

**Wayang and Puppetry Now:** UNIMA Councillor Meeting Seminar. Institut Seni Indonesia (Indonesian Institute of the Arts), Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia, 28 April 2023.

*This is a report on the seminar held on 28th April 2023 at the Institut Seni Indonesia (Indonesian Institute of the Arts), Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia, 28 April 2023. It was part of the UNIMA 2023 Council Meeting. The report highlights the place of spirit and of ritual practice in Asian puppetry, as a way to understand and to function in the world.*

**Cariad Astles** is a puppetry scholar, practitioner, teacher, trainer and director. She is puppetry tutor at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and Exeter University in the UK. She is Vice-President of UNIMA and President of its Research Commission. She runs regular international training workshops in puppetry performance, directing, dramaturgy, research and applied puppetry. She has directed shows for the Northcott Theatre, Med Theatre, PuppetSoup and Puppetcraft amongst others.

---

This contribution is written primarily as a report on a meeting/seminar held in Bali during the UNIMA Council Meeting in April 2023. The event took place at the tertiary arts training college, Institut Seni Indonesia, in Denpasar, under the auspices of Professor I Nyoman Sedana and Pak (Mr.) Dimas Samodra Rum, who was the convenor. There were four speakers, all professors of importance within the world of puppetry scholarship: Keynote speaker Professor I Nyoman Sedana from the Institut Seni Indonesia-Denpasar and three from the USA: Professor Matthew Cohen from the University of Connecticut-Storrs; Research Professor Kathy Foley from the University of California-Santa Cruz; and Professor Claudia Orenstein from Hunter College, City University of New York. I served as respondent.

Having said that the emphasis is on a report, the quality and content of the papers presented at this event leads me to do a number of things beyond merely repeating who spoke when and how. Instead, I would like to highlight themes that emerged and the significance of these within

the world of puppetry in the contemporary era.

Asian puppetry has deep ritual and historical connections to spirit, ancestry, and power. In part this is due to its heritage as a means to communicate spiritual messages to communities, in visual and performative form. All puppetry in some sense is derived from this desire to imagine gods, spirits, monsters, and beings beyond the immediately tangible within the material world. Additionally, it has been used across all known continents to enable didactic and embodied spiritual practice through the sharing of collective myths, belief systems, and community ideologies. This can be seen in multiple historical documents and studies.

Western puppetry, however, despite sharing these historical roots, has attempted to divide itself from religious practice for several centuries. Whilst there are many religious and/or spiritual puppeteers and puppetry groups across Western countries, the dominance of Cartesian duality over the last 350-or-so-years has meant that arts practices have often separated themselves from religious or spiritual connotations. Puppetry in the West established itself as a modern art form and the puppetry training schools and academies in Europe and the Americas, which were established during the twentieth century, developed programs wherein puppetry was pursued as a secular art form, dominated by technique and innovation rather than by devotion or worship.

But, just as nature reclaims its own when not destroyed by humanity and as the frameworks for understanding puppetry ever-expands, the concept of “spirit” has in recent years returned to puppetry identity and scholarship in a significant way.



Figure 1. Wayang and Puppetry Now panelists. From left to right: James Darmawan, Cariad Astles, Kathy Foley, I Nyoman Sedana, Matthew Cohen, and Claudia Orenstein. (Photo: Putu Gede Suyoga)

All four speakers were discussing Asian, rather than Western, puppetry. Professors Cohen, Foley, and Sedana talked about Indonesian puppetry, and Professor Orenstein discussed Japanese practice. Asian puppetry has never divorced itself from its spiritual roots in the same way as Western practice, yet the presentations delivered a sense that spirit has re-emerged as a key theme within puppetry across the globe. The potential for the spiritual roots of puppetry to contribute towards understanding and care for the human condition was something that lay within each presentation. This is tremendously inspiring for our future work as practitioners and scholars. It is significant that two volumes of essays discussing puppetry and spirit, under the editorship of Professor Orenstein and Tim Cusack (2023 and forthcoming), are now in publication. The interest in spirit, and related themes, is high. Perhaps this is connected to the sense that many people are experiencing in the contemporary world: that of the final days of the crumbling of Western empires. Asian creativity is recognized in popular consciousness and its consequent cosmologies and worldviews. The knowledge that our world is entering a new paradigm suggests that humanity is conscious once more of our connection to worlds beyond the material, and of the importance of this awareness for our survival. This recognition of spirit

works hand in hand with ecological and social practices and ideologies as we reformulate the contemporary world.

