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Voicing Identities in the Ancient Greek Theatre and the Balinese Shadow Puppet Play

VOICING IDENTITIES
IN THE ANCIENT GREEK THEATRE AND
THE BALINESE SHADOW PUPPET PLAY

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SUMMARY

I will discuss the main strategies used by the "invisible" actors to voice the identities of the characters in ancient Greek theatre, and in Wayang Kulit, Balinese shadow puppet theatre. Of course, these two traditions are very different. A Greek actor, covered by a costume and a mask, acted directly in front of the audience and moved his whole body while voicing the character. Balinese puppet master has to act from behind the screen and he moves only his hands. The Greek actor gave voice to one mask at a time; the Balinese puppeteer produces voices of each of the many characters in the play. But there is something the Greeks and the Balinese may have in common: in both performative traditions voice seems to be separated from the physical person. I will argue that it is this separation that enhances and problematizes the construction of gender as well as stimulates the audience to emotionally participate in the performance.

Keywords: performer**,** voice, ancient theatre, Wayang Kulit, Balinese theatre, actor, masque, puppet, dalang, ritual

Balinese contribution to the performative turn

Greek theatre has survived only in texts, archeology and iconography, all of which are extremely complex and difficult to interpret. Most texts are medieval copies. Most theatres were rebuilt and later reduced to

ruins. There are almost no traces of the wooden stage typical for the 5th century BC. Vase paintings are problematic – only one picture seems to preserve a realistic rendering of the stage action. Music is lost and the sparse fragments that survived pose more questions than answers. Recent scholarship, following the groundbreaking works of Oliver Taplin[1], focuses mainly on reconstructing the visual aspects of ancient actors' performances, but their voices seem to be mute forever. However, a few modern artists work hard to awaken the ancient voice. I will present an artistic experiment that succeeded in expanding and enriching the scholarly visions of the ancient Greek theatre.

In order to bring a fresh, performative and informative perspective to my analysis, I propose to look at the ancient theatre practices, today lost, in the context of Balinese ritual theatre. It is a rare tradition that still successfully combines religious efficacy and solemnity with high-quality artistic entertainment, and this may offer the modern audience a performative experience most similar to the ancient one. Balinese performers contributed highly to the modern performative turn. They inspired European artists to rediscover the performativity of theatre. After seeing Balinese dances at the Paris Colonial Exposition in early August 1931, Antonin Artaud became convinced that theatre had to be liberated from the hegemony of literature and philologists. A new paradigm was born: return to the sources. Artists became anthropologists.

I will approach performances in Bali and in Europe as an anthropologist looking for traces of the ancient voice. To better explain theatre practices I will distinguish between the stable "characters" defined by puppet-makers or mask-makers, and the unstable "identities" performed by a puppeteer or actors in front of a live audience.

Puppets in theatre

Balinese puppet theatre is a unique tradition, still regularly practiced and undergoing major transformations. It is considered to be a model and foundation for all performing arts in Bali. According to Jane Belo[2]:

> A puppet is that which represents a spirit. Plays are originally the representation of nonhuman spirits. By dramatic connotation, actors and dancers are like puppets, for they behave in accordance with a spirit which is not their own.

That is why child performers are so significant in Balinese culture: their underdeveloped identities make them especially good "puppets". For Belo "puppets" have become synonymous with trance possessions.

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[1] » O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; tenże, *Greek Tragedy in Action*, London: Routledge, 1978; tenże, *Comic Angels and Other Approaches to Greek Drama through Vase-Painting*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; tenże, *Pots and Plays: Interactions between Tragedy and Greek Vase-painting of the Fourth Century B.C.*, Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007.

[2] » J. Belo, *Trance in Bali*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1960, s. 12.

