

R EVIVING JAVANESE PICTURE SCROLL THEATRE

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Wayang beber is a form of picture performance from the Indonesian island of Java. It has a centuries-long oral tradition, from its beginnings in royal palaces to finally finding its place in two villages, where it has been preserved to this day. However, despite the significance and the strong performative and ritualistic aspects that *wayang beber* had in the past, this theatrical form became very rare and unknown even to the majority of the Javanese. This article offers a historical overview of the *wayang beber* and analyses its existence today in both traditional and contemporary styles.

Keywords: *wayang beber*, traditional theatre, picture performance, oral tradition, Panji, Java, Indonesia

Introduction

Picture performance is a technique of performing stories using painted images and a narrator. It is known worldwide under several different names – *wayang beber* in Indonesia, *etoki* in Japan, *pian-wen* in China, *parda-dar* in Iran, *par vacano* in India, *bänkel-sang* in Germany, *cantastoria* in Italy, and *retablo de las maravillas* in Spain (Bell 1996: 283). The Indonesian version, *wayang beber*,¹ was once a popular royal court performance in Central and East Java, and it has survived to the present day as a living tradition through two remaining sets of paper scrolls kept in two small Javanese villages.

Traditional Indonesian dramatic shows, commonly known as *wayang*, have so far developed in many forms, which differ in terms of narratives, props and style. Movement is present in all traditional *wayang* style shows, and sometimes relates to the movement of puppets, while on other occasions to the movement of dancers/actors. This emphasizes the uniqueness of *wayang beber*: the static characters are brought to life only through narration and singing (Lysloff 1992/1993: 150). According to traditional Javanese historiography, *wayang beber* was a phase in the development of shadow puppetry (Kusumadilaga in Cohen 2005: 18) *wayang kulit*² and despite its

¹ An alternative name for *wayang beber* is *wayang karèbèt/kerebet* or “fluttering *wayang*” (Mair 1988: 57), which is nowadays rarely used.

² *Wayang* puppet theatre has been inscribed on the UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (originally proclaimed in 2003). However, there is no mention of *wayang beber*. Source: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/wayang-puppet-theatre-00063> (accessed 30. 5. 2017).

significant position in history, nowadays it is mostly marginalized and forgotten, a fact which encouraged us to begin researching this topic.

This article is the result of an analysis of a selected bibliography and independent ethnographic fieldwork³ conducted on Java from August to October 2016, and ongoing field research during August and September 2017. After returning from the first fieldwork period, we presented part of our research results in the form of an exhibition in the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb (25 January – 2 April 2017) entitled “Lost and found: Indonesian picture scroll theatre”.

The research was initiated following our first visits to Indonesia in 2013 and 2015, when we gained insight into the theatre and discovered that it has been generally proclaimed as dying. Despite this, its popularity has increased lately among young artists who use it as a way of appreciating their local heritage and striving to bring it back to life.



Figure 1. Authors in the house of the painter Dani Iswardana, Surakarta, Central Java (photo taken by Vedrana Pretković, 5 August 2016)

³ This fieldwork was conducted as part of our ongoing project “Wayang beber on Java”, within our NGO AngArt – open platform for engaged cultural and art practices. The project is supported by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (Beasiswa Unggulan Scholarship), Oxford University: Peter Lienhardt and Philip Bagby Small Research Travel Grants, the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Zagreb, the Croatian Ethnological Society, the Croatian Ministry of Culture and other sponsors and donators. Hereby we would like to thank all of them, and our interlocutors and friends who shared their knowledge about *wayang beber* with us. Furthermore, we would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the Editorial Board of *Etnološka tribina* for their insightful suggestions that contributed greatly to this text.

During our time spent on Java we watched performances and talked to numerous interlocutors who were familiar with *wayang beber* (Figure 1). The aim of the fieldwork was to gain an overview of the theatre from different perspectives: to learn about the physical condition of the artefacts, about the frequency of performances, to observe the social context of the performances, and to familiarize ourselves with contemporary practices involved in its revitalization.

The focus of this paper is on two sets of historical paper scrolls:⁴ the Wayang beber Pacitan which is currently kept in the village of Gedompol (Karangtalun, Pacitan Regency, East Java) and Wayang beber Wonosari, which is kept in the village of Bejiharjo (Gelaran, Gunung Kidul Regency, Special Region of Yogyakarta).⁵ It is not clear how many *wayang beber* scrolls existed in the past,⁶ but the above mentioned sets are the two most known today. This article aims to give an overview of the *wayang beber* starting from an historical perspective and continuing with a discussion of the latest research developments on the material condition of the scrolls, the social and cultural context of performances, and the contemporary forms which are emerging as inspired by the traditional form. We hope that this article will contribute to expanding existing knowledge about *wayang beber* by providing up-to-date information from the fieldwork.

General notes on *wayang beber*

Traditional performances of *wayang beber* are centred around the colourfully painted horizontal paper scrolls rolled onto bamboo sticks on both sides, which are being unrolled by a storyteller (*dalang*), scene by scene (Figure 2). This type of performing is suggested in its title, because in the Javanese language *ambèbèr* means “to open (by spreading)” (Soelarto 1983/1984: 1), and this came to be the common name for this theatre in the fourteenth century (Anderson 1974: 34).

⁴ When referring to these specific scrolls, our interlocutors use the term *asli* or “original” scrolls. In this article, we refer to them as historical paper scrolls, pointing out their age and the material they are made of, because the combination of these two characteristics distinguishes them from other types of scrolls created in later years.

⁵ There are several variations on names for the sets according to the (sub)districts of the Pacitan and Wonosari areas: Wayang beber Pacitan (named after the city of Pacitan, the capital of the Pacitan Regency), Wayang beber Gedompol (named after the village of Gedompol), Wayang beber Donorojo (named after Donorojo, a subdistrict of the Pacitan Regency), Wayang beber Karangtalun (named after the Karangtalun hamlet), and as regards the other set Wayang beber Wonosari (named after the city of Wonosari, the capital of Gunung Kidul Regency), Wayang beber Gunung Kidul, and Wayang beber Gelaran (named after the Gelaran hamlet). In this article, we use the names Wayang beber Pacitan and Wayang beber Wonosari due to the frequent use of these names in the local community.

⁶ A further six *wayang beber* scrolls made on the same kind of paper are kept in the Museum Volkenkunde – the National Museum of Ethnology, the Netherlands (Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Collection number RV 360 5254, RV 360 5255, RV 360 5256, RV 360 5257, RV 360 5258, RV 360 5259). What is known is that the scrolls have been in the Netherlands since 1846/1847, and further research on them (and possibly others of this kind) has not yet been conducted.



