

# Wayang Potehi: Popular Minority Cultural Phenomenon in Java as a Symbol of Multicultural Harmony

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**Abstract.** First, Wayang Potehi was brought by the Chinese to Java in the 16th century. At that time, the Chinese ethnic risked a new life for the opportunity to trade. This opportunity became an opening window for them to bring a new culture to Indonesia. Wayang Potehi continues to grow and is well received by Indonesian society, especially those in Java, Semarang City. Through literature review and participant observation, the authors found that Wayang Potehi became a successful form of acculturation of Chinese culture and Javanese culture. This Wayang successfully combines stories from Chinese and Indonesian. In addition, Wayang Potehi has succeeded in adapting itself to using the local language, so that people can easily understand and accept the presence of a new culture. Through the eyes of Bhikhu Parekh, the author sees that Wayang Potehi is a successful form of multiculturalism in Semarang City. On the other hand, through the eyes of Clifford Geertz, Wayang Potehi became a symbol of Chinese ethnic and Javanese ethnic identity that lives in peaceful harmony. This is a matter of pride for Semarang City and Indonesia as a region that has a diversity of ethnic groups but still has the rhythm and dynamics of living together in harmony.

## **1 Introduction**

Wayang Potehi, introduced by ethnic Chinese groups in the 16th century, is a form of puppet performance in Indonesia in which the puppeteer's hands are inserted into a cloth. Kong (1993:213) argues that the Potehi puppets were created in Fujian Province and the Minnan dialect was used in the naming of Potehi. "Potehi" when translated into Indonesian refers to a small wooden doll like a cloth bag, with a head connected to a cloth and dressed (Purwoseputro,2012:20-21). Potehi is used by inserting your hand into the cloth sheath to control the doll. During the Old Order period from 1945 to 1966, especially in Java, Indonesians enjoyed Wayang Potehi performances. However, since the New Order period, Wayang Potehi performances have been banned, causing a decline in interest among fans.

Claudine Salmon (1985) argues that the history of Potehi in Indonesia can be traced back around 3 centuries. Until the late 1940s, Potehi performances could still be found in Surabaya and Semarang, often held in front of the Temple. In Surabaya, the only place where the Wayang Potehi performance can be seen is at the Kampung Dukuh Temple. Since the Reformation period, when the government gave freedom to all Chinese communities to carry out their traditions, customs and develop their culture, including the presence of Wayang Potehi, the Chinese community began to perform Wayang Potehi performances again.

Wayang Potehi is a traditional Chinese art that tells many stories from Chinese lands. However, after growing rapidly in Indonesia, Wayang Potehi art has experienced a lot of acculturation with Indonesian culture. These acculturations can be seen in the stories presented by each show. Today, they do not only focus on Chinese stories but also retell Indonesian history, which are stories of heroism. This Potehi puppet originally functioned in religious ceremonies or rituals as an intermediary for communication between humans and their ancestors. Nowadays, not only as an intermediary or media in ceremonies and as one of the entertainment shows, Wayang Potehi is widely interpreted by Indonesian people as a symbol of multiculturalism in Indonesia. The multiculturalism that is intertwined with the existence of Wayang Potehi is one of the ways that Indonesian indigenous people can accept the existence of Wayang Potehi in line with its original function, while also being able to adjust to the social conditions of society in Indonesia.

### **1.1 Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism is a view that ethnic groups and cultures can live together harmoniously with a willingness to respect each other's cultures. Bhikhu Parekh (1997) describes multiculturalism as a difference that does not simply arise from personal choice but is a culturally acquired difference. This difference has a recognized authority and is given form because it is bound up in an inherited and historically held system of meaning. Thus, multiculturalism is involved with a culturally inherent diversity or difference. In summary, multiculturalism refers to a situation in which a society composed of differences can live together in harmony by respecting and appreciating the differences that exist.

