

MATERIALS

- scrap paper for drawing
- stiff paper or used manila folders
- pencils & erasers
- scissors
- hole punches
- paper fasteners
- 1/8" dowels or thin sticks
- masking tape
- small nails
- foam pieces 4" x 6"

RESOURCES

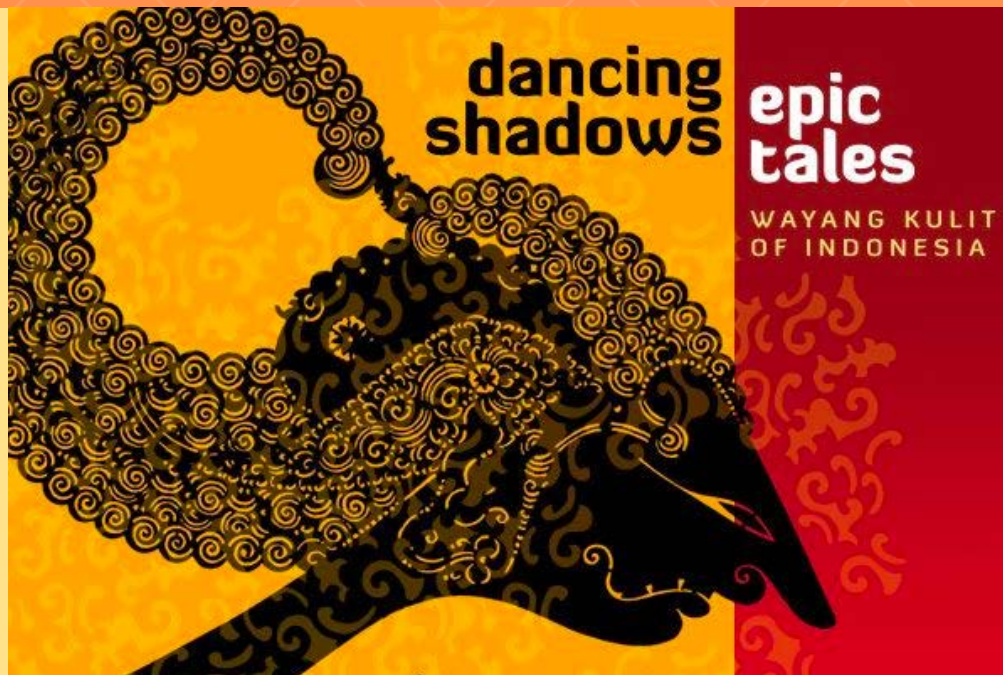
- Museum of International Folk Art
<http://online.internationalfolkart.org/dancingshadows/exhibition.html>
- Friend of Gamelan -
www.chicagogamelan.org
- American Gamelan Institute -
www.gamelan.org

VOCABULARY (Definitions on page 3)

- **Archipelago**
- **Blencong**
- **Buta puppets**
- **Dhalang**
- **Epic**
- **Gamelan**
- **Gawang**
- **Kayon puppet**
- **Kelir**
- **Kepyak**
- **Kothak**
- **Kulit**
- **Mahabharata**
- **Pesindhen**
- **Punakawan**
- **Ramayana**
- **Simpingan**
- **Symbolism**
- **Wayang**
- **Wayang Kulit**

NATIONAL VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

- **Creating:** Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work.
- **Presenting:** Interpreting and sharing artistic work.
- **Responding:** Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.
- **Connecting:** Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.



INTRODUCTION

Wayang kulit (shadow puppet) performance of Indonesia is among the oldest and greatest story-telling traditions in the world and lies close to the heart of Javanese culture. *Wayang kulit* are flat, leather puppets elaborately decorated and perforated, casting intricate and dramatic shadows when performed. This highly refined art form commemorates important life cycle ceremonies and a variety of social events. Performances are usually based on classical literature such as the Indian epics, Mahabharata and Ramayana with contemporary issues incorporated into particular scenes. Performances are always accompanied by a gamelan orchestra and traditionally begin in the evening and last until dawn.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand how wayang kulit, Javanese shadow puppets, are used in Java to tell epic stories which include references to contemporary life (historical and cultural understanding).
- Students will learn about the materials and methods used to create wayang kulit (perceiving, analyzing, and responding).
- Students will find their own solutions in the process of creating shadow puppets by exploring materials, shapes, patterns, forms and color (creating and performing).

