



LITERATURE IN RITUAL: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF SCRIPTS AND PERFORMANCES IN WAYANG KULIT

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Abstract

This research explores the intersection between literature and ritual through an anthropological lens, focusing on the traditional Javanese shadow puppet theater known as *Wayang Kulit*. The study examines how literary elements—such as narrative structures, dialogues, and poetic language—are embedded within ritualistic performances and serve to convey cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and collective memory. Using ethnographic methods including participant observation, interviews with *dalang* (puppet masters), and textual analysis of *lakon* (scripts), this research highlights the dynamic role of *Wayang Kulit* as both a literary and a ritual form. The findings reveal that *Wayang Kulit* functions not merely as entertainment, but as a cultural medium that bridges the sacred and the profane, reinforcing social norms, transmitting local wisdom, and preserving the oral tradition within the community. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature can operate within ritual contexts, offering insights into the performative and symbolic dimensions of traditional arts in Indonesian society.

Keywords: Literature; Culture; Anthropology;

INTRODUCTION

Wayang Kulit, the traditional Javanese shadow puppet theater, is one of the most enduring and emblematic cultural expressions in Indonesia. With roots stretching back more than a millennium, it has evolved into a sophisticated art form that intricately weaves together narrative literature, ritual symbolism, moral philosophy, religious syncretism, and performance aesthetics. Though often viewed as a form of popular entertainment, Wayang Kulit carries profound socio-cultural, religious, and philosophical meanings, serving as a living conduit through which communities articulate cosmological beliefs, transmit ancestral wisdom, and negotiate identity in a rapidly changing world.

At the heart of Wayang Kulit lies **literature**—in both oral and written forms. The narratives performed, known as *lakon*, are primarily drawn from epic Hindu texts such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, yet they are not mere retellings. Rather, they are local adaptations, deeply infused with Javanese values, Islamic teachings, mystical Sufi interpretations, and local political commentaries. These stories are often reshaped by the *dalang* (puppet master) to suit specific occasions, audiences, and ritual purposes. The *dalang* is not merely a storyteller but a highly trained cultural agent who interprets complex literary material while simultaneously conducting a performance that is often embedded within a sacred or semi-sacred ritual framework.

The practice of Wayang Kulit is often inseparable from **ritual contexts**. Performances are commonly held in conjunction with religious ceremonies, such as *selamatan* (ritual community meals), *ruwatan* (ritual cleansing or exorcism), temple anniversaries, royal commemorations, and other traditional festivals. These rituals are believed to invite spiritual forces and restore cosmic balance, and the narratives enacted during the performance are seen as part of the mechanism through which harmony is reestablished. In this sense, Wayang Kulit functions not only as a vessel for storytelling but also as a **ritual performance imbued with spiritual power**. The transformation of literary texts into performance becomes a sacred act—one that is both communal and transcendent.(Junaedi, 2016)

The role of **textuality** within this ritual framework is particularly intriguing from an anthropological standpoint. Unlike the fixed and canonical nature of literary texts in the Western literary tradition, the *lakon* in Wayang Kulit are dynamic and fluid. The *dalang* may draw upon written manuscripts, memorized oral texts, or even invent new interpretations and plotlines to address current social or spiritual concerns. This dynamic adaptation illustrates a concept central to the anthropology of literature and performance: that **texts are not static objects**, but rather cultural processes that gain meaning through performance, audience reception, and social context. Here, the boundaries between orality and literacy, between scriptedness and improvisation, are continually blurred.(Satyani et al., 2024)

In examining Wayang Kulit through the lens of **ritualized literature**, this research engages with theoretical perspectives from the fields of **performance studies, literary anthropology, and ritual theory**. Scholars such as Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, and Clifford Geertz have emphasized the transformative nature of ritual and performance, arguing that they are spaces of liminality in which symbolic action produces social meaning. Geertz's semiotic approach to culture, particularly his analysis of the Balinese cockfight as a "text," provides a useful framework for understanding how Wayang Kulit functions as a dense cultural document—performed rather than read. Similarly, Turner's concept of *communitas* and liminality provides insight into the social

