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The Popularity of Wayang Orang Sriwedari During the Dutch East Indies Period: Reviews of Dutch Newspapers in 1923-1938

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Abstract

Wayang Orang Sriwedari which is one of the cultural theatrical arts in Surakarta City has put an impact on every era, including at its peak which encompasses its historical side. Founded in the early 20th century, Wayang Orang Sriwedari appeared at the same time as the inauguration of Sriwedari Park at the heart of Surakarta city around 1901. This essay is aimed to describe the romanticization of the history of Wayang Orang Sriwedari during the Dutch East Indies era by reviewing a number of archives of Dutch-language newspapers, ranging from De Locomotief, De Nieuwe Vorstenlanden, Het volk: dagblad voor de arbeiderspartij, Nieuwe Haarlemsche courant to Soerabaijasch handelsblad which were announced and reported the popularity of Wayang Orang Sriwedari around 1923-1938. This study seeks to expose the Dutch archives into Indonesian historiography, especially in revealing the romanticization of history of the popularity of Wayang Orang Sriwedari that are struggling in a number of difficult times from the land dispute of Sriwedari Park to the COVID-19 pandemic which has made them pause for a while and adopt new habits. This article provides a different view on the colonial record that had popularized Wayang Orang Sriwedari until achieving its popularity in Java and the Dutch East Indies, although this popularity resulted in several negative impacts.

Keywords: Wayang Orang Sriwedari, Sriwedari Park, Theatrical Arts, Dutch Newspapers.

Introduction

Currently, Sriwedari Park which stands majestically at the heart of Surakarta City looks gloomy because of a land dispute that began when KRMT Wirdjodiningrat was trusted by Pakubuwana X to build a 3 Hectares park in 1899. After Indonesia obtained its independence, the land of Sriwedari Park became the property of the government. However, the issuance of the certificate of Land Use Rights Numbers 11 and 15 by the National Land Agency on behalf of the Surakarta Government has caused turmoil on the part of KRMT Wirdjodiningrat (Wibowo, 2018).

This decision from the National Land Agency on the certificate of Land Use Rights was later challenged by the heirs of KRMT Wirdjodiningrat who then continuously won the case (Windazani, 2010). The land status of Sriwedari Park which was originally handed to the Surakarta City Government has now changed to private ownership (Riyanto & Nurati, 2013). However, the government's decision to not remain silent has made the dispute prolonged and endless.

The land dispute in Sriwedari today is tedious. Various parties involved have obscured the litigation that should be formed for the future of Sriwedari Park. Several parties claiming to have

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legality over the property ownership of Sriwedari have only exacerbated a conflict that has not yet subsided. Like an endless loop, despite many efforts to mediate, there has not been a solution to solve the dispute, even though from a socio-cultural perspective, Sriwedari park has a long history as a cultural heritage and conservation for cultural aspirations (Herlambang, et al., 2022).

Sriwedari is known across the ages as the early conservation area for all the cultural aspirations of the Surakarta palace. Apart from being a place of preservation of Javanese culture in Surakarta, Sriwedari Park has also played a key role as a public space for the people of Surakarta City since 1911 (Yasaharjana, 1926). There are a number of artistic and entertainment attributes, as well as stadiums and museums that complement the public needs (Iswari & Nurini, 2014). One of the icons that cannot be separated from this park is the presence of *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* (Ami, et al., 2016). The *wayang orang* performance is family entertainment for every visitor in Sriwedari.

Wayang Orang Sriwedari has become an integral part of the development of Sriwedari Park management. Its existence can be considered crossing the ages in which it grows and survives from time to time (Azhari, 2014). The *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* Committee has struggled in the post-independence era to keep showing its elegance, even when its stage in Sriwedari Park is constantly threatened by dispute. Then, this struggle continues when Indonesia experienced difficult times due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

After the spread of this modern plague in the middle of 2020, all public activities became very limited. It also caused a decline in public interest in watching the *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* performances. In addition, the significant increase in Covid-19 cases has forced the government to stop the *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* performances in order to prevent the spread of the virus.

All the difficulties faced by the *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* Committee in the past few decades have moved the authors to look further back at the romanticization of history of the growth and development of *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* in Surakarta. Through the Dutch archive site in Java from the 19th century to the 20th century, *Delpher (Nederlandsche)*, the author explored more information to fulfill the historiographical repertoire of *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* from several records in the colonial era.