Puppets made for the Wayang Kulit, Balinese Shadow Puppet Theatre, are flat images, made of perforated cowhide – *wayang* means "shadow" and *kulit* means "leather" or "puppet"[3]. During the performance, puppets are held against the screen with a single oil lamp behind them – to let the audience, sitting on the other side of the screen, see their shadows. However, the puppets are meticulously painted on both sides because humans are not the only audience. Shadow theatre performances are primarily for the benefit of gods, not humans. Every show is a ritual for the gods invited to witness the event from the side of the puppeteer and the musicians who sit behind the screen and are invisible to the human spectators. People are not ready to confront the full vision of reality and may endure only its' shadow – like in the famous allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic* (514a-520a). The most sacred type of Wayang Kulit called Lemah ("daytime") is performed during the day without the screen and does not need a human audience at all. It is a part of purification rites for upcoming rituals[4].

Balinese puppets are very special objects ready to perform complex identities. Being perceived simultaneously as real images and as their shadows, they have a dual nature. Puppets are considered to be very powerful and dangerous, and must be kept closed in a wooden puppet-chest. When not in use, they are placed in a shrine. To ensure their spiritual purity, small offerings are given to them throughout the year and each year their birthday is celebrated with a special ceremony called Tumpek Wayang. Some scholars derive *wayang* from *yang*, "moving" or "floating", and connect this word with a "ghost"[5]. During the performance puppets can be regarded as temporary abodes of the sacred. Before beginning to perform the puppeteer asks the supreme god Brahma to give the puppets life[6]. The God also inspires the puppeteer to give them voice.

The identities of the puppets are not stable. Some puppets can be used to perform different identities in different performances. The clowns simultaneously represent the performer's own body and the cosmic fire of the High God. They have the large breasts of hermaphrodites and soft, fleshy bodies. For each show they must be awaken with special rituals. Puppets of the characters who are killed during the performance have to be brought back to life with holy water and incantations.

A puppet can be a vehicle and a vessel for many different energies. Shadow puppet theatre can restore balance to a community. Villagers often request a Wayang Kulit performance in order to expose an illegal practitioner of black magic hiding amongst them. During such an exorcism the witch can be challenged and defeated by means of the puppets. Puppets can therefore act instead of the spectators by channeling the identities of the real villagers in the audience.

3 » I.W. Dibia, R. Ballinger, *Balinese Dance, Drama and Music*, illustrations by B. Anello, Singapore: Periplus, 2004, s. 44.

4 » L. Rubin, I.N. Sedana, *Performance in Bali*, London: Routledge, 2007,s. 20; I.W. Dibia, R. Ballinger, dz. cyt., s. 47.

5 » G.A. Hazeu, *Bijdrage tot de Kennis van het Javaansche Tooneel*, Leiden: Brill, 1897.

6 » A. Hobart, *Dancing Shadows of Bali: Theatre and Myth*, London and New York: KPI, 1987, ss. 68, 123.

Performing the puppets

Wayang Kulit is a one-man show, always accompanied by musicians. In the most popular Wayang Parwa, based on selected poems from the *Mahabharata*, four musicians play four metallophones (two "male" and two "female"). These are ten-key instruments called *gamelan gender.* Two of them are tuned in a medium register and two an octave higher. Each musician uses two mallets. Usually, with their right hands they create one melody from two independent musical lines while spinning out *kotekan*, "interlocking parts". Their left hands support the melody. Wayang Kulit music can feature two different *kontekans*, played simultaneously. This is the "most complex, technically difficult, and respected music in all of Bali"[7]. It helps the puppeteer to voice the identities of the puppets.

Dalang, as the puppeteer is called, animates all the puppets, gives them voices and conducts the music. Since his art is considered the most difficult and challenging, he is the most respected and most educated artist in Bali. In order to perform exorcisms he must be ordained a priest. He has also to learn many protective spells and incantations to purify the performing space and the puppets, and to ensure his own immunity when channeling powerful energies. Evil spirits may attack him as soon as he leaves home for the performance. When putting away the puppets, the puppeteer should use the formula: "OM, Grandparents Respected Gods, return to thy various heavens, and do not hinder the dalang, for he imitates the poets"[8]. Most of the magical texts, as the one just quoted, are collected in the Books of Rules called *Dharma Pavayangan* (Art of Puppetry) and written on the palm-leaf manuscript called *lontar.*

To perform traditional plays correctly every dalang must memorize many old texts. In the Wayang Kulit performance the main mantras are sung in Sanskrit and the characters speak different languages: gods and heroes use old Javanese (*kawi*) and clowns use Balinese, today also Indonesian and English.

