



Shadow puppets

Known as Wayang Kulit. Shadow (wayang) puppetry has been a key part of Indonesian culture for over one thousand years. The puppets are commonly made of leather (kulit). Using traditional local stories and adaptations of Hindu epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, performances can last from two to eight hours. Performed at night with a single lamp to create the shadow.

Although puppets are made to be viewed as shadows it is set up so that the paying audience view the shadow side of the screen. Most people prefer to view the performance from the same side as the musicians and the dhalang (puppeteer).

The following examples are all from the Ramayana, an ancient Hindu epic originating in India. Versions of the Ramyana story are found in most Southeast Asian countries even if the main religion is Islam or Christianity. The story is portrayed in film, dance, music, and puppetry.

There are many different interpretations of the story. The brief description below is a mixture of the Javanese and Indian versions.



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The Story of the Ramayana

The Ramayana is one of the two great Hindu epics, alongside the Mahabharata. It tells the story of Rama, one incarnation of the god Vishnu. It has been an influential sacred text within Hinduism for centuries, with Rama serving as a model of devotion to dharma, or virtue. It has heavily affected Hindu society and religion over the centuries and continues to have cultural relevance today.

Rama,⁽¹⁾ his wife Sita⁽²⁾ and brother Lakshmana spend 14 years living in exile. In the 13th year the Deamon King Ravana⁽⁵⁾ decides to capture Sita, convinced she will fall in love with him and be his wife.



During their exile they are involved in many smaller stories and encounter many characters such as Hanuman⁽³⁾ and his kingdom of monkeys. They fight with bandits who are raiding holy places, terrorising worshippers. They save animals from being hunted.

Ravana kidnaps Sita using his cousin Marica⁽⁴⁾ to lure Rama and Lakshmana away in the guise of a golden deer. Having lived virtuously and in helping so many people Rama has a huge army of friends and supporters ready to rescue Sita.

Ultimately, Ravana cannot be killed. Instead, He is buried under a mountain by Hanuman who then sits at the top meditating and is still there now, preventing Ravana from ever breaking free.

The images of puppets are from Good Vibrations wayang kulit collection.
They are edited versions of pictures originally taken by John Pawson

Kayon and other puppets

Kayon are multi-purpose puppets. Also known as Gunungan (mountain), when placed on the screen their position indicates where abouts in the story we are and indicate to the musicians what pathet (musical key) they should be playing in. Starting angled to the left, then pointing straight up and finishing angled to the right.

The kayon can be moved closer to the lamp to create huge shadows on the screen which mask changes for example, Marica becoming the Golden Deer.



This way round they can be used to represent buildings, forests and mountains, gateways, and other scenery.

There are also bespoke versions that can represent specific contemporary scenes. For example, the collection at the Southbank in London has a Kayon depicting the London Eye.



This side of the kayon indicates the elements: Earth, Wind, Fire and Water. The puppeteer will wave around the screen rotating it rapidly and shaking it to suggest spiritual-darkness or chaos.

As well as wayang kulit, there are other forms of puppetry. Golek uses carved 3D figures.

There are also puppets made from reeds. Stories on leather scrolls which are slowly unwound to reveal each part of the story. There is also Wayang Wong, people being puppets.

Golek (Rama)
© Malcolm Milner



Puppet seen from the shadow side of the screen

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