



Ibn ‘Arabī and the Metaphysical Meanings of the Shadow Play in Java*

İbn Arabî Metafizîğinin Java Geleneksel Gölge Oyunundaki İzdüşümleri

Lee Shan TSE**

Abstract

This article is about shadow play as a pedagogy in Indonesia and beyond, connecting it Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings. Ibn ‘Arabī is known as one of the most important Islamic thinkers from the 13th century, and his teachings have expanded across the entire Islamic world. However, his two main works, *al-Futūḥāt* and *al-Fuṣūṣ*, have remained largely inaccessible over the last 800 years, transmitted not through translations or writings but through teachers to select students. A Mursyid from Bandung has been teaching ‘Ibn ‘Arabī since 2019 publically. I am interested in the teachings, elucidations and use of the pedagogy of the shadow play in communities which strive to make meaning and value in people’s lives. The teacher of this community offers insights into the shadow play as a mystical tool for pedagogy. This article touches upon the often lost meaning of the shadow play central in Islamic teaching over the centuries. I will offer an ethnographic study of the role of shadow play in the seeker’s search for their self as it was told to me by the Mursyid. By doing so, we understand the interplay between the Divine and the Human within the shadow play, the search for the soul, and its metaphysical order of veil, light, and shadows.

Keywords: Ibn ‘Arabī, sufism, shadow play, *wayang kulit*, Java, Indonesia, veil, light, shadow

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** **ORCID:** 0009-0007-6168-3086. Dr., Evans Fellow, University of Cambridge,
E-mail: lst35@cantab.ac.uk

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Özet

Bu makale, Endonezya ve ötesinde pedagojik bir eğitim metodu olarak görülen geleneksel gölge oyununu, İbn Arabî'nin öğretileriyle ilişkilendirerek ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. İbn Arabî, 13. yüzyılın en önemli İslâm düşünürlerinden biri olarak bilinir ve öğretileri tüm İslâm dünyasına yayılmıştır. Bununla birlikte, iki baş yapıtı olan *Fütûhât* ve *Fusûs*, son 800 yıl boyunca büyük ölçüde erişilemez kalmıştır. İbn Arabî metinlerinin çağdaş bir öğreticisi olan Mursyid'in İslâmî eğitimi, 2019'dan bu yana artık yaygın bir şekilde halka açık hale geldi. Bu anlamda ben de, insanların hayatlarına anlam ve değer katmak için çalışmalar yürüten topluluklarda, pedagojik bir metot olarak gölge oyunu öğretileri, açıklamaları ve kullanımı ile ilgili araştırmalar yürütüyorum. Araştırmalarımı sürdürdüğüm topluluğun rehberi olan Mursyid, mânevî bir eğitim aracı olarak gölge oyununa dair farklı perspektifler sunuyor. Dolayısıyla bu makale, yüzyıllar boyunca İslâmî öğretinin merkezinde yer alan gölge oyununun çoğu zaman kaybolan anlamına değinmektedir. Mursyid tarafından bana anlatıldığı şekliyle, gölge oyununun, tâlibin mânevî yolculuğundaki rolüne dair etnografik bir çalışma sunacağım. Böylelikle, gölge oyunundaki Allah ve İnsan arasındaki etkileşimi, nefis yolculuğunu ve onun metafiziksel perde, ışık ve gölgeler düzenini anlayacağız.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İbn 'Arabî, tasavvuf, gölge oyunu, *wayang kulit*, Java, Endonezya, perde, nûr, gölge

Introduction

The importance and value of the shadow play as a quintessential artistic inheritance of Indonesia with its cultural values and identities has been studied in colonialist studies.¹ Historical anthropologist Ward Keeler and many other scholars along the way documented extensively the religious and philosophical interpretations of the ritual uses of shadows in Javanese shadow plays, drawing links between shadow plays and Javanese selves. I am interested in delving beyond the material culture of the shadow play to understand the practice and the use of the shadow play in religion and traditional arts, in contemporary contexts.

This article is about the shadow play as a pedagogy in Indonesia and beyond, connecting it

Ibn 'Arabî's teachings. Ibn 'Arabî is known as one of the most important Islamic thinkers, from the 13th century, and his teachings have expanded across the entire Islamic world. However, his two main works, *al-Futûhât* and *al-Fuṣūṣ* have remained largely inaccessible over the last 800 years. The Mursyid, a contemporary teacher of Ibn 'Arabî's texts, has offered his teachings to the public since 2019. These teachings are having a global impact. As an anthropologist, I am interested in the teachings, elucidations and use of the pedagogy of the shadow play in communities which strive to make meaning and value in people's lives.

