More on the *Taṇḍa* in Old Javanese Literature

*Andrea Acri*

École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), PSL University, Paris  
andrea.acri@ephe.psl.eu

**Abstract**

This article adds to the discussion on the figure of the *taṇḍa* in Old Javanese literature, recently revived by Jiří Jákl in ‘The figure of the *taṇḍa* in Old Javanese literary and epigraphical records’, published in *Bijdragen* 175 (2019). In this contribution, the author clarifies his position on some points criticized by Jákl, and adds a few more thoughts on the elusive *taṇḍa*.

**Keywords**

Java – *taṇḍa* – *vidu* – Old Javanese literature – *Rāmāyaṇa* *kakavin* – *Sumanasāntaka*

The article ‘The figure of the *taṇḍa* in Old Javanese literary and epigraphical records’ by Jiří Jákl, published in *Bijdragen* 175 (2019), is the hitherto most comprehensive and detailed discussion of the category of men referred to as *taṇḍa* in Old Javanese *kakavin* and epigraphical records from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries CE. Besides listing and analysing several references to this elusive category of people in Old Javanese sources, Jákl presents a lengthy and meticulous critique of previous scholarly views associated with *taṇḍa*. He synthesizes the issue as follows:

According to most scholars, *taṇḍa* were high-status officials, often interpreted as military ‘officers’. According to an alternative view, they were low-status military figures and their function was to oversee markets, or they were low-status figures associated with music and performances.

JÁKL 2019:309
In the Introduction, captioned ‘The myth of low-ranking taṇḍa’, Jákl points out that the term taṇḍa is translated in various, to his mind unsatisfactory, ways by different scholars (including Pigeaud, Supomo, Robson, Worsley, and ‘O’Brien’ [sic, for O’Brien, pp. 311, 338]), or sometimes left untranslated. In both the Introduction and throughout the article, Jákl pointedly embarks on a detailed critique of some scattered remarks on this figure that I made in three articles dealing with, respectively, some allegories between religious figures (especially the vidu), birds, and performers in the Old Javanese Rāmāyaṇa kakavin (hereafter RK) (Acri 2011); the wider issue of the association between ascetics and performing arts (Acri 2014); and a recently published edition and translation of the RK (Acri 2016).

Leaving aside the many merits of Jákl’s article, including an improved understanding of a difficult and much-discussed stanza of the RK, I must stress that I find Jákl’s critique most useful insofar that it has highlighted some inconsistencies and contentious points in my previously published articles. At the same time, I thank the editors of the Bijdragen for having given me the opportunity to rectify some statements that do not reflect my position and, concomitantly, to counter some of Jákl’s critical remarks. While I take full responsibility for all the unclear or factually mistaken points identified by Jákl, I also stress that my publications were primarily about the vidu and kuvoṅ but inevitably contained some cursory remarks on secondary figures, like the taṇḍa and taṅkil hyaṅ, and that my treatment of the taṇḍa merely tried to make sense of its intriguing association with the vidu/kuvoṅ in a single line of the RK. Here I hope to clarify my position and add a few more thoughts on that elusive figure. I will elaborate on the key points of contention below.

1 Low Status of the Taṇḍa

On several occasions, Jákl attributes to me the ‘thesis that Old Javanese taṇḍa are figures of low status’ (Jákl 2019:313), which I allegedly elaborated in view of the association between the taṇḍa and stage performers, or their involvement in the performative arts.1 Jákl repeatedly critiques the views that the

