

# An introduction to wayang kulit Cirebon

by Richard North

Of all the traditional performing arts in Cirebon, the shadow puppet theatre is probably the most prestigious. *Wayang kulit*, more often known in Cirebon as *wayang purwa* (lit. old, original) is one of two forms of puppet theatre popular in Cirebon.<sup>1</sup> To be a *dalang wayang purwa* (shadow puppet master) is considered by many Cirebonese to be the highest goal to which an artist can aspire. In addition to being able to manipulate the puppets skillfully, a *dalang* must be able to sing, chant, narrate, tell jokes, philosophize, and direct the gamelan ensemble. The *dalang* must have full command of the vast repertoire of *lakon* (stories) and *suluk* (chants of poetic texts), as well as mastery of all the instruments of the gamelan. Additionally, many *dalang* are highly respected members of the community and are even considered to possess great spiritual powers.

The people of Cirebon say that wayang kulit was created by the *wali sanga* (nine saints) who brought Islam to Java in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There is, however, considerable evidence that wayang predated the arrival of Islam, and was performed at the courts of the Hindu-Javanese kings. Viewed in a certain way, both statements can be seen as correct. The shadow play, gamelan, and other Hindu-Javanese art forms were drastically altered during the era of the Muslim saints in order to both conform to and help popularize the new faith. In this sense perhaps the old Hindu wayang may have been "created," or more accurately "recreated," by the *wali*. One of the most important cultural centers during this era was the city of Cirebon, which remains to this day a center of wayang and related Javanese arts of great antiquity.

## Music

Before describing some unique features of the Cirebon shadow play it would be wise to make brief mention of its musical accompaniment. The gamelan for wayang purwa is arguably the most elaborate and beautiful form of traditional music in Cirebon. It has a gentle and lyrical quality which distinguishes it from music played to accompany the various genres of Cirebon dance. Traditionally, the five-tone *gamelan prawa* (similar to the *gamelan sléndro* of Central Java) is the exclusive accompaniment for wayang purwa, and, except for some recent experiments, the seven-tone *gamelan pélog* is not used. This is similar to the preeminence of the *sléndro* gamelan accompaniment once the norm in most of Central Javanese

wayang. Likewise, even today, the *sléndro*-like tuning of the *gendèr wayang* is still the only tuning considered appropriate for the Balinese shadow play.

An exclusive feature of the gamelan accompaniment for wayang purwa in Cirebon is the archaic Cirebon *gendèr*. Sharing more physical similarities with the Balinese than the Central Javanese *gendèr*, the Cirebon *gendèr* possesses ten bronze keys, suspended over long bamboo tubes (*bumbung*), which make the instrument much taller than its present-day Central Javanese counterpart of fourteen keys. Ethnomusicologists contend that this taller *gendèr* was formerly prominent throughout most of Java.<sup>2</sup>

As in the rest of Java, the sound of the *gendèr* accompanies the *dalang* during his *suluk*. In Cirebon it is usually played by women, often the *dalang*'s wife or mother. The *dalang* hangs his *keris* (ceremonial dagger) from the side of the *gendèr*, which is thought to magically protect both him and the *gendèr* player during the wayang performance.

Another archaic aspect of the music for the Cirebon wayang kulit is the *kemanak*. This ancient instrument, which is described in Hindu-Javanese literature as early as the twelfth century, resembles a pair of hollowed-out bananas made of bronze. Often intentionally out of tune with the other gamelan instruments, the *kemanak* are struck one against the other in the old East Javanese manner, producing an eerie flow of haunting tones which add to the mystical atmosphere of the performance.

At the beginning of each wayang performance in Cirebon, the gamelan plays an elaborate series of long and difficult introductory pieces, or *talun*. In a complete version, the entire sequence includes three suites of ten pieces in all which may last up to an hour and a half. Although often played before the audience has arrived, they are considered quite important to the ritual efficacy of the wayang, and are felt by the Cirebonese to be exceptionally beautiful and magically powerful pieces. During the first suite of pieces the *dalang* plays the *kendhang* (drums), as a part of his mental and spiritual preparation for the long night of performance.

## The Puppets

Although generally similar to other Javanese wayang styles, the puppets of the Cirebon wayang tradition do have numerous distinguishing characteristics. Some of these traits are unique to Cirebon while others seem to link the

style to earlier forms of wayang from Java's Hindu past. Although a more exhaustive study is beyond the scope of this article, I would like to point out several interesting iconographic details of the puppets in the Allan Thomas Collection of Cirebon puppets, now housed at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand. The Thomas Collection is made up of a rather complete set of excellently crafted wayang purwa puppets in the old Cirebon style. This set of 140 puppets was purchased in a village near Cirebon in 1973, and had not been used for some fifty years prior to that time.

