

Entertainment and Circumcisions

Sisingaan Dancing in West Java

by

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Abstract

The article elicits the complex relationship that exists in many Asian societies between art, drama and religious ritual. Male circumcisions in West Java are often elaborated into extraordinary events, including hundreds of guests who take part in a common meal and enjoy different kinds of artistic performances. Sisingaan dancing is an art form developed to entertain guests during these rituals and the article demonstrates how the dance is weaved into a specific conceptual universe. The dance introduces the child to the adult world and dramatises certain cosmological principles of inclusion and exclusion. Central artefacts in the ritual are the wooden lions that are used as vehicles for the children to ride upon. These lions represent potentially destructive desires that are necessary to control in order to initiate a religious life. To understand the intrinsic meaning of the event, the analysis puts the significance of these wooden lions in the centre of attention.¹

Sisingaan

All boys on West Java, whose parents adhere to Islam, are circumcised in order to introduce them to society as proper Muslims. The time for the operation varies considerably, depending on when the family can raise what it considers sufficient money to stage a circumcision ritual, but the boys tend to be about four or five years of age.

Traditionally the operation was conducted by a local and performed in front of the family's house. Today, most people who can afford it take their sons to medical doctors and use local anaesthesia. When the wound has healed, a feast together with a ritual meal is held. Depending on the economic circumstances of the family, this feast can be anything from a very simple meal with

1. At http://www.sant.gu.se/film/singa_depok.mpeg, a short video of the performance described in the text is available. Although the quality could be better, it nevertheless conveys some of the flavours of the performance.

only neighbours and relatives invited, or a reception lasting for a whole day and including entertainment such as dancing and singing.

There are several art forms considered appropriate for the occasion, but as a general rule the show is spectacular and lively and often includes elements of communication with the otherworld. Although they differ in expression and paraphernalia, the performances share a basic structure that weaves together dances and acrobatics displaying physical strength and endurance with suggestions of mystical powers.

In his description of the performing arts in Java at the turn of the century Pigeaud (1991 [1938]: 36 ff.) draws a distinction between *wong mbarang*, which were travelling groups that toured a region with a commercial purpose, and *pemain sambilan*, groups that staged occasional performances in their neighbourhood at ritual events. The scant documentation of the latter category is unfortunate since this genre is still prevalent in a modified form in West Java. People who work as farmers, craftsmen, clerks or state employed officials get together and develop different kinds of performances (which provide the actors with a small extra income). This kind of performance constitutes a great deal of the entertainment regularly performed at circumcisions and weddings, and *sisingaan* is one example of a contemporary performance where local farmers and unskilled labour form the core of the participants.

Each region in West Java has developed its own specific variety of performances suitable for ritual occasions. The performances are thus often quite local even though they formally remind of each other. During the national celebrations of independence in 1995, when Indonesia celebrated its fiftieth anniversary of proclamation of independence, an art exhibition was held in Bandung, the provincial capital of West Java. In this exhibition, art specific to each region in West Java was displayed, which included several performances that reminded of *sisingaan*. These performances, however, used different kinds of animals.

As mentioned, the performances staged at circumcisions follow a basic pattern. The group starts its presentation at the house sponsoring the circumcision and later makes a rather extensive tour on foot through the neighbouring villages, called *arak-arakan* or *iring-iringan*. This kind of circuit is not restricted to *sisingaan* but is a widespread phenomenon included in many other performances as well (Kusmayati 2000). Common to most of the West Javanese performances is that they include either a real animal (usually a horse) or an animal replica (of a lion for example) for the circumcised child to ride upon.

To give an idea about the atmosphere created by the group at this occasion, one specific performance shall be described in more detail here.² The description is from a performance staged

2. On West Java both girls and boys are circumcised with the intention to initiate them to Islam. The feast that includes *sisingaan* may be held for either girls or boys, but tend to be held mostly for the boys.

by a well known group called *Kencala Wulung*. They perform at circumcision rituals, but also during the national celebrations of independence and at hotels as an attraction for, mainly, Indonesian tourists. The performances may vary considerably in style and length depending on if they are staged for tourists, at public celebrations or as entertainment during circumcision feasts.³ The performances during these circumcision feasts may also exclude or include different elements of the introduction, the clowning or the possession that ends the dance. However, some fundamentals are always included such as the *arak-arakan*, the dynamic dances, the lions and some sort of display of physical strength and spectacular skills.

