

## Al-Ghazālī on Stage

### Toward a Theological Interpretation of the Javanese *Wayang* Theatre

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This paper offers a theological interpretation of the role of a particular character in the Javanese *wayang* or shadow puppet theater. As Sears (1996) has shown, the *wayang* as we know it today cannot be separated from the colonial moment and orientalist scholarship that presented and, indeed, created it as a manifestation of an unchanging essence of ‘Javaneseness’ that had more recently been corrupted by Islam, and that could be uncovered and reconstructed by Europeans. Both descriptive and constitutive of prevalent power structures, scholarly accounts of the *wayang* not only became part of the colonial Dutch, but also of the post-colonial Indonesian hegemonic political agenda. However, as a performative tradition that is constantly re-imagined, the *wayang* can also be and has been used for the subversion of these power structures. The objective of this paper is an analysis of Semar, a particular figure in the *wayang*, who has been used as a subversive factor in the hierarchy of power and status depicted in the *wayang*. It proceeds by looking at both play scripts and accounts of Semar by recent Indonesian intellectuals that negotiate the mythical boundaries that delineate the *wayang* tales, and by interpreting these sources through the lens of al-Ghazālī’s articulation of the interaction between different epistemologies and his imagining of ways in which types of knowledge that are irreducible to each other can be simultaneously held and possibly even brought into conversation with each other.

Semar is the servant of the noble warrior in the *wayang*, and despite the fact that he appears crude and powerless, he is nonetheless divine. In the play scripts and the interpretations of Semar by recent and contemporary Indonesian intellectuals, it becomes obvious that Semar fulfills a role that in other literary contexts is often called a trickster figure. He is characterized by a pervasive liminality due to an ambivalence that is expressed by means of two irresolvable tensions: first, his extraordinary religious authority is in a dialectic relationship with his social and structural inferiority; and second, he is simultaneously unpredictable, even dangerous, and humanity’s comforter and sustainer.

Al-Ghazālī’s profound influence in Islamic Java in general and on Sufi traditions in Java more specifically has often been noted (Zoetmulder 1995; Feener 1998; Riddell 2001), and although the

presence of al-Ghazālī's theology in the *wayang* has not yet been explored, I believe that aspects of his thought that have been relevant for some Javanese are expressed by Semar, and that his theology can help us understand Semar's import. In particular, I will discuss al-Ghazālī's use of *dihlīz*, the threshold or vestibule, which, according to Moosa (2005) is key for understanding al-Ghazālī's integration of different epistemologies, in particular philosophy and revelation, into his *kalām*. Like Semar, the literary trickster figure, al-Ghazālī's theology displays the dialectic relationship between different epistemologies, that on the one hand seem to exclude each other, but on the other hand can only be understood in demarcation from each other and therefore depend on each other.

By exploring this dimension of the *wayang*, I am hoping to start a conversation on the way in which both scholarly and literary theological texts from the past are still influential contemporary Javanese Islam, although not in a straightforward and one-dimensional manner. While theological texts and literary types do provide a model or script for contemporary Javanese Muslims, the way in which these scripts are emplotted cannot be predicted and can diverge, especially when the audience is heterogeneous; and so a medium that was meant to maintain power structures can end up being used for their very subversion, as it is the case with the *wayang*.

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