Figure 2. A traditional wayang beber performance by the dalang Supani Guno Darmo, which took place in Klepu village in the Pacitan Regency, East Java (photo taken by Tea Škrinjarić, 30 September 2016)

The central role in every *wayang beber* performance belongs to a *dalang*, who sits on the floor in front of or behind a scroll, which is partly unrolled and fixed with the bamboo sticks onto the wooden box in an upright position. The *dalang* is surrounded by musicians, while the *dalang* manipulates the scrolls and narrates a story in the Javanese language. Throughout the narration, the *dalang* imitates the voices of the characters and each time he starts or ends the performance, and when he unrolls the next scene, he sings a song (*suluk*). The singing is accompanied by *gamelan*⁷ music. According to Soelarto (1983/1984: 10–11) and most of our informants, the knowledge and the skills of performing *wayang beber* are passed on orally from one generation to the next, and only a male descendant can become a storyteller. It is believed by many of our interlocutors that women are too weak for this role. According to the *dalang* Teha Tri Hartanto, the current owner of the historical paper scrolls from Pacitan, “women are not strong enough during their menstrual period and so they shouldn’t be holding *wayang beber* scrolls. Also, if they are pregnant and holding the scrolls, a miscarriage will happen”.⁸ To confront this traditional belief that is still passed on to younger generations, as of this year the daughter of the owner of the Wonosari set of scrolls is training to be the *dalang*, and she is the first woman to do so in the *wayang beber* tradition. She is still not allowed to perform with the historical paper scrolls, but only with their duplicates. Nevertheless, this demonstrates changes in a long tradition of *beber dalangs* and a shift in the roles of women in *wayang beber*, which is a topic that we would like to place a greater focus on in our further research.

⁷ One of the oldest music forms on Java is *karawitan*. In the West, it is known as *gamelan*, which not only implies *karawitan* music, but also a set of musical instruments and various cultural and musical aspects. *Gamelan* music can also be found on the island of Bali (Balinese *gamelan*).

⁸ Teha Tri Hartanto, personal communication, 18 August 2016, Karangtalun, Gedompol.

Hereditary *dalangs*, including those of other *wayang* forms, are highly valued in the local community, and their particular importance lies in their advocacy of the “perpetuation and preservation of the *wayang* tradition, a responsibility they take seriously and embrace wholeheartedly” (Lysloff 2002: 171).

Unlike the usual repertoire of most *wayang* forms on Java, the themes of *wayang beber* plays are not Indian epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, but stories about the prince Panji,⁹ which were popular during the Majapahit period (from the end of the thirteenth century until the early sixteenth century) and which were orally passed through the generations. There are many variations of Panji stories, which differ in the adventures that the main characters experience (Kieven 2014: 6), which is also notable in stories depicted in the *Wayang beber* Pacitan and the *Wayang beber* Wonosari scrolls.

The history of this theatre remains incomplete and unclear to this day. On the one hand, it has been suggested that this type of performance on Java has its origin in Indian storytelling. Victor H. Mair described the different types of picture performances and compared the Chinese and Indonesian ones, suggesting that these two traditions of storytelling with pictures have a common source in the Indian tradition (1988: 3). Similarly, Meinhard compared old Indian performances of *Mankhas* and *Yamapatikas* to *wayang beber* (1939: 11) and suggested that “it was probably from the Tamil coast, and probably at a very early time, that the Indian prototypes of (...) the *wayang beber* found their way to Java” (ibid.: 111).

On the other hand, it has also been suggested that *wayang beber* originated from Java. In the tenth century, King Jayabaya of the Mamenang kingdom ordered images of his forefathers to be drawn on small palm leaves (*lontar*), which he called *wayang purwa* (Anderson 1974: 34). Only in the twelfth century did people start telling stories about these pictures, but without musical accompaniment at that time (ibid.). The thirteenth century brought many changes in the development of such *wayang*. *Gamelan* music was introduced to performances with *lontar*, which was at that time painted in black and white (Anderson 1974: 34; Sayid 1980: 25). Later in the same century, *lontar* was replaced with beaten bark paper *daluang* to create larger scale pictures, and storytellers started to use a wooden pointer to point at what they were narrating (Anderson 1974: 34; Sayid 1980: 26).

The key period for the formation of *wayang beber* was the fourteenth century, during the era of the Majapahit Empire. During that period, *wayang beber* as we know it today was formed: scenes were painted in colours on long paper scrolls, wooden handles were attached to both ends of the scrolls and since they had started to be used in ritual purposes, offerings and prayers (*sesajen*) became an integral element of every *wayang beber* performance (Sayid 1980: 26). In the royal palaces, performances were accompanied by a full *gamelan* orchestra, while in villages only *rebab* (a string instrument similar to a violin) was used (Anderson 1974: 34). The first known written record about *wayang beber* performances from that period lies in the writing of Ma Huan, a secretary of a Ming dynasty admiral who travelled with

⁹ For more on Panji in Javanese culture see Kieven 2013.

him to Southeast Asia. In his reports from the year 1416, he described seeing a show on Java which resembled a *wayang beber* performance in the form we know it today (Soelarto 1983/1984: 3).¹⁰

After centuries of Hinduism and Buddhism and the decline of Majapahit power, the Islamic sultanate of Demak came to rule on Java (1475 – 1554). During that period style innovations in the appearance of the scrolls were made due to the influence of Islam, which then became the dominant religion on Java. Up to the sixteenth century, the paintings on the scrolls still portrayed characters with human features, which was not in accordance with the concept of aniconism, and so the apostles of Islam (the *Wali Sanga* or Nine Wali) created a new stylized form of the human figure and carved it in leather (Sayid 1980: 27). These new performances continued to be accompanied by the music for *wayang beber* (Anderson 1974: 34).

Even though Anderson (*ibid.*) suggests that *wayang beber* was then forbidden in the *kraton* (royal palaces) and continued to live on as a folk-performance, Soelarto (1983/1984: 3) similarly describing changes in the style, refers to the manuscript of Sastromirudo and indicates that *wayang beber* was still patronized and performed at the Demak *kraton*, even by the king himself, and that it was only in the early seventeenth century during the Mataram era that the performances were forbidden and replaced by *wayang kulit* for the ceremony of *ruwatan*. From these two sources it is not clear whether the performances continued for other occasions besides *ruwatan*, or whether they were taking place outside of palaces. It is also unclear when and how the *wayang beber* gained in popularity again, since there are records of the production of new scrolls after the Demak era in the new painting style created by the *Wali Sanga*.

