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Collaborative Efforts to Preserve *Wayang Beber* in Indonesia

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Introduction: beaten-bark culture in Indonesia

Indonesia, with its vast geographic and ethnographic diversity, has various material outputs. One of them is the beaten-bark material, which is mostly inherited from the past. Yet, how distant is this 'past'? When examining a wider region, like Asia-Pacific for instance, the Pacific tapa culture has an undeniable relationship with the Austronesian expansion and the history of Indonesia. It can be examined through its distinct material remains and the active culture that is still using and even producing beaten-bark material. At least three identified cultural groups are still using beaten-bark materials for various purposes ranging from household goods and performance to sacred ritual.

In Sulawesi, the term *fuya* refers to beaten-bark materials. The people in Central Sulawesi are not only actively using, but also eagerly producing *fuya*. Sakamoto (2016) considers this practice of employing traditional techniques to create *fuya* using a stone beater, as a "living fossil". There are many products made from *fuya* including regular and ceremonial barkcloth, and also a sacred calendar. Further, Djorimi (2016) has surveyed several areas in Central Sulawesi and found that they are still traditionally producing handmade *fuya*, while in other areas the production practice has ceased to exist. Looking back through the documented history, the manufacture of *fuya* was officially recorded during colonial times by two Dutch missionaries, N. Andriani and A. C. Kruijt, and was published in 1912 (Kennedy 1934). In 2008, an expedition by *Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia* (LIPI) the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, in collaboration with the Kyoto Beaten Paper Research Institute, Japan and the Center for Prehistoric and Austronesian Studies (CPAS), explored the continuity of the production of beaten-bark materials throughout Central Sulawesi to South Sulawesi to enrich its relationship with Austronesian culture (Simanjuntak et al. 2008). These studies show that beaten-bark culture in Sulawesi is one of the key areas in understanding the relationship of beaten-bark cultures throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Further south, in Bali, the native Hindu Balinese are still using a white beaten-bark material as a sacred object in their religious ceremony. This is called *ulantaga*, a script-bearing ritual instrument (Fox and Hornbacher 2016). Then, in Java, two groups are still using beaten-bark materials as their main object for visual performance known as *wayang beber*. These objects, like any other beaten-bark material, are deteriorating gradually over time. This paper explores the efforts that have been made by various Indonesian *wayang beber* stakeholders to preserve the *wayang beber*, ranging from conservators, material researchers, artists/manufacturers, and the government.

What is *wayang beber*?

This is an essential question to be discussed in the beginning. First, it is important to know that there are many forms of *wayang*. The word *wayang* itself is derived from the word *wewayangan* or *wayangan*, which means *bayangan* or shadow (Suharyono 2005). There are many forms of *wayang*, such as *wayang kulit* (leather), *wayang golek* (three dimensional wood), *wayang klithik* (flattened wood), *wayang suluh* (popular characters such as teachers,

farmers), *wayang purwa* (leather), *wayang krucil* (smaller sized *wayang* typically from Blora, Central Java), *wayang warta* (leather), *wayang wahyu* (stories from Catholic biblical stories) and many more. These forms are distinguished by many factors, such as materials, shape, and the performance culture to which they are attached. Suharyono (2005) defined *wayang beber* as a type of *wayang* performance based on pictures. These pictures are painted on a paper or fabric sheet, then others are made, following the sequence of the narrative. The word *beber* means “unrolled”, referring to how the performance is created by unrolling and rolling the *wayang*, while the puppet master or *dhalang* sits behind the *wayang beber* reciting stories by looking at its shadow. This is accompanied by background music from the *gamelan* (Lis 2014; Suharyono 2005). Therefore, the term *wayang beber* refers to the painted scroll performance.

