



***Bima Suci* and the Modern Human Existential Crisis: A Philosophical Study of
Ki Manteb Sudarsono's Wayang Kulit Performance**

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Abstract

Amid the identity crisis of modern humans due to the dominance of digital culture and globalization, the wayang kulit performance of *Bima Suci* by Ki Manteb Sudarsono presents a sustained philosophical reflection on the meaning of life, an epistemology of praxis, and spiritual transformation. This study aims to analyze the philosophical meaning contained in the play using qualitative methods and a systematic-reflective philosophical approach. Primary data derive from a video documentation of Ki Manteb's performance on the Donkgedank YouTube channel (2018), supplemented by Javanese philosophical literature and relevant scholarship. The findings demonstrate that this performance highlights the teachings of *Sangkan Paraning Dumadi* (the origin and ultimate purpose of existence), an epistemology of praxis (knowledge gained through lived experience), and Bratasena's transformation into a spiritually mature self. This philosophical message is particularly relevant for modern humans facing existential alienation in the digital era, suggesting that wayang kulit serves not merely as a spectacle but as a contemplative medium for rediscovering an authentic sense of self.

Keywords: bima suci; ki manteb sudarsono; search for the true self; performative elements; *wayang kulit* performance

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INTRODUCTION

Amid the clamor of the digital era that shapes artificial realities and virtual identities, the crisis of identity and self-alienation has become a fundamental problem confronting contemporary humanity. Self-representations constructed through social media performances and algorithmic obscures the reflective process of recognizing one's true nature and the essence of existence (Munajah et al., 2023). This condition calls for a medium that can guide humanity toward a reflective understanding of the origin, purpose, and

meaning of life. In Javanese tradition, the *wayang kulit*, or shadow puppet theater, serves not merely as entertainment but also as a source of moral and philosophical guidance (Suherman, 2024). Through its symbols and philosophical messages embedded in every performative element, *wayang kulit* becomes a mirror of the human soul, enabling reflection upon the meaning of existence (Sutrisno et al., 2009).

Within the realm of *wayang* performances, the play *Bima Suci* holds a distinctive position as a narrative that portrays

humanity's existential journey toward enlightenment. The story recounts how Bima is instructed by his teacher to seek two metaphorical objects—*kayu gung susuhing angin* (the excellent tree abode of the wind) and *banyu suci Prawitasari* (the sacred water of purity). This journey symbolically represents humanity's quest for truth and wisdom, emphasizing that truth and wisdom transcend external or material pursuits. In the course of this search, Bima attains enlightenment through his encounter with Dewa Ruci, a radiant miniature figure who reveals himself as the true reflection of Bima's own self. The dialogue between them conveys profound philosophical insights into *sangkan paraning dumadi*—the origin and ultimate purpose of human life—a concept that forms the core of Javanese existential philosophy. (Apriliani, 2024).

Furthermore, among the many *dalangs* who have staged *Bima Suci*, Ki Manteb Sudarsono (1948–2021) stands out as a pivotal figure for presenting the play as both an aesthetic and philosophical experience. Through his performative style and interpretive improvisation, Ki Manteb crafted a staging that not only narrates a story but also invites the audience to engage in inner tension and spiritual contemplation. In this context, Ki Manteb's *Bima Suci* performance transcends the boundaries of art as mere spectacle; it becomes an epistemic space through which philosophical values are articulated and enacted through the performative dynamics of *wayang kulit* (Setyawan, 2015).

