

Walter L. Williams, "Dance Teacher in the Sultan's Palace of Yogyakarta," in *Javanese Lives: Women and Men in Modern Indonesian Society*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Among the most distinctive aspects of Javanese culture are its artistic traditions. Java is justifiably famous, worldwide, for its classical dances. These slow and methodical movements, accompanied by gamelan orchestras with their mesmerizing melodies, are taught at the sultan's courts. Traditionally, the sultans of Yogyakarta and Surakarta were the main patrons of the arts. The classical dances were performed mainly for the courts. Historically, there has been some rivalry between the two courts, and this man's comments about the relative refinement of Yogyakarta dancing over Surakarta dancing reflect this rivalry.

This dance teacher participates in the old style of life in Yogyakarta, a deliberately leisurely pace that recognizes more important things in life than material

wealth and modernization. Although he was born in 1928 and has lived through the dramatic changes of the last half-century, this man has been relatively insulated from these changes. He concerns himself with retaining the cultural heritage of his people. He recognizes the reality of change, but he sees its impact in things like the necessity of staging abbreviated dances for tourists rushing in and out of Java. He regrets these changes, but, given his traditional value in not becoming upset over anything, he adapts to realities. This man is not unrealistic; rather, he prefers to keep his distance from the realities of a new order and its more frantic approach to life.

He was interviewed at the sultan's court, lounging in his sarong under a cool veranda while sipping tea brought to him by a palace servant. The interview was conducted in Javanese by Priyanto (male, age thirty-nine), translating for Walter L. Williams.

## HOLDING ONTO THE PAST

Perhaps I was born to be a dancer. My mother was a dancer during the reign of Sultan Hamengkubuwono VIII [1880—1939], and I trained to dance the classical Javanese style when I was a very young boy. There was no formal dancing school during the Dutch

time. I learned to dance in the prince's house, and the prince himself was the instructor.

When I had to go to the school for the noble family, I did not feel at home. I was in the same class with the sultan's sons; I felt very awkward because they were royalty and I was not. In addition, my ability to speak Dutch was not very good; therefore, I left the school. I had to realize that I was not a prince. My chance to attain a formal education was very limited. I quit school even before I was circumcised. At that time boys were circumcised at about the time they were ready to get married. There were no doctors, and the job was done by a person who specialized in circumcising boys. I was circumcised at the same time with some princes. We were nine boys all together.

Only a few people are interested in Javanese classical dance because it is difficult to learn and it takes time. You have to start very early, when you are very young. When you begin to learn dances too old your movement becomes awkward and stiff. The basic dances of Yogyakarta style and Surakarta style differ. Yogyakarta style is more difficult; it is smooth, elegant, and very refined. Surakarta style is more dynamic and perhaps much easier to learn. Yogyakarta style, in the old time, was performed only in the palace. In contrast, Surakarta style was also performed outside the palace, for commercial purposes.

I have been teaching dance here for more than thirty years. I teach students only in the afternoon from five to seven, but when there is a general rehearsal I conduct my class later at night. I have to pay homage to the royal household once every ten days from nine to twelve in the morning. In addition, I have to train the prince's children to dance in the *Kasatriyan*, the ceremony marking the passage of a sultan's son from childhood to adulthood when the boy is about twelve years old. My other duties involve working in the palace department that oversees the maintenance of the palace heritage—care for the royal artifacts, coordination of cultural activities, and tourism. The high official in charge of this department is Prince Hadiwinoto, the second son of Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX [1912—1988]. The prince is a university graduate with a degree in anthropology.

I receive only a little sum of money as salary, but I receive a supplement as a dance teacher. I don't expect too much. I have no wife or children, so I can manage—just enough to live. A small apartment is given to me, where I stay in the house for nobles in the palace. But most of all I am happy that I can do something for somebody else.

I think everybody knows that nowadays the sultan actually resides in Jakarta. For a time Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX was the vice president of

Indonesia. After the republic took over governmental administration, the royal families gave up the power to control their kingdoms. Today there are no more kingdoms, even though Yogyakarta continues to hold the status of "Special Territory." But even Yogya's sultan does not have the power to rule like he did before the revolution. He is more or less a figurehead. While the sultan is involved with the national government in Jakarta, the authority to maintain the palace is with his brother, Prince Puruboyo, who married some eight years ago, when he was seventy years old. The "lucky girl" was only twenty-seven when the prince married her. Her parents were very proud, and it was a real tribute to them; besides they received some money to start a small business. The prince has two sons from his first wife, but with the second one he doesn't have any child yet. Perhaps they will have children in the future, I don't know.