I have been following Mursyid's teachings on the metaphysical meanings of a popular traditional arts performance, the art of *wayang kulit* (shadow play),² from the 15th century for three years. Mursyid leads a Sufi order of 800 members across Java and Sumatra and across the globe, helping them to define

1 Schechner studies how the Dutch colonial intervened into the practices of the wayang kulit (shadow play), especially during the Java War (1825-1830) onwards. Many changes took place during the Dutch East Indies during the long colonial epoch, where the Dutch 'stripped wayang of its politics and historicity, its ability to relate contemporary events'. Instead, they emphasized on ancient myths, aesthetics, and mystical functions. See Richard Schechner, "Wayang Kulit in the Colonial Margin," *TDR* 34, 2 (1990): 25-61.

2 Readers are invited to enjoy the webpage and the illustrations on wayang kulit created by Momina Khattak, an artist from Pakistan. www.n-sphere.space/shadow-play

and negotiate their past, present, and future. This community's lineage traces back to the first saints of Indonesia, called the Council of Nine Saints – the *Wali Songo* (also transcribed as *Wali Sanga*), who introduced Islam to the Hindu islands (Indo-nesia) through the shadow play. This community follows the Islamic teachings of Ibn 'Arabī closely and focuses specifically on the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī's second major work, called *al-Fuṣūṣ*. The teacher of this community offers insights into the shadow play as a mystical tool for pedagogy, which we explore in this article.

According to Ibn 'Arabī in his work *al-Futūḥāt*, the shadow play begins with the puppeteer, who uses a three-dimensional puppet, making it come alive as it is removed from the first box called 'womb' to be placed at the end in the box called 'grave' – what the audience sees is the life on stage, the in-between, narrating a universal story of humanity. The audience behind the veil sees only a two-dimensional shadow play, having lost the dimension of the intricate, colourful puppets which had been crafted in great detail.

This article will touch upon the often lost meaning of the shadow play central in Islamic teaching over the centuries. I will offer an ethnographic study of the role of shadow play in the seeker's search for their self as it was told to me by the Mursyid. By doing so, we understand the interplay between the Divine and the Human within the shadow play, the search for the soul, and its metaphysical order of veil, light, and shadows. These findings come from a series of semi-structured interviews with the community teachers and puppeteers, and local shadow play audiences. I used participant observations in my fieldwork during two summers between 2022-2024 and received permission to publish the research findings by all research participants. All research participants have been given anonymous names for privacy protections.

As part of a decolonial way of engaging with ethnographic material in the field, this article uses direct, first-hand teachings, without the academic, colonial, performative rituals of citation. This encourages the research participants of the community (*ṭarīqat*) I spent 2 years' time with, to speak in their own voices, without the constant mediation of an anthropologist.³

1. The Process of *Wayang Kulit*

I met one of the contemporary puppeteers (*dalang*), whose name is Nani, in a radio station in Java, who was about to give a performance later that evening. He was a man in his forties with more than 30 years of experience in the shadow play. Inspired by his grandfather who was a well-known village *dalang*, close to Jogjakarta, he became a *dalang* at a young age and later studied at a *dalang* performative arts school in Jogjakarta – and with a chuckle, he goes on: "Against my parents' permission – I only told them to come to my graduation, when they became aware of my professional path as a *dalang*." He explained the process of the shadow play to me as follows: some of them can go on over many hours, sometimes even 9 hours, from early evening to the dawn. The *dalang* is the puppeteer who is also the narrator of the selected plays he performs during the evening. He often sits cross-legged facing the rectangular screen, with the light shining on to the puppet on to the screen. Traditionally, the audience sits behind the screen so that the *dalang* would not be seen, but nowadays, many of the audiences sit on the side of the *dalang*. (The Mursyid sees this as evidence that the lesson of the shadow play has been lost.) Then behind the *dalang* sit the gamelan players, who are the musicians

3 I would like to thank all research participants who contributed to the findings and made this research possible in the first place. I am grateful for the Evans Fellowship for funding this independent research.