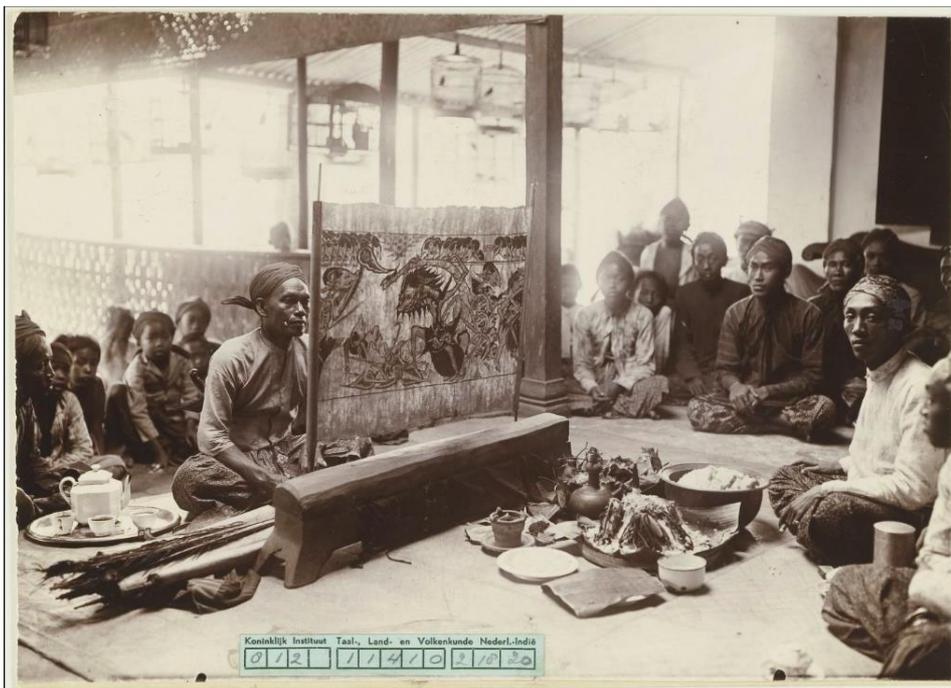


Figure 1. Earliest photographic documentation of the *wayang beber* from Gelaran village performed in the house of Wahidin Soedirohoesoedo. Reproduced from Cephias c.1902.

It should be noted that only the *wayang kulit*, *golek*, and *klithik* were included as UNESCO Intangible World Heritage in 2008 under the term ‘Wayang Puppet Theatre’ (UNESCO 2008). It does not include the other forms of *wayang*, including *wayang beber*. As a result, there is an imbalance regarding its preservation and development priority. Many Indonesian experts have developed skills to conserve leather-based materials because it is essential for conserving *wayang kulit*. In contrast, there is no significant improvement in the effort to preserve both the materiality and the culture attached to *wayang beber*. Lis (2014) described *wayang beber* as a dying art; the traditional performances are scarcely practised, performed only a few times a year.

At the moment, it is known that there are two active groups of *wayang beber* scrolls. The term ‘active group’ is used here to indicate that the *wayang beber* is still a dynamic performance object being used by the community. The first *wayang beber* is located in Gelaran, Wonosari,

Gunung Kidul and was firstly visually documented by Kassian Cephas in 1902 (Figure 1). Another group, which has been studied more, is owned by Mantep Ki Mardi Guno Utomo, nicknamed Pak Mardi, the 13th generation of the *dhalang* family from Karangtalun, Donorojo, Pacitan. Pak Mardi owns six scrolls; in general, they are 0.07mm thick and 4m long. They have a lattice pattern: most likely, when examined under transmitted light, a beater mark with 1mm intervals (Figure 2).



Figure 2. a) Measuring the thickness of *wayang beber*. b) Examining *wayang beber* using transmitted light. c) 1mm lattice beater mark pattern under transmitted light. © Sakamoto 2006.

According to a 2006 documentary, there is no written source for the story - it is passed down verbally from one generation to another. Pak Mardi's *wayang beber* story is about Panji Asmoro Bangun and Dewi Sekartaji; there are 23 scenes and it is performed for approximately 1.5 hours (Figure 3; Ibrahim and Tari 2006).



Figure 3. Pak Mardi performing *wayang beber*. © Sakamoto 2006.

Wayang beber materials and date

As mentioned before, the *wayang beber* medium is a paper or fabric sheet. It is identified that the *wayang beber*, both in Wonosari and Pacitan were painted on paper or, particularly, on beaten barkcloth (Tejjeler 2016). In Indonesia at least two different species of trees have been used for making beaten-bark materials; firstly, *beringin* in Indonesian, or banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*), and secondly, the most common, the paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*). This tree has various vernacular names in Indonesia. For instance, while in Central Sulawesi, it is usually called *ivo*, in West Java, the local name of this tree is *sæh*. A DNA study published in 2013 shows that paper mulberry in Central Sulawesi, Garut-West Java, and Taitung-Taiwan have the same features (Hanamori, Hiroshi & Sakamoto 2013).