Nevertheless, academic studies on this play and its performances have remained

confined mainly to textual and narrative approaches. Muslimah (2016) For instance, Bima Suci was examined from the perspectives of ontology, epistemology, and axiology; however, her focus was primarily on the *serat* manuscript, without engaging its performative dimension. Setyawan (2015) In his dissertation, he offered an in-depth exploration of Bima's character as represented in Ki Manteb's rendition of the play. Similarly, Setiawan (2017) and Apriliani (2024) investigated the philosophical values within the same story but confined their analyses to its religious dimensions within a content-analytic framework of the written narrative. Meanwhile, Lamirin (2025) did incorporate the performative aspects of *wayang kulit*. However, his study focused on the educational transmission of Buddhist values by another *dalang*. It thus did not address the construction of an epistemology of *laku* (praxis) in Ki Manteb Sudarsono's *Bima Suci*. Consequently, a research gap remains in integrating the performative dimension of Ki Manteb's *Bima Suci* with its underlying philosophical meanings, particularly in relation to the human condition in the contemporary digital era.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how Ki Manteb Sudarsono's *Bima Suci* performance presents the human quest for self-understanding through its performative elements. It examines how the philosophical messages embedded in the play retain their relevance for contemporary humanity, particularly amid the identity crisis engendered by the dominance of digital culture and globalization. This research seeks to expand the philosophical horizon of *wayang* as

a reflective medium for understanding the modern human condition and to demonstrate that traditional performing arts retain profound existential power in addressing the challenges of life in the digital era.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with a philosophical approach, intended to investigate the philosophical messages in Ki Manteb Sudarsono's *Bima Suci wayang kulit* performance in relation to the crisis of human existence in the modern era. The primary data consists of video documentation of the performance uploaded to the YouTube channel. *Donkgedank* (2018) under the title "*Wayang Kulit Ki H. Manteb Soedarsono – Lakon Bimo Suci*." Supporting data comprises literary sources such as *Serat Dewa Ruci*, works on Javanese philosophy, and previous studies discussing symbolic values in *wayang* art and the *Bima Suci* narrative. The research took place between May 7 and 17, 2025, focusing on the narrative structure and philosophical messages—both explicit and implicit—expressed through the performative elements of the performance, such as *sulukan* (chanting) and *dalang* improvisation.

The research procedure followed several stages: (1) observation and detailed note-taking of the performance video documentation; (2) identification and categorization of performative elements within the performance; (3) collection of supporting data from relevant literature to contextualize the symbols and structures of meaning within the play; and (4) philosophical data analysis using the systematic-reflective research

framework of Bakker & Zubair (2025). According to this framework, the researcher serves as the primary instrument in uncovering the layers of meaning inherent in the object of study. The process begins by interpreting each element of the object, reviewing its internal coherence in relation to the interpretation, considering its holistic unity, and comparing the object to its broader framework. In this context, the analysis focuses on exploring the existential-philosophical meanings manifested through the form of performance. Consequently, a philosophical reading of traditional art expressions as epistemic spaces and media for self-contemplation is made possible.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Ki Manteb Sudarsono's *Bima Suci* Performance

In the *Donkgedank* (2018) documentation, Ki Manteb Sudarsono's *wayang kulit* performance of *Bima Suci* opens with the traditional stage layout typical of Javanese puppetry. The performance begins with an introductory *sulukan* (chant) recited by Ki Manteb, accompanied by a *gamelan* orchestra and the voices of *sinden* (female singers). The opening *gendhing* (melodic composition) flows rhythmically, interspersed with the beat of the *kendang* (drum) that regulates the tempo and atmosphere. The *sulukan* contains prayers and expressions of reverence to ancestors, saints, and legendary figures from the *wayang* tradition. After completing the chant, Ki Manteb commences the narration of the story.

The storyline depicts Bratasena's quest after receiving an impossible task from his

teacher, Resi Durna, to find the *kayu gung susuhing angin* (the great tree nest of the wind) and the *banyu suci Prawitasari* (the sacred water of purity). Throughout his quest, Bratasena faces numerous trials — battles with giants, warnings from Bathara Bayu and Anoman, and a fierce duel with the serpent Nemburnawa. These trials are expressed visually through Ki Manteb's dynamic *sabetan* (puppet movements) and the fast-paced rhythm of the *gamelan*, which together express both the physical and inner struggles of Bratasena.