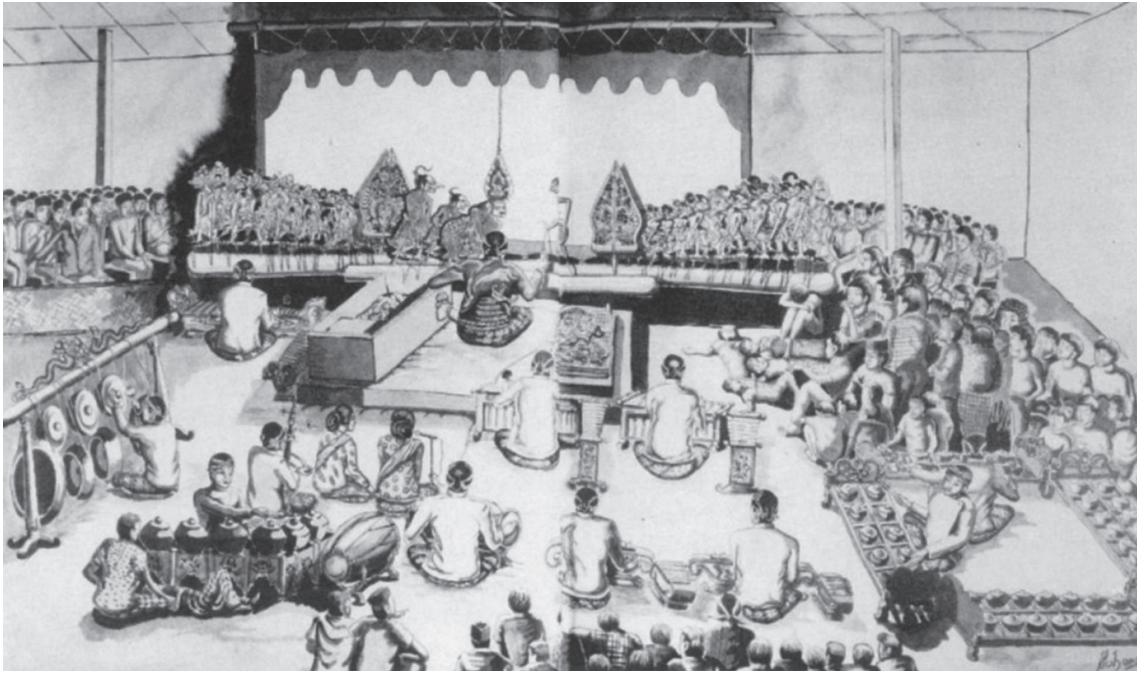


Image 1: A Drawing of the Shadow Play. In Ward Keeler, *Javanese Selves*, 1987.

improvising the musical accompaniment of the shadow play. Spectators are on both sides of the screen. In most contemporary performances, invited guests are seated on chairs watching the shadows, while uninvited guests and passersby observe from the *dalang*'s side. Other scholars noted that in the past, there was a gender-segregated seating plan, where women and children were on the shadow side, while men on the *dalang*'s.⁴ The stories that are narrated include familiar puppets known to the community, containing stories of legendary Javanese figures, some based on the *Ramayana*, some on the *Mahabharata*. As the play begins, I find Nani in the middle of the stage, concentrating on the shadow play. He is focused and multi-tasking, using a wooden mallet in his left hand and a small mallet held between his toes. While all the puppets are arranged in order of size at the sides of the screen, with the smallest placed nearest the screen, he starts the dialogue, interchanging

4 Willem Huibert Rassers, "On the Origin of the Javanese Theatre", in Pañji, *The Culture Hero: A Structural Study of Religion in Java*, (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1931), 93-215.

the voices of the different characters on stage, as he is the only narrator of the play. He does so without any script. He explained to me at another meeting how he is always making sure that he is in ritual purity (ablution, *wuḍū'*), that he is prepared with a few shadow plays and has practiced them. But for most part they are inspired or improvised on the day of the shadow play: "We (*dalang*) are in the veil between the light and the audience, and we feel out what is in the atmosphere. It is a special role as a *dalang*, as I feel I am the intermediary between both sides of the screen."

Most *dalangs* do not learn their plays (*lakons*) by reading them but rather through oral and spiritual transmission. It used to be that there was great importance in knowing and more profound understanding the puppet arrangement, language, sacred music and plots, following the character's journeys, relationships and hierarchies.⁵ However, when I asked about the meanings of the shadow play and

5 Schechner, "Wayang Kulit in the Colonial Margin," *TDR* 34, 2 (1990): 25-61.

interviewed participants in the audience, they seemed not to know them nor were concerned about them. Instead, they were interested in the play itself as an evening entertainment for themselves and for the meaning. How these meanings are lost has not been a concern for the professional puppeteer Nani, who feels that the shadow play invites anyone interested in the arts, whether they are called to understand the meaning or not; to him, this is not important. However, it has been a concern for the local community teacher Mursyid, who maintains the importance of shadow play and the need for its accuracy and faithful tradition.