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1 See Jákl 2019: ‘Acri (2014:29) has reiterated his claim that the taṇḍa of pre-Islamic Java were low-status figures’ (p. 312); ‘In total, Acri (2011, 2014) selects four passages in support of his hypothesis that a taṇḍa was essentially a low-class functionary and performer’ (p. 312); ‘The second passage invoked by Acri in support of his thesis that Old Javanese taṇḍa are figures of low status […]’ (p. 313); the low status of the taṇḍa ‘is taken for granted rather than questioned’ (p. 313); ‘It seems to me that in his interpretation of the Old Javanese taṇḍa as a figure
taṇḍa ‘would represent low-status soldiers or men making their living by some type of performance’, affirming that they possessed ‘skills one would not ascribe to rank-and-file soldiers, performers, or religious figures’ (p. 320), being therefore ‘[h]ardly identifiable as low-status soldiers or humble performers’ (p. 321).² I wish to stress here that in virtually none of the passages of my work critiqued by Jákl (except one; see below) I state, either directly or indirectly, that the taṇḍa had a low social status, and is to be identified as a performer, both in pre- and post-Majapahit sources. In fact, I repeatedly qualify the taṇḍa as ‘functionary’/’functionaries’ (Acri 2011:62, 2014:29, 46), ‘dignitary’/’dignitaries’ (Acri 2011:70–1, 2016:459), and ‘officials’ (Acri 2011:70–1). It seems to me that being a ‘low(er)-ranking (court) functionary/dignitary’ (as per the definition of Pigeaud) is not the same as being of ‘low status’ tout court, which is what Jákl has consistently understood to be my position. Furthermore, I do not think that calling the taṇḍa a ‘low-ranking dignitary’ is radically different from saying that ‘the social status of taṇḍa is (relatively) high’ (Jákl 2019:322).

Now it seems to me that Jákl has selectively attributed to me the idea that the taṇḍa was a figure of low status, associated with performance, by drawing on a single sentence in a passage on the interpretation of stanza 24.112 of the RK in one of my writings (Acri 2011:79):

There, the kuvoṅ was accorded an extremely low status (kaniṣṭa) by the starling and was blamed for being impure or stained (kaśmala), which may allegorically represent the low position of the vidu in the eyes of courtly, householder-oriented and urban Javanese society. In line b the bird is said to be a taṇḍa, whose ‘fortress’ or ‘walled palace’ (kuṭa) is nothing else than a hole (kuvoṅ). The low status of taṇḍas, associated with performances, was made object of satire.

Thanks to Jákl’s critical reading, I now realize that the last sentence should have read ‘The low status of vidus [...]’. I cannot but explain this mistake as an unfortunate lapse. It is in fact obvious from the context of the discussion that the main object of satire in the stanza is not the taṇḍa, but the vidu, alias...
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kuvoṅ; furthermore, the cumulative remarks on the taṇḍa in my articles make it clear that I do not consider the taṇḍa as having a low status, let alone that his function was purely ritualistic or performative. As acknowledged by Jákl himself (2019:316), I clearly regarded the taṇḍa as covering a military function: ‘Acri (2016:460) offers three possible meanings for taṇḍa. First, the function of taṇḍa is linked to the institution of the kuwu (initially meaning: “makeshift fortress”), strongholds that Javanese rulers built on the frontiers of their maṇḍala domains’. In short, Jákl attributes to me a ‘grand theory’ on taṇḍa as a low-status performer, which I never explicitly or systematically advanced, on the basis of a single sentence.

I would now like to draw attention to some crucial passages that epitomize, and hopefully clarify, my position. In one of my articles (Acri 2016:459), while commenting on stanza 24.112 of the RK, I point out the following: ‘I have suggested (Acri 2011:62) that taṇḍa could quite well be understood in the meaning of “dignitary”, but with a sarcastic force’; compare Acri (2011:62): ‘Here the [kuvoṅ] bird is depicted as a homeless and unattached wayang-player, and, at the same time, ironically compared to a taṇḍa’. The words sarcastic and ironically are key here, conveying as they do the idea that in this line we might have a juxtaposition between vidu (here used with a deprecative force, associated with mavayaṅ) and taṇḍa (fundamentally positive, a dignitary, whether ‘low-ranking’ or not). I took the line to mean that since the kuvoṅ, compared simultaneously to a (low-status) vidu and a (high-status) taṇḍa, lives in a hole in the ground, he has a ‘mean fortress’, with the result that he is ridiculed: how could a lofty taṇḍa have a hole as his fortress? Indeed, I suggested the kuvoṅ could even be ‘accused of posing as a taṇḍa functionary’ (Acri 2014:46).