Processing the beaten bark from the banyan tree requires a boiling process to make its texture malleable, so that it is easier to beat. In comparison, this process is not needed for pounding the inner bark of paper mulberry because the texture is already malleable (Damayanti 2016). It is believed that paper mulberry is used in Java and Central Sulawesi because it produces a higher quality beaten bark in comparison to other trees (Damayanti 2016; Veys 2017).The

beaters normally used to process the paper mulberry are mainly known to be made from metal.

In Java, when paper mulberry is processed it is usually termed *daluang* paper. It appears that the mulberry tree is the only type of tree that has been used in the process of making *daluang*. It is rarely seen that the Javanese used paper mulberry for clothing; however, there was a report of a traveller from East Java to West Java wearing a loose white garment made from barkcloth in 1646 (Damayanti 2016; Teijgeler 2016). More than a century earlier, in 1550, as mentioned in old Javanese literature such as Tantu Panggelaran, clothes made from *daluang* were worn by priests (Sukmawati et al. 2015; Teijgeler 2016). Furthermore, *daluang* was mentioned in the Javanese version of *Ramayana* several times and the Sarwadharma charter instructed the clergy to cultivate paper mulberry in both the 9th century and at the end of 13th century (Teijgeler 2016). These historical documents give a sense of relative dating about the usage of paper mulberry for various purposes.

What about the *wayang beber*?

Various studies have investigated the origins of *wayang beber*. Historically, it had already been developed in the Majapahit kingdom period in the 14th-15th century and then continued to be a court performance art during the Demak sultanate in the 16th century (Lis 2014). Furthermore, the two groups of *wayang beber* scrolls have been comprehensively documented; the one from Pacitan is dated between 1690 and 1739, while the one from



Figure 4. a) *Wayang beber*, RV-360-5255, from the collection of the Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden. © Museum Volkenkunde. b) Detail. © Saiful Bakhri. c) Sample taken from the object. © Sakamoto 2018.

Gunung Kidul is dated between 1700 and 1735 (Teijgeler 2016). In 2018, two Polish researchers, Tea Škrinjarčić and Marina Pretković, collaborated with Isamu Sakamoto on a project related to *wayang beber*. They took samples from the Museum Volkenkunde collection of *wayang beber* for radiocarbon dating. The dating and analysis were carried out by experts from the University of Tokyo. One sample, object number RV-360-5255, is dated between 1633 and 1669 (Figure 4). Two others from the same museum have been dated and the result is similar. These results indicate the dating of the *wayang beber*.

The role of an artist



Figure 5. a) Mufid gave a workshop at PT. Balai Pustaka, an Indonesian state-owned publishing company in East Jakarta. b) Mufid gave a *saeh* tree to the Head of Heritage at PT. Balai Pustaka. © Bakhri, 2019.

Aside from conservators and scientists, another role that is essential for the preservation of the production of raw material or *daluang* is that of the artist/craftsman. For this, the role of Ahmad Mufid Sururi, often called Mufid, an active *daluang* artist/craftsman, is a perfect example. This Bandung-based artist/craftsman still actively produces contemporary artworks based on *daluang* as his main material. One of Mufid's platforms to share his knowledge and expertise is the provision of talks and workshops on *daluang* making. In a session on 11th March 2019, he shared the history of use and taught the participants, predominantly Indonesian high school students, to make *daluang* barkcloth (Figure 5a). At every workshop, Mufid gave the host institution a mulberry tree sapling to plant in their gardens (Figure 5b). This initiative also addresses what Damayanti (2016: 21) saw as a key issue: sourcing the paper mulberry tree as the main raw material. In addition, Mufid has collaborated with a local Wonogiri artist, Faris Wibisono, to make a contemporary *wayang beber* (Figure 6).



Figure 6. *Wayang beber* “*Bergegas Tempa Saèh, Tak Tergesa Menjelma Daluang*”, 2017. 40x169cm acrylic on *daluang*. *Daluang* by Mufid and *sungging* by Faris. © Bakhri 2019.