The climactic moment of the play occurs when Bratasena enters the ocean and encounters Dewa Ruci, a radiant, miniature divine figure. In their sacred dialogue, Dewa Ruci teaches the doctrine of *sangkan paraning dumadi* — the understanding that the origin and purpose of life are not external but reside within the self. Ki Manteb visualizes this encounter with gentle *sabetan*, soft *sulukan*, and focused *blencong* (oil lamp) lighting, creating a contemplative atmosphere that signifies this meeting as a moment of enlightenment.

Bratasena then undergoes a spiritual transformation, marked by the *gelung Minangkara* hairstyle, returning as Werkudara — a spiritually mature being. His homecoming scene is accompanied by a slow-tempo *gendhing* and calm *sabetan*, concluding with *tancep kayon*, the symbolic planting of the *gunungan* (tree-of-life puppet) at the center of the screen. Through this symbolism, the performance transcends the narrative of heroism, conveying a philosophical message about the human journey — from external conflicts toward inner awareness and spiritual wholeness.

The entire journey of Bratasena in this play can thus be read as a metaphor for humanity's inner pilgrimage. The giants, Anoman, and the serpent are not merely physical adversaries but representations of existential obstacles — desire, doubt, and fear. Each of Bratasena's victories symbolizes a triumph over the self, culminating in his encounter with Dewa Ruci, which reflects his actual being. Consequently, the story demonstrates that genuine knowledge is not attained in the external world but emerges through an honest and profound inner struggle.

Symbolic Elements: The Philosophical Foundation of Ki Manteb Sudarsono's *Bima Suci*

In Ki Manteb Sudarsono's *Bima Suci* performance, as documented by *Donkgedank* (2018), the artistic components of the show extend beyond their function; they embody symbols that open a space for philosophical reflection (Joseph, 2022). Movement, sound, light, and narrative improvisation operate as signs that reveal the deeper meaning of humanity's journey in search of self-realization. These elements can be understood as a bridge linking the artistic realm of *wayang* with a profound philosophical dimension.

First, *sabetan* (the puppet's movement) not only animates the story but symbolizes the dialectic between physical and spiritual strength. (Ismurdyahwati & Srinarwati, 2024). Rapid, forceful movements in the battle scenes against the giants express external struggles, while slow, gentle gestures in Bima's encounter with Dewa Ruci signify moments of

contemplation and enlightenment. (Kushendrawati, 2016).

Second, *sulukan* (chanting by the *dalang*) creates a sacred atmosphere, serving as a symbol of transition from the profane world to a spiritual domain. The soft chanting during Bima's meeting with Dewa Ruci, for instance, reflects an inward journey into the most profound realm of the self. (Pramulia, 2018).

Third, the *dalang's* improvisation serves as a space for adaptation, keeping the performance vibrant and contextually relevant. Through dialogues such as those between Anoman and Bima, Ki Manteb inserts social criticism and humorous commentary on contemporary issues—such as the rivalry among religious scholars—thereby connecting the classical narrative of *Bima Suci* with modern realities. This improvisation establishes a dialogue between traditional text and the audience's social context, maintaining both emotional engagement and social relevance. (Setiawan, 2015).

Fourth, *tembang sinden* (songs performed by female singers) function as symbols of emotional resonance. Their soft, melodious intonation during contemplative scenes evokes emotional depth, uniting the inner world of the characters with the audience's experience. (Sunardi, 2020). The presence of the *sinden* not only enriches the atmosphere but also serves as an emotional bridge, enhancing the dramatic transitions between scenes. With their plaintive tones, the *sinden* evoke a spiritual nuance that reinforces the philosophical message of the play. (Setiawan, 2020). Here, the *audience becomes* a collective medium of feeling, creating a cosmic

unity among the stage, characters, and spectators.

Fifth, the *gamelan* performance symbolizes the rhythm of the cosmos. The fast tempo reflects the dynamism of worldly life, while the slow tempo creates moments of stillness, symbolizing self-contemplation. (Kushendrawati, 2016). The interplay between *gamelan*, *sulukan*, and *sabetan* produces a narrative and emotional continuity while the inner states of the characters and the audience are interwoven in a multilayered musical rhythm.