The *Kencala Wulung* group is based in a small village outside Bandung and consists of local men aged between eighteen and forty and includes four wooden lions. If the sponsor of the event wants to include more than these lions, the group rent props and human resources from other groups for the specific occasion. The village economy is based on agriculture and dairy cattle and the members all have their basic income from other sources than the performances. The revenue for each performer vary slightly depending on skill and age but is roughly equivalent to a days work at a construction site or other blue collar work.

Early in the morning, the group assembles at the house of the leader. The actors are all men from the village, except for the female singer, who lives in Subang, a two-hour drive away.⁴ She is paid a bit extra because of her talents as a singer; she has a good voice and knows by heart most of the songs that are wished for by the audience. The props, today including two of the large and heavy wooden lions, are loaded on the back of a small truck. To mark the importance of the singer she is allowed to sit in the front while the other members of the group jump up on the platform at the back and pack themselves together with the lions, gongs, and electric amplifiers that are to be used during the performance. The particular performance under consideration here has been ordered by a villager nearby, so the bumpy ride lasts less than half an hour.

When we arrive, the lions are placed in an open space outside the house where the performance is going to be held. Their eyes are covered with cloth and they are “resting.” To prepare for a safe performance, the local spirits and ancestors are invited. The opening includes a mixture of Islamic prayers and offerings of coconuts, sugar, fruit, betel, small pieces of meat, cigarettes, sweet smelling balm and incenses. An old man recites the proper mantras over the offerings and burns the incense. Each of the members approaches the offerings and meditates for a moment in front of them, inhaling the fragrances. Some take small pieces of the balm and apply it to their hands and head. The foreheads of the lions are also rubbed with the balm. These are the

3. For a more detailed description of meanings evoked by the dance in different contexts see, Hellman (2003).

4. According to oral history, also reported by Nanu Munajar (1986), the dance originated in Subang.

spiritual preparations for the performance, and as they are done the participants are generously fed by the sponsor of the event who invites the troupe to take part in a delicious buffet. There is a real rush to the table and the young men enjoy large helpings of the good food, which is free of charge.

While we are eating, the young boy who was circumcised about a week ago is prepared for the performance. He is dressed in beautiful clothes with golden and silver threads woven into them, making him look like one of the persons in the Indic *Mahabharata* epos. A small moustache is painted on his upper lip and lavish makeup makes his face radiant. The boy is about four years old and is stunned by being the focus of attention, and probably also distrustful of what is going to happen. People indeed agree that the children are terrified but do not dare to say anything. His older mates however, roam gladly around and are obviously looking forward to the event, hoping that they will be able to ride the second lion.

After these preparations, the group is ready to start the performance. A short speech is held to inform the audience of the reason for the festivities and to introduce the troupe. The child is seated on a chair in front of the lions and the open space, which now functions as a performance area. A large, Hindu type, umbrella is held over the boy to shade him.

The music is transmitted through loudspeakers and people from neighbouring villages flock in to enjoy the spectacle. Suddenly, ten dancers run forth to the lions and from now on the performance continues for the whole day at the same unflagging tempo. The song bursts out through the megaphone and the music is loud. The ensemble consists of percussion instruments, a wooden trumpet, electric guitars, drums and the voice of the singer. The tunes are rhythmic and repetitive, foretelling about the possession at the end of the day with their trance-like quality.

The dancers encircle the lions and perform a dance which reminds one of *pencak silat*, a local form of martial arts. After this, they take the cloth away from the lion's eyes and the animals become very much "alive" when the dancers lift them up on their shoulders and swirl them around. The time is now about ten o'clock (a.m.) and when the lions are placed on the shoulders of the dancers the expectations rise among the people by the minute. Still, no one is sitting on the lions and therefore they are handled with extra speed, presenting the children with some idea about what they are going to experience. The atmosphere and the dances are dynamic and masculine. Suddenly, the dancers drop the lions to the ground and the music stops.