Before every performance the puppeteer has to perform complex rites invisible to the audience. These preparatory performances transform the event into a ritual, and help the *dalang* to fall into a trance. A regular performance lasts for about four to five hours. During that time the *dalang* has to sit with crossed legs on the floor in front of the screen. There is no intermission during the performance. So, for at least four hours he must speak and sing in the proper metrics, with a clear and loud voice, while moving the puppets, conducting the musicians and tapping the puppet-chest with the small wooden hummer held between the toes of his right foot (*cepala*). Tapping punctuates the speeches and always accompanies the battle scenes. Most dynamic events, like the battles, are usually performed at the end of the show and may be especially challenging for the dalang's vocal cords. Trance-like channeling can help him to retain his vocal apparatus unharmed.

Among the preparatory rites the most important is praying to the ancestors, who can improve the performance by filling the performer's body with the ancestral energy called *taksu*. In Bali performers

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[7] » M. Tenzer, *Balinese music*, Singapore: Periplus, 1998, s. 84.

[8] » C. Hooykaas, *Kama and Kala: Materials for the Study of Shadow Theatre in Bali*, Amsterdam and London: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1973, s. 45.

continually improvise, but in their voices and movements they painstakingly repeat the traditional patterns in order to channel the appropriate energies. Their selves seem not to be present during their performance. Recent research in neuroscience may help to better understand this process.

Performance and the self

A team of scientists at the Department of Neurobiology at the Weizmann Institute in Israel discovered that intense perception turns off the perceiver: rapid perceptual tasks inhibit any "self-related" brain activity in the prefrontal cortex[9]. So in a highly engaging sensory-motor act we can actually "lose ourselves". Rafi Malach, the chair of the Department of Neurobiology at the Weizmann Institute, speculates that "instead of thinking about the brain as a global network, we now see evidence for a fundamental, bi-partite, subdivision of the brain into two major networks, an extrinsic one dealing with the outside world and an »intrinsic« network, whose detailed function is still enigmatic but which appears to be dealing mainly with aspects of the self and internally oriented processes". One network can inhibit the work of another. As their motto the scientists quoted Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki (1870–1966), the leading expert on Zen: "Life is an art, and like perfect art it should be self-forgetting".

Strong focus on the external procedures and patterns can inhibit self-awareness in the brain of the Balinese performer and enhance trance-like channeling. Similar processes could have happened in the brain of the ancient Greek performer. Acting was an external and extremely difficult task. In a huge, open-air theatre actors had to recite and sing complex poetical structures with a fixed order of long and short syllables and pitch accent. Their main task was not to identify with the part but to deliver the texts correctly to the distant audience. Some actors had to use several masks in one play. In *Trachinian Women* the lead actor was required to play first the whimpering Deianeira (ΔHIANEIPA), and then her brutal husband Heracles (ʹHPAKΛHC). In *Oedipus in Kolonos* all three actors had to play a part of Theseus (ΘHCEYC) in order for the performance to work with three actors[10]. The sharing of a single role between two actors was frequently practiced in comedy and especially in Menander[11].

Theatre performances were parts of religious festivals. The main actors may still have been regarded as priests celebrating the liturgy and their number might have been limited by religious requirements[12]. The beautiful lyrics they delivered were appropriate for the solemn occasion. No Greek playwright ever composed in prose. Mere singing or reciting of the strongly rhythmical verses could turn off the self-awareness

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[9] » I. Goldberg, M. Harel, R. Malach, *When the brain loses its self: Prefrontal inactivation during sensorimotor processing*, "Neuron" 2006, nr 50, s. 329–339.

[10] » I.C. Storey, A. Allan, *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, s. 58.

