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Balinese Shadow Puppetry

Resource Guide



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Introduction

Wayang kulit, or shadow puppetry, is one of the oldest and most ritually significant performances in Bali. This small island in Indonesia uses performance, such as dance, music, drama, and puppetry, as a way of honoring their gods. Most of the stories come from important Hindu texts such as *The Mahabharata*, but also incorporate many uniquely Balinese elements in their desire to connect the present with a mythic past. *The Mahabharata* is believed to contain both mythical and historical events, and is central to Indonesian culture, even though the text itself originates from India. The performances are sacred and traditional – but also address contemporary concerns, and often use humor to both entertain and teach the audience.



The *dalang*, or puppeteer, is the central figure in this performance genre and is revered in Balinese society as a teacher and spiritual leader. For example, a *dalang* can make holy water, a necessary part of Balinese religious practices, in a special ceremony that is part of a performance. The *dalang* controls all aspects of a *wayang kulit* performance as playwright, actor, director, orchestra conductor, musician, singer, producer, and priest. He needs to be an expert in Balinese philosophy, religion, and myth, as well as a talented storyteller and comedian. The *dalang's* skill as a performer, together with his knowledge and perceived wisdom, make him one of the most respected members of his community. The characters will be speaking Kawi, which is an ancient language that few people speak regularly anymore. The story is explained by the *dalang* and the clowns. Most *dalang* are men, though there are a small number of women who are *dalang*.

This specific story is called *Arjuna Tapa*. It follows a traditional story outline, as described below.



The Opening

Every *wayang kulit* performance begins with an incantation to call down the gods and to warm up the *dalang*'s voice. This is in Kawi, an ancient Javanese court language. The words mean:

*Once upon a time, it is not even known how long ago,
the eighteen Parwas were composed,
by the holy man Kresna Dwipayana.
In them appears the sacred shadow figure,
like a sheet of lightning penetrating the entire cosmos.
Then suddenly appears the mighty lord of poetry to create the story.*

The second part of the opening incantation is specific to the story being told. In this case it means:

*Now Arjuna enters,
to discuss with his two servants,
that he desires to go to the mountain, Indra Kila Giri, in order to meditate.
That is why they meet together here.*

The performance then begins. The mythic characters such as Arjuna continue to speak Kawi. But the performance is translated for the entire audience by the clown or servant characters into the local language – in this case English.

Structure of the Performance

Each *wayang kulit* performance generally follows a three-part structure:



PART ONE: The “good” characters meet and discuss what it is they want to do. This often includes introducing a problem and their plans to solve it.

PART TWO: The “bad” characters complain about what the good characters plan to do. They decide how they are going to cause trouble.

PART THREE: The two sides meet – and there is a battle. This stresses the necessary balance between good and bad, and is not about good overcoming evil - rather tension and balance.

The Story

Arjuna Seeks Wisdom

The story being performed is from *The Mahabharata* (one of the oldest and longest stories of all time!) Arjuna is one of five brothers. Their earthly father is named Pandu (even though they were all sired by gods, but that is another story), so they are known as the Pandawa brothers. They have been locked in a serious battle with their one hundred cousins, known as the Korawa brothers, over who will rule the kingdom. Arjuna is concerned because so many innocent people are suffering and dying because of the war. Arjuna plans to go to one of the most sacred mountains in Bali, Indra Kila Giri. Once there, he desires to meditate and pray in order that he might be granted wisdom from the gods about what to do in this situation. Arjuna’s servants, Twalen and Merdah, agree to go along with him up the mountain even though Twalen is nervous about the journey and the hardships they will face.





The ogre Momosimoko is jealous of Arjuna and his favor with the gods. He worries that the gods will give Arjuna a powerful weapon. Momosimoko decides that the only possible action is to fight Arjuna and kill him. Momosimoko also has two servants, Delem and Sangut, who agree to help him.

On the top of the mountain, Arjuna and Momosimoko are locked in battle. It appears that Momosimoko has the upper hand and will defeat Arjuna – but then the gods give Arjuna a powerful weapon. He is

able to be victorious. At the end of the battle the gods take Arjuna up to heaven in a magical chariot. There is another ogre causing havoc up there and only Arjuna can defeat him.