The ironical force of this passage is admitted by Jákl himself (2019:331–2), who explains the depiction of a ‘humble, wretched taṇḍa’ in stanza 24.112, standing in stark contrast with his finding that ‘the taṇḍa were high-status warriors, military chiefs, and figures of the royal administrative hierarchy’, as a conscious parody. Jákl’s reading of this stanza in connection with stanza 22.35 of the RK constitutes a clear improvement, as it unpacks the parody: ‘in stanza 24.112, the figure of the taṇḍa (allegorically associated with the kuvoṅ bird) is represented as a wandering, lord-less warrior, a former warlord, who is cherishing the hope of establishing a new stronghold from which to launch predatory

3 In Acri 2016:460, n. 18, I acknowledge that this view derives from personal communication with Jiří Jákl. Jákl kindly shared with me his expert views on the taṇḍa in a personal email dated 10 March 2012. The association between taṇḍa and kuwu fortresses is mentioned by Jákl a couple of times in his article, but it is not elaborated upon.
raids’ (p. 335). And yet, Jákl does not elaborate on the religious allegory, whereby the kuwoṅ is simultaneously called a taṇḍa and compared to a wandering vidu. Furthermore, Jákl’s (p. 331) translation of line b of the stanza (sambegāṇiṅ kuwoṅ tekana hinaṅaṅ-aṅaṅ donyān pamǝjahi) as ‘The disposition of the kuwoṅ over there is to concentrate his thoughts, for his aim is to kill!’ is problematic: the passive form hinaṅaṅ-aṅaṅ should not be rendered as the active ‘(is) to concentrate his thoughts’, but rather as ‘(the kind disposition) is thought about’, ‘reflected upon’, which in this context must have meant something to the effect of ‘is to be carefully considered’, ‘doubted’ (with an exhortative force, in spite of the lack of an irrealis, which is admittedly problematic but could be justified as metri causa).

2 Association of the Taṇḍa with Performance

Jákl (2019:312) acknowledges that ‘[l]iterary associations between a taṇḍa and an enigmatic kuwoṅ bird in Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa 24.112, along with the participation of taṇḍa in court performances in Sumanasāntaka 113.3, led Acri (2011:71) to pose the interesting question of why we find taṇḍa associated with widu both in texts and in music and performances’. Leaving this question largely unanswered, Jákl seems to disagree with this association by offering a different interpretation of Sumanasāntaka 113.3 (Worsley et al. 2013:297):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{rasa bubula taṅahniṅ rājyāpan paḍa gumǝrǝh} \\
\text{para ratu saha goṅdiṅ goṅ rojeh tabǝ-tabǝhan} \\
\text{apituvi para taṇḍasraṅ-srāṅan midǝr arigan}^4 \\
\text{saha paḍahi gumǝntǝr lagy atry āsurak aṅavat}
\end{align*}
\]

It seemed that the centre of the kingdom might split asunder because of the thundering noise
Of the kings with their gongs, cymbals and idiophones.
The more so because taṇḍa officials in particular vied with one another, milling about in a great crowd,
With conical drums thundering as they continued to sound loudly the introductory themes for the music.

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4 This line is printed as apituvi para taṇḍasraṅsāṅan midǝr aritan in the edition by Worsley et al. 2013, and in Jákl’s article; however, the translation presupposes the emendation of taṇḍasraṅsāṅan into taṇḍasraṅsrāṅan, and of aritan into arigan (see Worsley et al. 2013:497; Acri 2011:70).
Jákl (p. 314) comments:

Acri [2011:70–1] links the performance of taṇḍa to that of widu, claiming that ‘[t]he taṇḍas accompany the performance of the vidus with a “thunderous noise” (gumǝrǝh) made with their drums’. But the text nowhere says that they do so; rather, the taṇḍa are depicted here in a simulated combat, in close proximity to the ‘kings’ (ratu), obviously persons of high social and political standing.