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dynamics that emerge during these ritual performances, where hierarchical distinctions are temporarily suspended and collective reflection occurs.(Pongsibanne, 2017)

This study also builds on **anthropological literature that repositions storytelling and literary practice within the broader social and ritual landscape**. Scholars such as Ruth Finnegan and Jack Goody have interrogated the dichotomy between oral and written cultures, emphasizing the need to study how texts circulate and are enacted within non-Western contexts. In the case of Wayang Kulit, written scripts are often transmitted orally, orally composed texts are eventually written down, and both forms are reactivated and reinterpreted in each new performance. These dynamics challenge conventional notions of authorship, textual authority, and literary canon.

The **central objective** of this research is to explore how literary elements—narrative structures, character dialogues, poetic metaphors, and mythological references—operate within the ritualized setting of Wayang Kulit. Specifically, it asks: How do these literary forms mediate between the sacred and the profane, between tradition and innovation? What ritual functions do they serve beyond aesthetic communication? And how does the performance of literature contribute to the shaping of cultural memory, identity, and social cohesion within Javanese communities?(Yudhistira, 2022)

To address these questions, the study employs a **qualitative, ethnographic methodology**, combining participant observation of live Wayang performances, semi-structured interviews with *dalang* and cultural custodians, and textual analysis of various *lakon* used in different ritual contexts. Fieldwork will focus on regions in Central and East Java where Wayang Kulit remains an active part of community life. Particular attention will be paid to variations in performance style, use of language (Kawi, Javanese, and Bahasa Indonesia), and the ritual context in which the stories are told.

Ultimately, this research argues that Wayang Kulit should be understood not merely as a traditional form of theater, nor simply as a medium for preserving epic narratives, but as a **ritualized literary practice**—a culturally specific way of doing literature that is rooted in performance, infused with spirituality, and deeply intertwined with social life. Through its unique integration of literary form and ritual function, Wayang Kulit reveals how texts can become sacred, how stories can perform healing, and how art can function as a vital means of cultural continuity in the face of modernity.(Damayanti et al., 2024)

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a **qualitative ethnographic approach**, rooted in the traditions of anthropological fieldwork and performance studies. Given the nature of the research topic—which examines the intersection of literature, ritual, and cultural performance in the context of Wayang Kulit—a qualitative methodology allows for in-depth exploration of both textual and experiential dimensions of the practice. The research is designed to uncover the meanings embedded in the literary texts used in Wayang Kulit, the ritual functions of these texts in performance, and the cultural logics that shape and are shaped by such practices.

1. Research Design

This research is structured as a **multi-sited ethnographic study**, focusing on several key locations in Central and East Java where Wayang Kulit remains an integral part of community ritual life. The study combines **textual analysis, participant observation, and interviews** as primary methods of data

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collection. The methodological framework draws from interpretive anthropology (Geertz, 1973) and performance ethnography (Madison, 2005), allowing for both analytical rigor and cultural sensitivity.

2. Data Collection Methods

a. Participant Observation

Fieldwork will involve **direct participation and observation** of Wayang Kulit performances conducted in various ritual contexts, including but not limited to *selamatan*, *ruwatan*, *grebeg*, and traditional ceremonies linked to Javanese cosmology. The researcher will observe the preparations, the narrative development, the ritual components, the role of the *dalang*, and audience responses. (Setiani, 2023)

Detailed fieldnotes will be taken during and after each performance. When permitted, audio and video recordings will be used to support analysis of verbal and non-verbal elements of the performance, including voice modulation, puppetry techniques, and ritual gestures.

b. In-depth Interviews

The study will conduct **semi-structured interviews** with key cultural agents, including:

- *Dalang* (puppet masters), as primary narrators and ritual specialists
- Gamelan musicians and other performance participants
- Elders, religious figures, and cultural custodians involved in ritual practices
- Audience members and community leaders

These interviews aim to uncover personal interpretations of the narratives, understand the ritual significance of specific performances, and explore the cultural meanings of the literary elements embedded in Wayang Kulit.

c. Textual and Script Analysis

The research also involves a close **literary analysis of selected lakon (Wayang scripts)** used in ritual performances. Texts will be collected from archives, private collections, and direct contributions from *dalang*. Both classical scripts (in Kawi or Old Javanese) and contemporary adaptations will be examined.