Prince Pujokusumo is my cousin, and I am surrounded by those royalty whom I have known my entire life. I am living in the same house where my mother lived when she was a dancer here. My mother died when I was only twelve years old. I blame her death on my father, who treated her badly. The lives of the noble families are very complicated. One thousand days after my mother's death, as is the custom here, my father married again. He married

his cousin and had three children with her. If you marry, you should treat your wife respectfully, at a distance. Only in the Western culture are husbands and wives intimate with each other. In Javanese, the saying is that a wife is “only a friend when we are in the kitchen.”

I have two brothers and one sister. They are all married and have children. My sister is married to a batik merchant, and she is living with her family in East Java; my two brothers are living in Jakarta. I would rather stay here in Yogyakarta. Yogya is a nice place to live; it isn't too busy. I don't like busy life. People must make a living to provide for their needs, but they also have to enjoy their lives. I think many Westerners are so caught up in making money to buy material goods that they forget to do this. Don't work too hard. Do things as you can, don't press yourself too much, and you will live longer.

That is the attitude we follow at the palace. People who want to get a position at the palace do it, not because they want to make money, but because they have other special reasons. Lots of people, mostly farmers, want such positions. When there is not much work to do in the fields, after the harvest or in a drought, instead of sitting around worrying about rain they would rather be able to enjoy participating in the many social activities of the court. In the old days, when the sultan had a lot of land, he would often

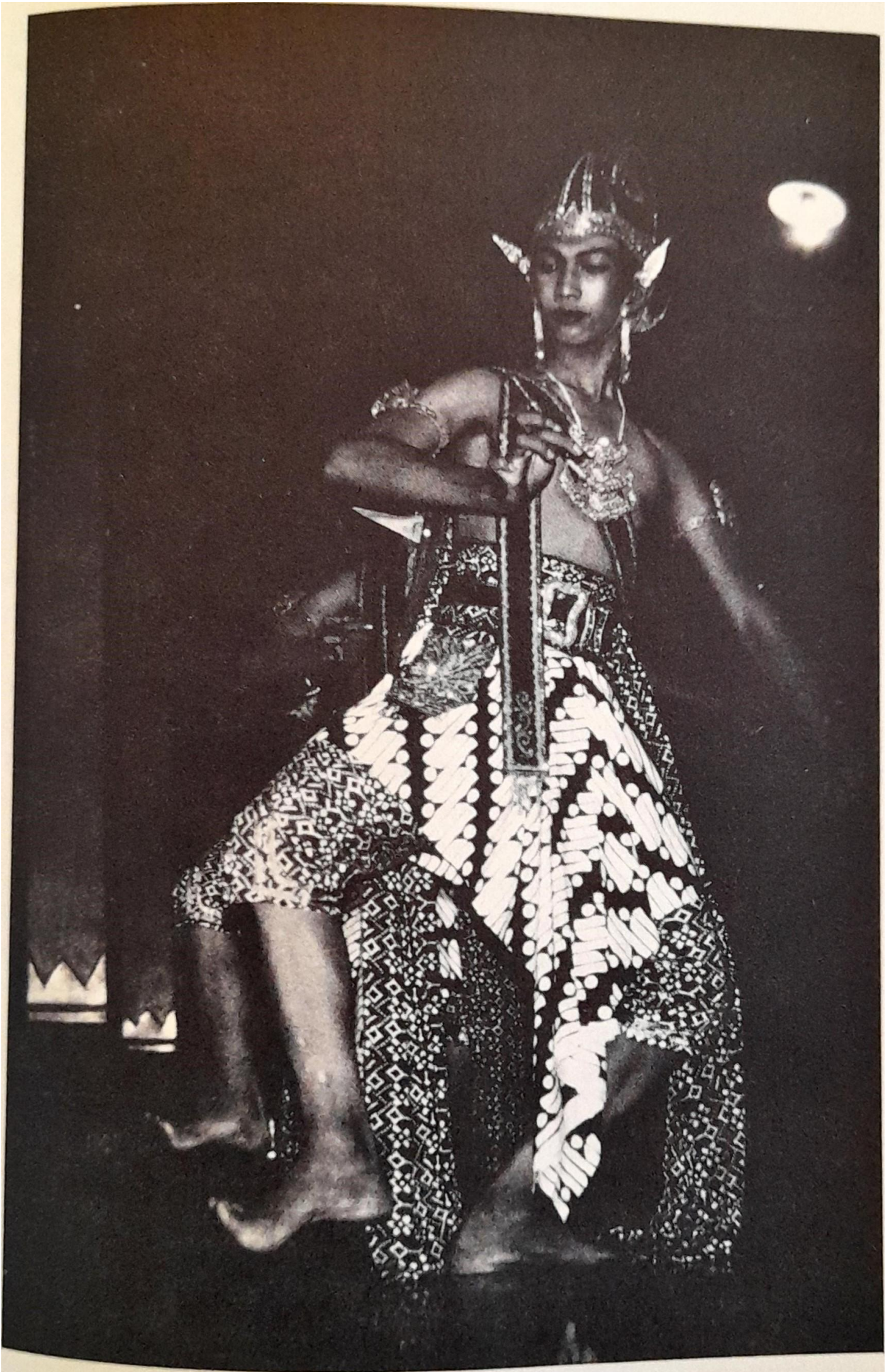
reward those with a position at his court by giving them a piece of land. More important for most people, however, is that they apply for a position at the palace to gain high social status. This provides a kind of psychological satisfaction. They receive only a very small amount of money, but they are very proud and happy to be part of the palace. You will see that life is not always measured by wealth. The Javanese philosophy says: "Be rich without treasure and win without warriors. " It means that we are expected to be wealthy in the sense of our mental attitude; then we will be honored by love and fulfilment. People always want to achieve happiness, but they think wealth is the way to get it. You can more likely become happy by not being demanding. With the right mental attitude, you can achieve victory without fighting.