Perhaps the most prominent feature of Cirebon puppets is the shape of the *gelung*, or headdress, of the noble male characters of the *ksatriya* (warrior or knight) class. Prominent examples of this type are Arjuna and Bima (figures 1 and 2, respectively). In the Central Javanese style the *gelung* worn by these characters extends from the back of the neck in a curl and attaches at the top of the head. In the Cirebon version, the *gelung* does not touch the top of the head but extends halfway up and stops in midair.

This distinctive *gelung* shape is one of the easiest

ways to distinguish a Cirebon puppet from its Central Javanese counterpart. This design is *not* however exclusive to Cirebon. It is also found in other north-coast styles of Javanese wayang, as well as in the shadow puppet theatre of Bali and *wayang wong* (dance drama) in East Java. This same iconography is also found on wayang characters of old Javanese temple reliefs such as the fourteenth century Candi Panataran, and suggests that the Cirebon wayang may in fact preserve an older style which later died out elsewhere.

#### Semar And His Sons

The semi-divine clown servants, known as the *panakawan*, hold a prominent place in all forms of wayang. The most important of these is Semar, a revered figure in Javanese wayang and the father of the other clowns. While there are four *panakawan* in the Central Javanese wayang tradition, there are *nine* in the Cirebonese wayang (figures 3, 4, 5, and 6).<sup>3</sup> These are said to represent the *wali sanga*, or nine saints, that played such an important role in Java's transition from Hinduism to Islam in the fifteenth and