From the rear enters the *Lengser*, a person dressed like an old man. He walks slowly towards the circumcised boy and invites him to ascend the lion. He helps the boy from the chair, lifts him up on the lion and uses the cloth, which used to cover the eyes, to secure the boy on the back. This done, he waves to the audience and leaves the place.

The *Lengser* as well as the Hindu type umbrellas were traditionally reserved for the local

regent and the upper class of West Java. The *Lengser* received important guests and the style of umbrellas allowed to be used by the local gentry was even regulated by law by the Dutch during colonial times. Abruptly, the music starts again and the dancers hurl the lions up in the air. The boy, who is going to spend the next couple of hours on their shoulders, shows no emotion.

After one or two further dances the entire troupe starts out on the walking tour through the neighbourhood. The lions, with the children on top, are taken for a trip around the villages lasting for several hours. While the procession slowly advances, the singing and dancing continue. Sometimes the procession stops for a drink or to stage some extra dances at a garden where people are willing to pay. This day turns out to be a lively occasion and even adult men take their place on the lion and spray money around them while the dancers sweat away beneath them. Around the lions, a crowd of people (men) are dancing. This is in the middle of the day and the spectacle attracts much attention.

When the group returns to the sponsor's house, they continue to perform different dances according to the will of the host, or the audience may ask for a song and pay a small amount of money to have the wish fulfilled. A recent addition to the traditional instruments is the inclusion of electric guitars, which makes it possible to perform *dangdut*. This is a highly popular style of modern dance music, especially appealing to the young audience who comes forward to dance together with the group. When the audience is satisfied, the performance continues with *atraksi*, acrobatic tricks. Members of the group stand on each other's shoulders, or someone lifts the heavy lion by himself without the help of the others. These attractions are interspersed with joking and clowning. Two of the members make fun of the whole performance by imitating and ridiculing the display of acrobatic skills.

The members of the group appreciate the attractions where they may display their personal competence and the audience admires the show of individual strength. The atmosphere is tense with expectation and the performance has now been going on for about five hours; it is hot and the music has penetrated into the very nerve system of the participants.

Finally, if it is not a strict Muslim area, the man who previously carried out the offerings, enters the performance. He has prepared a glass of water over which he has read mantras and now he makes a short bow, takes a sip of the water and blows it on the earth. He stamps his feet into the ground after which he starts to perform *pencak silat* movements. These preparations are done to appease any spirits that would be averse towards the performance and to obtain the protection of Mother Earth. The orchestra starts to play a song called *Kembang Gadung*, which is an old fashion song the forefathers are supposed to appreciate and therefore appropriate to play while inviting them to the show. The *pencak silat* movements are attracting other unseen forces to the arena.⁵ He

5. The reason not to include this section of the show is that some Muslims either oppose the idea of the

moves in different directions and suddenly he smacks his hand on the forehead of a man in the crowd. Immediately the man enters into a trance like state, he falls down on his knees and starts to run around like a wild animal. The men from *Kencana Wulung* rush forward and grab him by his hair to prevent him from attacking someone in the crowd. Raw meat and eggs are put in front of the man and he smears them into his face, eating some and throwing the rest around. Suddenly he sees a chicken and rushes to get it. It takes three young men to control him and they tear down a fence while trying to calm him down. Depending on what kind of food he prefers, one can tell what kind of animal that has possessed him. If he chooses bananas it is an ape, if he chooses raw meat it may be a tiger or a wild boar.

Meanwhile the ritual leader has been standing at the side of the performance but now he takes a new sip of water from the glass and sprinkles it on the forehead of the possessed man. The orchestra changes its rhythm to *Kidung Rahayu* which is necessary to get rid of the spirit. The man falls down unconscious and is covered with a cloth. He is massaged, and eventually brought back to this world. While he is waking up, members of the group roam around with a bucket to collect donations.⁶ The possessed person rarely has any memory of the event. They say that everything goes black and that they do not remember or feel anything during the possession. Their personal self is considered to be absent during the possession and they are not in any way responsible for their actions.