Soelarto suggested that both *wayang beber* and *wayang kulit* became very popular by the eighteenth century, after which *wayang beber* started to be performed less frequently (1983/1984: 6). Anderson sees reasons for the decline in *wayang beber* from two perspectives. First, he suggests that since *wayang beber* was “a combination of two old Javanese arts – painting and the recitation of *kakawin* or other incantatory poems” (1974: 35), the painting of new scrolls decreased under Islamic rule, during which “painting on Java was (...) driven underground” (*ibid.*: 36). Second, he assumes that the other reason could lie in the “long period of turmoil, impoverishment, and civil war” (*ibid.*), when the early Mataram rulers didn’t devote their time to the creation of art but rather mostly to preparations for war (*ibid.*).

Despite banning *wayang beber* performances at the royal courts, they persisted as a part of the rural community, where they gained an important ritual function as a part of *Murwakala* (also called *ruwatan* (exorcism) *Murwakala*) – rituals of purification from evil spirits (Lis 2014: 508; Soelarto 1983/1984: 7) and other ceremonies related to, for instance, the birth of a child (Bagyo in Lis 2014: 508) or in certain threatening situations for villagers, such as the plague (Ismunandar in Yunita 2015: 4). However, when Islam suppressed Hinduism in the sixteenth century, the ritual function of the *wayang beber* during religious ceremonies became less noticeable

¹⁰ Compare with Anderson 1974: 34–35 and Mair 1988: 3.

(Soelarto 1983/1984: 8). Belief in magical characteristics from the Hindu era of the *wayang beber* is still present, and one of the *dalangs* of the *Wayang beber* Pacitan scrolls explained that the scrolls are sometimes used in healing rituals. As he described, he is occasionally invited to perform *wayang beber* in the homes of people with health problems. Every time this kind of performance was held, as he says, the people were healed.¹¹ Unlike with the Pacitan set, performances connected with the curing rite were not present with the Wonosari set (Anderson 1974: 45), nor did we hear about such past or present practices during our fieldwork.

Even though Anderson suggests that in the nineteenth and twentieth century “*wayang beber* was virtually dead” (1974: 36; see also Soelarto 1983/1984: 6–7), Cohen (2005: 18) mentions its minor revival in New Order Indonesia (1966 – 1998):

New *wayang beber* were commissioned to stock provincial museums, even in the absence of a local tradition of scroll theatre. (...) *Wayang beber* was part of the curriculum of art conservatories in central Java in the 1980’s, and possibly earlier. Subsequently *wayang beber* style panels and sequences were introduced to the art market.

In all the sources that describe the general history of *wayang beber* and the history of the two remaining sets of scrolls from Java, these two past developments are often not distinguished. Further, it is uncertain whether the performances held in royal palaces occurred in parallel with performances in villages or whether they were primarily courtly art, which only became popular in rural areas after its decline in palaces. In addition, many assumptions unsupported by historical evidence have been made, including whether the *wayang beber* painting originates exclusively from *kratons* or whether there were cases in which scrolls were created outside of palaces. Therefore, further research into the general history of *wayang beber* as well as into the two sets of scrolls is needed.

The exact dates of creation of these two sets from Pacitan and Wonosari are still a source of great debate. Only at the time when the capital of the Mataram Sultanate (1587 – 1755) was Kartasura (1680 – 1755) was the history of the two sets mentioned. According to Sayid (in Soelarto 1983/1984: 5), the making of the *Wayang beber* Pacitan set commenced¹² during the rule of King Sunan Mangkurat II who ordered the production of six scrolls that depict the story of Joko Kembang Kuning. The other set, *Wayang beber* Wonosari, was created in 1735 during the rule of Sunan Paku Buwono II on the king’s orders, and it depicts the story of Remeng Mangun Joyo. Soelarto (1983/1984: 5) suggested that there are no traces of other scrolls having been produced after the eighteenth century.¹³

¹¹ Supani Guno Darmo, personal communication, 21 August 2017, Dilem, Klepu.

¹² “The date of completion of this particular *wayang* is marked by a pictorial chronogram with the numerical interpretation according to the Christian calendar of 1692 A.D.” (Sayid 1980: 28) in the fourth scene of the first scroll, which was similarly pointed out by several interlocutors, who suggested that it marked the year 1691.

¹³ If this is true, it would mean that the historical paper scrolls that are kept in the Museum Volkenkunde – the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden were either made before the eighteenth century or that Soelarto was not familiar with them.

Based on the literature and information provided by our interlocutors, the two *wayang beber* sets moved from the palaces to the villages during the Java war (1741 – 1743), when the King Paku Buwono II escaped from his kingdom of Kartasura to Ponorogo. It was ordered that the valuable belongings from the palace must be taken there as well, but as the terrain was less accessible, they were unable to reach their destination and were placed in family houses in the hamlets of Karangtalun and Gelaran (Sayid in Soelarto 1983/1984: 6). They have been kept there ever since, and in addition to having a royal legacy, they became a valuable family heritage.

Each set of scrolls is kept in a special room in its owner's family house (Figure 3) and stored in a wooden box (*ampok*). The box is approximately one metre long and together with the scrolls, peacock feathers are placed inside, which, as the owners stated, keep the scrolls safe from pests. Prior to displaying scrolls or performing with them, a ritual and a prayer are carried out (*sesajen*). The exact elements of *sesajen* for *wayang beber* have been modified throughout history, but it has always consisted (and still consists) of burning incense and offerings composed of traditional local food. In the past, after a performance, a *kenduri* (thanksgiving ritual) followed and the audience was invited to eat the offerings (Slamet in Lis 2014: 509; see also Soelarto 1983/1984: 10). During our field research we saw only one performance with the historical scrolls, which was not followed by a *kenduri*. However, after the ceremony for opening the scrolls from Wonosari, the prepared offerings were eaten by all the people who gathered, which was not the case after the opening of the scrolls from Pacitan.



Figure 3. Burning incense and praying before taking the scrolls out in the family house in Gedempol in the Pacitan Regency of East Java, during our first visit to Java (photo taken by Tea Škrinjarić, 1 February 2014)

A range in performance length from one and a half hours (Anderson 1974: 37) to three hours (Sayid 1980: 30) suggests that the timing of performances changed over the years, perhaps depending on the *dalang* or the occasion of the performance. The performances were usually held outside or in family houses, either at around noon or in the evening (Soelarto 1983/1984: 10).

