Dancers wearing masks often speak of how limited vision establishes a way to separate from vision’s crucial role and to move towards an understanding of what essential “seeing” really is: the innate ability of the body to know of nearby objects without actually seeing them distinctly, what Merleau-Ponty calls the body-subject.

Most important to notice from the “inner face” of this Bapang mask from East Java (Fig. 1) is that it is carved to be worn low on the face, so that for the dancer to be able to see in a limited capacity through the narrowly carved and down-turned eyeslits, he or she must tilt the head back while harnessing all the other senses in the process. Any dancer wearing a mask must be willing to forgo this visual limitation for an enhanced embodied experience. Key to this kinesthetic grasping of the surrounding performance space in Indonesia are makeshift built forms, temporary bamboo constructions that not only “house” the performative event, but that cue the visually constrained dancers’ placement in, and movement through a highly interactive, intimate, and potentially transformative sphere.

As a graduate of Cornell University, a professor in the History of Art and Visual Studies, and a former director of SEAP, I have come to think of space and the shaping of social relations in the Southeast Asia Program over the years as a similar makeshift structure, reminiscent of the popular British nursery rhyme, “This is the House that Jack Built.” Both the rhyme and the program are cumulative narratives that do not always divulge the details of their “houses” per say, or even who the cast of characters might be (Jack for one!) who provide the architectural planning. Instead, both reveal over the longue durée how each “house” is indirectly linked to other things and people — i.e. “the horse, the hound and the horn that belonged to the farmer sowing his corn.” Each sentence in the nursery rhyme (or SEAP’s cumulative history) is an example of a deeply nested relative clause that reveals how everything is intimately interlinked.

On the eve of the 70th anniversary of the Southeast Asia Program, I would like to meditate on the house that SEAP built by focusing on two “deeply nested” carved wooden masks from a collection gifted to the Herbert F. Johnson Museum in 1998 by the late Benedict R. O’G. Anderson (1936–2015), political scientist and historian, perhaps best known for his 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, which explores the origins of nationalism. Anderson was the Aaron L. Binenkorb Professor Emeritus of International Studies, Government & Asian Studies at Cornell University, and a former director of the Southeast Asia Program. One afternoon in the Fall of 1998, Ben confided that while he was pleased to give others (including me) the opportunity to teach with his mask collection in the years to come, he also spoke of his misgivings and the sadness attached to parting with these objects that had become “good friends” over the years, intimate in their interactive potential.

Two “dancer king” topeng masks in particular became the focus of our conversation in his home in Freeville that day in 1998, a strong red-faced Bapang (Dursosono) mask from Polowidgen, Blimbing, East Java, gifted to Ben in 1964 by his friend, the historian and public intellectual Ong Hok Ham (1933–2007) (Fig. 2 revealing the recto [“outer face”] of Fig. 1’s verso [“inner face”]); and a refined Dalem mask from Tebesaya, Bali, carved and gifted to Ben in 1967 by the renowned artist, Ida Bagus Made (1915–1999) (Fig. 3). The style of traditional Javanese masks tends to differ significantly from that of Balinese masks. While Javanese masks often display more triangulated faces, tapering toward delicate chins, with sharply ridged and pointed noses, and relatively
smallmouths; Balinese masks reveal rounder faces with broad noses, and full lips.

In the case of the Bapang mask, Ong inscribed the follow-

Left to right: Fig. 2 – Front or “outer face” of Fig. 1. (Bapang Klono (Dursosono) mask by artist “M. Patawi,” painted wood, Malang, East Java; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Gift of Benedict R. O’G. Anderson (photograph by Tony De Camillo)). Fig. 3 – Refined Dalem mask by artist Ida Bagus Made, plain wood with mother-of-pearl inlay, Tebesaya, Bali, HFJM, Gift of Benedict R. O’G. Anderson (photograph by Tony De Camillo). Fig. 4 – Back or “inner face,” detail of inscription on right temple of Fig. 2, Bapang Klono (photograph by Ellen Avril).

text following in the blue callout box on the left of the temple of the “inside face” where the rattan cord coils, awaiting to clasp the head of a would-be performer. The inscription on the left reads: “Untuk Ben Anderson dari teman-nanya Ongkohgum, 17 Sep

Ben disclosed to me that the mask’s name or character might indeed be coaxed one day out of the rough and raw grain of the wood. He spoke endearingly of Ong and Gus Made who had entrusted him with these masks, “gifts exchanged between friends,” he remarked, and struck by the confluence of material and geographical forces that could restore a wild man (“all tattered and torn”) to a noble dancer king reborn.

My own associations with Gus Made and Ong engage with an earlier history then that provided by Ben and his mask col-

In the case of the Bapang mask, Ong inscribed the follow-

3

Fig. 4 – from the first page

2

“Refined Dalem mask by artist Ida Bagus Made, plain wood with mother-of-pearl inlay, Tebesaya, Bali, HFJM, Gift of Benedict R. O’G. Anderson (photograph by Tony De Camillo).”