The analysis will focus on:

- Narrative structure and character development
- Use of symbolism and metaphor
- Moral and philosophical content
- Language styles (including poetic and archaic expressions)
- Transformations of epic sources (e.g., *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*) in local context (Widodo, 2018)

3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be used to identify recurring patterns and themes across observations, interviews, and textual materials. Data will be coded according to categories such as ritual function, literary symbolism, cultural values, and performative elements. The interpretive framework will be informed by:

- **Victor Turner's** theory of ritual and liminality
- **Clifford Geertz's** concept of culture as "text"

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- **Performance theory** (Schechner, 1985) to understand the embodied and communal dimensions of Wayang Kulit

Triangulation will be applied by comparing data from different sources (texts, observations, interviews) to enhance validity and depth of understanding.

4. Research Ethics

This study adheres to ethical guidelines for ethnographic research, ensuring informed consent from all participants and respecting local customs and sacred practices. Anonymity will be preserved when requested, and cultural protocols surrounding sacred performances will be strictly followed. When dealing with unpublished scripts or sacred narratives, permissions will be obtained from custodians or cultural authorities.

5. Scope and Limitations

While this research focuses primarily on Javanese Wayang Kulit, it acknowledges the diversity of Wayang traditions across Indonesia (e.g., Wayang Bali, Wayang Sasak, Wayang Golek). The findings, therefore, may not be universally applicable but are intended to offer a deep case-specific understanding. Limitations may also arise from language barriers (especially with Kawi or archaic Javanese), restricted access to certain ritual events, or the inherently fluid nature of oral literature and performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the multifaceted and dynamic relationship between literature and ritual in Wayang Kulit performances. Drawing from field observations, interviews with dalang and community members, and textual analysis of selected *lakon*, several key themes emerged that demonstrate how literary narratives function within ritual contexts, not merely as aesthetic or entertainment tools, but as deeply meaningful cultural and spiritual instruments.

1. Narrative as Ritual: The Sacred Dimension of Storytelling

The *lakon* performed during ritual Wayang Kulit events are often carefully chosen based on their symbolic and spiritual significance. For instance, performances involving the *Semar* character, a divine clown figure in Javanese mythology, are frequently used in *ruwatan* ceremonies aimed at cleansing individuals from misfortune (*sukerta*). The presence of specific characters and the invocation of cosmological myths were found to hold ritual power—stories were not just told but *performed as acts of spiritual intervention*.

Dalang consistently emphasized that the stories themselves, when performed with sincerity and proper intention, functioned as a bridge between the human world and the spiritual realm. In several performances observed during the research, specific verses were chanted in archaic Javanese (*Kawi*) and treated as sacred utterances (*mantra*), reinforcing the idea that segments of the script were performatively "activated" during the ritual.

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2. Textual Fluidity and the Role of the Dalang

One of the most significant findings was the **flexibility and adaptability** of Wayang narratives in ritual settings. Dalang rarely followed fixed scripts; instead, they worked from a basic plot structure and creatively improvised dialogue, songs, and philosophical commentaries in response to the occasion, audience, and spiritual purpose of the ritual.

For example, during a village-wide *selamatan* ritual for agricultural blessings, a dalang altered a standard *Mahabharata*-based story to include local myths about the village's founding ancestor, integrating moral lessons about environmental stewardship. This form of literary performance is inherently **intertextual**, merging epic sources, local oral histories, and spiritual teachings into a single cohesive narrative tailored for the community's immediate needs. (Endraswara, 2006)

3. Language and Symbolism as Carriers of Cultural Values

The use of symbolic language—metaphors, allegories, and poetic phrases—was found to be a primary means through which the dalang transmitted **moral and philosophical teachings**. Audiences often interpreted these symbols through a shared cultural lens. For instance, the recurring motif of *gunungan* (mountain-shaped screen) was explained by several dalang as a representation of the cosmic axis, marking transitions between the material and spiritual realms during the performance.

