The History of Indonesian Puppet Theater (Wayang)
The term for puppetry, wayang, comes from the Indonesian word for shadow bayang. Wayang kulit, shadow puppetry using figures made from water buffalo hide, is considered to be the oldest freestanding puppet form; the earliest references to it date from the 800s. A court
A poet during the reign of King Airlangga (1035–1049) wrote: “There are people who weep, are sad and aroused watching the puppets, though they know they are merely carved pieces of leather manipulated and made to speak. These people are like men who, thirsting for sensuous pleasures, live in a world of illusion; they do not realize the magic hallucinations they see are not real.”

It has been debated whether or not puppetry is indigenous to Indonesia or was introduced from India or China. Indigenous origins are argued by scholars who point toward connections between the jesters and ancestral spirits; the jester characters that appear in every play have no clear Indian precedent. Indeed, Semar, the principal jester, is sometimes said to be the ancestral spirit of the island of Java itself, and this character is sometimes used in healing or protective rites. Even today in some areas of Indonesia, carvings, puppets, and gongs are considered by some to be objects that ancestral spirits can temporarily inhabit. Performances of puppetry are still held once a year at cemeteries where the founders of each village are buried. Ancestors are believed to have particular favorite stories. There is evidence that local animism has been a source of the puppet arts. In times past, if the harvest was threatened by various pests, the story of the Indonesian rice goddess, Sri, might be performed to ward off the attack. Today, such ritual stories are performed infrequently, but they remain a part of the history of the art.

Regardless of whether the impulse behind wayang is indigenous, widespread development of the art took place during the Hindu-Buddhist period, especially between 800 and 1500. According to myth, a prince named Aji Saka brought aspects of Indian culture to Java. A long ritual opening to the wayang performance celebrates his arrival on the island; he came bearing the hanacaraka, the Sanskritized Javanese alphabet, which he then split into four, casting a quarter to each of the four directions and thus transmitting literacy and prosperity throughout the land. The poetic language used by puppeteers in songs and narratives is laced with Sanskrit-based words. The repertoire is largely based on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the great Hindu epics. Some scholars feel that the Balinese puppet traditions resemble—in the realistic form of their puppets and the looser structure of their performance sequences—the art as it was performed on Java before the
arrival of Islam to Indonesia in the 1500s. The Balinese (who remained Hindu) believe *wayang* was introduced by refugees from Majapahit, the last Hindu-Buddhist kingdom on Java, when it fell around 1520.

On Java, however, *dalang* say the art was invented by the wali, the nine saints who converted Java to Islam. One story told by Sundanese puppeteers is that Sunan Gunung Jati, a wali of Cirebon, was having a conversation with another saint, Sunan Kalijaga, about how to attract people to Islam. Sunan Gunung Jati drew the outline of a *wayang* figure on the ground with a stick. Kalijaga understood and created the first leather puppet. He presented his first performance in the local mosque and, in order to enter, viewers had to recite the Islamic confession of faith (“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet”). Although *wayang* encompasses traditional Javanese stories and Hindu elements, most *dalang* are Muslims. Contemporary *dalang* consider themselves the literal or spiritual descendants of the wali. The elongation of arms, noses, and other features that gives an air of abstraction to the Javanese figures is attributed to this tradition. The elaborate tuned percussion (*gamelan*) orchestra used in Java and Sunda (West Java) was introduced at this time. Two other Muslim saints are said to have originated the art form of three-dimensional rod puppets.

Unlike shadow puppet theater, which requires darkness to enact, rod puppet theater can be enacted at any hour. Rod puppets have a long history in China, and it is possible that these figures reflect Chinese influence (thought by some scholars to have been brought by the Chinese Muslims who took part in converting the Javanese to Islam), as the region where along the north coast of Java these wooden puppets flourished was heavily populated by the Chinese. Most scholars believe that *wayang* existed before Islam came to the island; nonetheless, there may be some truth in tales of Muslim promotion of the art form. Significant innovations were made during the era of the *wali*. Some changes in the Indian stories were also made to accommodate Islam. For example, in Indian versions of the *Mahabharata*, Princess Draupadi (Drupadi) marries the five Pandava (*Pandawa*) brothers, but since polyandry was distasteful to Muslims, in the Javanese version she marries only the eldest brother, Yudhishthira (*Yudistira*). Another example of such changes is in the depiction of Durna (*Dorna*),
the teacher of the Pandavas, who is a Hindu religious figure and a great hero in India. On Java, however, he is depicted (probably in an effort by Muslims to discredit Hindu clerics) as a meddlesome poseur. Moreover, during the period of the wali, stories that were Islamic in origin were introduced into the repertoire. Though not as widespread as the tales from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the stories of Amir Hamzah, the uncle of Muhammad, which came from Gujarat or Persia around this time, as well as tales of the exploits of the Islamic saints on Java, were also dramatized.

By the 1700s most of the features that characterize contemporary wayang were in place, but this dramatic form had not yet spread beyond the region where Javanese was spoken, and wooden doll puppets were used solely to tell Islamic tales while leather puppets were used for Hindu-based stories. Slowly, Javanese performers from the Cirebon-Tegal area of the north coast migrated into the highlands of West Java, where Sundanese was spoken. The Dutch colonial government opened new roads, facilitating this movement of people and arts. Local aristocrats known as regents, working under the colonial government, invited dalang to settle in those cities. By the late 1800s shadow puppetry was rare in West Java, and wooden rod puppetry had become the favored form. The repertoire performed with the wooden rod puppets, however, consisted primarily of stories from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the epic Hindu tales (purwa, meaning “first” or “original”), and Islamic tales were enacted only rarely. New sets of rod puppets that followed the iconography of the wayang kulit figures were made to present the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

Today major wayang performers are known all over Java. They appear on television and radio, and cassettes of their performances are available in stores. While it is still true that most major dalang are descendants of the families of traditional performers, in the twentieth century there began to be performers who were not trained by their own elders. The national high school of the performing arts, Sekolah Menengah Karawitan Indonesia (S.M.K.I.), and the college academy of Javanese performing arts, Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia (S.T.S.I.), have recently opened programs where puppetry can be studied by all.

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