

The Dance of the Shadows

A Dream More True than Reality

By Dipika Rai

Wayang kulit, shadow puppet drama, has been performed in Indonesia for over 1000 years. It was, and is even today, a vehicle for public education, an agent for informal information, and an instrument of abstract communication. It is considered a high art by scholars and was recognised as a “Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” by UNESCO in 2003.

In Indonesia, the people traditionally have lived close to the land and their metaphysical beliefs. They were extremely conscious of the afterlife, and the spirit of incarnation was a palpable force that guided social behavior. The symbolism and iconography of their beliefs required a special non-verbal language of communication. And so they used *wayang kulit* shadow plays to bridge the gap between their material and spiritual worlds.

The word *wayang* is thought to be a derivation of the Javanese word *bayang* for ‘shadow’ or ‘spirit.’ Hindu traders from Orissa brought leather puppets (known in Javanese as *wayang kulit*) to the Indonesian archipelago in

the fourth and fifth centuries and soon the shadow plays became an integral part of the oral tradition. The sagas enacted scenes of mythical proportions in which gods and humans played equally important roles.

With the spread of Islam to most parts of Indonesia, the physical appearance of the puppets became highly stylised, as Islam discourages the representation of the

human form (in spite of which, this versatile medium was used to preach and propagate the teachings of Islam).

Different puppets are ascribed different personalities depending on their physical features: size, foot stance, nose shape and the slant of the head. The most refined puppet,

the epitome of charm and temperance, is Arjuna, the protagonist of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. Arjuna is also seen as the ideal Javanese man and, as with many of the other characters, has become a role model in a society where children are exposed to *wayang kulit* from an early age.

Wayang performances typically begin in the late evening and continue until dawn. During this time, hundreds of puppets are brought into action by the *dalang*, the master puppeteer. The *dalang* is no ordinary man. Schooled in the scriptures at a very early age, he is also an historian, a philosopher, a highly respected figure in society and, above all, a skilled storyteller.

Conjuring up spectacular scenes using dozens of puppets, a lamp and a flat white cloth, he holds his audience spellbound all night. The flickering lamp imparts an eerie quality to the performance – a performance that is used principally to convey a mystic message about the laws governing all creation.

Equally important is his interaction with the musicians who accompany each performance. Called the *gamelan* (from the Javanese word ‘to strike’), it is the largest traditional orchestra in the world. Its instruments have existed since the ninth century and its musicians play without notation. *Gamelan* instruments include bronze-keyed *sarons*, sonorous gongs and kettle drums, the latter most often used to create a mood of war during a performance. Often, the

The unreal hath no being; the real never ceaseth to be; the truth about both hath been perceived by the seers of the essence of things.

- The Bhagavad Gita



Bima, and Dewi Ruci, two characters from the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*. Leather Shadow Puppets, Java, Indonesia, 20th century

orchestra is joined by women who sing in old Javanese. They are the voices of the puppets, closing the final gap that separates the performers from the audience.

Performances generally start in the evening, are structured and follow set patterns. The opening scene, for example, is used to introduce the characters, define the situation and set the mood. The real action begins in the second act, in the dead of night. Here the hero is alternatively downcast and entertained by his 'clown followers' and fights in tremendous battle scenes. By the first light of the rising sun, the hero emerges victorious as the enemy is slain, and all is well with the world again.

Like most things Javanese, *wayang kulit* performances are suffused with magic and mysticism. During the 12-hour performance, the *dalang* manages to transcend the middle-world and achieve a divine dialogue. The abstract messages of the universe, many of which cannot be translated into empirical or logical equations, are conveyed almost subliminally through the engrossing stories enacted on the screen. *Wayang kulit* performances do have a less esoteric purpose too, however. Traditionally held on special occasions, they provide a reason for the extended family (and sometimes the whole village) to gather for a night of community entertainment. *Wayang kulit* is believed to be protected by magic, and that no harm can come to those participating in or attending a performance.

The importance of *wayang kulit* in Indonesia is unsurpassed; it wields more influence than cinema, newspapers and literature. The puppets are considered to be resting spirits of departed souls, waiting to be brought to life under the deft hand of the master puppeteer.

In the mythological world of *wayang kulit*, nothing is absolute: there are always shades of black and white, grades of good and evil, subtleties between love and hate, degrees of happiness and sadness, and nuances between male and female. For Indonesians, the puppets are guides, teachers, friends and neighbours who enter their lives and live in their hearts and minds in a dream sometimes more true than reality.

To see a film excerpt of a *wayang kulit* performance, complete with *gamelan* accompaniment, along with examples of the leather puppets and a full *gamelan* orchestra set-up, visit the Asian Civilisations Museum's performing arts gallery on the second floor of the Southeast Asia gallery.

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Photos courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum



Hanuman, Malay Wayang Kulit shadow puppet



Rama, Malay Wayang Kulit shadow puppet