One characteristic feature of the traditional scrolls is a specific type of multi-faceted perspective achieved by depicting the bodies of the characters from the front, with their heads as profiles, but with both eyes and cheeks visible (Figure 4). Their bodies are stylized and disproportional, with especially long arms. When discussing the *wayang beber* painting style with us, some interlocutors compared it with Picasso, who according to them takes a similar approach to the human figure. In highlighting this comparison, we may notice a sense of pride in the distinctiveness of the *wayang beber* style.

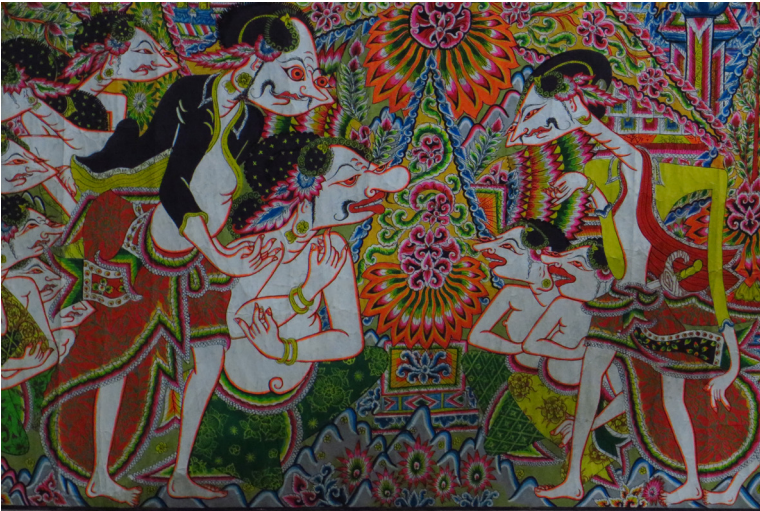


Figure 4. Details of the scroll duplicates from Pacitan (photo taken by Marina Pretković, 31 August 2016)

The main stylistic difference between the two sets is visible in the use of decorative motifs: the backgrounds of the Pacitan scrolls are overflowing with colourful details, while the Wonosari scrolls have a plainer background and a less intense range of colours. The painting technique used in both sets is called *sungging* (a Javanese word for “decoration” and “painting”), named after Sungging Prabangkara, a Majapahit prince who painted the *wayang beber* scrolls for his father King Brawijaya in 1300 (Kusumadilaga in Cohen 2005: 6). *Sungging* refers to a colour gradation achieved by using lighter and darker tones of the same colour or a gradation of different colours from the darker ones to the lighter. The traditional scrolls are made from a beaten tree bark paper named *daluang* (or *dluwang*, also known as *kertas* Ponorogo or Ponorogo paper), and are painted with colours composed of natural pigment powder (animal bones, tree bark or leaves) and glue.

A *wayang beber* performance traditionally involves only a few musical instruments taken from a *gamelan* orchestra. Mair (1988: 75) suggests that this “instrumentation is far more elaborate than any known elsewhere for storytelling with pictures and reflects the relatively high cultural status of some individual *wayang beber dalangs* as compared to their counterparts in India, China, Japan, and elsewhere”. The music is simple and repetitive, only performed during periods when the *dalang* sings.

Wayang beber Pacitan

The Wayang beber Pacitan set consists of six scrolls, with four scenes painted on each scroll. During the performance, a *dalang* sits behind a scroll while he narrates the story, unrolling the scenes from the left to the right. If he is skilful in the changing of the scrolls, the audience almost never sees him during a performance. This manner of performing has not changed since the fifteenth century (Soelarto 1983/1984: 9). The traditional performances in Pacitan include the four musical instruments of a *gamelan* orchestra: a *kendang* (drum), gong, *rebab* and *kenong* (a type of a small gong), with *rebab* playing a dominant role.

The Wayang beber Pacitan unrolls one of the stories from the cycle of Javanese legends about Panji entitled *Joko Kembang Kuning*. The story describes the romance between two young characters, Dewi Sekartaji and Panji Asmoro Bangun (Joko) whose love is forbidden due to the lack of approval of the two kingdoms.

The first *wayang beber* storyteller was mentioned during the reign of the Majapahit Empire in the 15th century. According to a legend told in the literature and in the field, the Brawijaya King gave the *wayang beber* scrolls to a hermit Nolodermo as a sign of gratitude for curing the King’s daughter and this is how Nolodermo became the first *wayang beber dalang* (Yunita 2015: 4; Sayid 1980: 31; Anderson 1974: 40; Soelarto 1983/1984: 11) of the Pacitan lineage. Today, a dispute persists over the question of who was the true kinsman of Nolodermo between the two families from Pacitan – Teha Tri Hartanto (Karangtalun, Gedampol) and Supani Guno Darmo (Dilem, Klepu) – who both claim to be “authentic” storytellers. Even though both *dalangs* claim to be direct descendants of Nolodermo, it is not clear how the legend from the Majapahit era became part of the oral tradition which numbers possibly fifteen generations of descendants.

Teha Tri Hartanto is a young *dalang* who claims to be of the twelfth generation of the *dalangs*. Four historical paper scrolls are kept in Karangtalun in his house, whereas the other two¹⁴ are in the house of his cousin in Semarang, in the northern part of the island. The reason underlying this kind of storage system for the scrolls dates back to the past when, in order to protect them safely, the scrolls were moved every two months from the house of one family member to another, so that the vil-

¹⁴ Teha Tri Hartanto, personal communication, 16 August 2016, Karangtalun, Gedampol. Another version is that the first three scrolls of the set are in Karangtalun, and the other three in Semarang. Another interlocutor who is a close friend of the owner suggested that all scrolls are located in Karangtalun.

lagers would not find out where exactly the scrolls were. Nowadays, not everybody knows where the scrolls are and even if they do, not many people are allowed to see them, nor dare take a look at them because of the belief in their magical powers and their potential effects.