This *wayang beber* was created in 2017, titled *Bergegas Tempa Saèh, Tak Tergesa Menjelma Daluang*, and measuring 40x169cm. The artwork depicts the process of preparing the inner-bark of the paper mulberry tree and turning it into *daluang*. Not only does Mufid use the traditional *daluang* barkcloth-making technique, but he also employs a traditional painting technique called *sungging*. This is a common Javanese traditional colouring/painting technique for *wayang* in various forms and materials (Haryanto 1991; Suharyono 2005). Even though the *wayang beber* made by Mufid and Farid is a modern work, it is still an important artwork to show that both the *daluang* preparation and the colouring process still use traditional methods.

Lastly, Mufid is also an avid Instagram user. He shares his events, artworks, and craftsmanship through @toekangsaeh_journey. As one of the most popular social media platforms in Indonesia, Instagram has enabled Mufid to reach out to a wider audience, attracting new enthusiasts. This is aligned with Cook et al. (2017) who demonstrated how Instagram could be used as a tool for conservators to build a collaborative conservation network and a strong catalyst for enabling an endangered culture to reach new generations.

Indonesian governmental effort

There are also several formal efforts by the Indonesian government to preserve and promote the *wayang beber*. During the 1980s, *wayang beber* documentation and performance on television were part of a government programme by the Department of Education and Culture

(Lis 2014). Then art schools in Central Java and Yogyakarta started to teach their students about *sungging* by copying *wayang beber* and eventually creating their own more advanced examples (Lis 2014). Further, Indonesia's Directorate General of Culture inscribed the *daluang* as a national intangible heritage in 2014, categorized as traditional craftsmanship (KWRIU 2014). This act shows the government's intention of providing the necessary support to preserve the craft. However, most other stakeholders feel this is inadequate, particularly looking at the current state of practice. Five years after it was inscribed, there is not enough effort from government officials to encourage the production of *daluang*, exploration of its usage, and the possibility of using it as a conservation support material for the old *wayang beber* in Wonosari and Pacitan. Jakarta Textile Museum, run by the provincial government, has intensively promoted, exhibited, and hosted events of the beaten-bark culture for the last four years. The museum is also planting various beaten-bark trees in its garden and they hope someday they could be harvested and used by beaten-bark artists and craftsmen.

Conclusion - what next?

As known earlier, some *wayang beber* located within communities are still active objects. The communities still use them on ceremonial occasions, despite the fact that their condition is concerning. In detail, flaking, cracking, loss and fading are some of the condition problems that could clearly be seen from past records. However many efforts are currently progressing and aim ultimately to preserve the materiality of *wayang beber* along with its practice and culture. First, *daluang* has been developed over the years by Tedi Permadi, an Indonesia University of Education academic, who intensively encourages communities in the island of Java and Bali to boost the production of *daluang* and its products (Permadi 2005). It is also suggested that *daluang* could be used as a backing support for *wayang beber* to at least provide a structurally sound object; this is possible with help from Permadi and Mufid. Nevertheless, further consideration is needed as this cannot be done yet. It is essential to employ a similar quality of *daluang*, in terms of its thickness and pattern but there is no evidence about the metal beater that is used to make the *daluang* paper for the *wayang beber* in Wonosari and Pacitan.

Besides, a question arises when comparing the documentation taken by Kurkdjian (1880) showing a full photograph of the *wayang beber* in Pacitan in very bad condition (Figure 7). The 2006 documentary showed that it has been, at least, improved by an effort to conserve it. The hole below the figure on the left has been treated (Figure 7b). Spanning more than 100 years, what kind of treatment has been carried out on the *wayang beber*? Who did it? There is unfortunately no documentation on the process of conservation/restoration. It is possible that the lack of documentation means that conservators might have missed valuable information, probably including information on the traditional way to repair/restore the *wayang beber*. Another problem is, when used as part of the performance, offerings are burnt in proximity to the *wayang beber*; this poses some risks to its materiality as it is constantly exposed to smoke (Ibrahim and Tari 2006). What can a conservation professional do to minimise this risk while still embracing the tradition? These are some of the challenges that should be discussed and resolved when talking about objects within a living tradition.



Figure 7. a) *Wayang Beber* in Pacitan. Reproduced from Kurkdjian c.1880. b) Detail. © Sakamoto 2006.

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