Sriwedari Park and the Early Appearance of *Wayang Orang Sriwedari*

The *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* known today is a form of toponyms transformation of the term *wayang wong* from Old Javanese pronunciation. The use of the term *wayang wong* began in 930 AD. The usage of this term is found in the Wimalasrama Inscription in East Java. In the ancient Mataram era, *wayang wong* performed the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata (Rusliana, 2002). *Wayang wong* originated from the word *wayang wwang* (pronounced *wayang wong* in Javanese) which means a *wayang* performance played by people. The appearance of the *wayang wong* is a transformation from the *wayang* puppet made of leather or *golek*,

Sudarsono (1990), stated that the early appearance of *wayang wong* both in Surakarta and Yogyakarta was the renaissance of *wayang wong* that has developed since the time of the Majapahit kingdom. Many years earlier, Clifford Geertz (1981) said that *wayang wong* which appeared in the 18th century was a revival of classical Javanese art after having been pressured by the spread of Islam in Java. Early *Wayang wong* performed in the palace before the 19th century was not well-known in public. The performance of nobility was an icon for every *wayang wong* performance that was played for the delight of the aristocracy of Surakarta palace (Murkhamah, et al., 2006).

Since the establishment of Sriwedari Park in the 20th century, the cultural orientation of wayang wong performances has shifted from a show full of cultural essence to have more commercial nature as an entertainment for the public of Surakarta. After the 20th century, *wayang wong* began to be known as *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* which first appeared as a theatrical cultural performance within the walls of the Surakarta palace. *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* is estimated to have been around since 1901 coinciding with the establishment of the Sriwedari amusement park or *bon rojo* (King's Garden) in Surakarta (Ricklefs, 1991).

Sriwedari Park is a royal garden that stands majestically in the heart of Surakarta City. It was founded thanks to the reign of Pakubuwana X who turned the land owned by his father, Pakubuwana IX, into a green space. As soon as the location was determined as a future king's garden (Sriwedari), the people who lived there were ordered to move. Several old magazines reported the beginning of the establishment of this park.

The toponym of Sriwedari Park was taken from many names and stories of Javanese *wayang*. In addition, it could be inspired by the artificial garden of Prabu Arjunasasra, as written in *Serat Arjunasasra*, which is known for its incomparable beauty that is not much different from the gardens in the heavenly realms because it was created by the god, Sri Batara Vishnu (Kajawèn, 1928). The *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* entertainment performances began when Pakubuwana X initiated the opening of Sriwedari Park as a public space that could be enjoyed by natives in Surakarta around 1901.

A number of Dutch language reports were published to introduce Sriwedari Park along with *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* as part of the entertainment performances. Sriwedari Park was marketed as a charming recreational park offering several entertainment features. The May 31, 1938 edition of the *De Locomotief* newspaper described: "Beautiful paths and shady trees invite you to take a walk. Children can pamper themselves there. The seesaw, swing, *Bima* horses, and two elephants named Sultan and Sahat are interesting attractions for children."

Sriwedari Stadium was also one of the best features in the Sriwedari complex considering that this stadium was expected to be the first football stadium in the Dutch East Indies. According to an advertisement in *De Locomotief* (1935), Sriwedari Stadium was one of the most beautiful football fields in the Dutch East Indies where most of the corners of the field had been illuminated by magnificent lighting. In addition, thousands of spectators had come to enjoy international football matches there, such as the matches between the Dutch East Indies football team and teams from Singapore, Austria, and several other prestigious matches.

Besides the beautiful park and the stadium, the *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* performance was the most popular entertainment. The correspondent of *De Locomotief* said, "Javanese theaters can also be an enjoyable show because it has many admirers," (De Locomotief, 1935). Advertising in the mass media as large as *De Locomotief* (most popular in Java, even the Dutch East Indies) for Sriwedari Park and the theatrical wayang orang performances attracted numerous tourists. Due to advertisements from newspapers that were popular at the time, Sriwedari Park was visited not only by the royal elite or natives but also by Europeans.

In the beginning, *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* performed their stage performances in an open space with spectators standing in all corners of the stage by paying for an entrance ticket to Sriwedari Park before it was then developed by the construction of a permanent proscenium stage. When *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* had found its loyal audience, it began performing regularly at the *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* Theater in the Sriwedari Park complex in 1911 (Haryanto, 1988).

Popularity of Wayang Orang Sriwedari In 1923-1938

Opening colonial records from old Dutch news has opened up a chance for the authors to look back at the popularity of *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* in its prime. Through the *Delpher (Nederlandsche)* website, Dutch-language newspapers in Java have recorded stories of the popularity of *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* in Java and even the Dutch East Indies. The Dutch-language newspaper, *De Locomotief* (1935) reported that *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* was considered the best theatrical art in Java at that time.

Wayang Orang Sriwedari started their glorious performance due to the trust of Susuhunan Pakubuwana X. He often provided stages for the performers to perform from one event to another. As reported in the *De Nieuwe Vorstenlanden* (1928), he entrusted *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* to be an entertainer in the *geloofsbelijdenis* honorary event (confession of faith or oath) for the Palace's Princess, Goesti Sekarkedaton Koestijah in Sriwedari Park. The event was enlivened by a magnificent and lively party in which a number of beautiful firecrackers blasted into the air followed by the release of balloons into the air.