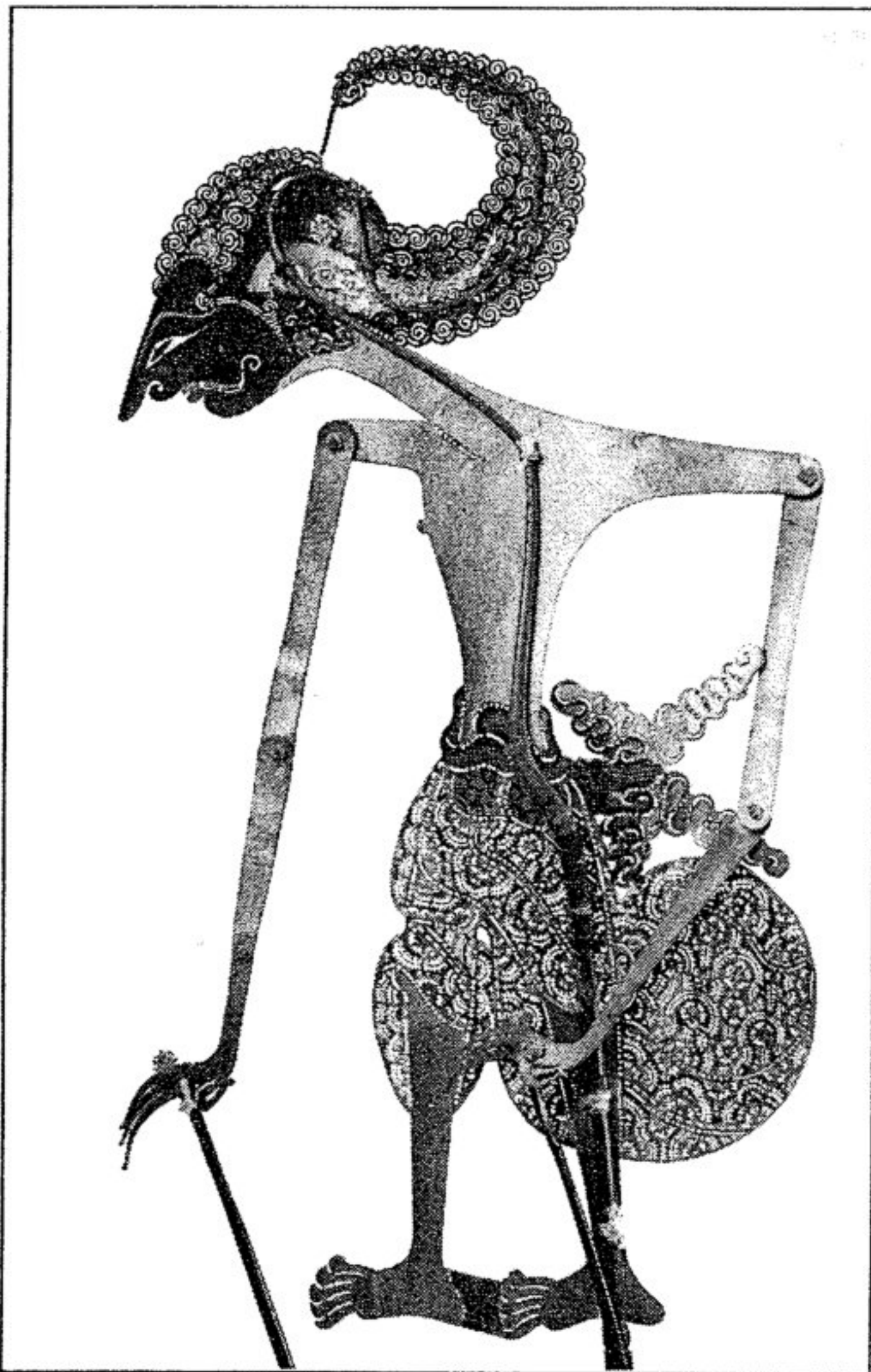


Figure 1. The Cirebon version of Arjuna.

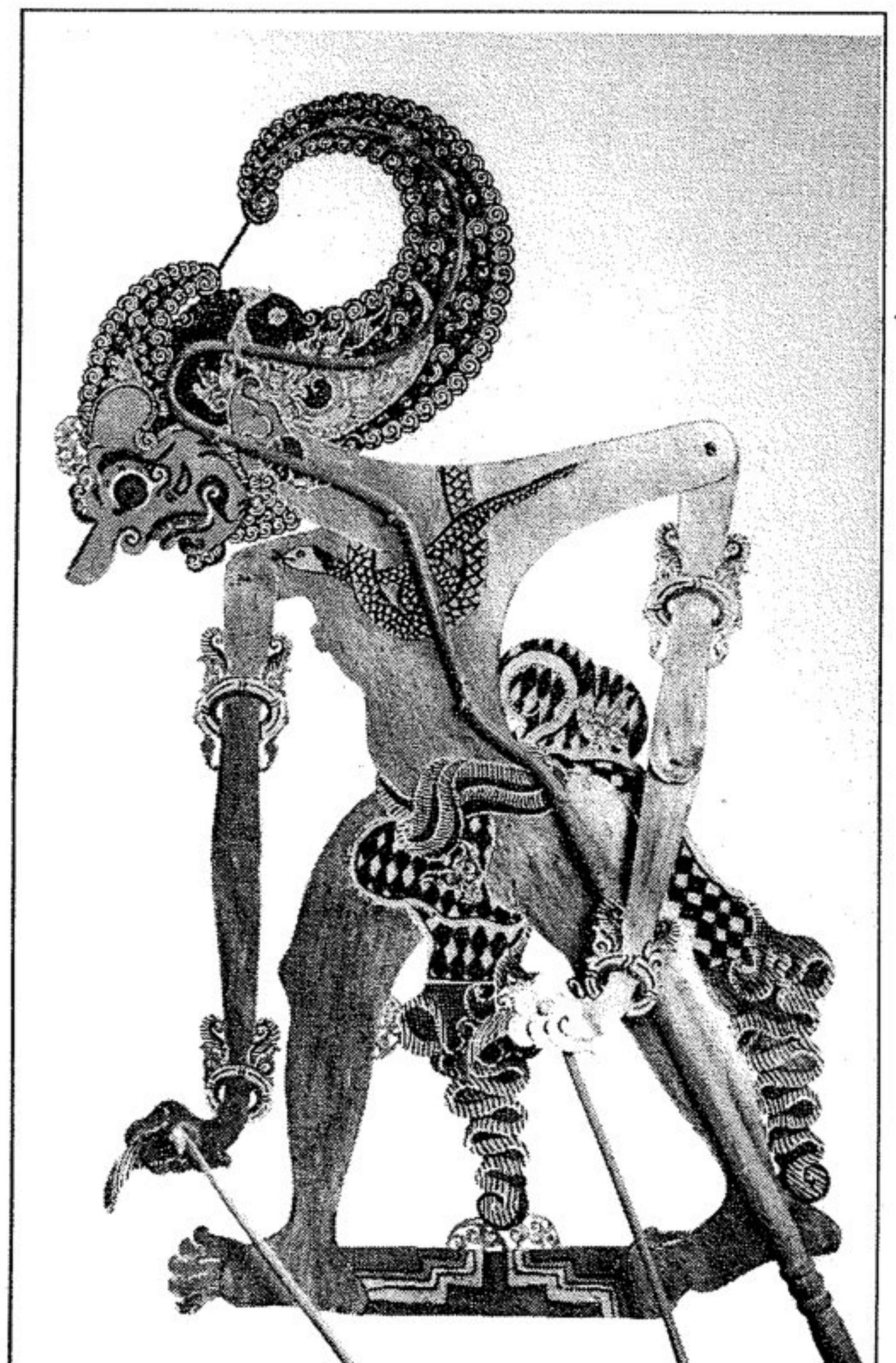


Figure 2. Bima.