Sixth, *blencong* (lighting) symbolizes the distinction between the profane and the sacred realms. (Setiawan, 2020). Ki Manteb employs dynamic and modern lighting to enhance the transition of moods. For example, when Bratasena enters the ocean and encounters the serpent Nemburnawa, the lightning turns red, evoking tension and a sense of mysticism. Conversely, in Bima's encounter with Dewa Ruci, the *blencong* casts a soft, focused light on the puppet figure, creating a transcendental aura that heightens the scene's spiritual dimension. This play of light delineates shifts in space and time, distinguishing the sacred from the profane, and deepening the atmospheric layers of the *wayang* performance.

Thus, these symbolic elements do more than construct the aesthetic beauty of the show—they offer a reflective experience through which Ki Manteb's rendition of *Bima Suci* reveals its philosophical teachings in the language of symbols. The performance becomes a contemplative space for the audience to meditate upon the nature of

humanity, the course of life, and the ultimate purpose of existence.

Philosophical Messages of *Bima Suci* Performance for Modern Humans

Ki Manteb Sudarsono's version of *Bima Suci* transcends the level of aesthetic performance, offering instead a profound reflective depth imbued with philosophical teachings. Through Bratasena's spiritual journey, the play unfolds values concerning the nature of the self, the meaning of life, and the transformation of human existence. The following discussion elaborates on these philosophical messages in the context of their relevance to modern human life.

a. The Nature of the Self in Sangkan Paraning Dumadi

The concept of *sangkan paraning dumadi* is a fundamental principle of Javanese philosophy that situates human existence within a spiritual journey—one that begins from an origin (*sangkan*) and moves toward an ultimate purpose (*paran*). In the performance, through the character of Durna at timestamp 00:49:58, it is explained: "*Sangkan paraning dumadi kui wantahe urip saka sapa, urip arep ngapa, lan pungkasaning urip kui piye*" (*Sangkan paraning dumadi* means: from whom life originates, for what purpose it exists, and how it ultimately ends) (Donkgedank, 2018). This concept affirms that human life is not a series of random events but a process of deep existential search for meaning. (Permono, 2021).

In the context of *Bima Suci*, Bratasena's quest to find *kayu gung susuhi angin* (the great tree nest of the wind) and

banyu suci Prawitasari (the sacred water of purity) symbolically represents humanity's struggle to discover its true self amidst a reality filled with illusion and worldly temptation (Sunardi, 2020). This idea is conveyed in Durna's statement at the 50th minute: "*Mula saka iku Bratasena, sadurunge kowe bakal tak paringi kawruh kasampurnan mau, luwih disit kowe pundhut bebana ingkang sinebut Kayu gung susuhi angin. Kaping pindone Banyu Suci Pawitrasari. Upadinen yento sira bisa mituruti pangendikanipun Bapa, kowe teka esuk bakal tak medharake, mbengi bakal tak medharake.*" In English, "*Therefore, Bratasena, before I teach you the knowledge of perfection, you must first seek the kayu gung susuhi angin and then the banyu suci Prawitasari. If you can follow my words, come in the morning, and I will teach you again in the evening and at night.*" (Donkgedank, 2018).

The climactic moment—Bratasena's encounter with Dewa Ruci—serves as a metaphorical manifestation of the true self and the core of the play's philosophical message. Near the two-hour mark, Dewa Ruci says: "*Bratasena, sing kok goleki ana ing njero awak sira. Jagad iki ora ana ing njaba, nanging nyawiji ing jiwamu.*" (Donkgedank, 2018). It means, "*Bratasena, what you seek lies within yourself. The universe does not exist outside you—it is united within your soul*". This profound dialogue between Bratasena and Dewa Ruci emphasizes that the source of wisdom, serenity, and true happiness does not lie in the external world but resides in the deepest recesses of the individual's inner being. This message parallels the *ma'rifat* concept in Sufi mysticism, which underscores self-knowledge as the primary path to divine understanding (Apriliani, 2024).