I would therefore like to highlight in all the presentations the importance of the following:

inherited wisdom: the sense of connection with ancestral performance;  
 the connection of past, present, and future in understandings of time;  
 puppetry as medicine for our ailing world;  
 puppetry as social responsibility, and as a means to examine behaviour;  
 respect, compassion, truth, homage and duty;  
 the playful concepts of exuberance, incantation, and song in the pursuit of peace.

Professor Sedana's presentation on "*Wayang Sutasoma*, Bali's New Puppetry Infused with Insights on Transforming Global Conflicts into Harmony and Peace" offered us a cosmological view of *wayang* in Indonesia as a practice which requires discipline and honesty in its dealings, both training and practice being valuable to society and the whole world. It was enormously inspiring to hear how the art form that we love can be used to promote peace. Professor Sedana reminded us that in puppetry practice students are trained to internalize the wisdom that they learn through the philosophical, cultural, and spiritual roots of *wayang*. He used the example of a new adaptation of *Sutasoma*, the tale of a Buddhist Bodhisatva-king willing to sacrifice his life for others. The production, based on the *kakawin* (verse narrative) by the fourteenth-century poet Empu Tantular, was a performance that UNIMA Councillors saw outdoors in a Denpasar park during the UNIMA Festival.

Professor Cohen's "*Ramayana* and Animism in *Wayang* Puppet Theatre" reminded the audience of the relationship between ecology and puppetry. Cohen cited Peter Wohlleben's book *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015) as both inspiration for practical work but also as a metaphor for the understanding of animism as a practice in puppetry. Animism is not, he noted, an epistemological failure, but an understanding of the reciprocity between people and the world. Through the archetypes performed in *wayang*, people recognize that they can endlessly transform and have agency within the world. While puppetry already decenters the human from

his (*sic*) hegemonic dominant position, the possibility within puppetry performance for optimism, for understanding our connection to the natural world, and for the emerging and fascinating world of cross-species exploration is vast. Cohen used the example of his shadow puppet production *Ramayana: A Tale of Trees and Wood*. This was a 2023 collaboration with Rahul Koonathara presented by University of Connecticut Puppet Arts students. Cohen and Koonathara hybridized Javanese *wayang kulit* and Kerala, India's *tholpavakoothu* for the offering. (To see more, see Council on Southeast Asia Studies 2023 at <https://cseas.yale.edu/ramayana>).

Professor Foley's "Wayang and Missionizing: Religion and Puppetry Indonesia, Hindu, Islam, Christian, and Buddhist" further developed the theme of Indonesian puppetry as a model for behavior within the world; and how creating and performing puppetry enables us to explore situations within the world in a playful and honoring environment mode. Archetypes offer us great potential to go into the depths of cosmological struggle and wrangle with very real questions and sufferings in order to re-emerge more powerful and wise. Puppetry in this understanding is clearly a healing form.

Professor Orenstein's "Diversity of Japanese Traditional Puppetry" focused on her recent research into Japanese forms beyond *bunraku* and offered insights into several little-known genres of puppetry in Japan. Through their performances, the forms combine play with philosophy, and demonstrate great depth of knowledge through the process of memory, ritual, and celebration. Like the previous three speakers, Orenstein highlighted the importance of puppets as sacred vessels for deities, demons, and hybrid beings and the puppets' play in this world is a means to reinforce, challenge, or question values and ideologies. Professor Orenstein gave detailed reference to some of the movements of the forms, including "stomping, twisting, vigorous movement, dancing on the earth."

I, as respondent noted the common themes. We are reminded through all of these wonderfully optimistic presentations that puppetry is a means to "stomp on the earth" in order to awaken the spirits of positive change, transformation, and energetic presence—both within us, the

puppeteers, and in the societies around us. We are further reminded that our parameters of puppetry, consciousness, and society are shifting dramatically, and we need to be open to the voices and influences of our spiritual and societal ancestors in the pursuit of peace and truth. Puppetry is a powerful means to enable play which, more than ever, is needed in the world.

*Cariad Astles*

Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and Exeter University

---

## References

Council on Southeast Asia Studies [Yale University]. 2023. *"Ramayana: A Tale of Tree and Wood."* 20 April. <https://cseas.yale.edu/ramayana>, accessed 13 Sept. 2023.

Orenstein, Claudia, and Tim Cusack, eds. 2023. *Puppet and Spirit: Ritual, Religion, and Performing Objects. Volume 1: Sacred Roots: Material Entities, Consecrating Acts, Priestly Puppeteers.* London, New York: Routledge.

\_\_\_\_\_. Eds. Forthcoming. *Puppet and Spirit: Ritual, Religion, and Performing Objects. Volume 2: Contemporary Contexts.* London, New York: Routledge.

Wohlleben, Peter. 2015. *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World.* Vancouver; Berkeley: Greystone Books.