sixteenth centuries. Even the term "pana-kawan," which means "clever friend" in Javanese, relates to the wali. The word "wali" also means "friend" in Arabic, implying a "friend of God" (*wali'ullah*). Like the clever and sometimes naughty panakawan, the wali sanga are often portrayed in Javanese literature as intelligent but mischievous rascals. Moreover, both the clown servants and the wali are said to have a special relationship with God.

The general appearance of Semar in the Cirebon style resembles the Central Javanese counterpart, with one notable exception: the Cirebon version has a moveable jaw (figure 3). The dalang works the jaw up and down by pulling on a thin string, allowing Semar to appear to "speak." This is similar in design to the clown servant Tualen in the Balinese wayang.

The Semar puppet is considered to be very sacred in Cirebon. It is one of two puppets that require lengthy fasting and elaborate offerings before a puppetmaker can begin carving and tooling the leather. The other puppet requiring this elaborate preparation is the *gunung*, or sacred mountain.

### The Gunung

The *gunung* (or *kayon*) puppet is one of the most complex symbols of Javanese traditional culture. Its outline suggests the shape of a leaf, and it is filled with branches and small creatures symbolizing the cosmic "tree of life,"

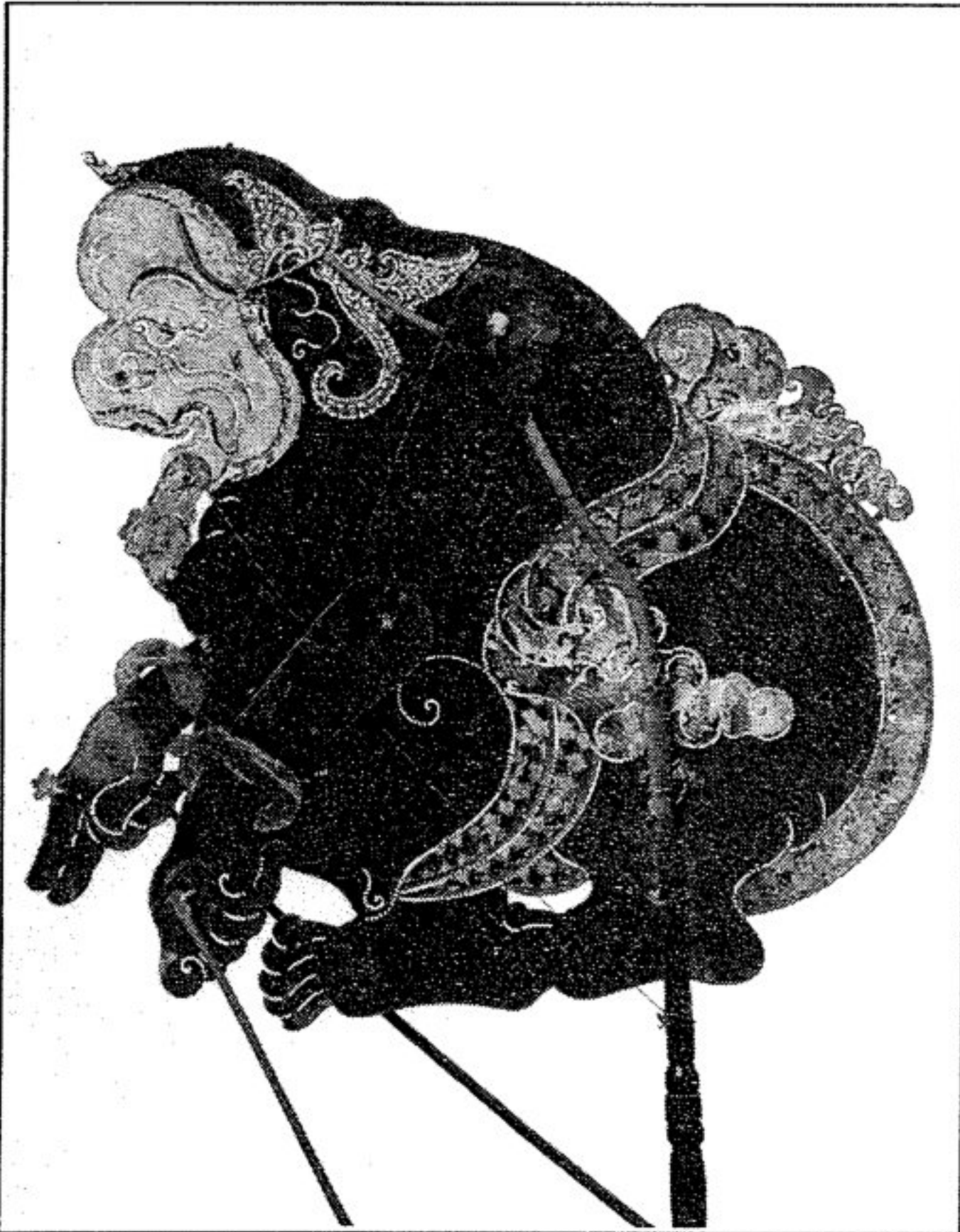


Figure 3. Semar.

represented in Javanese and Balinese palace compounds by the sacred banyan tree. Its shape also suggests a mountain (*gunung*), another prominent cosmic symbol in mystical thought—a symbol of great power on an island where volcanos can mean life or death to the people. Thirdly, it symbolizes a gateway, not only from one portion of the palace to another, but from our world to the world of spirits. Furthermore, it may symbolize a meditation cave, a hermitage where mystics enter to contact the gods. The *gunung* symbolizes all these things in wayang traditions throughout Java.

There are several details however which distinguish the Cirebonese *gunung* puppet from the more familiar Central Javanese form (figure 7). First is the decorative base in the form of stylized rocks or *wadasan*, a typical decorative motif in the visual arts of Cirebon, as well as Bali. Second, is the figure of the elephant-headed god Ganésa, son of Siwa. Third, and perhaps most interesting, is the unique interpretation of these elements of the *gunung* as a symbol of the three religious streams which constitute the Cirebon Javanese spiritual heritage. Ganésa represents Hinduism;