The relevance of this concept to modern humans is unmistakable, particularly in the current era of digitalization and globalization. Modern individuals often lose their sense of direction under the influence of social media, materialism, and consumerism, resulting in fragmented identities and existential alienation. (Munajah et al., 2023). The principle of *sangkan paraning dumadi* offers a reflective solution, urging contemporary individuals to turn inward and rediscover their lost existential meaning amidst the distractions of digital life. Bratasena's encounter with Dewa Ruci thus becomes a crucial symbol: in the face of modern challenges, one must recognize that true enlightenment emerges from the internalization of spiritual values and deep introspection into the essence of one's existence as a spiritual being—not through endless external exploration that leads only to greater emptiness.

b. The Meaning of Kayu Gung Susuhing Angin and Banyu Suci Prawitasari

The term *kayu gung susuhing angin* literally means “the great tree that nests the wind.” As described in the narrative, this task is a deceitful command devised by Resi Durna to endanger Bratasena—sending him on a quest to find something that, in truth, does not exist. The phrase embodies a paradox, for the wind has no nest; within Javanese philosophy, it symbolizes a search that is physically impossible yet profoundly meaningful in a spiritual sense. (Zustiyantoro et al., 2022). In the performance, Bathara Bayu explains this meaning at timestamp 01:27:44: “*Kayu gung iku, kayun iku tegesé karep, Gung kui gedhe. Karep kang gedhe utawa gegayuhan kang dhuwur, gedhe, pangajab kang luhur. Susuhing angin iku*

pangendhalèning napas, pangendhalèning hawa nepsu, ora kena grusa-grusu.” (Donkgedank, 2018). It means, “The great tree (*kayu gung*) refers to great desire or a noble aspiration. The nest of the wind (*susuhing angin*) symbolizes the control of breath, the restraint of passion, and the avoidance of impulsiveness.” Thus, the quest itself serves as an allegory for self-mastery—the discipline of the senses, the cultivation of patience, and the direction of spiritual desire through calm breath and purity of soul. One who carries grand ambitions or noble ideals must first learn to govern oneself.

Meanwhile, *banyu suci Prawitasari*—presented as the subsequent task Bratasena must undertake to attain the knowledge of *sangkan paraning dumadi*—derives etymologically from *prawita* or *pawitra*, meaning purity, and *sari*, meaning essence. The term, therefore, signifies “the essence of purity” or “the quintessence of spiritual enlightenment.” This sacred water is said to lie at the bottom of the ocean of *Minangkalbu*. It can only be reached by those who have purified their hearts and annihilated their egos. In the performance, this is symbolized through Bratasena's descent into the ocean, his confrontation with the guardian serpent, and his ultimate rescue by the divine figure Dewa Ruci, who represents his most authentic self. In Dewa Ruci's teaching, Bratasena is invited to enter the deity's body, undergo an inner journey, and experience ultimate illumination. Bathara Bayu reinforces this message in one of his utterances: “*Heh Bratasena, banyu suci Prawitasari iku ana ing jero atimu. Yen sira bisa nyucèkaké rasa lan ngilangi kadonyan, sira bakal nemu padhang sajati.*” (Bratasena, the sacred

water *Prawitasari* resides within your own heart. If you can purify your feelings and detach yourself from worldly desires, you will attain true enlightenment) (Donkgedank, 2018). Hence, *banyu suci Prawitasari* symbolizes the essence of actual spiritual knowledge—one that can be attained only through *laku* (spiritual discipline), contemplation, and unity with the Divine.

The symbolic meanings of these two objects form the central philosophical teaching of the play. *Kayu gung susuhing angin* conveys the importance of self-restraint and liberation from material illusions. At the same time, *Banyu Suci Prawitasari* represents the purity of life and spiritual wisdom born from introspection and inner purification. Together, they construct a narrative of existential enlightenment, urging humanity not to stop at external quests but to turn inward—to the deepest layers of the self—in search of ultimate truth.