After a few meetings with Tri, we asked to see the scrolls and waited for him to choose the most suitable time for the ceremony. We were invited to his family house on one afternoon. In addition to ourselves and him, Tri's father and uncle were also present at the ceremony, but they did not actively participate in it. We had to give a financial contribution for the preparation of the offerings, but despite suggestions that the complete *sesajen* had to be performed before taking the scrolls out of the *ampok*, we did not witness this prior to the opening in Karangtalun, except for the burning of incense and prayers completed by Tri himself. Moreover, we were not invited to see the box where the scrolls were kept, but were expected to wait in a room for Tri to bring the scrolls. After taking them out of the *ampok*, we were allowed to see the first two scrolls of the set which he unrolled on the floor, but he did not allow us to take any photographs because of their sacred character. He unrolled them slowly and carefully since they were in a fragile condition: the paper had many wrinkles and holes and another layer of a different kind of paper at the back of the scrolls was visible, but Tri did not know when this layer had been added. He explained the story while showing us scene by scene, and commented that he had learned to perform and narrate the story by just observing the scrolls.¹⁵

Despite general concern about the physical condition of the scrolls and their preservation, Tri stated that they would fully renew themselves, since he had witnessed the last four scrolls return to their previous condition. We have not seen the last four scrolls, but we have acquired a video from 1981¹⁶ and collections of photographs from 1937,¹⁷ 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007,¹⁸ 2008 and 2010¹⁹ of all of the six scrolls from Pacitan (however some collections of photographs are incomplete). The greatest visible changes in the paper material of all six scrolls naturally occurred during the longest interval, from 1937 until 2003, with lesser paper deterioration occurring over the following years. What is evident is that by 1981, additional paper support had been added to the reverse side of all the scrolls, possibly on at least two occasions. The two scrolls that we saw at Tri's house didn't display any major changes in material or colour compared with the latest photographs from 2010.

What is curious about the Pacitan set is that the last, twenty-fourth scene is never shown, neither for performing purposes, nor for ritual ones, due to beliefs that something unfortunate might happen. Despite this, in our collection of the photo-

¹⁵ Teha Tri Hartanto, personal communication, 18 August 2016, Karangtalun, Gedompol.

¹⁶ A video of a performance held in Jakarta on 6 June 1981. The video was given to us by Karl Mertes. Among other videos that we have in our possession, this is the oldest record of a Wayang beber Pacitan performance, which is the reason why we chose it so as to compare the scrolls.

¹⁷ Photographs by Claire Holt, The New York Public Library, Digital collections. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/photographs-of-indonesia/#/?tab=navigation&roots=17:c5764c70-c5c0-012f-e5c6-58d385a7bc34> (accessed 27. 8. 2017).

¹⁸ Photographs from the field research of Isamu Sakamoto, a senior paper conservator from Japan.

¹⁹ Photographs by Yayak Antara, a photographer from Pacitan.

graphs, the scene was documented in 1937 and the author of the photographs from 2010 claims to have seen and photographed it as well, but he does not share it with other people.

During our stay on Java, one of us had a chance to see a performance with the historical scrolls from Pacitan performed by Tri. The performance was held in Sragen (Figure 5), near Surakarta, and it was part of a larger event held that evening, followed by a contemporary *wayang kulit* performance. This event was also associated with the magical properties of the scrolls, which was described by a close friend of the *dalang*:

When we were about to leave Pacitan for Sragen, he [Teha Tri Hartanto] told me that he would bring two scrolls, the first and the second one. (...) So two scrolls were put in the box [*ampok*] but after arriving in Wonogiri, the other four scrolls that were in the house before suddenly appeared in the trunk of the car.²⁰

The sacred nature and magical properties are not only reserved for *wayang beber* but have been associated with other *wayang* forms, and as Geertz described it, “for the Javanese, mystical experience is not a rejection of the world but a temporary retirement from it for purposes of increasing spiritual strength in order to operate more effectively in the mundane sphere” (1960: 275). During our fieldwork, both of the sets were given such attributes by our interlocutors, especially the owner of the Pacitan scrolls who described communication with the scrolls as guidance for his performances (such as teaching him how to perform or even asking for permission to take them out of the *ampok*), or as an intermediary in communicating with his ancestors.



Figure 5. A traditional wayang beber performance held in Sragen in Central Java by the dalang Teha Tri Hartanto (with wayang kulit setting in the background) (photo taken by Marina Pretković, 20 August 2016)

²⁰ Faris Wibisono, personal communication, 30 August 2016, Pracimantoro.

The performance in Sragen was opened with six men entering the stage. They were four musicians and Tri as the *dalang*, dressed in traditional clothes: *batik*²¹ cloth wrapped around their waist (*sarong*) painted with motives of the Surakarta palace, a short jacket (*peskap*), a dagger (*keris*) tucked into the belt on the back, and a traditional Javanese headdress (*blangkon*) with matching *batik* motifs. There was also an elderly man who later led the opening prayer prior to the performance. They were all carrying parts of the offerings: candles, incense, a plate of food with roasted chicken, *pisang raja* (a type of banana), rice and a plate of flowers. Tri was circling around the *ampok*, covered with the *batik* cloth, and throwing flowers from the plate. After arranging all the candles and food on the floor in front of the *ampok*, the musicians sat by their instruments (*kendang*, *rebab*, *gong* and *kenong*) placed behind it. Tri sat behind the box and opened it in a ceremonial manner. He first took out the peacock feathers and then two scrolls, after which he closed the lid. The music then started and Tri began singing while unrolling the first scroll. During the performance, which lasted for about one hour, he presented the first two scrolls, which we saw previously in the house of the *dalang*.

Since the scrolls are old and in poor physical condition, one set of duplicates of the historical scrolls on canvas was created in 2010 by the painter Almar Hum Musafiq, and these are used for the performances today. These duplicates are kept by the relative of the *dalang* Supani in Gedompol, who claims to be the fifteenth descendant in the lineage of *dalangs*. The historical paper scrolls were in his family, as he recalls,²² until around 2008 or 2009 when they were taken to Karangtalun by Tri's father, who claimed the scrolls belonged to his ancestors. Despite this long-lasting dispute between the families, today they both have the same goal: to hand down the tradition and preserve the existence of *wayang beber*.

From the beginning of August 2016 until August 2017, Supani collaborated with a group named *Wayang beber Sakbendino* from Pacitan city (more about the group is written later in this text) in such a way that along with their everyday performance of the contemporary *wayang beber*, once a month Supani performed a traditional *wayang beber* in different locations in the region, using the duplicates. Even though the scrolls were not the historical ones, Supani performed a ritual before the show, and after that narrated the same story accompanied by music as did the *dalangs* before him. He said that during his performances, he narrates the last scene as well, but never unrolls the scroll to show it. According to him, the twenty-fourth scene is not painted on the duplicates, but he has never opened the scroll to the end. His performances typically lasted for about an hour and a half and were always held during the evening, either in his home or in the houses of people from his village. We saw two such public performances in Klepu and they were both attended mostly by people from the village.