Figure 4. Ceblok, one of the nine Cirebon panakawan.

the pair of winged creatures represent Islam and the *bouraq* on which Muhammad ascended to heaven on his miraculous "night journey" (*mi'raj*); and the serpent represents Buddhism and the *naga* (snake, or sea serpent) that protected the Buddha during his Enlightenment. This interpretation of the gunung is typically Cirebonese in its tolerant and all-encompassing spiritual point of view.

### Conclusion

For someone accustomed to the wayang kulit of Central Java, Cirebonese wayang is both familiar and yet foreign. Many of the shadow puppets are strikingly different from their Central Javanese counterparts (figure 8). The shadow screen (*kelir*) and puppet chest (*kotak*) are somewhat smaller like that of the Balinese shadow play. There is also an intensity of music and action which feels closer to Bali than to Central Java.

The wayang tradition of Cirebon is centered not in the *kraton* (royal courts), but in the villages surrounding the town. Performances in the *kraton* "borrow" artists from villages well-known for excellence in wayang. As elsewhere

in Java, the villagers are often more conservative than their urban counterparts—especially in the realm of the arts. In Cirebon they have rejected the introduction of gamelan pélog for wayang accompaniment, and until the last several decades would not sanction the inclusion of female vocalists (*sindhèn*) in shadow play performances. They have clung to the archaic *kemanak* as well as the ten-keyed *gendèr*.

They have also stubbornly refused to replace the oil lamp (*dalung*) with the more practical electric bulb now widely used in other parts of Java. (It's told that one Cirebon *dalang* who attempted to use an electric light was literally pelted with stones by angry villagers until he agreed to resume using a flame.) Watching the Cirebonese wayang is like stepping back into a magical realm of flame and shadow where men and gods mingle freely. Yet this is only one regional style of wayang kulit, among many, such as the old traditions of Banten, Krawang, Banyumas, Madura, Lombok and Banjar Masin. The publication of Allan Thomas' catalogue of Cirebon wayang puppets is a good first step in exploring the rich variety of wayang styles extant in Indonesia today. ▸