MOTIVATION

Ask the students to name all of the different types of puppets that they are aware of. What are puppets for? Explain that *wayang kulit* are shadow puppets made in Java out of water buffalo hide. They tell epic stories that are very important to their culture. What are epics? What stories are important to the students? Look at *wayang kulit* or images of *wayang kulit* and discuss the aspects of the puppets, their characters, their features and the way that they are highly decorated, even though they are designed to appear in shadow. Tell your students to think of a character who has something really important to say that they would like to make into a puppet.



PROCEDURE

1. Have the students sketch out their ideas for figures on scrap paper. Encourage them to think about the main shape of the figure and how that form will convey a sense of attitude, an emotion, or a value. Have them draw one shape for the body and legs. Draw the arms separately. Older students can draw the arms in two pieces, one from the shoulder to the elbow and the other from the elbow to the hand.
2. Cut out the scrap paper and place the shapes on the stiff paper or used manila folders. Trace around the shapes and cut them out.
3. Punch holes in the shoulders for the arms and at the tops of the arms and then again at the elbows if they made the arms in 2 pieces.
4. Use paper fasteners to assemble the pieces.
5. Use small nails to puncture patterns where light can go through the puppets.
6. Have the students color their puppets with markers.
7. Use tape to attach the dowels or thin sticks to the puppet's body and the arms.
8. Make or find a shadow screen or a light source and look at the shadow of the puppet.

EVALUATION

- Have the students share their puppets by holding them up and talking about their characters. Use or make a shadow screen for this event.
- Make a puppet display and have the students write descriptions of their puppet characters.
- Stage a shadow puppet play using the entire class and their puppets.
- Have students work in small groups to write an original play that they can perform with their puppets.
- Create a tableau on a bulletin board by arranging the puppets in different positions. Use it as an inspiration for writing or storytelling.

VOCABULARY

1. **Archipelago** - a group or chain of islands
2. **Blencong** – the light source used to cast the puppets' shadows. Traditionally it was an oil lamp; often today it is an electric light.
3. **Buta** puppets – ogres
4. **Dhalang** – the *dhalang* is the puppeteer/shadow master in a wayang performance. The *dhalang* single-handedly manipulates each and every character and speaks all the lines of the puppets, giving them a unique voice and personality. In addition, the *dhalang* conducts the gamelan orchestra.
5. **Epic** - a lengthy narrative poem in elevated language celebrating the adventures and achievements of a legendary or traditional hero.
6. **Gamelan** – the musical ensemble that accompanies the wayang performance. Gamelan ensembles may include a variety of instruments such as metallophones, xylophones, drums and gongs; bamboo flutes, bowed and plucked strings, and vocalists. In *wayang kulit*, the *dhalang* conducts or cues the gamelan in part by rapping on the puppet chest, *kothak*, with a wooden mallet held in the left hand.
7. **Gawang** – the screen in front of the *dhalang* where he manipulates the puppets, often white cotton stretched over a wooden frame.
8. **Kayon** puppet – represents the tree of life, or a cosmic mountain; marks the end of a scene or can represent a forest, palace, tomb, or other actual places; also strong emotions.
9. **Kelir** - the screen onto which the *wayang kulit* shadows are cast by the *dhalang*. The screen is symbolic of the universe.
10. **Kepyak** - the metal plates that the *dhalang* hits with his foot to denote emphasis or tempo.
11. **Kothak** – Puppet box used for storing the puppets; also rapped on during the performance by the *dhalang* to cue the gamelan
12. **Kulit** - skin or leather
13. **Mahabharata** – A major text of Hinduism, it has a total length of more than 90,000 verses (roughly 10 times the size of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* combined). The core story of the work is that of a dynastic struggle for the throne of Hastinapura, the kingdom ruled by the Kuru clan.
14. **Pesindhen** – Singers, or female soloists making up an ensemble.
15. **Punakawan puppets** – Clown-servants – they usually have separate scenes from the storyline. The *punakawan* also allow the *dhalang* to give personal opinions, and social messages (such as “have small families”) to the audience.
16. **Ramayana** - The *Ramayana* has had a profound impact on art and culture in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. It consists of 24,000 verses in seven books and 500 cantos, and tells the story of Lord Rama, whose wife Sinta is abducted by the demon king Rahwana. Thematically, the epic explores the themes of human existence and the concept of dharma (duty).
17. **Simpingan** – the arrangement of puppets in the *gedebog* (banana log).
18. **Symbolism** - the artistic method of revealing ideas or truths through the use of symbols.
19. **Wayang** - originally the word meant ancestor or shadow, now it can mean puppet or performance
20. **Wayang Kulit** – *Wayang* is a generic term denoting traditional theater in Indonesia. *Wayang Kulit* refers to shadow puppets prevalent in Java and Bali, the best known of the Indonesian wayang. Kulit means skin, and refers to the leather construction of the puppets that are carefully chiseled with very fine tools and supported with buffalo horn handles and control rods.