Efforts to preserve the *Wayang beber* Pacitan have come not only from these two families but also from the local government in Pacitan. They had the idea of setting

²¹ A traditional technique of painting fabrics using wax and dyes.

²² Supani Guno Darmo, personal communication, 10 October 2016, Dilem, Klepu.

up a *wayang beber* museum in Pacitan and focusing on developing tourism around it, but these ideas never came to life. Nevertheless, government officials are trying to promote their cultural heritage by collaborating with Rudi Prasetyo and organizing *wayang beber* performances. Rudi is a *wayang beber* storyteller who is not a descendant from the family of the *dalangs*, but who performs with another set of duplicates of the historical scrolls that he made himself. Even though we did not see any of his performances, family members who claim to be Nolodermo's direct descendants suggested that these performances do not carry the true spirit and the magical power of *wayang beber* cannot be felt.

Wayang beber Wonosari

The second historical *wayang beber* set is kept in the hamlet of Gelaran with the family of Wisto Utomo. He inherited the scrolls from his father, and even though he is certain that he is a member of the fifteenth generation of scroll owners, he cannot recall the story about the beginning of the storytellers' lineage. He himself is still learning to be the *dalang*, so this role is currently designated to his cousin Karmanto Hatikusumo who learned to perform from Wisto's father, occasionally performing with the historical scrolls from 2003 onwards.²³ Nowadays, Karmanto is teaching Wisto's daughter Nony Tia Fatmawati to be a *wayang beber* storyteller. Once Tia is ready to perform, she will be the first known female *wayang beber dalang* from a hereditary lineage.

There are eight scrolls in total and even though there is no mention of the painter's name in the literature, it has been suggested that he was a painter from the royal court of Kartasura and, according to Wisto, his name was Drajah. All eight scrolls are kept in one *ampok*, but they do not belong to just one story as they do in Pacitan. Four of them, each consisting of four scenes, depict a story Remeng Mangun Joyo, describing episodes from the time when Panji lived as a hermit and surpassed many obstacles in order to return to his wife Dewi Sekartaji. As concerns the remaining four scrolls, there are many uncertainties. Two scrolls with four scenes resemble the Pacitan set the most, and it is not known whether only one or both present the story of Joko Tarub. The remaining two scrolls were often not allowed to be seen and it is not clear whether they belong to the same story or whether they are fragments of two separate stories (Soelarto 1983/1984: 12; Lysloff 1992/1993: 149).

As we were interested in seeing the scrolls, we had to arrange the ceremony with Wisto and provide the funds needed to prepare food for the ritual. Wisto, as he explained, does not reveal the scrolls often, and only if somebody asks to see them. Since this kind of event rarely occurs, many people from the village – mostly men

²³ Since Wisto, the owner of the scrolls expressed a wish to become the *dalang*, it is not clear if Karmanto's role is only temporary or whether it will become secondary after/if Wisto starts performing.

– were interested in viewing the scrolls together with us that afternoon. The food used as part of the ritual was prepared in the morning by women from the family. The closed *ampok* was firstly displayed in a small, dim room with plates of flowers presented as offerings in front of it (Figure 6). The event began with the burning of incense and a prayer made by Wisto's mother, after which the *ampok* was carried by Wisto into the large room where the scrolls were put upright on the *ampok* and unrolled in front of everyone (Figure 7). Out of eight scrolls in Wonosari, we were only allowed to see four scrolls depicting the Remeng Mangun Joyo story and only one scroll depicting the Joko Tarub story. Wisto explained that it is forbidden to show the three other scrolls “because they are the oldest scrolls. They are very sacred.”²⁴ He also mentioned that the first two scrolls about Remeng Mangun Joyo are read from right to left, while the third and fourth are read from left to right, but he couldn't explain why this was the case. We were allowed to take photographs of the scrolls, but we had to remain a small distance from the box. After the last scroll was shown, they were all placed back into the box along with the peacock feathers in a ceremonial manner. Prior to placing each scroll back in the *ampok*, Wisto quietly recited a short prayer. Afterwards, a village elder led a speech and prayer, following which all of the gathered people sat on the floor and ate the food which had been prepared for the ritual (Figure 8).



Figure 6. The closed *ampok* with flowers presented as offerings (*sesajen*) in Gelaran, the Special Region of Yogyakarta (photo taken by Tea Škrinjarić, 27 September 2016)

²⁴ Wisto Utomo, personal communication, 31 August 2016, Gelaran, Bejiharjo.



Figure 7. Wisto Utomo while displaying one scroll from the Wayang beber Wonosari set in Gelaran, in the Special Region of Yogyakarta (photo taken by Tea Škrinjarić, 27 September 2016)



Figure 8. Food prepared for the ritual which was eaten by the gathered people after the scrolls had been stored away, Gelaran, Special Region of Yogyakarta (photo taken by Marina Pretković, 27 September 2016)

According to the description of the *dalang* Karmanto, when performances of the Remeng Mangun Joyo story occur, they are approximately two hours long and are also accompanied by several *gamelan* instruments which are enriched with female singers (*sinden*). While narrating the story, he sits in front of the scroll with his back turned to the audience and points to the scenes and characters with a wooden stick.

Lystoff (1992/1993: 147) and Anderson (1974: 46) suggested that while the Pacitan set still managed to remain a part of the living theatre tradition, the Wonosari scrolls were no longer played but used only as ritual objects, and for the local community this set was primarily an object of worship, named *pepunden* (Soelarto 1983/1984: 9). During our fieldwork we did not see any performances with the Wayang beber Wonosari scrolls nor were we told about any kind of active performative practice which could explain why these scrolls were better preserved than the scrolls from Pacitan. Some attempts in revitalizing Wayang beber Wonosari were made in 2005 when Indonesian artists gathered in Gelaran in order to make duplicates of the scrolls intended for museum displays. The problem was that they did not have good quality paper, nor a painter able to carry out the task faithfully, and so this idea was not realised (Chan 2010). Nevertheless, in 2014 a duplicate of the Wonosari set of scrolls was made on Manila paper by a painter named Indiria Maharsi, and these scrolls were intended to be used for performances.

Even though the Wayang beber Pacitan scrolls are considered to be a finer quality court painting and, as Anderson (1974: 40) described them, “beautiful and sophisticated in composition, design and coloring”,²⁵ it is Wayang beber Wonosari’s less decorative background and the manner of performing that has inspired many artists interested in the *wayang beber* tradition and in creating contemporary picture performances on Java.

