely linked to natural elements, holding secrets to understanding the universe. *Aksara* not only serves as a key to spiritual knowledge but also connects to natural sounds and the artistry of the

dalang. Balinese painters, like Nyoman Gunarsa, have reflected the power of *aksara* in their work. Gunarsa once physically touched images of lotus flowers that he painted, relating the shapes to *aksara*, saying, “that is me.” The tension between opposites, like the floating lotus leaves, is an embodiment of the concept *Ruabineda* essential compent of Balinese cosmography, that is rooted in the mud yet reaching toward the light, embodies the powerful, transformative force of *aksara*. Reciting *aksara* imbues sacred power into water, symbolizing a bath of knowledge, as seen in the celebration of Saraswati Day. Even the *lontar* itself is considered a source of mystical energy.

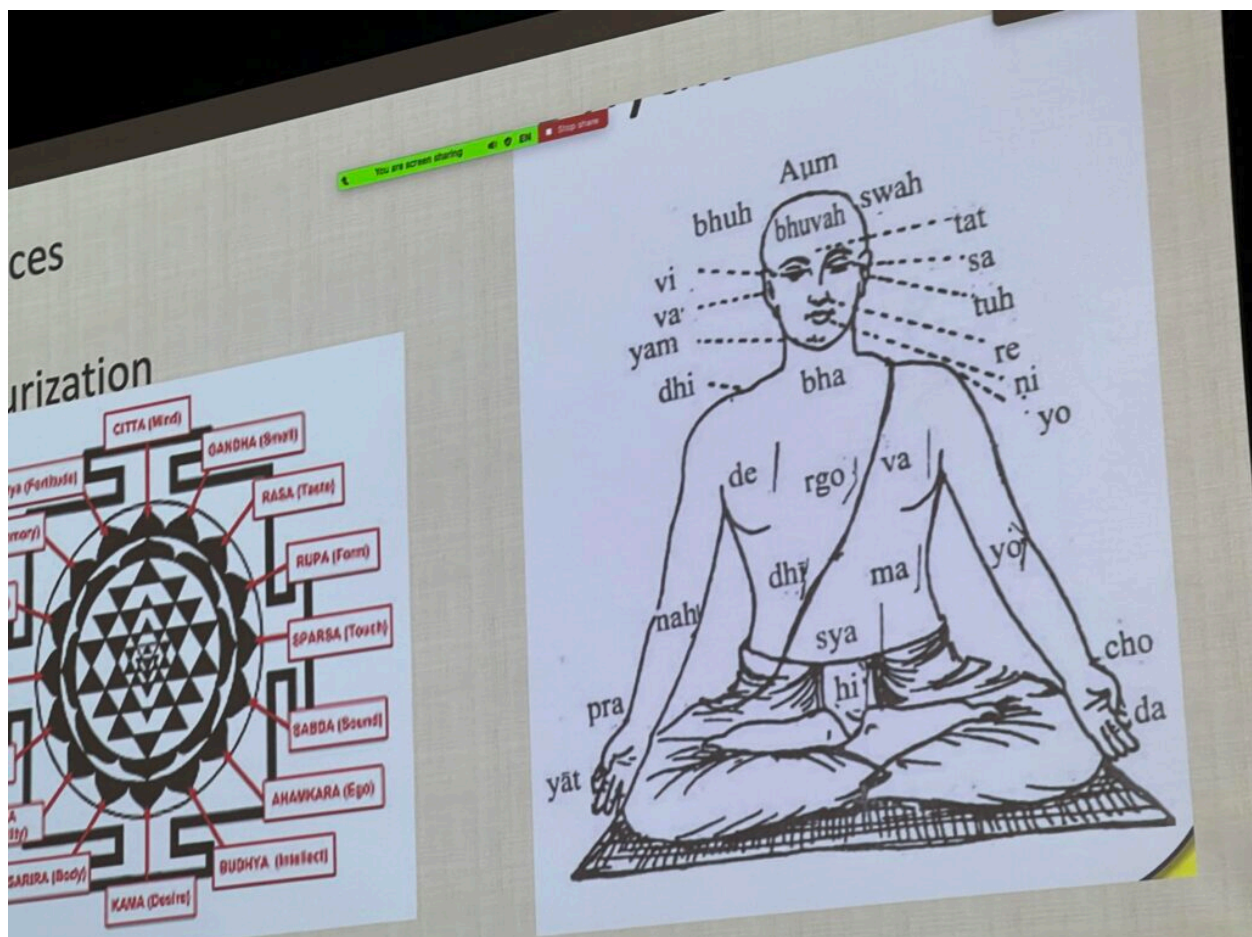


Figure 3. Ron Jenkins' presentation slide for “Sacred Alphabets: Aksara as Sources of Wisdom in Balinese Performance.” November 9, 2024. (Photo: Rahul Koonathara)

The responsibility to transfer wisdom is a key theme in Balinese performance. For example, Ketut Kodi views his role as a *dalang* as a means to pass the wisdom of

Saraswati through the mask to the audience. *Aksara* is believed to sustain life. The act of cutting trees can be countered by reciting *aksara* to bring the trees back to life. Bodies, through their connection to *aksara*, act as bridges for spiritual power. The art of orality, often marginalized in contemporary contexts, is essential in Balinese culture.

Professor Sumarsam contributed to the conversation the example of how the *pustaka* (sacred texts) transform into *pusaka* (sacred heirlooms). Many *dalang*, despite being semi-literate, still refer to written texts, demonstrating the coexistence of oral and written traditions. Gunarsa, whose grandfather was a *dalang*, incorporated *aksara* into his paintings and performances, including a *wayang* story that explored the theme of identity forgery. Ultimately, *aksara* represents the sacred link between language, nature, and the divine, playing a central role in the transmission of wisdom, life, and power in Balinese culture. Each *aksara* syllable carries distinct sounds and metaphysical meanings. For instance, the *Modre Aksara* resonates with the voice of fire in a strong wind, while the syllable “ANG-AH” signifies life and “AH-ANG” symbolizes death.