Dancing Shadows, Epic Tales: Wayang Kulit of Indonesia

Where is Java?

Indonesia is an archipelago of over 17,000 islands that occupies an area approximately the same size as the United States, coast to coast. Indonesia has a long, rich history of trade, commerce, and interaction with the cultures of India, China, the Middle East, mainland Southeast Asia, and Europe. Influence from these regions can be seen in its religions, languages and literature, architecture, visual and performance arts, politics, history, and cuisine.

Indonesia has over 300 distinct ethnic groups, and is home to the world's largest population of Muslim people. Historically, Java has been Indonesia's center of power and, culturally, Central Java is still regarded as the heart of artistic traditions. One of Indonesia's best known art forms is *wayang kulit* which thrives in Central Java.



Punakawan (clown -servant characters)

How Wayang Kulit are Made

The art of creating *wayang kulit* is incredibly detailed. Several artists are usually involved in the different stages required to make a single puppet. These artists often learn the art from family members and apprentice with a master, and in the past they may have also studied at the *kraton* (palace).

Wayang kulit are made from water buffalo hide, cut and punctured by hand, one hole at a time. Once the hole-punching is complete, the puppets are painted in layers of water-based paints, heavily decorated with extraordinarily fine details, and often finished with gold or bronze leaf. The sticks attached to the base and articulated limbs of the *wayang kulit* are made from water buffalo horn and/or wood. A large character may take five months or more to produce.

Classical *wayang kulit* artists follow very specific traditional guidelines when creating the Leather Carver Rukun Santoso, Kasihan Bantul, 2007 puppets. They have some leeway in terms of individual preferences and creativity, but for the most part, they carve design patterns and choose colors that are suitable to particular characters, based on designs from previous generations.

Puncturing the Leather

This is the most time consuming stage of the art making process. The artists who carve and puncture the water buffalo hide begin by scratching the outline and details of the *wayang* figure onto the leather. The carving and punching of the leather, which is most responsible for the characters' portrayal and the shadows that are cast, are guided by this sketch.

A mallet is used to tap special tools, called *tatah*, to punch the holes through the leather. Despite the seemingly infinite designs found in the cut-outs, the tool only comes in two basic shapes, flat and curved, but they do come in a variety of sizes. Regardless of the size, most carvings require several turns of the *tatah* to achieve the desired detail.



Leather Carver Rukun Santoso, Kasihan Bantul, 2007

Painting

The carved and punched *wayang* figure is smoothed with sandpaper. This prepares the hide for paint, which is added in layers. Water-based paints, such as acrylics, are preferred and they are mixed with *ancur*, a natural adhesive often made from fish bones. The foundation coat, usually white or yellow, covers the entire piece to even out the leather's tone. The piece is burnished with a seashell and subsequent colors are added when each layer is dry. Gold or bronze leaf is used on finer pieces. The leaf is very delicate, prepared and applied with great care. *Ancur* is mixed with paint to soften the gold so it adheres more smoothly. Certain colors are added after the gilding process, and fine details such as thin lines and tiny dots are painted or stippled into the design.

Creating Characters

When creating specific characters, artists must refer to traditional rules for the carving and painting of the *wayang* that communicate a particular identity, essence, and social status. Templates of previously made *wayang* are used as a reference point by most artists.

Facial Features

There are a fixed number of shapes used to depict physical characteristics. Eye shape is one of the principal identifying features for understanding a figure's personality. The most refined characters will have thin downward cast eyes, whereas poor mannered characters would have big, round eyes with large pupils.

