

Clown, Servant and God. Popular Expressions of the Divine in Javanese Shadow Theatre
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Abstract: Semar is one of the most important figures of the Javanese shadow theatre, Wayang. He is the most venerable of the Punakawan, the clowns and servants who function as intermediaries between the world of gods and men. How is it possible to see the divine in this fat clown? Especially considering that Islamic doctrine rejects any visual representation of God? And how is it that a submissive servant epitomises the pinnacle of religious perfection? I would suggest that Semar is a central figure of religious identification for Javanese Muslims. In discussing this hypothesis I will at the same time show that Semar is an ideal example for showing the relevance of material studies for the study of religions. I will further argue that the Wayang figure Semar is an important part of the religious culture of Java, a typical “thing that matters” (Morgan 2011) and a key to understanding popular Islamic culture in Java.