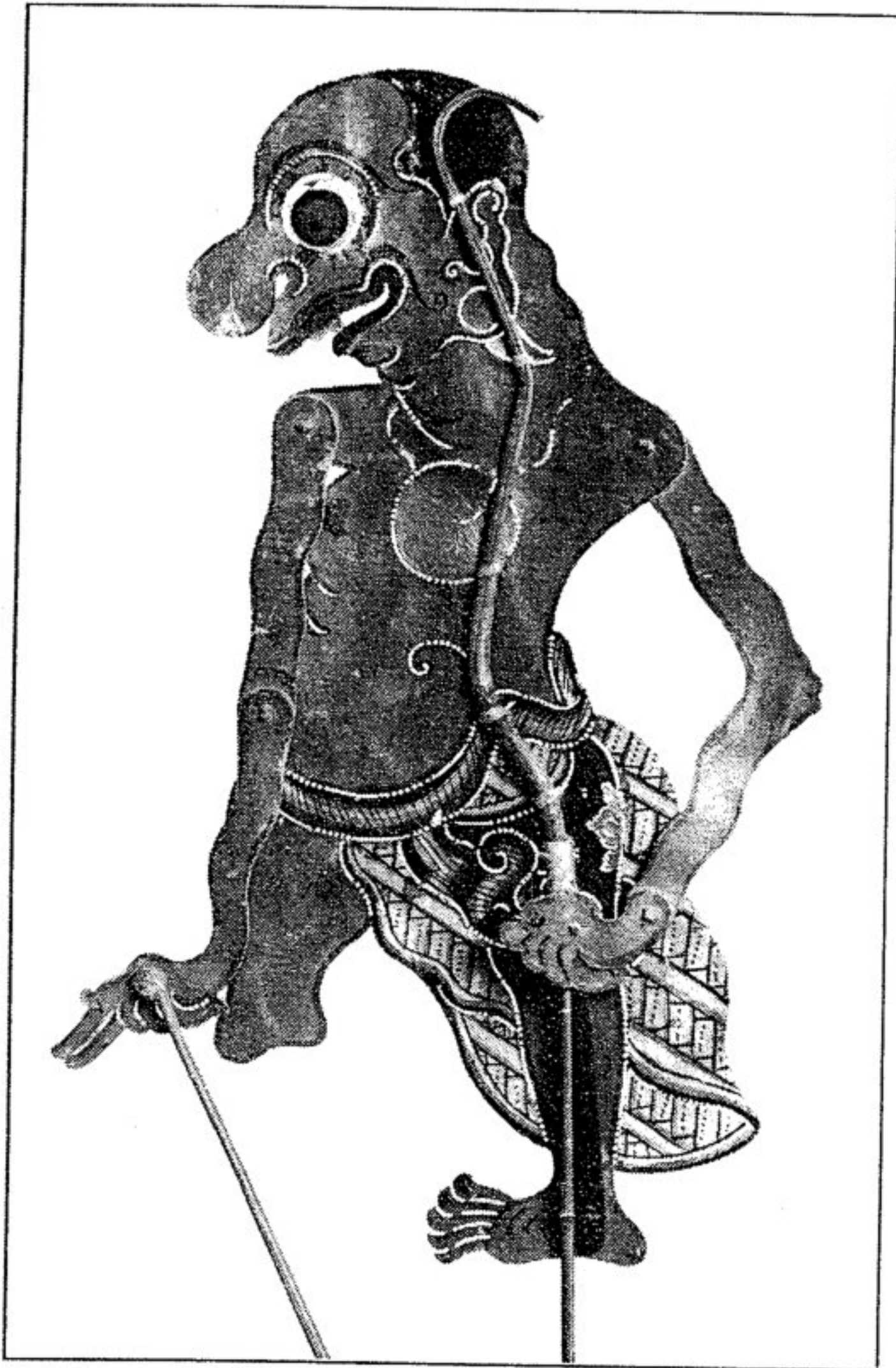


Figure 5. *Bagal Buntung*, one of the nine Cirebon *panakawan*.



Figure 6. *Sekarpandan*, one of the nine Cirebon *panakawan*.