It seems that, according to Jákl, line c would be describing the conical drums of the ‘allied kings’ (see section 4 below), and not of the taṇḍa. While the Old Javanese is admittedly ambiguous and could be interpreted either way, let me reproduce below three relevant lines of stanza 81.26 of the Bhomāntaka, quoted by Jákl on pp. 324–5 (Teeuw and Robson 2005:440, trans. by Jákl):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{taṇḍaniraṅ vatǝk ratu paḍātihaṅ asira-siran} \\
\text{ghūrṇita tan pasankya karǝnǝ tabo-taboḥan ikǝ} \\
\text{len ta sañ asrameñ lǝbuh aḍeñ hulun ika sabatǝk}
\end{align*}
\]

The taṇḍa of the kings were all well-prepared, vying with each other, [while] boisterous din of countless percussion instruments could be heard; Others performed simulated attacks on the square, while the whole group of their followers stayed quiet.

This stanza strikes me as not only sharing similar terminology with the above-quoted stanza of the Sumanasāntaka, but also as describing a similar situation, that is, a staged performance in which taṇḍa are engaging in a ritualized/simulated battle in front of the king, accompanied by percussion instruments (tabo-taboḥan). Here I point out that the expression tabo-taboḥan ikǝ (printed as such by Teeuw and Robson, as well as Jákl) could indeed be read as tabo-taboḥanikǝ, where (n)ikǝ represents the third-person possessive pronoun: thus, an alternative translation of the second line would be ‘the boisterous din of their countless percussion instruments could be heard’, where ‘their’ is the taṇḍa’s (compare hulun ika = hulunika, ‘their followers/slaves’, in the next line). Thus, the instruments could have been played by the taṇḍa themselves, some of whom were drumming up the simulated battle staged by their colleagues.

An association between taṇḍa and percussion instruments is found in other Old Javanese sources, as noted by Jákl himself (2019:326), especially in RK stanza 26.7 (‘[n]umerous drums are sounded, “like the paḍahi used to mark
time for the taṇḍa rakryān to celebrate the month of Māgha”;

kadi padeṇdehyde taṇḍa rakryan mamāgha) and Sumanasāntaka 19.4 (“The ceremonial use of drums by taṇḍa seems to be implied […] the taṇḍa “make a noise like the thunder day and night, rumbling all together, answering each other in turn from all sides of the compass”; soresuk gumorah makakrätug abandaṇ asahuran aganti lor kidul). It seems to me that the passages quoted by Jákl support the idea that the taṇḍa themselves were also playing percussion instruments during these performances (and indeed, they might have done so also in a context of military signalling; see p. 326, n. 43), hence the frequent use of verbs like gumorah and gumantor to describe their ‘thundering’ performance. Be this as it may, I feel confident to reiterate my point that ‘besides their official and military activities, this category of functionaries also had the prerogative to take an active role in ceremonial performances’ (Acri 2011:71). There are several passages in Old Javanese literary and epigraphic sources pointing at this aspect that would merit further investigation, such as Navanatya 10a, where taṇḍa are mentioned in a context of percussion instruments (for instance, gamelan, salukat, mṛdaṅga), performances (for instance, rīngitan, ‘wayang performances’), and other entertainments staged in the palace under the supervision of the rakryan damui officer (Pigeaud 1960).