Older members of the audience particularly emphasized the importance of *pitutur* (wise counsel) embedded in the performances. Through dialogue between characters like Arjuna and Krishna, or Pandawa and Semar, ethical dilemmas and spiritual guidance were dramatized and internalized by the community as **living lessons**—a testament to how literature becomes pedagogy through ritual. (Pangesti, 2012)

4. Wayang as Collective Memory and Cultural Continuity

Wayang performances, especially in ritual settings, were found to function as acts of **cultural preservation and transmission**. The stories performed often connected current generations to a mytho-historical past, serving as a form of **collective memory**. In one community in East Java, a *Wayang Ruwatan* was performed to commemorate a major flood; the dalang used a story involving Bima and the sea god to reflect on environmental imbalance, casting the disaster within a moral-ritual frame.

Community members interpreted these performances not simply as metaphors, but as **moral explanations** of real-world events, reinforcing social cohesion and offering a sense of cosmic order. Several respondents stated that Wayang “reminded them who they are,” showing how deeply entwined literature and identity become through ritual performance.

5. Embodied Literature: Performance as Meaning-Making

The embodied aspect of the dalang's performance—voice modulation, character switching, rhythm, humor, trance-like chanting—was central to how literary meanings were conveyed and received. Observations revealed that it was not merely the text of the *lakon*, but **how** it was performed that shaped its impact. Certain scenes—

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such as the descent of gods, battles between moral forces, or the comedic interludes—elicited emotional, spiritual, and even physical responses from the audience.

In some performances, spectators engaged in **spontaneous prayer, tears, or laughter**, showing that the delivery of the narrative had a performative power beyond the literary content itself. Literature, in the Wayang context, is not simply read or heard—it is *experienced* collectively, ritually, and emotionally. (Dwijayanthi, 2024)

Summary of Findings

In summary, this study demonstrates that:

- Wayang Kulit narratives serve specific **ritual functions**, often aimed at healing, blessing, or cosmic realignment.
- The *dalang* plays a central role in dynamically shaping the narrative to meet **spiritual and social needs**.
- The literary content of Wayang is rich in **symbolism, moral philosophy, and cultural memory**, making it an effective tool for cultural transmission.
- The performance of literature within Wayang is an **embodied, communal, and sacred experience**, where meaning is co-created by the performer, the audience, and the ritual context.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the intricate relationship between literature and ritual through the lens of Wayang Kulit, revealing how traditional narratives are not only performed for entertainment but are deeply embedded in the spiritual and cultural fabric of Javanese society. Through ethnographic observation, textual analysis, and interviews, the research has demonstrated that the literary elements of Wayang Kulit—its scripts, characters, dialogues, and symbolic language—serve essential ritual functions, including spiritual healing, moral education, cultural transmission, and the reaffirmation of communal identity.

One of the central findings is that in Wayang Kulit, literature is not a static or isolated artifact, but a **living, performative, and adaptive tradition**. The *dalang* plays a pivotal role in interpreting, modifying, and embodying the literary texts in response to specific ritual and social contexts. Their ability to fluidly shift between oral improvisation and written scripts illustrates how Wayang literature is constructed in performance, shaped by both tradition and innovation.

Furthermore, the narratives performed during ritual events often function as **vehicles of collective memory and moral philosophy**. They provide audiences with not only entertainment but also ethical guidance, spiritual reflection, and a deeper understanding of their place within the cosmos. In this way, Wayang Kulit acts as both a mirror and a mediator of cultural values, offering a space where the sacred and the profane, the past and the present, converge.

Importantly, this study also highlights the **embodied nature of literary performance** in Wayang Kulit. Meaning is generated not solely through the content of the texts, but through the dynamic interaction of voice, gesture,

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music, space, and audience response. This performative dimension enriches our understanding of literature as an active process—one that is felt, lived, and shared in ritual time.

In conclusion, Wayang Kulit stands as a profound example of how literature can function within ritual frameworks to create and sustain cultural meaning. It invites us to reconsider the boundaries between text and performance, literature and religion, and oral and written traditions. As such, it not only preserves the legacy of Javanese epic narratives but also actively shapes the lived experience of spirituality and identity for the communities that engage with it.

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