Parekhin Azra (2007) distinguishes multiculturalism into 5 types, such:

a. *Isolationist Multiculturalism*

Communities that embrace this multiculturalism have their laws and have minimal communication with one another. An example is the Samin community in Indonesia. These communities accept diversity, but they try to maintain their culture separately from the rest of society.

b. *Accommodative Multiculturalism*

An accommodative multicultural society does not force the dominant culture to be implemented by the minority community. On the contrary, the minority community does not ask the majority community to make what they understand followed by the majority community. In this understanding, the majority community also liberates the minority to carry out and develop their culture without any oppression.

c. *Autonomous Multiculturalism*

Autonomous multiculturalism includes conditions in which the minority group seeks to will its thoughts and culture into a collective culture that is also implemented by the majority group. This type of multiculturalism is practiced, for example, by Quebecois in Canada and Muslim immigrant groups in Europe, who demand the implementation of sharia and the education of their children in Islamic schools.

d. *Critical or Interactive Multiculturalism*

Critical multiculturalism usually sees cultural groups in a place demanding to create a new collective culture that does not reflect just one culture. However, usually, the dominant group will not agree to this paradigm. An example is the struggle of the black community in the United States.

e. *Cosmopolitan Multiculturalism*

Cosmopolitan multiculturalism refers to the attempt to erase cultural boundaries, intending to create a society where individuals are no longer

bound to a particular culture. Instead, they freely engage in intercultural experimentation and at the same time develop their own cultural lives. Proponents of this type of multiculturalism are mostly diaspora intellectuals and liberals who tend to have postmodernist views.

### **1.2 Culture as a Symbol by Clifford Geertz**

Geertz argues that culture is a pattern of meaning expressed through diverse symbols (Geertz, 1973: 89). Furthermore, Geertz interprets culture as a group of symbolic tools used to control human behavior. Culture serves as a guide for humans in behavior and interaction and encourages the emergence of innovations that help meet life's needs. Geertz also states that culture is the structure of meaning through which humans interpret their experiences. Geertz consistently emphasizes that culture focuses on the values that serve as a living compass for human behavior.

The components of culture not only contain symbols in the form of signs or language but more broadly also include other things such as movements or objects. Simply put, Geertz suggests that culture is a set of control mechanisms. According to Geertz, the concept of control mechanisms regarding culture is a set of systems that contain plans, rules, and instructions to regulate human behavior. Culture is considered as knowledge that is trusted by society and used as a reference in the assessment system of values such as goodness, badness, worthiness, and unworthiness (Suparlan, 1986: 66). Culture functions as a filter used to determine and select what is considered right or wrong, appropriate, or inappropriate. In this situation, humans need a foundation of thought both within themselves and their group to maintain a wise attitude.

## **2. Result and Discussion**

### **2.1 History of Wayang Potehi and its Development in Java**

The history of Potehi Puppetry begins in the 9th century, during the Tang Dynasty where at that time, the involvement of the Chinese with the archipelago was very rapid. During that time, the purpose of the Chinese stepping foot in the archipelago was only to trade and risk their fate for a new life. Then, in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, the Ming Dynasty ordered Admiral Cheng Ho to sail to Java. This voyage brought a massive migration of Chinese to Java. Of the many Chinese who entered Java, the Hokkien tribe was the most numerous tribe living in Java. These Hokkians came to Indonesia, especially Java, by bringing many Chinese

cultures from where they came from. Of the many cultures brought, one of whose existence is still popular today is the Potehi Puppet culture.

Potehi, according to Hokkien pronunciation, is taken from several words such as Pao which means cloth, Tay which means bag, and Hie which means puppet. For this reason, Potehi puppets are pocket puppets. There are several versions of the origin of Potehi, but the most popular version is that while awaiting execution after being sentenced to death during the Tang Dynasty (617-918), five prisoners used a rectangular piece of cloth to pass the time. They tie one end of the cloth to resemble a human head, then by inserting their forefinger into the knot, they move it according to the character they are portraying. The music is accompanied by using the eating and cooking utensils around them. This performance was heard by the king, who then decided to free them as a form of appreciation for the creation of this type of art.

Looking at the history of Wayang Potehi, it can be seen that the essence of Wayang Potehi is very far from the ritual function. However, its development in China at that time was used as a medium or intermediary to ward off evil things because the stories performed with Wayang Potehi were stories about gods. In Indonesia itself, Wayang Potehi is often found as a means or form of entertainment for citizens of Chinese descent or native Indonesians. Wayang Potehi is mostly found in Javanese areas such as Semarang and Surabaya. In the Central Java area, Semarang, Wayang Potehi is still consistently played by one of the Potehi activists, Houw Lie, in Chinatown Village. Meanwhile, in East Java, especially Surabaya, Potehi is also still often played by Mr. Toni in the Gudo area. The involvement of these two regions arises due to the common goals and missions to preserve Chinese art in Java. It is not uncommon for them to work together to complement each other's performance needs, such as importing puppet clothes from Gudo.