Fig. 5 – Back or “inner face,” detail of inscription on right temple of Fig. 2, Bapang Klono (photograph by Ellen Avril).
shift bamboo structure that simulates a pavilion (Fig. 2) was read in tandem. In one of Sal's lectures, the strong male East Asian character of the Bapang (Fig. 2) was given a solid Dutch education. But the Japanese Occupation of Java, in 1942-45, and the subsequent national revolution would have disrupted this performer's family aspirations. Instead, Ong enrolled in an Indonesian school, and spent the 1950s exploring his possible vocation as a dancer, immersing himself in the study of Javanese art and culture. He started studying law at Universitas Indonesia (UI), but by 1957 had given up on this work to study as an assistant for then Cornell professor and SEAP alumnus, Bill Skinner, researching the Chinese in Indonesia. In the 1960s, Ong turned his attention to a period of intense fieldwork in East Java, where he became increasingly enamored with living theatrical forms and culture. Like many other Javanese mask carvers, Ong was increasingly concerned by what he saw as the economic deterioration and political tensions of Guided Democracy (1959-1965). Appalled by the violence in 1965, Ong spoke out, and was imprisoned for his actions. This period of incarceration, however, did not end his career. On the contrary, in September 1968, Ong set out for the United States where he pursued his doctoral studies at Yale Universi ty. His dissertation, entitled as a means to make a career as a public intellectual. He published widely on a variety of topics: colonial history, Javanese art and society, the Indonesian Chinese, and even the social history of Indonesian cuisine. He grew impatient with theory and was remembered for emphasizing the motto: “concentrate on the person.” After Ong’s death in 2007, Ruth McVey shared a moving tribute to Ong, written in her own words. According to Ruth, “Ong had written his statement in the wake of the disasters of 1966-67, which had brought him impairment and threatened a mental breakdown. His friend, the artist had suggested that he try to reach self-understanding by writing an account of his life that emphasized the things he thought had most influenced his development. He gave a copy to Ben Anderson, who visited Indonesia in 1967, with the request that he pass it on to a few mutual friends.” It is Ruth’s copy that was published in Indonesia by way of a memorial. I am grateful to Ruth for sharing Ong’s personal testimony as it helps to illuminate the conditions of the times, this new climate, as reflected by his upbringing and the spiritual life of his family. For example, there is the time when, as a boy, Ong becomes ill. It is then that, with the family’s unanimous consent, his old servant brings him to a local Hindu stone statue of King Keregantara. He describes being introduced to the statue by the servant and being urged to shake its stone hand and make an offering. This belief in the healing power of natural materials like wood and stone is also reflected in his essay on wayang topeng Malang. In it, Ong describes an old topeng dancer from Tumpang, Ong had faith in the wearer of the mask from Tumpang, Ong had faith in the wearer of the mask that was published in 1967, with the request that he pass it on to a few mutual friends.” It is Ruth’s copy that was published in Indonesia by way of a memorial. I am grateful to Ruth for sharing Ong’s personal testimony as it helps to illuminate the conditions of the times, this new climate, as reflected by his upbringing and the spiritual life of his family. For example, there is the time when, as a boy, Ong becomes ill. It is then that, with the family’s unanimous consent, his old servant brings him to a local Hindu stone statue of King Keregantara. 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In light of their combined efforts, the traditional and demotic mask like the Bapang (Dursosono) with its phallic, in-your-face nose may have signaled a shared “bad boy” view of the world, one born out of the epic Mahabharata. In his 1965 publication on the Javanese shadow theater, Ben describes the character of Dursosono, as one of brotherly devotion to the clan: Dursosono, the second of the nine-nine Kurawa brothers, is the most envious of his contemporaries. He is always looking out for a chance to make a name for himself. For example, if there is the time when, as a boy, Ong becomes ill. It is then that, with the family’s unanimous consent, his old servant brings him to a local Hindu stone statue of King Keregantara. He describes being introduced to the statue by the servant and being urged to shake its stone hand and make an offering. This belief in the healing power of natural materials like wood and stone is also reflected in his essay on wayang topeng Malang. In it, Ong describes an old topeng dancer from Tumpang. In his youth he danced the now vanished Bapang dance: at present he lives a leisurely life among his lengkeng (fruit) trees near the ruins of the old Tjandi Djago.” Ever hopeful, Ong concluded: “The Malang wayang topeng tradition is not yet dead. As a topeng dancer from Tumpang said, “we do the same things in wood that our ancestors did in stone,” pointing to the carvings on the ruins of Tjandi Djago which represent in stone the rhythm of life.” Like the wearer of the mask from Tumpang, Ong had faith in the journey even though he could not always see the path ahead. “Concentrate on the person,” was his motto. In the case of his friend, Ben, this concentration resulted in a shared critique of Indonesia, one that resulted in imprisonment and expulsion. 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