[11] » A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, (2nd edn, revised by J. Gould and D.M. Lewis, 1968; 3rd edn with supplement and corrections, 1988), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, s. 154.

[12] » C. Sourvinou-Inwood, *Tragedy and Athenian Religion*, Lanham, Meryland: Lexington Books, 2003, s. 199.

and stimulate trance-like channeling. The modern mask maker Thanos Vovolis requires his actors to learn Grotowski's breathing exercises before allowing them to use the mask. Jerzy Grotowski developed these exercises not only to strengthen actors' voices but also to inhibit their self-awareness and enable the flow.

Genderless voices

In Bali, vocal mimicry is not gender specific. The high voice is reserved for the most refined human heroes. Gods express their supernatural status with deep and booming voices. Low cast characters and clowns speak in low and coarse voices. Only the animals are usually portrayed with apt and humorous virtuosity[13].

The acrobatics of the puppeteer's vocalizations seem to follow the movements of the puppets. His voice is generally vibrant and energetic, sometimes hilarious, but rarely simply imitative. Vocal mimicry in the ancient theatre was also not gender specific, especially in its early period. Aeschylus effectively complicated gender stereotypes. His play *Agamemnon* is dominated by the hyperactive and androgenic queen Clytaemestra (ΚΛΥΤΑΙΜΗΣΤΡΑ) who murders her husband and threatens to beat the chorus of elders. Though female mourners usually performed funeral laments in real life, "the longest and most flamboyant of any lament in extant tragedy" was performed not by a female character but by the young king Xerxes and the chorus of elder men at the end of *Persians* (908–1077), the earliest extant tragedy[14]. Xerxes' entire role was in song or recitative and demanded an expert singer[15]. As Edith Hall points out: "early tragic actors' roles may have consisted almost entirely in singing"[16]. In his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, written between AD 217 and 238, a Greek sophist Philostratus claims that it was Aeschylus who invented spoken dialogue for the actors, "discarding the long monodies of the earlier time" (6.11). He could be right though definitive evidence is lacking.

In the early Greek tragedy elaborate and surprisingly diverse costumes and masks defined the gender of the characters on stage. Visual evidence suggests that the strict equation between character-type and costume emerged much later[17]. Although by the late 5th century BC tragic costume became more uniform, a difference between female and male characters was still obvious. On the other hand it is very probable that actors experimented with vocal mimicry, sometimes overacting it. The Roman rhetorician Quintilian, referring to a style of performance of Menander in the 1st century AD, writes:

comic actors seem to me to commit a gross offence against the canon of their art, when, if they have in the course of some narrative to quote either the words of an old man [...] or of a woman [...] they utter

13 » A. Hobart, dz. cyt., s. 142.

14 » A. Suter, *Male lament in Greek tragedy*, [w:] A. Suter (red.), *Lament: Studies in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, s. 160.

15 » E. Hall (red.), Aeschylus, *Persians*, Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris and Phillips, 1996, s. 169.

16 » Taż, *The singing actors of antiquity*, [w:] P. Easterling, E. Hall (red.), *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, s. 4.

17 » R. Wyles, *Costume in Greek tragedy*, London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011, s. 33.

them in a tremulous or treble voice, notwithstanding that they are playing the part of a young man (*Institutio Oratoria* 11.3.91)[18].

There is still no conclusion to the scholarly debate – best summarized by Eric Csapo[19] – about using falsetto to portray women in ancient drama, especially in comedy. No definitive testimony survived to prove that ancient actors could use high voices to represent female characters, let alone whether they followed ancient medical texts and distinguished the higher voice of virgins from the lower of mature women[20].

