Changing Wayang Scenes
Heritage formation and wayang performance practice
in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia

Summary

Cultural heritage is often associated with something from the past, but calling something from the past 'heritage' is a way of dealing with the past in the present. Following Smith (2006) I regard cultural heritage as a process in which the meaning and value of the past in the present is created and re-created, authorized and re-authorized. Such negotiations often deal with issues of political, national, religious, and ethnic identity issues, linked to local, national and world value systems for culture. These values and meanings of culture are not static, but change over time. The addition of the concept of intangible cultural heritage to the heritage vocabulary is proof of this change.

Intangible cultural heritage was meant to balance the dominant focus of UNESCO's concept of the World Heritage Convention, designed in 1972, on tangible remains from the West, such as monuments and buildings. It aimed at making the heritage concept less Eurocentric and more representative of its member states. To this end, in 2001 UNESCO started a project to proclaim 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' every other year. The objective of the project was to encourage the identification, preservation, and promotion of cultural expressions, such as language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture, and other arts, as well as traditional forms of communication and information. The Masterpiece project was a listing system similar to the World Heritage List, and was to be the driving force behind the drafting of a new convention for intangible cultural heritage. In 2001 the first nineteen Masterpieces were proclaimed by UNESCO. Two years later UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

If cultural heritage is regarded as a process, this raises the question how this process evolves. This thesis gives insight into the dynamics of heritage formation with a focus on the wayang performance practice in Indonesia. The word wayang refers to many kinds of traditional theatre in Java, Bali, Lombok, and some other parts of Indonesia and
other countries of Southeast Asia. In Indonesia the two most widespread forms are wayang kulit, played with flat shadow puppets carved out of leather, and wayang golek, played with three-dimensional wooden rod puppets. I investigate how wayang was constructed as intangible cultural heritage, and how UNESCO’s concept of intangible cultural heritage influences heritage practice. Wayang has been incorporated in a western body of scientific colonial knowledge and has come to refer to an ‘authentic’ indigenous past. It has become a symbol of Java or Bali or Indonesia or even the East Indies. However, wayang discourse, that what is said or written about wayang, often seems far removed from its performance practice. Standard ideas of wayang are still repeated in popular literature, in textbooks that mention wayang, in (anthropological) museums that display wayang puppets, and even in some very recent publications on wayang, both Indonesian and Western (Bondan 1984 and Katz-Harris 2010). It can also be found in the Candidature File that Indonesia submitted in 2002 to UNESCO to have wayang proclaimed a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Wayang’s diversity seems contradictory and causes puzzlement and wonder. Performances are rooted in the past and in local traditions, the audience hardly understands the language that is used (Kawi, the dead Old Javanese language). At the same time the show is adapted to the modern world. Wayang attracts many people from all walks of life, sponsors, audiences, scholars, museum curators, politicians, but also pickpockets and street vendors. It is popular on radio and television, in comic books, and is commercially produced on cassettes, VCDs, and DVDs. Like the great variety of forms of puppet theatre, every wayang performance is different to the next, and there are as many different performance styles as there are puppeteers or dalang.

The numerous wayang performances I watched between 2009 and 2011 by various dalang all had their own character and were always overwhelming in their loudness, scale, sounds, smells, sights, tastes, colors, and audience numbers. Often the performance was a dazzling spectacle revolving around a large stage on which an enormous screen was set up with a large gamelan orchestra. Invited guests were seated on chairs, and a large audience of uninvited, sometimes hundreds or even thousands, of spectators all enjoyed watching and listening, strolling around, sitting or laying down, while talking, drinking, eating, smoking, or even napping. The performances are extremely lively and entertaining. People
are fascinated with the performers, the musicians, the beautifully dressed female singers (pesinden), but above all with the dalang. The first question people ask about a wayang show is: ‘Who is the dalang?’ The dalang is appealing both as an individual and as an artist. People admire his skills, his stamina, and his charisma. They are curious about the gossip that surrounds him and the singers, as well as about the scholar who is following the dalang.

Experiencing and watching wayang makes one wonder how the static and standard image of wayang has survived, and how discourse and practice can seem so far removed from each other. It also raises the question how discourse and practice interact and influence each other. This thesis addresses these questions and tries to bridge that which is being said about wayang in discourse with contemporary wayang performance practice. The thesis is based on discourse analysis of historical sources and extensive fieldwork in Indonesia. In the first part of this thesis I analyze chronologically the discursive construction of wayang discourse. I examine the creation and authorization of meanings of wayang from colonial times in the Netherlands and Indonesia that culminate in current international heritage discourse. In the first chapter I analyze colonial writings from about 1800 until Indonesia’s independence in 1945. These writings discursively produced standards for wayang performances and were consequently institutionalized in various ways, such as in the museum display of the Tropenmuseum, formerly the Colonial Institute in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and in the Javanese courts in Surakarta and Yogyakarta.