Sriwedari Park advertisement poster from *De Locomotief* May 31, 1935 edition with *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* as the icon of the city park (*De Locomotief*, 1935).

The *geloofsbelijdenis* became an opportunity for *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* to show their skills to the guests of the palace. The elites and aristocrats who were present to celebrate got to watch and be entertained by the performances. In addition, at the same time, girls from the van de Venter *Kepotren* (Surakarta) school had the opportunity to see the performance directly for free.

After the appearance at the Pakubuwana X's geloofsbelijdenis party, *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* began to appear in many Dutch East Indies mass media.

Advertisements about Sriwedari Park and *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* began circulating in many newspapers. One of the advertisements illustrated in the 35 edition of *De Locomotief* published in May 1935 stated that one of the biggest attractions of the Solo City was the Sriwedari Park which offers several interesting things: "a beautiful garden with a large pool, a playground for children, a garden for well-maintained animals, a cinema with first-class films, a Javanese theatre, including the famous *Wayang Orang*, a modern stadium with lighting for night matches, an interesting museum to visit." Meanwhile, *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* became a separate icon for the advertisement of Sriwedari Park with the header "The Famous Wayang Orang."

Furthermore, the news about Sriwedari Park carrying *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* as its icon made their popularity soar. This popularity invited a large visit from the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Sriwedari Park which was a big discussion among many Europeans. The visit was conducted by H.M. de Koningin, Princess Juliana of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. A report was published by the well-known Dutch newspaper, *De Locomotief*, on July 20, 1938 edition.

H.M. de Koningin, Princess Juliana is the crown daughter of the Queen of the Netherlands, Wilhelmina who reigned from 1890 until 1948. At that time, Juliana still held the honorary title of princess or royal princess. Her visit was aimed at celebrating her 29th birthday party. The night of the princess's birthday celebration was prepared and celebrated in a very special way. One of Princess Juliana's desires was to witness the *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* performance.

Wayang Orang Sriwedari, who received a guest of honor from Europe, planned to show a different performance than usual. The performance of *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* telling the story of Mahabharata was performed with *Langendriya* (an art performance that combines dance, drama, sound, narration, movement, and facial expressions) and conducted in an open space which the performance usually took place inside a building. It was held at night and featured a number of lighting effects that made their stage performances more attractive and impressive.

In addition to celebrating Princess Juliana's birthday, the show which took place in July did not necessarily celebrate the princess's birthday who was born in April but also celebrates the birth of her baby. According to the correspondent of *De Locomotief*, several things had also been prepared to celebrate the birth of Princess Beatrix (daughter of Juliana) who was born in the Netherlands on January 31, 1938, including the special performance held on the night celebration. *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* show had also put a part in featuring something special to celebrate her birth.

Negative Impacts of the Popularity of *Wayang Orang Sriwedari*

It must be admitted that in the few years after the name *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* appeared several times in large-scale newspapers in Java and the Dutch East Indies. *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* was highlighted as a new icon in the world of entertainment. It was seen as an icon of indigenous culture which also attracted Europeans. However, it turned out to inevitably make the players affected by many problems and other negative impacts as a consequence of being widely known in the community.

A report mentioned the attempted arson of the *wayang orang* building in the Sriwedari area on the afternoon of October 4, 1923. A number of juveniles who had been monitored by the Dutch East Indies police conducted a series of attacks from September to November 1923. *Het volk*:

dagblad voor de arbeiderspartij (1923) newspaper summarized a series of disturbing arson acts in public spaces in Surakarta, including the attempt to burn down the *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* Building managed by van der Rönker.

Prior to the attempt by these radicals to burn the *Wayang Orang* building, they had performed their actions on September 17-18, 1923, after a patrol officer found a fire at the *Comedy-Loodsen* warehouse. The attack continued on the afternoon of September 21, 1923, when they set fire to the exhibition warehouses in *Aloon-aloon* (north square in front of the Surakarta Palace). As a result of the fire and the damage caused, it was estimated that the palace lost around f.8 to f.9000 (gulden). The correspondent from *Het volk: dagblad voor de arbeiderspartij* said that the series of attacks by these individuals were allegedly conducted by adherents of radical leftists and communists.

After performing vandalism by burning many public spaces in Surakarta, the radicals broke into *Sriwedari* without being noticed by the patrol officers. On the afternoon of October 4, 1923, when the theater was about to be prepared for the performance, it was reported that a fire was found near the stage. A number of crew and players were panicked but some were aware of an attack from radicals who were on the run from the police. In the aftermath of the incident, the show was reportedly postponed for some time to neutralize the precarious situation and conditions at that time.