In my own life, though I have very little money, I feel that I have achieved this. I do not have to worry about the future, and I know that when I am old I will be cared for adequately. Other people worry about having children to take care of them, but children can die or even turn against a parent. I am assured that I will be well attended to at the sultan's court. I enjoy my daily activities, and I do not feel under pressure. I enjoy my dance teaching the most of any of my activities. Besides the prince's children, I have

twenty-five students from the Academy of Dance and almost that many who come from the villages.

I prefer to teach them the classical dance styles. Some of the newly created dances or modern Javanese dances are good and very





Javanese classical dance, at the Sultan's Palace in Yogyakarta.

Photo: Walter L Williams

attractive, but in my opinion they are not real dancing. These new dances are more like performing exercises or sport: there are no specific rules, and its basic movement varies. It is a kind of mixed dance, I would say, with elements of Sundanese,



Balinese, or Sumatra movement all jumbled together. Most people admire them only in the first show, and then they get bored very soon. The classical dance has its own rules and several meanings. When you are watching the classical dances you have to see its background and the meaning. Then you will understand.

Nowadays I am often called on to organize a dance event for tourists, in which I have to change the rules and shorten the time of the performance. I hate to do that, but there is nothing else I can do. Most tourists want to see only the main part because they don't have enough time. Each night we have different performances, but the tourists' favorite is the Ramayana Ballet. The sultan has decided that we are going to promote our culture so that more people will visit Yogya. The cultural show is the main attraction here. But we also must not forget the importance of the dancers' social security. In this case, we have to consider that these performances are like special requests, and thus we have to ask for payments for the dancers. Perhaps you might think that I am too commercial; but what else could we do? They must make a living to support themselves also.

Life has changed today. We are no longer living in the traditional times. The life in the palace has changed drastically since the sultan moved to Jakarta. The princes don't have enough money to support the financial needs of the palace. That is why we are now encouraging tourism—to bring in enough money to continue our culture. You see, some princes have even had to sell their antique family treasures and houses. They begin to live in different ways. However, we don't lose everything! Thank goodness we still have our traditional way of living, as a part of our daily activity at the palace.

Javanese people, especially Yogyakarta people, are trying to rebuild their sense of glory from the past. Have you see the palace warriors under Prince Hadiwinoto's command? Oh, what a stirring sight. Protecting our culture depends entirely on the people. The only thing we can do is to create "self-awareness." We have to bear in mind that the development of the Javanese culture is our responsibility. I am sixty years old, but I intend to do all I can to keep our traditions and values alive.

By paying attention to the traditions, I think people today can get important messages for how best to live their lives. For example, my favorite character in the wayang puppet shows is Semar. Wayang stories reflect our basic philosophy. In his job Semar is just a lowly servant; but at the same time he is also the manifestation of Batara Ismoyo, a god who protects the good spirit and truth. He is a servant on the one hand, and on the other hand he is a god. In applying this to society, I think Semar is the symbol of democracy. His masters cannot do anything without him. The message of the Semar stories is that leaders can do nothing without the help of the common people. I grew up under the Sultan's rule, and now I live in the Indonesian Republic. I cannot truly decide if democracy is a better system than monarchy. Both forms of government have advantages as well as disadvantages. I only want to say that, whatever system exists, the people's voice must be heard.

You have to know the Javanese saying *Djo Dumeh*, which means you have to care for others. If you are able to achieve something better than other people, then you have to think of the others. Those who don't do this eventually find themselves alone and without support when they need it. You see, life is a wheel, and you are on that same wheel with everyone else. So, when you are on top, it is to your benefit to help others who are currently on the bottom. Because the wheel never stops moving: It moves up and down, and round and round.