Standard colors are also used to portray personality traits and moods. For example, the most common facial colors (at least for human characters) are gold, black, white, and red. A gold face signifies dignity and calmness. Black can represent strength or anger. Red symbolizes a more intense, violent anger and usually a rather callous and nasty personality. A white face indicates a person's youthful age and/or innocence. Specific features such as these, combined with other features (such as the shape of the nose, body type, teeth, etc.) indicate "who's who" and provide clues to their dispositions.

Punch Shapes

Combinations of curved and flat punches create details such as clothing style, hairstyle, and ornamentation, each relevant to specific characters. For example, a pattern of straight line-dashes might be used for the edging of skirt cloth, whereas rounded spirals are used to represent hair.



Hadi Siswanto, Klaten, 2007

Accessories

Particular accessories are reserved for certain characters. A king usually wears luxurious ornaments such as a crown and certain styles of jewelry, which makes him different from commoners who are not allowed to wear such items. Gods or those who reside in the heavens wear shoes, whereas ordinary people and ogres usually do not. Designs used to portray these opulent accessories involve more complicated and more ornate carvings.

Making the Puppet Sticks

To make the base handle for the *wayang kulit*, a whole water buffalo horn is split in half, length-wise, using a simple saw, and then quartered. The quartered piece is cut down the middle, but not severed. The piece is heated making it pliable and the horn is gently pulled apart forming a “V” shape. Using an adze, the rough outer layer of the horn is hacked away and filed, smoothing the surface. The horn is placed in water, helping it to cool and harden, preparing it for the next step. Again, using a simple saw, the artist slices the horn down the middle without severing the piece, following the angle of the “V” shape.

The horn is held over a flame and the angles are flattened out, forming one long, straight line. In the end, this is the segment that holds the leather puppet. The process of heating, cutting, filing and soaking may be repeated until it is ready to be polished with leaves and natural chalk powder. The handles are finished with carved, decorative touches. When the rest of the puppet is ready, the artist attaches the handle by carefully and precisely molding the ends of the horn around the figure and it is secured with a needle and thread.



Shadows of wayang kulit, Bantul, Indonesia 2007. Photo by Felicia Katz Harris

When Do Wayang Kulit Performances Occur?

Wayang kulit performances are events that last throughout the night, accompanied by a live gamelan orchestra. In village settings, hundreds of people gather to watch. Performances occur for a wide variety of reasons. They can commemorate an important event such as a birth or marriage, kick off a political campaign, or simply entertain. A performance celebrating a birth might tell a story about the birth of a heroic character. The shadow puppets and the *dhalang* (puppeteer) are thought to be charmed by protective spirits, so performances can also take place at times of crisis to provide a community with protection and well-being. *Wayang kulit* performances are elaborate affairs. The ability to sponsor an event usually reflects a high social status but village performances are characteristically open to the public. There may be special seating, food, and drinks for invited guests, but the villagers are not excluded. Today, when staged at more elite venues, they are often broadcast on radio or television, still providing access to a great number of people. Regardless of sponsorship and venue, *wayang kulit* remains very much an art of and for the people.

Shadows

The *dhalang* manipulates the puppets to create dramatic shadow effects, which can be seen from both sides of the screen. By touching the puppet to the screen he creates small, well-defined shadows, while pulling the puppet away from the screen, towards the light, creates large, ethereal shadows. Originally, the audience watched the show from the shadow side but would walk around to see all the action that took place behind the screen. Today, many performances are set up for the audience to watch from the *dhalang's* side of the screen, but they can still walk around to the other side to catch a glimpse of the dancing shadows without the distraction of the *dhalang*, the puppets, and the gamelan.

What are the Elements of *Wayang Kulit* Performance?

The fundamental components of a performance include:

- the puppeteer, *dhalang*
- a mallet used by the *dhalang* to knock on the puppet box, *cempala*
- metal plates that the *dhalang* hits with his foot, *kepyak*
- shadow puppets, *wayang kulit*
- a light source, *blencong*
- a traditional Indonesian orchestra, *gamelan*
- female singers and a male chorus, *pesindhen* and *penggerog*
- banana logs, *gedebog*. The pointed sticks of the wayang base handle pierce the peeled trunk of a banana tree and the spongy substance holds the puppets in place.
- a puppet box, *kothak*
- a screen frame and screen, *gawang* and *kelir*; the main focus of the performance

The *Dhalang* (Puppeteer)

As the central artist of *wayang kulit*, the *dhalang* really makes the *wayang* and the performance come alive. He (commonly, but not exclusively male) single-handedly manipulates every character, conducts the gamelan orchestra, and sometimes makes puppets or designs them. These skills are usually passed from generation to generation, and today many *dhalang* enhance their training by attending a formal art institute that offer degree programs in *dhalang* studies.

