

Traditional Puppetry in Indonesia

In Indonesia, like other Eastern countries, puppetry does not have its origins in entertainment; instead entertainment is a by-product and its roots are in spirituality, religion and communication.

Wayang Golek are a traditional form of puppetry from Sunda, West Java. They are made from wood, are three-dimensional and do not use a screen. The better-known **Wayang Kulit** are leather shadow puppets which are found in Central Java and Bali, though their style varies in each place. In the case of *Wayang Kulit* a tight cloth screen catches the projected shadow of the puppets, created by a light behind the screen which was originally the real flames of an oil lamp.

Both types of puppetry use two levels of banana log in which the puppets stand, (resembling a giant leek but representing the Earth) behind which one puppeteer (or ***dalang***) is accompanied by his ***gamelan*** percussion orchestra with (in Java) up to 20 musicians. The drummer guides the musicians. He in turn is guided by signals that the *dalang* gives whenever there is a change of mood or pace required. Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim nation, yet the stories are usually based on the epic stories of the ***Ramayana*** or ***Mahabharata***, originally Hindu epics from India, which were later adapted to suit Muslim teachings. (It is generally only in Bali where *Wayang* are still used within the Hindu faith in Indonesia).

Traditionally *Wayang* shows are performed for at least six hours during the night, attracting an adult audience of all social classes. The show does not usually tell the whole story of these epics. Instead one story might be chosen from a tiny part of the whole epic, and there are many stories within stories. Sometimes new stories are also created, but the history of the characters in the original epic is always respected. After a new story has been performed for some years, this too might become a part of the established fact or story bank (***Pakem***) which other *dalang* then draw upon. *Wayang* storytelling is therefore like a tree that continues to grow many new branches from the same long-established trunk.

Originally these shows were performed, (for example), to appease the gods, to offer thanks, to ask protection for a harvest or to exorcise evil spirits. They continue to be performed at circumcision or wedding parties, or at events such as anniversaries of large businesses. The *Wayang* performance becomes a social event around which there may be many stalls selling refreshments and other small items. The audience come and go as they please, watching or listening from all sides, sometimes gathering in their thousands around a small nucleus of invited guests who share a feast with the host. The crowds particularly enjoy the clown scenes, when much tomfoolery and satire take place. In Indonesia many people are familiar with the different types of character which can be recognised by the size, shape colour and angle of their eyes and nose and the way they walk, talk, sing, dance and fight. Characters can also be

depicted at different times in their lives, and can be a complex mixture of many both good and bad character traits.

It is a highly respected art form, and, though threatened by global trends, continues to thrive as a vibrant living tradition, offering a coded philosophy within which there is something for everyone, rich or poor, politician, scientist or artist alike.

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