2. Towards a New Meaning of the Javanese Shadow Play – Shadows, Puppets, and the Light

I was introduced to Mursyid through one of his disciples, T, who works as a translator and writer in the Netherlands. After I had known her for 3 months in 2021, she soon invited me to visit Mursyid and the community, in Autumn 2022. All my interviews with Mursyid were accompanied by T., who translated the conversations from Indonesian to English. She was enthusiastic about the shadow play because Sunan Kalijaga of the *Wali Songo* was one of her ancestors. Sunan Kalijaga is known as the one who brought the shadow play.

Mursyid is her teacher and is a spiritual leader of a Sufi order with 800 followers in Bandung. During the day, he is a professor at the local university, and he offers spiritual teachings outside office hours, almost daily. During the visit, there were three wayfarers (*sālikīn*), who generously offered their help with communication between Mursyid and I, and simultaneously translated our conversations, which were often held in a living room set up. Sometimes, the interviews took place

on Zoom, while T. was in Bandung to help with the interview. All conversations were recorded and then translated into English, with full transcripts into Indonesian, provided by a team of *sālikīn* who offered their skills and assistance to me.

During the first visit, a community member, one of his *sālikīn*, brought me to a Batik store, and they selected a unique dress for me with the wayang's feature. I was gifted a shadow play dress by the community! In our first meetings, I saw Mursyid's passion for shadow play. He explained the etymology to me: "*Wayang* comes from the root word '*bayang*,' which means shadow." For the traditional Sufi order Q., the shadow play has an extraordinary metaphysical meaning beyond the cultural tradition of storytelling. From our meeting, I knew that the shadow play existed in a deep meaning dimension for his community. Mursyid reminisces about the beginning of his spiritual journey when he met his teacher, whom he calls 'father' or Bapak. From however long he has been on the path, he recalls his fascination with the *wayang kulit*.

"The shadow is related to the imagination," says Mursyid with his head nodding and a gentle smile. He continues: "Humans who are guided by the light, need to imagine the meanings of the teachings, that are often in the unseen dimensions." He picks up his Qur'ān and looks through it, explaining that the shadow is mentioned 33 times, which is the key to the deeper meanings of the shadow play. During this interview, I saw how his face lit up when he was talking about his own guide, his teacher: "My teacher Bapak used to say, 'Our true self is not the body; this is only a copy, a shadow of our true self.'" He opens the Qur'ān and reads out loud to me: *Have you not seen your Lord (Rabb) how He lengthens the shadows and if Allah*

wills will be made permanent (not moving and not changing). And We made the sun a guide over the shadow (al-Furqān 25/45-46) For Mursyid, there is an interaction between the shadow and its puppet and the puppet and its source of light, with the shadows either aligned or misaligned. When the shadow is aligned, it is possible that they even become 'lengthened' – that is extended shadow. It immediately occurred to me that a shadow is not just a shadow, rather different kinds of shadows exist. He shared that the *wayang kulit* may seem like a performance, but it is not. Mursyid, now unpacked two large puppets from his bag, demonstrates what he meant by 'image'.

Now, look at these beautiful puppets. Look at the shape, the carvings. They are made of leather. Do you see all the colours and details? All of this, [he points to the puppets,] speaks for a very detailed and serious craft. But when one is sitting in the audience, all one can see is the shadow. If the puppet was not that important, and all it needed to do was cast the shadow, why would the craftsman put hours and hours perfecting the puppet in its volume, depths, colours and detailed carvings? This, in fact, already shows the two levels of realms. The first one is the shadow, which is but the image on the screen that can only speak of the physical realm ('*alam al-mulk*'). And the puppet, being the second realm.