Another problem is the nonexistence of binary gender categories in Bali as well as in ancient Greece. *Dharma Pavayangan* instructs the dalang to begin the performance with a stimulator spell in front of the public: "May men be stimulated, may women be stimulated, may hermaphrodites be stimulated"[21]. *The Book of Rules* distinguishes among the Balinese three sexes at least. In Plato's *Symposium* (189C-193C) Aristophanes also says that originally there were three sexes but in ancient Greece gender classification was much more problematic. In Euripides male heroes like Jason (*Medea* 573–575) or Hippolytus (*Hippolytus* 616–624) yearn for male asexual generation. Aristophanes in his plays mocks the real passive homosexuals in the audience, calling them *katapugones* (buggers), *euruproktoi* (wide-assed) or *lakataproktoi* (cistern-assed). In *Women at the Thesmophoria*, the famous poet Agathon is presented as a woman. He is wearing woman's clothes, has no beard, "speaks with a woman's voice" (191–192) and enjoys passive homosexual intercourse (200, 206). Sexual ambiguity of Athenians is the butt of many jokes of Aristophanes' comedies. According to Stephen Greenblatt[22] for the ancient Greeks the two sexes were two poles of a continuum, which could be traversed.

In the ancient Theatre of Dionysus, as well as in Balinese puppet theatre, male performers used to voice identities that often differed radically from their biological sex or age. Their voices became genderless instruments to perform all possible types of humans and gods.

The art of transformation

Every puppet in Wayang Kulit can be regarded as a vehicle for transformation. In ancient theatre, the transformative power could be attributed to the mask. The Greek voice teacher Mirka Yemen Dzakis has

18 » E. Csapo, W. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994, s. 284–285.

19 » E. Csapo, *Kallippides on the floor-sweepings: The limits of realism in classical acting and performance styles*, [w:] P. Easterling, E. Hall (red.), dz. cyt., s. 127–147.

20 » E. Hall, *Actor's song in tragedy*, [w:] S. Goldhill, S. Osborne (red.), *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, s. 103.

21 » C. Hooykaas, dz. cyt., s. 39.

22 » S. Greenblatt, *Fiction and friction*, [w:] T.C. Heller, M. Sosna, D.E. Wellbery (red.), *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality and the Self in Western Thought*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1986.

discovered that the small oral openings in the ancient mask were especially shaped to resonate with ritual yells and shrieks[23]. In drama these primordial and archetypal cries were translated into:

1. vowels or diphthongs (as: i, e, a, o, ie, ee, ei, ea, oa, io, ii, ioi, iou);
2. vowels or diphthongs in combination with pronouns as: *oimoi*, *omoi* or *iomoi*;
3. words creating assonance as: *toti*, *otototi*, *ototototi*, *pape*, *papapape*.

The mask maker Thanos Vovolis, cooperating with Yemen Dzakis, has found that the cries "correspond to different resonance chambers in the human body and lead to a metamorphosis". According to Vovolis, when the human body resonates with these primordial cries the human face expresses "the emptiness of the tragic mask"[24]. The mask of emptiness does not convey any personality nor individual character. It is a channel for external energies and a machine for transformations.

Vovolis has constructed a series of masks from papier-mâché and crushed cloth. The helmet form of his masks is based on archaeological findings and vase paintings. The helmet, covering the whole head, functions as a resonance chamber for the performer's voice. The words of the drama have to be literary breathed into it. In his work with actors, Vovolis draws on yogic methods in order to create a depth and power of breathing "that will allow the dome of the mask to resonate"[25]. At the same time, a helmet with two small eyeholes effectively limits the performer's perception, enhancing his concentration and focusing him on the external environment. What results is a state of emptiness. The actor loses him- or herself and is ready for trance-like channeling.

Research and the theatre practice of Vovolis suggest that ancient Greek mask could transform a performer by emptying him of his own self and distancing him from his own voice. Vocalization of the primeval shrieks and strongly rhythmicized words amplified the transformative power of a religious event. Recent research on the dithyramb as a motor of poetic, musical and socio-political change supports this theory strongly[26].

Disembodied voices

The Balinese puppet is a good metaphor for an ancient actor in the mask. It is mute and must be animated. Voice, separated from the invisible puppeteer, has to be reconnected to the puppet by the spectators. Ancient actors, removed far away from the audience, were also hidden behind rich costumes and masks. They resembled puppets rather than human beings. The audience reconnected disembodied

23 » T. Alström, *The voice of the mask*, "The Drama Review" 2004, nr 48 (2), s. 133–138.