Contemporary currents in *wayang beber*

After reading about *wayang beber* mostly in the context of vanishing traditions and forgotten forms in the performing arts, it was surprising to see that there are strong tendencies presently pushing for its revitalization. This is a current resulting mostly from the efforts of several enthusiasts, but this tendency had also become visible to locals and provoked greater interests from scholars as well. Meeting those artists who are involved in creating new *wayang beber* performances and paintings in a style resembling that of the traditional scrolls was our first point of contact with this picture scroll theatre.

One of the painters we met, Hermin Istiariningsih (known as Bu Ning) from Surakarta, is the only woman who paints scenes from the historical *wayang beber*

²⁵ On the contrary, Cohen (2005: 17) disagrees with Anderson and suggests that this is just a speculation and that much superior work was and is also produced in rural areas.

scrolls from Pacitan, scenes which inspired her to create her paintings on canvas. Although she never saw the historical scrolls in person, on the basis of photographs she was given in 2006, Bu Ning made duplicates of all six scrolls from Pacitan for the museum Wayang dan Topeng Setiadarma near Ubud, Bali.

A further two artists who we met in Surakarta – Faris Wibisono and Dani Iswardana – are artists of a younger generation with a more individual approach to the traditional scrolls. Faris also draws his inspiration from the Pacitan set, and plays with its form (by repeating the Pacitan format of twenty-four scenes on six scrolls), painting technique (by using *sungging*, but applying his own colour palette) and motifs (by including motifs connected with the traditional lifestyle – farm animals, crops, agricultural tools, traditional clothes – along with new ones such as modern technology used in agriculture and communication, modern shops and modern clothes in a similarly dense and decorative background) (Figure 9). His focus is on depicting stories concerning the vanishing Javanese rural customs and values (such as social gatherings and activities in the villages, living by the laws of nature, farming and agronomy), and he has created a set of six scrolls, naming them Wayang Beber Tani or “the agricultural *wayang beber*”. This also became the name he uses for his performances with these scrolls, which he began in 2016. He also creates drawing workshops for children and teaches storytelling.



Figure 9. A scene from a contemporary wayang beber scroll by Faris Wibisono (photo taken by Tea Škrinjaric, 1 August 2016)

Dani is a painter who focuses on painting *wayang beber* scrolls and is already quite well-known in the *beber* community. He uses tradition as an inspiration for creating new designs and translates tradition into contemporary forms of language. In his scrolls, Dani deals with social criticisms and comments on the problems of contemporary Java such as globalization, corruption and ecological issues, by placing his

characters in his own environment: in the city, at the traditional market, and at shopping centres. Dani was also a founder of one of the first contemporary *wayang beber* groups called Wayang Beber Kota (or “urban *wayang beber*”) which he commenced in 2004 with Tri Ganjar Wicaksono as the storyteller (Lis 2014: 511; personal communication with Dani). Today, Wayang Beber Kota is active under a different name – Wayang Beber Sakbendino (“everyday *wayang beber*”) – after having formed in early August 2016 in Pacitan on the initiative of Tri Ganjar. As the group’s name suggests, they have been performing for one year every day at a different location in Pacitan or in nearby towns and villages. The location and duration vary for each performance, as does the accompanying music, which is often a combination of traditional and electronic genres. The scrolls they use are the scrolls painted by Dani Iswardana and new ones created by Tri Ganjar. One of these *sakbendino* performances was held in the surroundings of Jolotundo temple in Mojokerto, East Java. The *dalang*, Tri Ganjar, was sitting in front of the scroll which was held up by two other group members, and he used a long wooden pointer to show characters or scenes which he was describing. He was dressed in casual clothes, as were the other members of the group, who contributed to the show by either singing or playing music. The performance was held in the evening, lasted around thirty minutes and was attended by only a dozen people from the village who gathered in front of a *warung* (a type of Indonesian small restaurant) where the performance took place. Despite not being many in number, the audience loudly commented on the *dalang*’s narration and often laughed. Since the story was recounted in the Javanese language, we were not able to understand it, but the group members explained to us that through the story they reminded the audience that this exact area used to be appreciated for its fresh water sources in the past, and placed it in the context of the importance of water sources today. The performances of Wayang beber Sakbendino were normally not given a name and the story often included people or details from the environment of the place where it was performed, adapting each time to the local context (Figure 10).



Figure 10. A contemporary wayang beber performance by Wayang Beber Sakbendino in Mojokerto, East Java (photo taken by Marina Pretković, 31 August 2016)

Another group, active in the Surakarta art scene from 2012 onwards (Lis 2014: 515), is Wayang Beber Welingan, or as they like to describe themselves, “socio-educational *wayang beber*”. The word “weling” denotes a “message” in the Javanese language, and therefore the name of the group can be interpreted as a *wayang beber* that wants to convey messages, inform and educate. Special focus in group performances is placed on raising awareness about environmental protection, which is today one of the biggest issues in Indonesia. The founder of the group is a painter named Anthony Sastrowijoyo who has created all of the group’s scrolls using the traditional *batik* technique. Innovations used in their performances include instruments made of recycled materials, an innovation in accordance with their aim of illustrating creative ways of using waste and materials that seem unusable. On one occasion we attended their morning workshop and a performance held at an international elementary school in Surakarta. First, they held short lectures about *wayang* in general and about their group. Then the pupils were divided into groups and created single paintings based on a template of one of the group’s scrolls, and made up their own short stories which they then presented in the form of a picture performance to the other children. Afterwards, the group held a twenty minute performance using one *batik* scroll that depicts the adventures of the main character Joko Weling, and which was narrated by Paksi Rukmawati. Unlike in the traditional performances, the *dalang* narrating the story was female. The music was the group’s original work as influenced by traditional music and accompanied by instruments made of plastic waste. The songs performed during the opening, at the end, and between scenes were sung by a singer who also helped the *dalang* by pointing at the characters with a wooden pointer. One of us completed a short dancing performance with a traditional *wayang* mask during one of the songs. After the performance, a group member explained the differences and connections between the traditional performances and their own (Figure 11).