This comment indicates multiple levels of understanding of shadow play as a pedagogy. On the one hand, he details the materiality of the puppet, which is three-dimensional, hand-carved with intricate details, and colourful; on the other hand, he speaks of the shadow as an image of the puppet, and when the puppet's shadow is cast on the screen. What happens is that the three-dimensional puppet becomes, because of the casting, a

two-dimensional shadow. Traditionally, the screen is supposed to be illuminated by a single source, a flickering oil lamp, and the puppets are supposed to be made from parchment formed out of water buffalo hide, horn and bone, but these days such practices disappeared.⁶ From the audience's perspective, sitting on the other side of the curtain, all they see are the two-dimensional shadows, and they know that their origin is the true puppet behind the veil. These are the first two immediate realms of shadow play, which form part of the metaphysical cosmic order of the shadow play: the first higher dimensional realm is that of the light shone onto the puppet, which represents the unseen world, while the second realm represents the seen world, with one lesser dimension.

Then he continued: "Now, let's look at the shadow. The shadow indicates where the sun is." I thought that this comment was very interesting because he starts with what is seen and backtracks to the backstage; he extrapolates the shadow, to the puppet, all the way to the light, which is behind the veil. I would have thought that he would start with the light, puppet, and shadow, but he very much turned the sequence around, beginning with the shadow.

In the eyes of Mursyid, the shadow represents all that we can perceive, akin to the physical realm we inhabit. It is not just the puppet that casts a shadow; everything we see is merely an image of something that truly exists, such as the puppet in this case. Initially, it seemed perplexing to me that we could perceive shadows, as I had always thought that what we see with our eyes is light. However, to Mursyid, the visual imagery and the physical stage of

6 See Roger Long, *Javanese Shadow Theatre: Movement and Characterization in Ngayogyakarta Wayang Kulit*, (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982). See also Schechner, "Wayang Kulit in the Colonial Margin," *TDR* 34, 2 (1990): 25-61.

the shadow play explain it all: what we see is what the audience observes watching the shadow play, representing the shadow world (*'alam al-mulk*). However, the True realm in the *jabarūt* and the *malakūt* is the world of Light, with souls and spirits and the source of life. That world is concealed behind the screen. What we perceive are shadows, while what is illuminated by the light, like the puppet, remains unseen. Every image we perceive is merely the shadow of the actual entity behind the veil. I came to realize that the two opposites, light, which remains unseen, and the shadow, the only 'thing' we see, are two necessary antipodes in the shadow play.

3. The Search for the Self

He lifts the puppet this time and explains that everything begins with a story of a story. "The Wali Sunan Kudus of the *Wali Songo* was one of my ancestors," Mursyid explained that Sunan Kalijaga's mother was one of the Chinese emperor's daughter and travelled across the sea from ancient China to Indonesia in the 15th century. His father was King Brawijaya the 5th. Indonesia was a Hindu nation at the time, hence the origin of the name Indonesia, my interlocutors told me.^{7*} Sunan Kalijaga brought with him the shadow play. The art of the shadow play made its way to Indonesia during the pre-Islamic era when the majority of the population was Hindu-Buddhist; however, *wayang kulit* emerged and played a central role in the

spread of Islam, marking the beginning of an Islamic period. The shadow play was suited as a tool for the spread of Islam because it used ancient tales that were already familiar to the Hindu population, and enhanced the universal truth, while effective in introducing new dimensions and aspects of Islam.

See, there was not any Javanese-style shadow puppet like the ones we know today, before his coming. Neither did the shadow play, the way they existed in Java, exists in India itself, though the stories originate from *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. It was created only at the time of Sunan Kalijaga. We have to understand that was not Sunan Kalijaga's subjective or personal artistic expression, but the existence of *wayang kulit* is by the command of Allah, divine sacred art, so to speak, and includes its very details how the puppets should look like and which stories they convey. So, he did not create them because he was an excellent craftsman or artist, but there was more to the art of *wayang*.

What he meant by 'bringing with him the shadow play' is that it is now an enhanced version. The art of *wayang* was not destroyed but rather transformed and enriched with Islamic teachings, ultimately evolving into the shadow play we know today. The captivating stories of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* revolve around the pursuit of truth. According to Mursyid, the Javanese tale of Dewa Ruci -based on the epic *Mahabharata*- was composed not by Sunan Kalijaga, but by his teacher Sunan Bonang, who was the son of Sunan Ampel, a *wali* of the *Wali Songo*. The main characters featured in the epic tales of *Mahabharata*, present the characters of Pandawa Lima (the five warriors) who are representing human beings and the journey of each of them to find and embody their specific *dharma* (the mission of one's life), also referred to as '*amal ṣāliḥ*'. It is a lesson that we each have such a *dharma*.