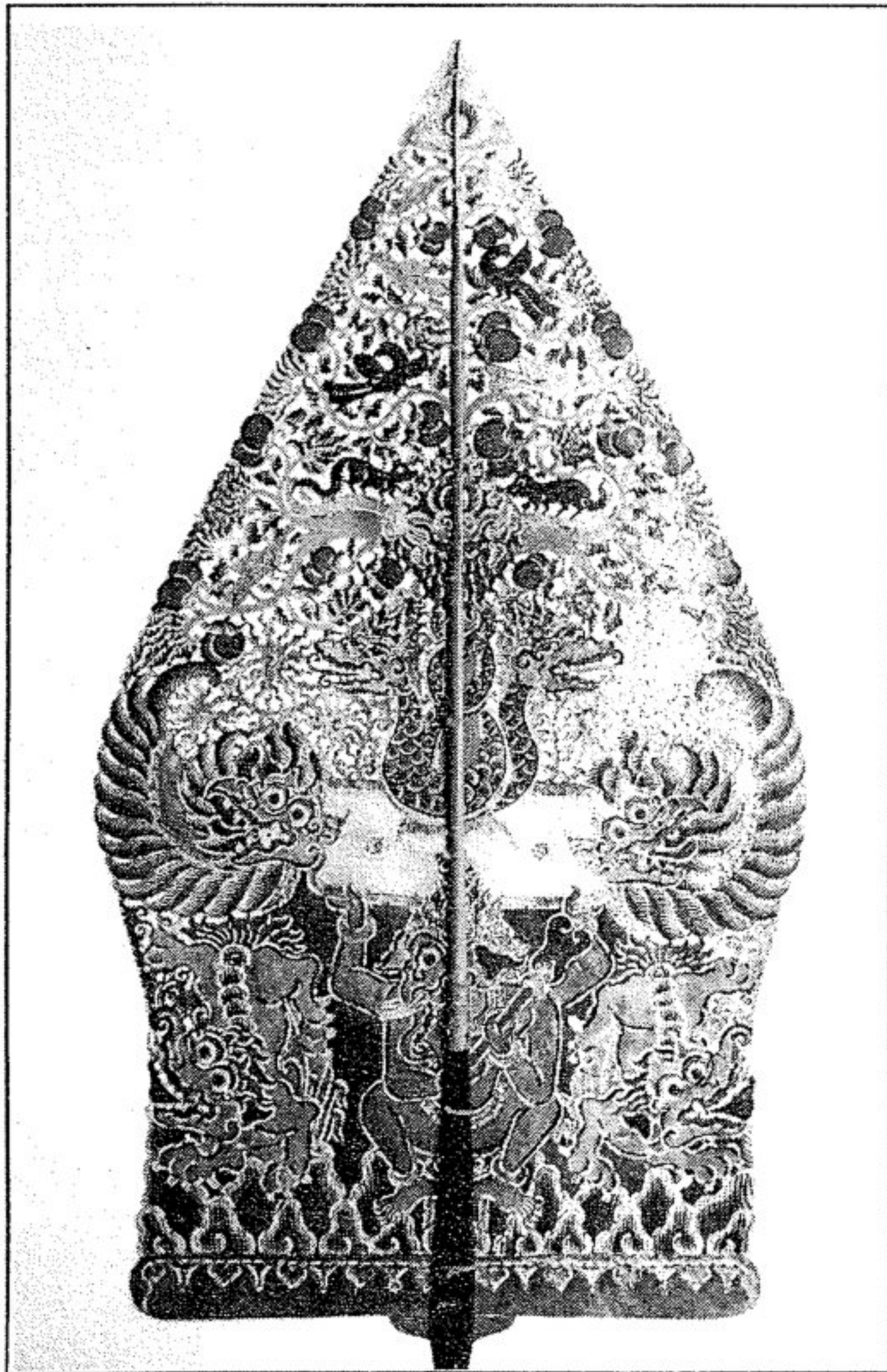


Figure 7. The Cirebon version of the gunungan or "tree of life" puppet.