Figure 11. A contemporary wayang beber performance by Wayang beber Welingan in Surakarta, Central Java (photo taken by Vedrana Pretković, 8 September 2016)

In 2009, a group of artists formed an art collective called Wayang Beber Metropolitan, based in the capital city of Jakarta. All members of the collective dedicated themselves to their common passion – creating *wayang beber* performances and presenting them to a wider, urban audience. They moved the old Javanese tradition to the Indonesian metropolis, using their shows to promote critical discussions between different generations about the problems of big cities. Alongside political corruption, ecological and social problems, they criticise the fast-paced lifestyle, which they assert causes alienation and a loss of contact with their tradition. *Wayang beber* is therefore viewed as a means for gathering different generations, who then collectively think through problems from their own environment and learn about local history and traditional arts.

The *wayang* is a spectacle but also a guide – a form of entertainment that has a positive meaning and provides a good example for life. A form of amusement and guidance for understanding life. (...) This can be a useful medium for discussing ecology, peace, life and many things.²⁶

In a different manner to other groups who narrate in the Javanese language, they use Indonesian in their storytelling, to attract audiences who are not familiar with the Javanese language used in the traditional *wayang beber* performances. Their music is created by combining vocals with different kinds of musical instruments, including the *gamelan*. To make the performances more dynamic and to more closely connect with younger generations, the group often uses puppets, dance and video projections together with scrolls. For instance, their performance *Teror di teror* (Terror in terror) held in the Wayang museum in Jakarta, was a good example of a mixed media performance. Before the show, which started at noon, a workshop for drawing *wayang beber* characters was held, during which one of the group members described the technique and style of the traditional *wayang beber* paintings to children and their parents. As in traditional performances, the show started with an introductory piece of music. In contrast to the traditional performances, there was no *sesajen* and the performers were dressed in casual *batik* clothes. The *dalang*, Samuel S. Adi Prasetyo, sat in front of a wooden frame with a banana tree log placed on top, resembling the *wayang kulit* performances (Figure 12). Throughout the entire performance two scrolls were used, but they were not on display the whole time: occasionally there were photographs and video projections on a large screen at the back of the stage, to which Samuel, just as with the scroll, used a long wooden pointer to help narrate the story. Besides the scroll and projections, *wayang kulit* puppets and puppets made of waste materials were used during the performance. *Teror di teror* was a story that compared external terror from modern society and the internal terror that we as individuals experience. Despite its serious connotation, many parts of this two hour show were narrated in a humorous tone, which could be seen in the audience's reactions.

²⁶ Samuel S. Adi Prasetyo, personal communication, 18 September 2016, Jakarta.



Figure 12. A contemporary wayang beber performance *Teror di teror* by Wayang Beber Metropolitan in Jakarta (photo taken by Tea Škrinjarić, 18 September 2016)

During our fieldwork we have followed and documented works of these three contemporary *wayang beber* groups who are currently the most active on Java. What connects them is the Wonosari performing style, combining modern and traditional music, using one scroll to tell many different stories and finding their inspiration in Panji stories. All of them are in some way socially engaged and want to convey critique of contemporary Indonesia and through performances promote the communal aspect of a social gathering, which is part of the core of the Javanese culture. The painters and members of art collectives often cross paths and meet at similar events throughout Java. As one artist commented: “From an unconnected community we consciously switched to a collective because we love *wayang beber*, especially Panji. We can all have our own paths, but we follow the same goal which is *wayang beber*.”²⁷

Conclusion – the challenges of preserving *wayang beber*

The historical paper scrolls of Pacitan and Wonosari have a great value as material cultural heritage as these scrolls document courtly painting from the end of seventeenth and early eighteenth century and in the specific form of horizontal paper scrolls. They are made on high quality beaten bark paper (*daluang*), which according to Isamu Sakamoto, a senior paper conservator,²⁸ constitutes evidence of highly

²⁷ Faris Wibisono, personal communication, 30 August 2016, Pracimantoro.

²⁸ Isamu Sakamoto, an expert on beaten bark paper who has been researching the *wayang beber* scrolls; personal communication during July and August 2017, Japan.

skilled craftsmanship from the Mataram era. On several occasions he emphasized that today in Indonesia there are still no craftsman skilled enough, nor adequate tools for producing *daluang* of the same quality, which could produce an identical duplicate of the historical scrolls. Today, both sets are in poor condition due to humidity and insect damage, and they therefore need urgent restoration by conservators and restorers. Performing with the scrolls has resulted in a physical deterioration of the paper. However, a solution such as placing them in a museum for public display, on the other hand, detaches them from their traditional purpose and changes their meaning for the local community. Therefore, making duplicates of both sets of scrolls takes positive steps to preserve this form of theatre, since it provides the possibility of more frequent performances and public access to the tradition, without endangering the original artefacts. In that context, *wayang beber* enthusiasts and artists surely provide inspirational examples which revive the local tradition by bringing it closer to the younger generations through art. Some interlocutors gave suggestions on how to make *wayang beber* more appealing to modern audiences by saying that its performance style should be more like the popular shadow puppet theatre *wayang kulit*. A similar solution has been proposed by the Pacitan Tourist Office which plans to spread knowledge of *wayang beber* by organizing more dynamic routine performances and in that way also attracting tourists to this region.²⁹

Besides the material aspect (the paper scrolls/artefacts), there is also a performative/immaterial one. They are intertwined and ought to be taken in account equally while deliberating over the preservation of *wayang beber*. The issue here lies with the traditional beliefs of the local community, especially the owners, according to whom the scrolls cannot be taken out of the house or opened by just anybody. Moreover, the *wayang beber* in Pacitan is, as in the past, believed to have healing powers, which demonstrates its important role in the community above a mere art performance. Therefore, in future attempts to preserve the *wayang beber*, it will be challenging to create a path which will serve both the purpose of conserving the historical paper scrolls, while at the same time respecting the still (to some extent) living tradition of the Javanese picture performance.

²⁹ Wasi Prayitno, head of the Department of Culture, Tourism, Youth and Sports of the Pacitan Regency; personal communication, 30 September 2016, Pacitan.

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Oživljavajući javansko kazalište svitaka

Wayang beber je kazalište svitaka s indonezijskog otoka Jave. Ta je višestoljetna tradicija započela u kraljevskim palačama te se prenijela u sela Središnje i Istočne Jave gdje se zadržala do danas. Međutim, usprkos velikoj važnosti te snažnim performativnim i ritualnim aspektima koje je *wayang beber* imao u prošlosti, taj je kazališni oblik postao rijedak i nepoznat većini Javanaca. Članak daje povijesni pregled *wayang bebera* i analizira njegovo postojanje danas u tradicionalnim i suvremenim oblicima.

Ključne riječi: *wayang beber*, tradicijsko kazalište, kazalište svitaka, usmena predaja, Panji, Java, Indonezija