7 The community I worked with often referred to Indonesia as a nation-state even when they talk about the 15th century, though from a historiographical point of view the name Indonesia was a modern development from the 19th century. Before the places would be named after individual kingdoms, and islands and the archipelagoes (Java, Sumatra etc), or colonial terms such as East Indies company. Officially the name Indonesia came into being with the gaining of independence in 1945. I have an impression that the community was mainly referring to the geographical region of Java, rather than Indonesia.

Mursyid begins to tell the story. The story of Bima is about one of the Pandawa brothers—of his quest for sacred knowledge:

It all began on the day Bima heard about a superior knowledge, Sastra Jendra Hayuningrat Pangruwating Diyu, which Drona said could turn giants into humans. Bima asked Drona to teach him Sastra Jendra, to which Drona replied that Bima would not understand unless he drank from the *Tirta Pawitra* (the Water of Life) first. However, Drona accidentally revealed a secret, which mesmerized Bima and made him thirsty to understand. Bima learned that he could not comprehend this sacred knowledge unless he found the water of life. His mystical journey led him to the isolated region of the South Sea, where he faced terrifying waves and fought a dragon as he crossed the ocean world. Finally, reaching the South Ocean, Bima ventured deeper inside and found himself stranded in a sea of despair and fear. He does not know what to do. He begins to drown and slowly sink into the deep ocean. Amid this deep ocean, in which he was about to die, he suddenly wakes up. He could not believe what he saw. Bima meets Dewa Ruci, the thumb-sized Lord, who is an incarnation of his spirit. Bima was told to enter Dewa Ruci's left ear. The story does not tell the end, but the universal story only begins.

Mursyid's eyes lit up when he explained and interpreted what the story of Bima meant.

Each element is purposefully guided. This work of art is truly exceptional. Behind this meticulousness in composition, details and form, a message must be conveyed. The public enjoys the lively performance of wayang kulit, but the central message in the story of Bima is to see him as a seeker who is searching for true knowledge, here the Water of Life (*Tirta Pawitra*), the water which is 'at the bottom of the sea'. He sees a dragon in his jour-

ney while seeking the Water of Life. He must swim on the surface of the sea and first defeat the dragon. The dragon signifies his ego, also known as 'the lower self' (*hawan*). In this struggle, there are two things he needs to learn: how not to drown but to endure, and how to defeat the dragon. In the inner struggle against his ego, Bima asks for forgiveness (*istighfār*) and repentance (*tawba*) from the Divine. Repentance is the key to the gate. And the peak of repentance is knowing one's nature - something that is not possible without 'the turning to the Divine', to discover what he is called to do in life.

Here, the vignette shows multiple teachings. For Mursyid it is clear that Bima's story is a universal story of seeking truth, for all of humanity. Mursyid continues:

Only when he overcomes the struggle, and only when Bima dives deep into the ocean, to his death, does he find his self. The goal of the path is to find one's true authentic self. Dewa Ruci is Bima's *Rūḥ al-Qudus* (Ruci comes from *Ruh Suci*, which means the Guide Suci). Bima and Dewa Ruci's faces are identical, but there is one difference. Look at their different sizes; one is Bima, and the other is "little Bima". That is because one is the shadow, while the other is the puppet, significantly smaller than the shadow of Bima.

The ultimate meeting of Bima and Dewa Ruci is akin to the meetings of the selves – Bima finds his self, and he does so by meeting his guide who shows him who his true self is. They become united when Bima enters Dewa Ruci's left ear. Bima and Dewa Ruci are merged and enter a different dimension, when Bima 'makes himself small' to enter Dewa Ruci, and together they enter a new realm. This means that now Bima is transformed and becomes lit up and guided from the divine light within and becomes a perfect human. Mursyid refers to Ibn 'Arabī and says that

only a person with an awakened self, through the guidance of Divine Light (*miṣbāḥ*) and then becomes the perfect human (*insān al-kāmil*). And when he becomes the perfect human, his shadow and his true self become aligned, and the three elements, the light, the true self (here the puppet behind the veil), and the shadow on the curtain all become an extension of the divine. The shadow is no longer just wandering around not knowing its true purpose, but instead the ego is vacated with Bima's near-death experience at the bottom of the sea. Bima and his soul's meeting marks the beginning of a new chapter. The metaphysical mechanism can be described as the shadow space becoming vacated, and in its space, the light fills in – that is when the shadow is illuminated with divine light, which the Mursyid explains as 'becoming an extension of the shadow'. "See, the *wayang kulit* has existed for centuries and lived for a long time in his country. Many people also interpret various things, for example, that the master puppet is God. Until now, there have been many interpretations of *wayang kulit*, and not all of them are true," says Mursyid.