Vocabulary

Word	Meaning	Translation	Context
<i>Wayang kulit</i>	type of theater with shadow puppets	<i>Wayang</i> means reflection, <i>Kulit</i> means leather (in reference to the puppets - which are made of cow leather)	a very popular art form in Indonesia, makes contemporary references and parallels to modern life, while drawing from ancient stories
<i>Dalang</i>	master puppeteer		this person chooses the story, narrates, does improv., etc. also considered a type of priest because of the ritual nature of the performances and association with certain religious events
<i>Twalen/Merdah</i>	clowns, unique to Balinese storytelling. they help guide and narrate the story, and may comment through the performance although they aren't characters in the story	<i>Twalen</i> is black and an incarnation of the deity <i>Shiva</i> , <i>Merdah</i> is his son	these two clowns help with the storytelling and represent the "good" or "right" side - in addition to being physically represented on the right
<i>Delem/Sangut</i>	clowns, unique to Balinese storytelling. they help guide and narrate the story, and may comment through the performance although they aren't characters in the story	brother clowns	these two clowns are associated with the "dark" or "bad" side - and are physically on the left



Geography

Indonesia is an archipelago (island chain) located in Southeast Asia and Oceania in the South Pacific ocean. The archipelago consists of thousands of islands. The country contains an estimated population of ~252 million people, making it the fourth most populated country in the world. It is located near Papua New Guinea, East Timor, Malaysia, Philippines, and Palau.



itself is comprised of 1,000s of tiny islands. The country contains 34 provinces and has an estimated population of ~252 million people, making it the fourth most populated country in the world. It is located near Papua New Guinea, East Timor, Malaysia, Philippines, and Palau.



Potential Teaching Questions & Activities

- **Discuss the idea of tradition** and what types of traditions different students have encountered
- **Discuss various "traditional" characters in stories** - what are the characteristics of the hero, the villain, etc.
- **Discuss good vs evil** and the idea of a balance in the world
- **Students come up with their own stories** that follow a similar structure to the *Wayang Kulit* - characters form a plan, other characters try to stop the plan, then they confront each other
- **Identify the different morals and lessons from the performance** (her story will focus on the importance of education)
- **Identify different clown or jester figures in our culture today** - what rules do they break and what good sometimes will come from their mischief?
- **Possibly provide coloring book pictures of the clowns or characters** before the performance so students can recognize them and follow easier
- **Word search** for the vocabulary or names

Helpful Links

- Sangut, Delem, Twalen, Merdah illustrations - <http://budaya.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/wayan-covarrubias-bhuja.jpg>
- Bali Storytelling Lesson from the Asian Art Museum (with a video of Balinese shadow theater) - <http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/background-information/storytelling-ritual-and-performance-bali>



About Jennifer Goodlander

BA – Kalamazoo College (theatre and women's studies); MFA – University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (Asian performance – directing); PhD – Interdisciplinary Arts from Ohio University focusing on theatre and performance studies with a certificate in Women's Studies and concentration in Southeast Asian Studies. Jennifer has received many grants and fellowships



for her performance work and research on Asian performance, including a Fulbright grant to Indonesia to research women and traditional performing arts in Bali. Jennifer has presented at national and international conferences, and has published in *Asian Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Journal*, *Puppetry International Magazine*, and has book chapters in several edited collections. She is currently working on a book

about gender and the power of tradition within Balinese shadow puppetry. In New York City and regionally she has worked extensively as a director and teacher with a special emphasis on new plays and physically based performance. She has combined Asian theatre into innovative productions of *The Ghost Sonata*, *The Bacchae*, and others. Jennifer is a consenrated *dalang* and has performed *wayang kulit* in Bali, New York, Ohio, Michigan, Kentucky and Indiana. Jennifer teaches world performance, performance studies, and Asian theatre for the Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance at Indiana University. Jennifer has curated an exhibit titled "Still/Moving: Puppets and Indonesia" that will be on display at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures until June 2015. Her book "Women in the Shadows: Gender, Puppets, and the Power of Tradition in Bali", published by the Ohio University Press, is expected out in 2016.