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Panel 3.1: Culture and Performing Arts

Style and Value in Performing Arts of the Javanese Courts

Royal courts throughout history have engaged with the performing arts. Practitioners, patrons, the lay public, casual tourists, and trained scholars speak of the "court" arts, reifying this descriptor as a meaningful category for discourse. This paper endeavors not so much to describe the arts associated with the courts of Java, as to ask how these arts are and have been understood by the various observers and stake holders. Are there stylistic characteristics that distinguish court arts from "non-court"? Do court arts retain their value and meaning in performances outside the courts, or do they invariably undergo changes? My inquiry combines a scrutiny of written discourse, from the late colonial era to the early 21st century, combined with personal conversations I have had over the last 45 years with Javanese, other Indonesians, and foreign observers. I argue for a view of the performing arts associated with the courts as navigating between exclusivity and permeability.