In the context of modern humanity, this journey can be understood as an allegory that profoundly resonates with the condition of contemporary individuals, who are often trapped in the pursuit of illusory and transient worldly goals. As emphasized by Alamsyah (2023), contemporary society tends to measure the meaning of life through material indicators such as social media popularity, wealth, and other external achievements. However, as symbolized in *kayu gung susuhing angin* and *banyu suci Prawitasari*, all such achievements can never truly satisfy humanity's existential thirst.

Through his *wayang kulit* performance, Ki Manteb implicitly conveys a profound critique of this condition. He

portrays Bratasena's transformation not merely as a physical journey but as a spiritual odyssey toward higher inner awareness. This process is rendered through the gradual evolution of *sabetan* movements, the atmosphere of the *sulukan* chants, and the shifting illumination of the *blencong* lamp, which together create a sacred aura as Bratasena encounters Dewa Ruci (Donkgedank, 2018).

Within this framework, Ki Manteb's message becomes increasingly relevant. Modern humans, who have become alienated from spiritual values due to the dominance of consumerist culture and digital imagery (Supriansyah, 2019), are invited to turn inward. Bratasena's journey affirms that true meaning is found only through direct experience, deep introspection, and the subjugation of the ego. Thus, this symbolism not only revitalizes Javanese philosophy in an aesthetic form but also offers an essential existential remedy for the modern crisis of identity.

c. *The Epistemology of Laku: Learning Through Experience*

The term *epistemologi laku* (the epistemology of praxis) can be used philosophically to refer to the way of attaining actual knowledge through direct experience or concrete action, rather than through theory or abstract reasoning alone. This concept emphasizes that a genuine understanding of life arises from one's immediate interaction with the concrete situations encountered (Setyawan, 2015). In the *Bima Suci* narrative, the epistemology of *laku* is embodied in Bratasena's journey, in which he does not merely rely on formal teachings from his guru,

Resi Durna, but instead learns through a succession of direct, lived experiences. His battles with the two giants, his critical dialogue with Anoman, and ultimately his inner encounter with Dewa Ruci all constitute stages of experiential learning through which he comes to grasp the essence of life and his true self.

One explicit passage in the performance captures this principle, expressed through Anoman's words: "*He, Bratasena! Ilmu sejati ora cukup mung saka guru utawa kitab. Kowé kudu ngalami, kudu nyemplung ing urip, supaya ngerti rasa sejati.*" (Donkgedank, 2018). It means, "Hey, Bratasena! True knowledge is not gained merely from a teacher or a book. You must experience it—you must plunge into life itself—to understand its true essence." Thus, the meaning of *epistemologi laku* here is that authentic knowledge can only be attained through lived experience, not merely by comprehension or memorization.

In relation to modern humanity, this epistemology of praxis becomes both a critique of and an alternative to the dominance of formal and instant knowledge in the digital era. Today, many individuals consider themselves knowledgeable simply through information obtained from social media or the internet, without ever truly engaging with reality firsthand. (Tarigan, 2024). However, genuine understanding arises from internalizing and applying knowledge in concrete life situations—transforming abstract information into meaningful and enduring experience. This process of embodiment, however, is often neglected by modern humans, who are overwhelmed by the flood of information.

Through this play, Ki Manteb Sudarsono firmly reminds his audience that actual knowledge is that which leads to wisdom and spiritual maturity. Such knowledge can only be achieved when humans dare to face and live through the realities of life in all their joys and sorrows. Direct experience alone can profoundly teach the virtues of patience, courage, honesty, and humility—values that often remain superficial and underdeveloped within merely theoretical forms of learning.