Each *dhalang* brings his own style, humor, and innovation to his performance, providing for a unique experience at every show. Traditional *wayang kulit* performances last all night, averaging nine hours, without an intermission or break. The *dhalang* remains seated, in a cross-legged position, facing the screen in front of him and his voice must remain strong and clear. The ability to get through the performances, let alone to get to the final scenes with as much gusto as the beginning scenes, demonstrates the stamina and strength of the individual.



Puppeteer Ki Midiyanto performs wayang kulit, Eromoko, Indonesia, 2007. Photo by Felicia Katz Harris

Audiences of *wayang kulit* are not “tuned in” for the duration of the night-long show. People walk around, socialize, nap, eat, come and go. Spectators depend on cues from the *dhalang* to pull their attention back to the show for important scenes. In addition to his main role as *wayang kulit* performer, the *dhalang* conducts the orchestra. He signals to the musicians and singers what composition to play, and when to play it. This is done through verbal and musical cues.

The *dhalang* gives verbal cues to the musicians in the form of a riddle or code whose word association is synonymous to the title of the required composition. The musical cues can be in a form of a short melody. Another type of musical cue is a rhythmic pattern tapped on the puppet chest by the *dhalang* with his mallet. The knocking sound on the box also serves other functions such as signaling the switch from one speaker to another in characters' dialogue, emphasizing important dialogue and recitations, and supporting an exhilarating song.

Truly, the *dhalang* is a master. He is a puppet master, a shadow master, a literary and linguistics master, and a leader. He is an entertainer who must have a strong voice for songs and poetic narration, and a strong sense of humor for telling effective jokes. The *dhalang* is also a political analyst and commentator on current affairs. However, his ultimate role is that of teacher. His foremost responsibility is to inform people about *wayang kulit* -- the meaning of the puppets, the philosophy behind the stories, cultural values, ethics, and esoteric details about God, the universe, and human nature. It is for their extraordinary artistic talent and philosophical insights that *dhalang* are highly respected in their culture and regarded as spiritual souls.

Gamelan in Wayang Kulit Performance

The gamelan orchestra is a vital accompaniment for *wayang kulit* performance. Music supports the all-night performance almost non-stop, though the number of instruments that play may vary. Similar to a movie soundtrack, gamelan serves both musical and dramatic functions. Music sets the mood, interprets, and reinforces various aspects of the *dhalang's* narrative. The entrances and exits of particular characters to the stage, journeys, battles, and narrations are accompanied by musical compositions of various lengths. At certain junctures of the play, the *dhalang* chants or sings songs to set the mood of the scene, which is accompanied by soft-sounding instruments.



Ki Purbo Asmoro performing with his gamelan group, Mayangkara, Jakarta, 2008

Symbolism

Wayang kulit performances are symbolic representations of the cosmos. The screen may be viewed as the universe and the *gedebog* (banana log) as the physical earth. The *dhalang* is like God in the sense that he uses spiritualism and knowledge to bring life to the story and puppets, the *wayang kulit* represent humanity, and the shadows signify a dreamlike or illusionary world.

Every performance is presented in three acts, which refers to corresponding modes of music. The three *pathet* symbolize the stages of life. The first act reveals the central plot of the story and represents youth and immaturity. The second act involves a spiritual battle between right and wrong, symbolically corresponding to middle age and the search for truth. In the final third act there is inevitably a final, brutal and gory battle scene that resolves the problem. It connotes old age and the attainment of inner peace and enlightenment.