Daniel Haryono, in his paper “Nadran: Acculturation in Biocultural Diversity,” explored how the Nadran tradition integrates elements of Hinduism and Islam. Drawing from the seven universals of culture (as outlined by American anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn and adapted by Koentjaraningrat)—knowledge, technology, livelihood, art, language, organization, and religion—this synthesis demonstrates cultural flexibility. While some aspects, like knowledge, adapt easily, others, like religion, require more nuanced adjustments. An example of such acculturation is the Chinese-Javanese hybrid *wayang* form known as *wayang thithi*, where cultural practices evolve without coercion. In Islamic Java, traditional offerings to the gods have transformed into acts of charity, and the invocation of Sanghyang has shifted to Allah, reflecting the influence of Islam. Similarly, in Bali’s *ngaben* (cremation rituals), the symbolic burning of bull or buffalo sculptures serves a spiritual purpose, harmoniously merging older Hindu traditions with newer interpretations.

Nadran, a coastal ritual known as *sedekah laut* (oceanic charity), exemplifies this cultural synthesis. Participants pray to Allah and honor nature, continuing the tradition of offering gratitude to the sea. While some conservative Islamic groups criticize it as *musrik* (denial of Allah), this misunderstanding overlooks the ritual's deeper significance. *Nadran* celebrates Javanese respect for the environment and fosters inclusivity. What makes *Nadran* especially unique is its egalitarian nature—people of different religions and genders can come together to participate and pray. It demonstrates how cultural traditions adapt and merge over time, balancing religious values with local customs, and preserving a harmonious relationship with nature.