The enactment of mock war dances by taṇḍa on the occasion of public performances or rituals, often alongside religious specialists, might have reflected magico-ritual concerns rather than purely military or secular/pragmatic purposes, as surmised by Jákl (2019): ‘No doubt, taṇḍa—like many other military figures—would engage in simulated combats, if for no other reason than as part of their military training’ (p. 313); ‘Such spectacles had a very practical purpose for the taṇḍa: it is clear that they strove to demonstrate their martial skills in order to increase their military value, making an impression upon the king’ (p. 325). For instance, the interesting mention of ‘warriors’ (whether of status, like the taṇḍa, or not, like the bhaṭa) performing what seems to be a mock battle or war dance alongside the vidu in Sumanasāntaka 113.3c and Deśavarnana 66.5c still cries out for an explanation. According to Pigeaud, the “warriors eager for a fight” (bhaṭa mapatra yuddha) are to be identified with modern Javanese performers of mock fighting dances’ (Acri 2011:72). But we know from other sources that, as late as the eighteenth century, under Prince Mangkubumi (later to become King Hamengkubuwono I) of Yogyakarta, there existed a corps of armed Islamic officials called suranata who, alongside their military tasks, were ‘responsible for the preparation of offerings and the reciting of incantations (both Javanese and Arabic-Islamic) for the metaphysical well-being of the king, royal family, and realm’ (Florida 1995:168). Could the taṇḍa, in their capacity as high-ranking military personnel, have played a sim-
ilar role, being involved in the personal protection of the king (see Jákl 2019:319, 323, 328), as well as in other important ritual occasions such as sīma consecrations and solemn royal events?

3 Meanings of Taṇḍa

Jákl (2019:312, 316) has distilled from my work three interpretations (clearly phrased as hypothetical and tentative) of taṇḍa in RK 24.112. In Acri (2016:460), I suggested that taṇḍa could cover a military role, being associated with the institution of the kuvu (see above); or, it could recall the Sanskrit word tāṇḍa (‘an old sage’; related to taṇḍu, taṇḍi, taṇḍaka, tāṇḍava: see Acri 2014:40); or again, taṇḍaṅ ko could represent a corruption of taṇḍak ko, where taṇḍak (meaning ‘dance (with songs)’; Zoetmulder 1982:1929) could be connected to the Modern Javanese tandhak, a category of singers and dancers. Being not traceable to any known root in Proto-Austronesian or any other Austronesian language, I ventured to speculate that taṇḍak/tandhak could derive from Sanskrit tāṇḍaka, ‘juggler’ (from the root taṇḍ ‘to beat’). Jákl (2019:312) notes that this Sanskrit word ‘is unattested as a loanword in Old Javanese’ and points out that ‘Gonda (1973:46) does not suggest tracing the Old Javanese taṇḍa back to Sanskrit, but rather offers “sign, mark” as the only meaning of the Old Javanese taṇḍa.’ Here I take the opportunity to clarify that I did not intend to suggest an etymology of taṇḍa, let alone trace its origin back to either taṇḍak or the Sanskrit tāṇḍ(aka); Rather, I merely tried to explain the occurrence of taṇḍa in a single line of the RK, in an allegorical chapter which is replete with doubles êntendres constructed around the reading of words in their Old Javanese and Sanskrit meanings—for instance, alepaka in 25.20c, (manuk/pakṣi) vidu/vidvan in 24.114, 25.21a, kaṭak/kathak(a) in 25.21a, and sambega in 24.112b (on which, see Acri 2008, 2011, 2014). Even if taṇḍa in the context of chapter 24 seems to refer primarily to a military officer, its association with a performing vidu in line c of stanza 112 would warrant the possibility of an intentional pun being made by the author, who was playing on assonances between words pertaining to different languages and/or semantic fields.