The reason behind the criminal acts that attacked the *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* building was the high number of enthusiastic audience who always enliven the *wayang orang* theatrical performances in which the radicals tried to warn this mass. The existence of a conflict that enveloped the left-radicals with the Surakarta royal family had an impact on *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* who is a courtier of the palace in terms of culture and entertainment arts. This popularity might lead to the attack on the Van Wajang-Orang Committee to postpone their performances.



Currency made by De Javasche Bank worth f.5 (gulden) depicting sombo, an actor of Sriwedari Wayang Orang (Tokopedia/National Geographic Indonesia).

Apart from the issues that occurred in the critical years of 1923, a problem arose again in the following years. The enthusiasm of the audience who came to watch *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* became unstoppable and difficult to control. This led to a new problem, namely the European culture to drink alcohol. As mentioned in the correspondence of *Soerabaijasch handelsblad* on January 26, 1934, several well-dressed Europeans, were drunk and always laughing out loud throughout the *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* performance.

It was an unusual sight at that time for hundreds of natives who were watching the *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* performance to be disturbed by the presence of alcohol in a crowd of spectators. The Europeans reportedly mocked and laughed at some stage acts or some local audiences. The correspondent *Soerabaijasch handelsblad* called this event "a disgusting sight". Together with some natives who could not stand this, the correspondent invited the other native audiences to expel the Europeans and start removing alcohol from their sight.

In addition, a report in 1936 from the Dutch language newspaper, *Nieuwe Haarlemsche courant*, showed more complicated problems faced by the *Van Wajang-Orang* Committee. The correspondent of the *Nieuwe Haarlemsche courant* on July 7, 1936 edition reported litigation for a portrait of the guilder issued by De Javasche Bank. In his report, he mentioned that De Javasche Bank irresponsibly took a portrait of a *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* actor.

The problem was known when De Javasche Bank officially issued a new banknote worth f.5 (gulden) with a picture of an unidentified Sriwedari Wayang player. In its editorial, the correspondent of *Nieuwe Haarlemsche courant* wrote that the *Van Wajang-Orang Sriwedari* Committee was surprised by the appearance of the new banknotes. It was because the De Javasche Bank in Batavia had not yet asked for permission to issue portraits of its player in which it was depicted with *sombo*.

A serious investigation was launched by the authorities, involving De Javasche Bank. The *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* actor whose portraits were taken and the *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* Committee were involved in the trial. The main reason for De Javasche Bank to display the Sriwedari Wayang Orang actor as the official currency of the Dutch East Indies, the guilder, was none other than the popularity of *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* in the Dutch East Indies. There was also testimony given by the victim about what he heard when De Javasche Bank speaks to his colleague after the photo shoot: "Maybe later, it will become money (*Barangkali nanti djadi oewang*)."

The actor of *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* who was asked for his portrait did not know his purpose in the photo shoot conducted by De Javasche Bank. The litigation problem occurred because no payment was earned from the photo shoot in this context. The *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* performance admitted that he did not get any money from the results of the photo shoot that was done to him. So, as the Dutch East Indies law No. 35 Copyright law, if De Javasche Bank was found guilty then they would receive sanctions.

The sanctions imposed could be in the form of destruction of the new banknotes and/or payment of compensation to the aggrieved party. Then, the De Javasche Bank was found guilty and chose to pay compensation to the *Van Wajang-Orang* Committee. However, despite being involved in these problems, *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* remains a historical icon whose portraits of its characters appeared on the official currency of the Dutch East Indies, the guilder.

Conclusion

From the beginning of the land dispute of Sriwedari Park until the COVID-19 pandemic, *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* has been struggling with its existence as one of the cultural theatrical performing arts in Surakarta City, but on the historical side from the archives of old Dutch newspapers, we can still see a romanticization of history of the popularity of *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* in Surakarta. A number of newspapers such as *De Locomotief*, *De Nieuwe Vorstenlanden*, *Het volk: dagblad voor de arbeiderspartij*, *Nieuwe Haarlemsche courant* to *Soerabaijasch handelsblad* reported on the prime and popularity of wayang orang in the 1923-1938 period.

News about the popularity of *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* started with advertisements in a number of newspapers that publicized *Wayang Orang Sriwedari*. Advertisements about Sriwedari Park and *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* began to circulate in many newspapers, such as the famous Javanese newspaper, *De Locomotief*. After that, wayang orang began to be known in many entertainment stages from performing in every Pakubuwana X agenda to appearing as the entertainer at the birthday party and preparing for the birth of Princess Juliana's daughter.

This popularity caused a negative impact on the *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* Committee and its players. A number of radical's attacks had been recorded in 1923 which caused danger and panic when a fire was found around the stage inside the *wayang orang* building. Then, the Europeans also caused trouble for *Wayang Orang Sriwedari* when they drank alcohol and disturbed the audience when the performance took place. Another problem that shocked the entire Dutch East Indies occurred in 1936 after the litigation of the *wayang orang* portrait in the guilder currency.

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