Ben Hagari discussed his film, *Trees of Life and Life of a Tree*, and his own connections to puppetry. He grew up immersed in the world of theatre. His mother introduced him to the secrets of backstage, including makeup and costumes. His exploration of shadows began with *À Nous La Liberté* (2012), a video installation projected onto a cube representing a prison cell turned inside out. Each wall featured a stop-motion sequence, while the inside of the cube displayed a projection of a hand shadow artist who was over 90 years old at the time of the recording. Hagari discovered the Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection of Indonesian Puppets at the Yale University Art Gallery while teaching an animation class. He was inspired to “bring dead puppets back to life,” which he saw as an act of animation. He became fascinated by the dual existence of puppets—as both objects and shadows. One of his inspirations was the fable of being pursued by shadows, exemplified by Hanoeh Levin’s play *Walkers in the Dark*. In studying *wayang*, Hagari learned how to film this traditional Indonesian shadow puppet art.



Figure 4. Ben Hagari's presentation on *Trees of Life and Life of a Tree*. November 9, 2024. (Photo: Rahul Koonathara)

Hagari mentioned that in *wayang* performances, the *dalang* (puppeteer) flipping the puppet creates an afterimage effect, reminiscent of a thaumatrope, a device demonstrating persistence of vision, where images appear superimposed. Hagari's work also involved documenting performances by twelve different *dalang* over the course of a summer. In his video of *Barikan*, he captured a daytime *wayang* performance set under a tree. Through this process, Hagari realized that while *wayang* has been extensively documented, live performances remain irreplaceable. However, filming the puppets up close with a camera can offer a different, intimate experience. He expressed interest in exploring further the interplay between the front and back sides of the performance in future projects.

In a question-and-answer session, Hagari reflected on his early interest in the dynamic between puppet and puppeteer. His initial work was first shown at a kibbutz in southern Israel, near the Gaza border. Tragically, the gallery was burned on October 7, and the kibbutzniks were massacred. Hagari is still digesting the vivid colors of *wayang* in contrast to the stark black and white of his earlier work. In Bali, water plays a key role in rituals and performances, symbolizing joy and unity. Communal water fights, for example, are integral to creating a sense of *communitas*, a shared experience of togetherness.



Figure 5. Matthew Cohen's performance scene from *Sea Offerings*. November 9, 2024. (Photo: Rahul Koonathara)

The day concluded with *Sea Offerings*, a solo performance created and performed by Matthew Cohen with video by Ben Hagari. It combined mythic storytelling, magic, and

dialogue with and about puppets with autobiographical commentary, ecological reflections, and documentary footage from coastal Java of miniature ships, a severed buffalo head made up as a woman, and the seascape. In this documentary performance, Cohen revisits a ritual drama that was central to their early puppetry training. The piece tells the tale of the misbegotten romance between a rice goddess and the diseased Budug Basu, brought to life through the unique medium of shadow-less shadow puppets. Traditionally sponsored by fishing communities, this performance is rooted in rituals meant to ensure abundant fishing, blending cultural significance with artistic expression. The interpretation aims to fill epistemological gaps, intercultural misunderstandings, dilemmas in cultural translation, and shared concerns about ecology, art, and spiritual values in the current moment of climate change, modernization, and globalization. This performance, offered in the symposium, included visual scenes of animal sacrifice, shot in summer of 2024, that could be upsetting to some audiences. But the portrayal of actual scenes from the myth gave audiences the opportunity to understand how the practice is continuing in this century.

Conclusion

The symposium underscored Indonesian *wayang*'s resilience and adaptability in the face of modernization. It highlighted the role of sacred puppetry in fostering ecological awareness, spiritual introspection, and cultural continuity. Discussions revealed how modern technology, from lighting to sound effects, enhances the spectacle while preserving its spiritual essence. As Foley noted, loud sounds and vibrant visuals are seamlessly integrated into *wayang*, reflecting Javanese acceptance of innovation without losing cultural identity. Whether through the tragic yet celebratory music of the *golek gambyongan*, the ecological critique in *Wayang Aswamedha*, or the profound spiritual symbolism of the *kayon*, *wayang* continues to inspire dialogue about humanity's place in the cosmos. The symposium invited participants to contemplate their relationship with the natural world, their spiritual selves, and the transformative potential of tradition in a rapidly changing world.



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Rahul Koonathara

University of Connecticut