4 Status of the ‘Kings’ (ratu) Mentioned in Sumanasāntaka 113.3b

Jákl (2019:314) critiques my translation (Acri 2011:70) of ratu—denoting the royal personalities invited by King Bhoja to the wedding of his sister Indumati—in that stanza as ‘vassals’ instead of ‘(allied) kings’. While not doubting
that these *ratu* were ‘obviously persons of high social and political standing’, and admitting that Jákl’s remarks do have some merits, I point out that the expression *ratu sāmanta* is common in Parva/Purāṇa texts as well as *kakavin* (see, for example, *Virāṭaparva* 95), being a calque on the Sanskrit *sāmanta-rāja* = ‘vassal king’. Indeed, in medieval Sanskrit epigraphy and *belles lettres*, *rājan* alone conventionally expresses the same meaning.⁵ In an (unfortunately, lacunose) passage of the Pucaṅan inscription (lines 28–30, Kern 1917), *ratu* would seem to be used in this sense (from the perspective of the Mahārāja, addressing a rebel ‘vassal king’; see also the expressions *rājadrabya* and *rājavāhana* in the same context, line 29). Ultimately, being deemed a ‘king’ or a ‘vassal king’ is often a matter of perspective: I think, for instance, about the idea of the premodern Southeast Asian ‘*maṇḍala*-polity’, constituted by a centre and a periphery of ‘tributary’ or ‘vassal’ kingdoms, or the concept of a ‘galactic polity’, encircled by (more or less independent) ‘tributary’ polities (Tambiah 1976). Chinese emperors, too, considered embassies from (independent and far-away) Śrīvijayan kings as being sent by ‘vassal kings’ of a feudatory kingdom, even if this vassalage probably constituted a mere exchange of gifts and a diplomatic act of formal allegiance. It is therefore not unlikely that the kings invited to the *svayambara* ceremony, although de facto independent, were perceived as ‘vassals’ or ‘subordinate kings’ by Bhoja’s court, and this could have reflected ideas current in the contemporary Javanese political imaginary.

5 Conclusion

To conclude: as a specialist in the religious history of India and Nusantara, I often rely on the work of other scholars whenever I am unable to discern the finer details of the military and social history of premodern Java, a field in which Jákl has produced a number of excellent contributions over the past few years. Admitting my over-reliance on Pigeaud’s treatment of the *taṇḍa*, and some inconsistencies in my cursory and scattered remarks on this figure, I acknowledge that Jákl has largely succeeded in his attempt to correct some erroneous perceptions about the function of the *taṇḍa* in previous secondary literature, as well as to finely analyse a wealth of data on this figure. Still, I believe that more attention needs to be paid to the intriguing associations of

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⁵ See Sircar 1966, s.v. *rājan*: ‘Rājan [...] , royal title; originally used by imperial rulers; later, when emperors assumed more dignified titles, a title of feudatories and smaller rulers’. I thank Arlo Griffiths for pointing out this source to me, and for sharing his forthcoming edition and translation of the Pucaṅan inscription.
the *taṇḍa* with performance and ritual, and also to the many sources containing relevant passages that have not been studied by Jákl—for instance, inscriptions and transmitted literature from the Majapahit period, as well as texts belonging to different genres than *kakavin*. In my response to Jákl’s article, I hope I have clarified some equivocal points and added some new elements to our appreciation of the *taṇḍa*. Only through scholarly debate we can deepen our understanding of Java’s fascinating past.

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6 Such as the *Praniti raja kappa-kapa* (stanza 9, mentioning *taṇḍa* and *patty ataṇḍa* [or *pañccataṇḍa*]); the *Rajapatigundala* (17a, giving the sequence *gusti, taṇḍa, mantri, ratu, viku*); the *Navanatya* (10a, mentioning inner- and outer-*taṇḍa*) (Pigeaud 1960–63); and the so-called ‘Śaiva version’ of the *Saṅ Hyaṅ Kamahāyānikan* (26a, featuring the seemingly hierarchically arranged sequence of institutions called *kabuddhān, karatun, kapamagotan, kamantryan, kataṇḍan, kasugihan, kavaiśyan*, et cetera) (Lokesh Chandra 1997).
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