He is saying the meaning is lost: when I asked what the shadow play meant for Mursyid, he immediately referred to a Qur'ānic verse and recited, *Whoever saves one soul, it will be as if they saved all of humanity* (al-Mā'idah 5/32). Every human being carried a divine mandate, something of inestimable value. Every soul (*nafs*) is called by Allah before being sent down to the face of the Earth and put into the womb (al-A'rāf 7/172). This is the true interpretation of the shadow play. Mursyid ends our conversation with a final teaching from his own life:

My teacher, Bapak, always says that you must know your life mission. The true you is not this body, which is motivated by your lower self, but to meet the true self that resides inside you. This is the uni-

versal human story that is so magnificent. The story is a story of you and me, of every human being. The role of a Mursyid is only to guide his students to find their true selves. For as long as the self is unknown, the shadow will not be at peace. Without meeting Bapak, I would not understand this story of Bima meeting his Dewa Ruci. I would not understand the metaphysical meaning of the self in its reference to the Qur'ān. I would be completely lost. I see myself as Bima, and my meeting with my guide Bapak as my Dewa Ruci, my *rūḥ al-quḍus*.

From the Mursyid's reflections, I understand that his teaching is about humans finding their selves, not merely a teaching of a regional, cultural identity, referred to as Javanese selves. The essence of the shadow play is to be found in the Qur'ān, without its connection, the teachings are lost and become merely entertainment. I could see how Bima was not only a universal story but also had a personal dimension in the life of Mursyid, as well as a historical and a spiritual trajectory, all interwoven in the shadow play. What I found most striking over the many months of collaboration with the community teacher is the profoundness of his personal story that lends itself as a pedagogy to his community of *sālikīn*. Each personal story is also tied to the *wayang kulit*, as stories within stories, and these stories are to be unfolded. They became richer as I spent more hours with this local community teacher and as he taught about *wayang kulit*. The stories of *wayang kulit* are hence not just of a performative nature but are teachings, deeply rooted in the tradition of Islamic studies, passed on from one generation to the next.

4. Three Realms – Islamic Cosmology in *Wayang Kulit* and Islamic Studies

According to Ibn 'Arabī, our existence is multi-dimensional, and this understanding

is crucial to contemporary Islamic studies and scholarship. In the manuscript *al-Futūḥāt*, in chapter 317, Ibn 'Arabī makes a direct commentary on the teachings of the shadow play:

If you want to recognize the truth of what I am hinting at for this issue, conder the shadow play and its images, and the one who is the narrator for these images shown before the little children, who are sitting away from the covering curtain drawn down between them and the players moving these images, and the narrator speaking about them... The little ones, in that sitting, are delighted and enjoying the play, while the heedless adults are taking it as mere play and amusement – while the ones who know are crossing over it as a lesson to be learned and are aware that God raised this only as a parable. This is why there comes out, in the first act, a person called the 'describer', and he gives a sermon glorifying God and declaring Him majestic.⁸

This depiction of Ibn 'Arabī as quoted above from *al-Futūḥāt* tells us that in the audience of the shadow play there are children seated who are delighting in the shadow play and understand that a lesson is being taught. They are contrasted with the adults and the scholars who see in the shadow play and in the existence of this life on this earth as mere play, and thus unimportant. Instead, Ibn 'Arabī encourages and warns us to see this as a Divine parable, in which the Divine is teaching the audience, the people, that the shadow play is the *deen* (way of life, commonly known as religion) itself, meaning the path of worship, and should be considered a precious teaching and treated with the utmost attention, care and importance. The children, and the knowledgeable ('*arifūn*') understand these Divine teachings. I began to see that the Arabic concept of *deen*, which is finding

your way of life and your purpose in life, to correspond to the word dharma that Mursyid uses. Already in the 13th century, before the Javanese shadow play, Ibn 'Arabī used the shadow play as a pedagogy to convey the *deen*.