The dominant emotions of the performance are those of passion, power and energy. The rhythmic, loud, continuous and repetitive music is like a mantra, encompassing performers and the audience as well as the entire village. The dances are fierce and violence is near at hand during the period of possession. The circumcised boy is elevated to the sky and tossed back and forth. The choreography is simple, with a repetition of circular and vertical movements. The final trance, when supernatural powers are invited to the scene by the ritual specialist, marks the culmination of the performance.

existence of these forces and if they do acknowledge that the forces exist they consider it a sin (or black magic) to communicate with them.

6. The one chosen for possession is often one of the members but may, as in this case, occasionally be someone from the audience.



Sisingaan performance (photo: © Jörgen Hellman).

Animal symbolism in Java

A central artefact in the *sisingaan* dance is the wooden lion that the circumcised child rides during the celebration. In West Java, wooden replicas of horses and lions play an important part in ritual life as means for symbolic statements, which conforms to a long tradition of exploiting animals for ritual occasions. A variety of different performances, used for rituals as well as for entertainment, includes live animals. Ram fights (*adu dombak*), cock fights (*adu ayam jago*) and wild boars fighting dogs (*adu bagong*) are some of the more prevalent performances in West Java where animals are used to express both strength and the unslashing of natural forces.

Representations of mythological animals, like the *Garuda* bird and the *Naga Antaboga* (Snake cum Dragon King) occupy an important place in oral history and theatre performances as well as in the political imagery. The *Garuda* bird is the central figure of the Indonesian national emblem. The *Naga* has a central place in Museum Indonesia as well as in historic architectures of religio-political prominence (Rassers 1982: 184). The buffalo is the symbol of PDI-P, one of the larger political parties in the country, and the Siliwangi military division of West Java has the tiger as its emblem. These images represent only a small selection of instances where animals are obviously important

symbols for power and strength.

In addition to these widely known figures and representations, there exists an abundance of local stories about people who have the power to turn themselves into different animals such as tigers, wild boars, dogs and snakes. Ancestors and different kind of spirits can become visible by taking the shape (sometimes entering the body) of animals, and to *munjung*, marry an animal-devil in the forest, is a way to achieve power and wealth. *Loro Kidul*, the mythical god-queen of the south sea, is known to transform herself into the form of a snake. Popular epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are filled with godlike animals like the Garuda (bird) and Hanuman the ape-king. In the story of *Arjunawiwaha*, the hero Arjuna is attacked by a demon in form of a wild boar. Both Rama and Arjuna (the two heroes of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*) are deceived by demons pretending as deers.

Animals occupy the symbolic space in-between the social and the demonic or uncivilized, and in-between the supernatural and human. Humans and gods are not the same as animals; yet some qualities are shared. Humans and animals are filled with desires and powers (as are many of the mythical spirits and demons), such as sexual drives, which are at the same time necessary for survival and potentially destructive and dangerous. Especially the tiger and the buffalo are exemplary in symbolising this ambiguous condition of danger and salvation. According to Wessing (1992) these two animals represent two sides of the human soul: the buffalo symbolises death and disease but also “rebirth and continuity”, while the tiger represents the “wild and chaotic ...”, although it also brings health and salvation” (Wessing 1992: 302). In other words, animals constitute a connection between the wild, chaotic nature, uncontrolled diseases and social continuity, health and order.

The animals are not only “good to think” but also good to use, because they can serve as vehicles used by man as well as by spirits, forefathers and gods to cross invisible borders between different realms of reality.

The significance of riding the lion

To understand the details of the ritual, why lions are used to carry the children, why the possessed man eats raw meat as well as the basic structure of the event, the interpretation has to move beyond the apparent surface. The *sisingaan* dance obviously has a communicative function informing the neighbourhood about the circumcision. Through the music and by the *arak-arakan* it is “announced” that a child has been circumcised and now is part of the Muslim *umat* (community of believers). To the participants and the audience, the event becomes important through the context of the circumcision, which marks the transformation of the boy into an adult Muslim.