24 » T. Vovolis, G. Zamboulakis, *The acoustical mask of Greek tragedy: Form, function and appearance of the tragic mask and its relation to the actor, text, audience and theatre space*, [w:] M. Vestin, G. Sneltved (red.), *The Face and the Mask of the Actor: Methodica 2003*, (*Skriftserie* 2), Stockholm: Dramatiska Institutet, 2004, s. 110.

25 » D. Wiles, *Masks in Modern Performances of Greek Drama*, [w:] E. Hall, F. Macintosh, A. Wrigley (red.), *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, s. 260.

26 » B. Kowalzig, P. Wilson (red.), *Dithyramb in Context*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

voices to these performers who were actually moving their bodies on the stage. In group scenes motionless characters were considered silent. Spectators contributed to the interpretation of the play by becoming involved in the event emotionally and creatively. Many ancient anecdotes report the misbehavior of spectators. According to a scholion to Aristophanes (*Peace* 734), "there were rod holders in the theatre who were responsible for keeping order among the audience"[27].

Balinese performing arts inspired European artists to study the sources of their arts. They discovered the origins of theatre not in old texts but in the human body. Such artists as Artaud or Vovolis complicate the concept of the ancient mimesis. There were strong limits of realism in classical acting[28]. Balinese shadow puppet theatre helps us to better understand the complex gender strategies used in ancient drama. The gender of the puppet-like characters on stage was produced by clear images of costumes and masks but at the same time it was problematized by male and disembodied voices, severed from the performers also by the propagation of acoustic waves in the theatre building.

C. B. Davis writes: "The disembodied voice is attributed to gods and ancestors because its invisibility links it to the pre-symbolic state before the emergence of the subject and object"[29]. And before the emergence of gender. Such a voice can also be a powerful transformative instrument. It can change a puppet or a performer into a super-human character in the sacred myth. It may be used to exorcise the whole community or to heal the sick in the audience. In ancient Athens, as in Bali, theatre was a powerful machine for communal transformation. Performers were not required to express their "selves" but had to disappear. They did not play the parts but rather were played by them. That is why their voices could destabilize the identities of the characters signalized by their masks and costumes.

In Bali I have witnessed powerful transformations of the performers and spectators. Trance could be stimulated by the rhythm of the song or gamelan music. Further research is needed to understand these processes— and performances in Bali can provide rich resources to study ancient techniques of voicing identities in theatre.

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[27] » E. Csapo, W. Slater, dz. cyt., s. 305.

[28] » E. Csapo, dz. cyt.

[29] » C.B. Davis, *Distant ventriloquism: Vocal mimesis, agency and identity in ancient Greek Performance*, "Theatre Journal" 2003, nr 55 (1), s. 46.

ABSTRAKT

Głos jako źródło tożsamości w antycznym teatrze greckim i balijskim teatrze lalki i cienia

W artykule omawiam sposoby używania głosu do konstruowania tożsamości osoby dramatu przez „niewidzialnych" aktorów w antycznym teatrze greckim i balijskim teatrze lalki i cienia, *Wayang Kulit*. Tradycje te są oczywiście bardzo odmienne. Artysta grecki, ukryty pod kostiumem i maską, działał bezpośrednio na oczach olbrzymiej widowni i użyczał swój głos jednej tylko postaci. Artysta balijski siedzi po turecku oddzielony od widzów ekranem i sam jeden użycza głosu każdej lalce animowanej przez siebie w scenie. W obu tych tradycjach głos zdaje się być oddzielony od fizycznej osoby performera. Postaram się dowieść, że to oddzielenie pogłębia i problematyzuje konstrukcje płci, a zarazem stymuluje publiczność do bardziej emocjonalnego uczestniczenia w performansie.

słowa kluczowe: performer, głos, teatr antyczny, Wayang Kulit, teatr balijski, aktor, maska, lalka, dalang, rytuał