## **2.2 Wayang Potehi and Community Acceptance**

The end of the New Order and Indonesia's entry into the Reformation period became a breath of fresh air for Wayang Potehi activists to continue introducing and performing Wayang Potehi to the public. In its development in Java, Wayang Potehi tends to follow the changing times. It can be seen that many of the Wayang Potehi performances follow the local culture. Wayang Potehi circulating in Java today is the result of the acculturation of Chinese and Javanese culture, where the storytelling performed by the puppeteers of Wayang Potehi is now a mixture of

Hokkien Chinese and Javanese. In addition, the stories told are not only about the stories of Chinese gods, but also in some performances there are heroic stories of Indonesian heroes.

Because of its flexibility, Wayang Potehi is always performed in open public spaces and does not refuse collaboration with other types of art, making the local community also very open to the arrival of Wayang Potehi. Because of this flexibility, people feel that there are new arts in their area that are interesting. The storytelling, which also adapts to the local area, makes people, especially Javanese people, understand the essence and meaning of what the Wayang Potehi show wants to convey. Many Javanese people, especially in Semarang and Surabaya, including the younger generation, enjoy this show. Through Wayang Potehi, Javanese and Chinese people can coexist peacefully because they have one thing in common.

### **2.3 Wayang Potehi as a Symbol of Multiculturalism Harmony in Java**

The existence of Wayang Potehi in Java is one of the characteristics of Javanese and Chinese people who live side by side. In this side-by-side life, multiculturalism emerges which we can see in the two different ethnic communities, namely the Javanese and Chinese communities. In their social life, the Chinese and Javanese (Surabaya and Semarang) live as neighbors in peace and harmony. There is no coercion of the dominant culture by the Javanese people on the Chinese minority culture. The majority community (which here is Java) gives full rights to the Chinese community as immigrants to develop and demonstrate the cultures that have been attached to them. With the existence of Wayang Potehi, it can be seen that the life of Javanese and Chinese people fall into the category of accommodative multiculturalism, in which the Javanese majority group did not limit the development of Wayang Potehi, and conversely, the Chinese minority community also did not demand that their culture (Wayang Potehi) become the dominant culture in Java. Wayang Potehi is only an immigrant culture that is preserved in Java and aims to entertain the local community.

As part of Chinese culture, Wayang Potehi is also a cultural symbol that has meaning. Wayang Potehi can be interpreted from various perspectives. First, as a form of culture that is useful for conveying moral

messages to listeners and audiences. Many Wayang Potehi performances include messages about justice, goodness, and wisdom, in the hope that the audience can convey and practice these messages. Second, Wayang Potehi can be interpreted as an effort to preserve culture, where Chinese descendants who are in Java actively hold Wayang Potehi performances in their respective areas and keep abreast of the times, especially in Java. Third, Wayang Potehi can be interpreted as a means of inter-ethnic interaction.

The meanings that arise for the existence of Wayang Potehi can be drawn from a common thread that Wayang Potehi is a symbol of the harmony of the multicultural life of the two ethnicities. With the existence of Wayang Potehi and as it continues to grow in one area, it can be seen that the area is open to the existence of Wayang Potehi. Not only that, but Wayang Potehi is also a symbol of bonding between Chinese and Javanese people who share the same passion, which is watching Wayang Potehi's art.

### **3 Conclusion**

Wayang Potehi, a performing art originating from Chinese culture, has taken deep roots in Java and became an integral part of the multicultural life of the Javanese and Chinese communities. The history of Wayang Potehi in Java began with the massive migration of Chinese citizens, and its existence continues to grow today. Wayang Potehi became a symbol of harmony between the two ethnicities, where the Javanese community gave freedom to the Chinese community to perform their culture. Wayang Potehi is not only a form of entertainment but also has moral meaning, cultural preservation, and a means of interaction between ethnicities. In its development, Wayang Potehi adapted to the times and local culture, so it was well received by the Javanese community, especially the younger generation. Through Wayang Potehi, Javanese and Chinese people can live in harmony, always prioritizing peace, and establishing unity in their love for this art.

Multicultural life between Javanese and Chinese communities in Java is seen through the existence of Wayang Potehi as one of the cultural characteristics that coexist. There is no imposition of the dominant culture by the Javanese community but rather they give freedom to the Chinese community to develop their culture. Wayang Potehi became a symbol of cultural preservation, conveying moral messages, and as a

means of inter-ethnic interaction. Through Wayang Potehi, the harmony of multicultural life is formed, which becomes the glue of the relationship.

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