However, the performance is also a kind of dramatisation of social and cosmological

presumptions that are not always explicitly formulated in words, while still underpinning the performance and making the choice of paraphernalia and symbolic thematic rational to the audience. Most societies on Java, including the Sundanese on West Java, are marked by a profound ideology of hierarchy and the idea that stable social relations reflect cosmic harmony (Geertz 1960; Glicken 1987; Palmier 1960; Soemarsaid 1981). The causal relationship between this world and, what in the West tends to be defined as the supernatural, is complex and equivocal. Social actions may have effects both in this world and the world of the gods (see e.g., Keeler 1992). What happens in this world is a reflection of the universal order, but to maintain the established social order is also a way to strengthen cosmic harmony. In the case of male circumcision, a young boy is acknowledged as a Muslim and transgresses the boundaries of childhood, which means that he is now ready to be educated. His social status changes and he is hereafter supposed to learn the rules of hierarchy and proper religious behaviour. One could describe the ritual as letting a new being into the collective, ideological universe. Social events like these are critical because they allow a new person to enter into an established pattern of social relations and thereby to secure the reproduction of that particular form of society. However, they also threaten to disturb the established cosmic order of fixed hierarchies. The transformation requires that the nominee crosses a social border, and that potentiates similar disruptions in the supernatural world. The *sisingaan* performance is a way to illustrate (and take control of) the cosmic instability that appears during the moment of passage. The music and dances produce a specific mood for the event that illustrates the energies set in motion in an otherwise (at least in its ideal state) well-balanced universe.

The boy's social status is altered, and to mark this he is elevated on top of the lion. Hovering over the congregation he is the king of the day (also illustrated by the *Lengser* and the umbrellas), negating that as a small boy he should be subordinated in power and prestige. He is temporarily, by being an anomaly (both child and king), disturbing the ideology of a fixed social hierarchy. Before this new situation becomes balanced, chaos is threatening. To prevent society from disorder the performance ends with the ritual leader taking control over the unseen forces that were invited into the show. He forces the spirits to leave the place and restores order by separating the human body from the animal spirit that possessed it.

Borders are by and large in focus of attention during the ritual. Borders between inclusion and exclusion, child and adult, religious and nonreligious realms, between the uncontrolled and the controlled are bridged and in a sense thereby naturalised, as the differences are graphically stated, there for everyone to see.

Animals inhabit a specific position in this scheme of borders as they both represent uncontrolled desire and simultaneously are vehicles for transformation. Tigers, lions and other animals can be containers for both good and evil forces. People and gods can change into animal

shapes to perform specific tasks and *sisingaan* dramatises the preoccupation in Sundanese society of establishing and crossing borders. The borders between different realms, such as between spirit and human, the natural and supernatural, are not absolute but have a potential of being traversed. The circumcision makes the child cross one of these borders and to progress from childhood towards a greater degree of humanity as he becomes prepared to receive religious education. Therefore it is proper to picture him on top of the lion, prepared to take control of the animal, which represents uncontrolled emotions and desires related to childhood.⁷ The idea that animals are driven by carnal desires is a point further emphasised during the possession when men transformed into animals eat raw food and behave as if they had no control over their instincts. After the circumcision, the boy is formally entitled to slaughter animals, and this is a symbolic statement of his capacity to control desire and to initiate a process of transformation of the animal into a valuable food product.

However, the animals in the performance do not only represent the forces of nature that the child is supposed to conquer. The lion also functions as a vehicle that helps to carry the circumcised from one realm (nature, child) into another (society, adult) thereby improving the child's social status. Animals are considered as living creatures that hold desires (just as gods and humans) but are at the same time without souls (distinguishing them from gods and humans). They can be infused by divine power and make room for deities to enter into the mundane world, or place an animal form at disposal to be used by human beings to enter into realities outside the reach of their everyday perceptions. Animals, in this case the lion, in their capacity of being in-between man, god and nature are perfect vehicles for transgressing borders that otherwise divide different social categories.

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7. One of the most important times of education in Islam is the month of Ramadan when the child is taught to resist desire and control emotions.

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