Further, consistent with 'Ibn Arabī's teachings in *al-Futūḥāt*, Mursyid explains the three dimensions through verse 35 in Sūrah an-Nūr (the Light). According to Mursyid, Islamic teachings should incorporate the three levels of the shadow play, '*alam al-mulk*', '*alam al-malakūt*', and '*alam al-jabarūt*'. First, '*alam al-mulk*' can be translated as the kingdom, the seen world. Second, '*alam al-malakūt*' can be understood and translated as the angelic world, and largely unseen to humans (in the same way the audience do not sit with and see from the perspective of the *dalang* – but now they do, and this leads Mursyid to say a lesson has been lost). The third realm is the realm of the heart of Islam. The puppet behind the screen is the true self in a higher fourth dimension who remains in the unseen world called '*alam al-jabarūt*'. These three realms form the metaphysical realms of the shadow play.

The in-between curtain is also referred to the *barzakh*; though Mursyid did not explicitly mention it as the realm of the shadow play, he does teach about *barzakh* to his students. It is here described as the 'curtain of the heart' and referred to as the screen in the shadow play, which is a non-orientable, non-dimensional surface, which on the one side faces the light, and on the other the shadow. This in-between space is the place in which all the shadows play, and scenes happening in the life of a human being's life takes place there. This *barzakh* is lit up and guided by the *miṣbāḥ*, the Divine lamp.

What is relevant for contemporary Islamic studies, as inspired here by the teachings of

8 Eric Winkel, *An Illustrated Guide to Ibn Arabi*, (New York: Pir Press Inc., 2021), 169-171.

Ibn ‘Arabī and Mursyid, is to consider the shadow as ‘everything we see’, meaning ‘existence’. The shadow play stands for everything that is happening in our lives ‘from womb to the grave’, as we first see it with our eyes in the seen world. Then, when human beings become more aware of their own spiritual and religious seeking, especially in Islam, accordingly they become more aware of the different dimensions beyond the seen world. And hence, they are seeking their true authentic self, asking existential questions about where they are from, where they are now, and where they are going. This is when they become aware of what is beyond the bounds of the physical world and bodies. This is the beginning of the search for meaning and the true self. This is the true self which lies ‘deep within one’s self’. With the beginning of the search for their soul, humans transform from humans (*bashar*) to human beings (*insān*), to eventually become perfect humans (*insān al-kāmil*), and they begin to function in the multi-dimensionality of the shadow play.

Mursyid explains that Bima is looking for the water of life, which here in this verse is the olive oil - because without the latter, the lamp cannot be lit. The veil (shade, *chadar*, *hijāb*) connects the body and the self. The human has all these three realms because it is the veil, the *barzakh*, and Allah breathed into the body of His spirit (*rūh*), which remains an unseen secret to the body, residing in the heart. The heart is central in Islamic studies, as it often is referred to the *hadīth qudsī*: *The heavens and the Earth do not contain Me, but the heart (qalb) of my faithful servant (mu’min) does contain Me*. It means that the human heart (*qalb*) has a tremendous capacity to contain the Divine. The universe is contained within the human in his heart, such as the human is part of the universe. Bima finds his self then, when he meets his guide, Dewa Ruci; only then his Divine guidance is opened, and

he transforms from being human to human being, to the final stage of the perfect human, who is the sum of all extraordinary worlds.

For Mursyid, the truth revealed in the Qur’ān takes on multiple forms. First, he sees a historical truth in the *Wali Songo*’s role in Indonesia, bridging the Hindu and Islamic worlds, as one of his ancestors brought the Divine gift of shadow play to Indonesia. Second, he sees the story of Bima as the search for the self. Third, the shadow play teaches directly the secrets revealed in the manuscript of Ibn ‘Arabī, and the scripture of the Qur’ān itself. Mursyid encourages his students and the public to study the importance of shadow play and see the critical value of shadow play beyond mere entertainment, but link it to daily worship, practices and Qur’ān studies.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study of the shadow play contributes to the tradition of Islamic study and Sufi studies, as it offers a pedagogy directly inspired by the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī. The ethnographic materials presented in this article come directly from the lived experiences and teachings on the ground, which foregrounds the participants’, performers’ and community teachers’ theological and metaphysical aspects of the shadow play. Rather than reducing the shadow play to either a performance or merely a form of entertainment, this article encourages others interested in the topic to delve into the ethnographic study of the shadow play itself and appreciate the value of incorporating sacred text, such as the Qur’ān, and unique works, such as Ibn ‘Arabī’s *al-Futūḥāt*, as well as live and living teachings, such as the ones provided by Mursyid. Just as with Ibn ‘Arabī, Mursyid uses many modes and languages to convey his teachings – shadow play, Bima and

Dewa Ruci, Qur'ān, grammar and metaphysical dimensions and realms, all to demonstrate a multi-dimensional reality and existence.

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