Contemporary Wayang Performance

Javanese *wayang* performance has experienced much change over the last several decades. In place of the oil lamp, the electric bulb has become a standard light source. Modern drum kits are sometimes used in *wayang* ensembles, intended to amplify the dramatic movements of the puppets. Genres of Indonesian pop music, and rock have been incorporated into *wayang* performance. Popular musicians will sometimes make an appearance during the comedic clown scenes. Also, during these special scenes, comedians have been known to show up as guest artists, interacting with the puppeteer and *pesindhen* (singers) in witty dialogue on contemporary topics. Today, a cutting edge *dhalang* might interact with the audience, or put himself in the show. It is not uncommon to see a *dhalang* act like a disc-jockey during the humorous scenes, taking requests from the audience to play favorite songs. Some artists even modify the portrayal of wayang characters to add excitement and artistic edge.

The changes reflect an ever-evolving art form that seeks ways to maintain relevance in a changing time. *Wayang kulit* continues to be alluring to all generations despite competing forms of entertainment such as movies, television, and the internet.

Wayang Purwa: Repertoire and the Cast of Characters

The term *wayang purwa* refers to four cycles of epics, which began to be standardized by the royal courts of Central Java in the eighteenth century. The two most popular and commonly performed of these epics are *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. *Wayang* stories involve moral and ethical dilemmas faced by the characters in their journeys through life, love, and war. The stories are about good versus evil, but more than that, they contemplate the existential struggle between right and wrong. They are about the pursuit of living a virtuous, noble life and the search for meaning. The means to those ends are not always clear cut. “Good” characters may possess certain negative traits and likewise, not all the “bad” characters are entirely immoral. Whatever the circumstance, *wayang* stories always present philosophical ideas and poignant messages.

Historic Roots

The Hindu stories, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, originated in India possibly as far back as the eighth century BCE and found expression in Java around the eighth century CE. For centuries, Hinduism was the predominant religion of Java. Over time, the epics became distinctly Javanese versions of the original Indian texts and by the tenth century they were recited in the form of *wayang kulit* as court-based theater. Most likely, the Hindu stories were applied to indigenous beliefs and local shadow puppet traditions, melding into a uniquely Javanese custom.

When Islam took hold in Java (1200 – 1600), the current stylized form of *wayang kulit* was adopted to meet cultural prohibitions on representations of the human form. The aesthetic traits of the puppets persist and Islam’s presence on Java remains strong, while the Hindu body of literature continues to be an important part of Javanese art and culture to this day.

The Epics

The epics are divided into over 200 distinct and autonomous, yet related episodes, which are the stories presented in singular, nine-hour performances of classical *wayang kulit* in Central Java.



Brahala Hitam and Brahala Putih, Indonesia, 1992. International Folk Art Foundation Collection in the Museum of International Folk Art. Photo by Blair Clark

Ramayana

Ramayana is a story about a kidnapping that involves romance, adventure, wars, and swashbuckling heroism. In this morality tale, the victim Sinta is tricked into abduction by Rahwana, the Demon King of Alengka and the epitome of evil, greed, and lust. Her virtuous husband Rama, his loyal brother Laksmana, and an army of monkeys spend years searching for her and fighting for her freedom. Rahwana repeatedly tried to seduce Sinta, but he was always unsuccessful. In the end, the villains are defeated, Rahwana is killed, and Sinta is rescued, but her fidelity is questioned.

Heroes of Ramayana

Prince Rama, his wife Sinta, and brother Laksmana were forced into exile due to family politics. Sinta was abducted by the Demon King Rahwana while they were living in the forest. Rama, Laksmana, and Sinta would not have prevailed without the help of these important characters and an army of monkeys.

Villains of Ramayana

With the help of his corrupt allies, the Demon King Rahwana kept Sinta in captivity and created great obstacles for the heroes. In the end the villains were defeated. Rahwana was decapitated and his head was buried by a mountain.

Mahabharata

Mahabharata is a complex story involving generations of family feuds, battles and gruesome wars. Throughout this epic tale, characters on both sides face major philosophical dilemmas, great adventures, and learn important life lessons as they make their way through the world. The focus is on the five righteous Pandhawa brothers and their errant cousins, the 100 Kurawas.

Their hostilities, aggression, and dispute for power over the Kingdom Hastina culminated in the Great War, called the Bharatayuda. In the end, the Pandhawas prevailed.

The Ancestors

Sakutrem, Palasara, and Abiyasa are the common ancestors of the rival cousins. Their family lineage can be traced back to the gods.