Dutch wayang scholars started wayang discourse with the documentation of wayang stories in the eighteenth century in dialectical relation with the Javanese elite and wayang performance practice, which is discussed in the first chapter. Loosely following M. Bloembergen’s periodization in Colonial Spectacles. The Netherlands and the Netherlands-Indies at the world exhibitions, 1880-1931 (2006), I distinguish three periods for wayang discourse: the years in which Dutch scholars attempted to discover Javanese culture from the early 1800s until 1870, the years between 1870 and 1920 in which Dutch scholars started to revalue Javanese culture as a result of the discovery of Indo-Javanese roots of contemporary culture, and the final period in which a preservationist attitude towards Javanese culture prevailed from the 1920s until 1945 (Bloembergen 2006, 32). Each of these periods shows shifts in making meaning of wayang, which resulted in the production
of different discourses by newly emerging agents. By the end of the 1930s a discourse of wayang had developed that became the standard or traditional idea of wayang. It emphasized philosophical and mystical elements in wayang and focused on its deeper meaning as a mirror of life. The writing down of wayang stories created tangibility in textual documents, which had a fixing tendency on the development of wayang discourse. In other words, the documentation of wayang in texts was limited in scope and became the accepted understanding of the performance practice, and gradually took on some kind of reality. This particular discourse was reaffirmed in exhibition practices that focused on the tangible side of wayang, the puppets, and as such displayed a rigid image of wayang. This static and unchanging image was reinforced by the fact that the display in the Tropenmuseum in the Netherlands for example, remained unchanged from the late 1920s until the 1950s.

In the second chapter I discussed how wayang discourse further evolved revealing continuities and change of the colonial discourse that developed after Indonesia’s independence. The Dutch lost their colony and their pre-eminent position in wayang studies to the Americans and Indonesians. However, the discourse as developed in colonial times proved to be foundational for wayang discourse until the 1970s. although it gained new elements under both President Sukarno (1945-1966) and President Suharto (1967-1998) it was also re-authorized and reiterated by them. Under Sukarno much experimentation with wayang took place to turn it into national culture and use it as a mouthpiece for political messages. Suharto focused on the dalang as a guru or teacher in society, who was also responsible for developing the Indonesian people and society. Attempts were made to control the dalang and his performance practice through the institutionalization of the dalang’s education on a national level at the Indonesian Institutes for the Arts (Institut Seni Indonesia, ISI), and through the foundation of the national wayang organizations Sena Wangi and Pepadi. These institutes and organizations acted as authorizing forces for wayang discourse and practice.

The development of wayang discourse was not merely a politicized process, but notably also changed under influence of innovations in technology and the emergence of mass media (Weintraub 2004). The mass media developed into a powerful authorizing force from the 1970s onwards to the present through the production and selling of
cassettes, VCD’s and DVD’s of wayang performances. These recordings created new forms of tangibility, which had the same result as the documentation of wayang stories by the early Dutch scholars: it had a standardizing and fixing effect on wayang discourse. As such, the wayang performance practice was influenced by the way wayang was documented in texts and forms of mass media. As a result of the development of mass media as an authoritative force for wayang, the superstar system for dalang emerged. This system made it possible for only a handful of dalang to capitalize on exposure in the mass media and gain fame and status at an unprecedented level as they were able to become meaningful to a broad audience through mass media. The superstar system reinforced the standardization and fixation of the discourse and performance practice, decreased the variety of performance styles, but stimulated innovation.

The third chapter deals with wayang as incorporated in national and international heritage discourse and shows the entanglement of colonial and postcolonial powerstructures, legacies of the colonial past and contemporary heritage formation. The exhibition policy and practice of the Wayang Museum in Jakarta relates to both local practices and international heritage discourse. It continues to display a largely national understanding of wayang in exhibiting tangible elements of wayang as a national culture that is made up of all local varieties of wayang. International heritage discourse too anchors wayang in a national context. Wayang discourse in Indonesia’s Candidature File for wayang can be regarded as yet another authorization of colonial and postcolonial discourses with an emphasis on the safeguarding and conservation of the supposedly endangered wayang performance practice. In the Candidature File Sena Wangi and Pepadi claim that wayang should be preserved because it is on the verge of dying out. However, despite this rhetoric of safeguarding heritage wayang’s proclamation as a UNESCO Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003 is utilized for national identity building purposes. In the Candidature File, Javanese culture is affirmed as national culture and vice versa national culture is argued to be Javanese culture. This notion of Indonesian culture directly relates to the postcolonial discourses of Sukarno and Suharto who were of opinion that being Javanese was the best way of being Indonesian. It is also related to the discourse of Javanese cultural nationalism in the early twentieth century. The nationalist discourse about wayang seeks backing through international acclaim of Javanese culture. As a
consequence, wayang as heritage does not result in making wayang part of global heritage, but rather secures it in national political discourse that roots in colonial power relations.