Therefore, the epistemology of *Laku* in *Bima Suci* calls upon modern individuals to value experiential learning as an essential dimension of life's education. Through this play, it becomes evident that Ki Manteb encourages his audience to move beyond the mere pursuit of formal or theoretical knowledge, urging them instead to engage actively with life's challenges as an authentic medium for self-perfection and existential realization.

d. Bratasena's Transformation into Bima Suci

In philosophical terms, *transformation* refers to a profound process of change encompassing the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of a person, leading toward a more elevated or ideal state of being (Setiawan, 2020). In the *Bima Suci* narrative, this transformation is symbolically embodied in the figure of Bratasena, who ultimately becomes *Bima Suci* after passing through a series of trials, ordeals, and an inner encounter with Dewa Ruci. Bratasena's transformation is marked not merely by external attributes—such as the *gelung Minangkara* (the coiled hair knot) symbolizing spiritual maturity—but more

deeply by a fundamental shift in his disposition, wisdom, and comprehension of the true meaning of life (Kushendrawati, 2016).

This inner awakening is poignantly expressed in Bratasena's line: "*Sapa sejatine aku, Prabu?*" It means, "Who am I, truly, my Lord?" (Donkgedank, 2018). This utterance signifies a new level of self-awareness—a moment of profound spiritual transformation in which Bratasena begins to recognize the essence of his own existence.

The transformation of Bratasena into Bima Suci thus represents the attainment of the highest spiritual realization, wherein a human being can fully master desire and ego while achieving deep consciousness of their existential purpose. In the context of modernity—where people in the age of globalization and digital saturation often become ensnared in inner conflict, anxiety, stress, and uncontrolled ambition—this transformation acquires profound relevance. (Zustiyantoro et al., 2022). Through his performance, Ki Manteb subtly reminds modern humanity that the journey toward perfection—or what may also be understood as true happiness—is not an instant achievement, but rather a long, arduous process that requires a steadfast will, patience, perseverance, and deep reflection on the nature of life itself.

In this performance, Bratasena's transformation is vividly conveyed through the evolution of his *sabetan* (puppet movements)—shifting from tense, rapid gestures to slower, gentler, and more contemplative motions. The *sulukan* chants performed by Ki Manteb likewise help shape an emotional atmosphere

that mirrors the depth of Bratasena's spiritual metamorphosis. This can be observed beginning around the climactic moments of the performance, when Bratasena meets Dewa Ruci and starts his inward journey.

Through these elements, the audience is invited to reflect on the idea that genuine transformation toward perfection is not a matter of external form or physical appearance. However, rather an inner metamorphosis grounded in self-awareness, introspection, and disciplined mastery of one's desires and emotions in confronting life's challenges. It is this inward change—the shift from ignorance to insight, from ego to harmony—that defines the true meaning of *Bima Suci*.

CONCLUSION

The *Bima Suci* performance by Ki Manteb Sudarsono presents the spiritual journey of Bratasena in a dynamic and symbolic narrative. Through expressive *sabetan* (puppet movements), deeply evocative *sulukan* (chants), socially relevant improvisations by the *dalang* (puppet master), emotionally resonant *sinden* songs, rhythmic *gamelan* compositions that shape dramatic flow, and the mystical, sacred lighting effects of the *blencong* lamp, the performance affirms that *wayang kulit* is not merely a spectacle, but also a medium of guidance and reflection.

The philosophical messages conveyed in this performance center on the *sangkan paraning dumadi*—the essence and purpose of human existence; the necessity of self-control represented by *kayu gung susuhing angin*; the meaning of true spiritual enlightenment symbolized by *banyu suci Prawitasari*; and the

significance of the *epistemology of praxis* (*epistemologi laku*) as an authentic way of understanding life. These messages call upon modern humanity—amid crises of identity and existential alienation—to undertake deep introspection, to rediscover the self, and to find genuine meaning in life from within their own being.

These findings open promising prospects for further research in two main directions: first, the deepening of epistemological inquiry into traditional performing arts as living spaces of philosophical reflection; and second, the exploration of digital transformations of cultural arts, such as *wayang kulit*, as contemplative media capable of bridging local wisdom with global challenges. Moreover, future studies may expand their focus to other *wayang* narratives, exploring how aesthetic and performative experiences can serve as vehicles for character formation and spiritual education within the context of contemporary cultural ecosystems.

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