Parents of the Pandhawas

Pandhu Dewanata was the King of Hastina. With his two wives he fathered the five Pandhawa brothers. He died prematurely and his executive wife, Kunthi raised the boys in the court of Drestarastra, Pandhu's blind brother who ascended the throne.

Parents of the Kurawas

The blind King Drestarastra became King of Hastina when his brother Pandhu Dewanata died. Together, Drestarastra and Gendari are the parents of the 100 Kurawas. Though Drestarastra was supposed to give the Pandhawas control of Hastina, he was manipulated by Gendari to crown his eldest son, Duryudana, King.

The Pandhawa Brothers

The brothers Puntadewa, Bima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sadewa are the heroes of *Mahabharata*. They are the five sons of Pandhu Dewanata and the rightful heirs to the Kingdom of Hastina. Symbols of justice, virtue, and spiritual purity, their victory is the will of the gods.

Putren (the women)

Indonesian women are highly respected in their culture and their families. Female *wayang* characters likewise play important roles in war, family, politics, and other major arenas of life.

The Kurawas

The one hundred Kurawas are the children of Drestarastra, the blind King of Hastina, who unjustly gave them control of the Kingdom.

These characters include the major players who fight for the Kurawas, led by the eldest brother, Duryudana. They are some of the villains of *Mahabharata*, however, they are not all entirely bad or immoral. Some of them live rather tragic situations. As a whole, the Kurawas represent flaws in mankind.

The Descendants

The story of *Mahabharata* does not stop with the Pandhawa brothers, but continues with subsequent generations. Gathutkaca, Abimanyu and Parikesit are among the descendants of the Pandhawa brothers.

The Advisors

The Pandhawa – Kurawa cousins grew up together in the court of Hastina. They were taught the philosophy of the satria (gracious, virtuous knights) and the artful skills of war by their mentors, Durna and Bisma. Both were noble but eventually sided with the Kurawas. Sengkuni, the Kurawas' uncle, prime minister, and chief advisor is one of the most sinister characters in the story.

The Great Kresna

An incarnation of the Hindu god Wisnu, Kresna is one of the most important characters in *Mahabharata* and an advisor to the Pandhawas. In his youth he was known as Narayana.

Character Types Found in Each Performance

Buta

Buta is a generic term for ogre. Some *buta* characters play very specific roles, while others are used interchangeably when any ogre will do. They are usually thought of as enemies from “overseas” and inevitably act as an obstacle that the heroes must overcome.

Punakawan

The *punakawan* play a special role in *wayang kulit*. They are servants to the gods and royalty and add comic relief to an otherwise profound performance. These characters are best known for their own special scenes (called *gara gara* and *limbukan*) that are completely separate from the main storyline. During these interludes the *dhalang* may present a personal point of view, political messages, social service information, or simply a humorous break. These comedic characters are commonly favored by the audience. Appearing in almost every performance, the *punakawan* are Javanese in origin and do not exist in the Indian version of the epics.

Animals

Animals play a part in battle scenes and are sometimes found in the forests. These animals play a special role.

Kereta

The *kereta* puppet is a royal carriage that is used to depict an important character, such as a king, arriving at or departing from a particular place.

Gods

The Hindu deities are prevalent in *wayang kulit*. They experience life and emotions in ways similar to humans. They can be passionate, moody, vengeful, and political, but they possess supernatural powers and a deep understanding of the universe.

Although these *wayang* characters are admired, at Islam’s core there is only One God. Therefore, on Java, a largely Muslim culture, these figures are appreciated as cultural icons and literary heroes.

Battle Scenes

Battle scenes are often an audience favorite because they are packed with action, elaborate puppetry, and dramatic shadows. Characters toss and flip each other across the screen and do somersaults in the air. Related to these scenes are special props and accessories (such as armies and weapons) that the *dhalang* uses to tell the story.

Kayon (or Gunungan)

The Tree of Life (*Kayon*) *wayang*, also known as a Cosmic Mountain (*Gunungan*), is used in every performance to begin and end the show, to mark scene divisions, to represent the natural elements, extreme emotions, and a palace, home, forest, or other type of place. These are the only puppets that are painted differently on each side. The back usually portrays water elements or fire with the face of a *barong*, a protective guardian figure.

Setan (Demons, Ghosts, And Ghouls)

These creatures disrupt harmony and distract people from their tasks and meditations.

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