In the second part of this thesis I confront these authorized wayang discourses with the contemporary wayang performance practice of three famous dalang. The last three chapters study the dialectical relation between the authorized discourse and wayang performance practice through an examination of the performance practices of three particular dalang: Ki [The Honorable] Purbo Asmoro, Ki Manteb Soedharsono and Ki Enthus Susmono. The last chapters deal with their performance practices, the distinctive social worlds in which they operate and the power relations with which they deal in shaping wayang and creating meaning of wayang. I show that discourse and practice are dynamically and dialectically shaped and developed. By this I mean that discourse and practice draw equally on and influence each other, refer to each other, authorize and re-authorize each other. Each dalang relates to authorized discourses of the state and international heritage discourse, but as each of the dalang discussed is situated in different socio-cultural contexts they each develop different strategies to cope with wayang discourse. The performance practices of the dalang provide a counterweight to authorized discourse, and show the reach and limitations of these accepted discourses.

Chapter four discussed the performance practice of Purbo Asmoro, who has university education and has been teaching at ISI Surakarta for twenty years. His approach to wayang appeals to many who assign importance to the philosophical and mystical elements in wayang, which go back to colonial and postcolonial discourse. Purbo did not develop his performance practice with an audience in mind, but claims to have always known that there would be an audience for him. International heritage discourse provides him with a frame to reach international audiences, which results in his growing popularity at home. Before Purbo, dalang who had graduated from the art academies had difficulties becoming successful in the popular domain. By applying standards institutionalized at ISI Purbo reaffirms them - all the more so as some of his students attend ISI to learn from him the ‘right’ approach to wayang. His rise to stardom is influenced by his academic network, namely at Universitas Gajah Mada, and his international relations like his acting manager. His international and academic success is reflected in his status as a popular performer at
home, and consequently, authorized standards enter the popular domain. His rising fame shows that academic and heritage discourse win ground in popular performance practice.

In chapter five Manteb Soedharsono is the central dalang, one who is recognized in both authorized and popular discourse. Manteb’s performance practice developed during Suharto’s New Order under the influence of authorized discourses and mass media, which turned him into a dalang superstar. Reciprocally, his performance practice influenced authorized discourses of wayang as heritage. Manteb is a master in balancing academically authorized innovations and popular audience expectations and appreciation. He is the star in Oskadon’s commercials for pain killers that are broadcasted on dozens of radio and television stations across Indonesia. Manteb became the personification of the wayang standard not so much by applying the institutionalized wayang, but rather because of his commercial success and the exposure to a mass audience through both his success as a dalang and through Oskadon. Manteb has become the standard for both popular and authorized wayang discourse and performance practice. This was illustrated and confirmed when Sena Wangi selected Manteb to represent the Indonesian dalang community in Paris at the ceremony of the Masterpiece proclamation in 2004.

The last chapter discusses Enthus Susmono’s performance practice, who is widely regarded as a radical innovator and known as both the Crazy Dalang (Dalang Edan) and Demolisher (Perusak) of wayang. His performance practice shows that there are always ways for the wayang performance to escape authorized discourse. Enthus claims always to be in search for new audiences. He applies a multi-layered marketing strategy to reach different generations and social classes. He advances his innovations to engage new audiences and stretches them to the limit, changing the esthetics of his puppets, composing new musical arrangements, and creating entire new genres, such as Wayang Rai Wongl (2002), wayang with realistic human faces. Critics who endorse standard understandings of wayang claim Enthus crosses the boundaries of wayang performance practice. The immediate success of his new creation Wayang Santri (2010) demonstrates that different audiences have a different understanding of what is and what is not allowed in wayang performances. Wayang’s boundaries are thus fluid and ever changing. Enthus’s spectators appreciate his shows for their comprehensibility, his openness, creativity, and vulgar humor, which make sexual jokes compatible with Islamic chants. Enthus’s innovations in both
content and form, and the audience’s appreciation of them show that the complex dialectic relation between *wayang* heritage discourse and performance practice is decided by audience appreciation. Although Enthus seeks international acclaim through his exhibition and performances in the Netherlands, France and Korea, he does not relate directly to the international heritage frame. While Manteb and Purbo refer to UNESCO’s heritage discourse, Enthus largely ignores this discourse.

Heritage discourse indirectly affects performance practice, as we have seen in the cases of Purbo and Manteb, who both popularize authorized discourse. At the same time, *dalang* actively interact and negotiate with these authorized discourses, which became clear from Enthus’s case. This interaction leads to the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that while the variety in performance practice styles has decreased under influence of authorized discourses, innovations in continue to be made. Stronger even, they are the most important element of the performance practice and are therefore stretched to the limit. The fieldwork chapters bring to the fore the connection between the personal approach of the individual *dalang*, and authorized norms and standards in local-specific socio-political settings. Instant personal needs of the *dalang*, such as status, money, but also politics and spirituality, sometimes clash with norms established in discourse authorized by political authorities. While authorized discourse of *wayang* functions as a controlling force that establishes guidelines and rules for performance practice, it provides individual *dalang* with a tool to adapt and bend these rules and guidelines to their own individual interests. They find their own way in the *wayang* arena, balancing the forces they have to handle. Seen from this perspective, politics and authorized discourse appear to be only of limited influence on their performance practice. Heritage discourse, to which the concept of intangible heritage is a recent addition, is just one element with which *dalang* have to deal. They utilize it when needed or when it offers them something, but and otherwise it is ignored.