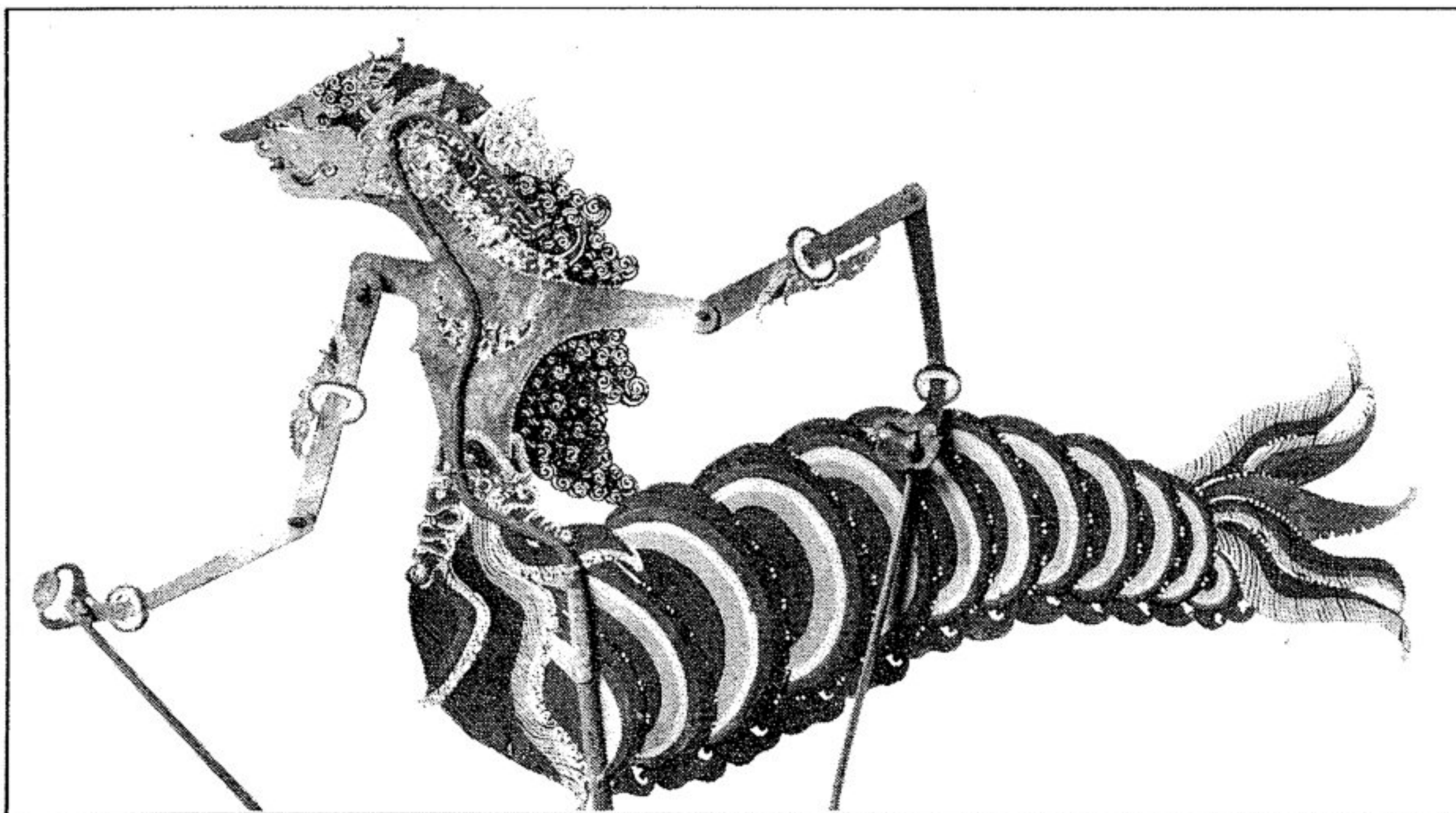


Figure 8. The Cirebon version of Dewi Rekatawati.

#### Notes

1. The other Cirebon form of wayang is the rod puppet theatre called *wayang cepak*, (lit. close) also known as *wayang papak* (lit. level, even). Both names are interpreted as "flat," and are descriptive of the low-profile carved headdresses worn by the wooden puppets who represent the Javanese and Arabic characters in the Panji, Amir Hamza, and Babad story cycles. A very similar style of headgear is worn by the puppets of *wayang golèk* and *wayang gedhog* in Central Java, *wayang klithik* in East Java, *wayang gambuh* in Bali, *wayang sasak* in Lombok, as well as the ancient Javanese scroll wayang form known as *wayang beber*. The repertoire for all of these forms of wayang is drawn from local Javanese, Balinese, or Arabic stories, rather than the Indian epics. The flat back-curved headdresses distinguish these genres of wayang from the purwa types, whose up-curved gelung headdresses adorn the Hindu characters from the Indian epics the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The cepak puppets of Cirebon are easily distinguished from the *wayang golèk purwa* of Sunda, whose rod puppets sport the high curled gelung headdresses of the Hindu purwa characters. With the exception of the Sundanese wayang golèk purwa, there has been relatively little research done on any of these lesser known forms of wayang.

2. Kunst, Jaap. *Music in Java*. (3rd Edition, E. L. Heins, ed.) The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973.

3. Besides the four panakawan traditionally found in Central Javanese wayang—Semar, Petruk, Gareng, and Bagong—Cirebonese wayang adds the puppets Ceblok, Bagal Buntung, Sekarpandan, Dawala, and Bitarta.