Hands On Learning
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BALI G146

Bali is an island that belongs to Indonesia. Most of the country follows Islam, but in Bali over 90 per cent of the population are Balinese Hindus. Religion is part of their daily life and is reflected in how people dress.



The men and women of Bali use dance and drama to explain their life. With puppetry it combines both movement and storytelling.

Wayang Kulit



Have you ever used your hands to make shadow puppets on the wall?

Wayang means theatre and kulit translates as skin. This name tells us a great deal about the object. Theatres are places for exciting public performances. This colourful doll is a character used in a shadow play, Bali's earliest form of theatre. Stories using wayang kulits have been told in Indonesia for over 1,000 years.

The puppet is made from leather usually buffalo skin. A stencil lets the maker draw the image onto the hide, this way the eyes and mouth can also be marked out. Sharp tools are used to cut out the puppet and their details. Colour is added to decorate the characters.



Above: A wayang kulit puppet performance

Projecting the shadows helps illustrate stories told in Balinese villages and palaces. In the beginning the audience would have seen the puppets. Their bright colours would tell the watchers who each character was. As Islam spread through Bali, people were discouraged from displaying images of people. The performers had to find a way of solving this problem. Their answer was to have the shadows of the characters tell the story.

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In Bali a performer is called a Dalang. They are the conductor, puppeteer, storyteller and singer throughout the story. It takes a great deal of experience to become a Dalang. They sit behind a cotton screen with a lamp above them. This allows the shadow of the puppet to be shown on the screen. The Dalang can spend up to nine hours doing a show with a large cast of puppets. Beside the Dalang is a wooden chest. This is hit with a hammer to signal when one of the characters is talking. It also directs the gamelan, which is a group of musicians that play the music during the show.



This puppet represents a Princess called Drupadi. In Balinese culture she is a character in the important and famous epic, *Mahabarata*. Drupadi is often portrayed with black hair and wearing a pink sari. An image of her can be seen on the right. This wayang kulit also has the Princess with her crown.

The *Mahabarata* story

The clan Kuru had two powerful families. One was the Korawas, sons of King Dretarastra. The other family were the five Pandawa brothers, sons of the King's brother, Pandu.

While Pandu ruled for his elderly brother the two families grew up together and competed in contests. The Korawa family became jealous as the Pandawa won them all. When Pandu died his elderly brother appointed Yudistira as the new ruler. Yudistira was from the Pandawa family and descended from Kharma, the God of virtue. This angered the Korawas and they began plotting against the new ruler and his family.

The Pandawas and their mother were persuaded to visit a small distant town. The house they were staying in burst into flames but they escaped and fled to the forest. In hiding the brother Arjuna, who was the greatest archer, won the hand in marriage of Princess Drupadi in a competition. Yudistira tells their mother they have been given a great gift. The mother, not yet aware of what the prize is, says the brothers must share the gift. Drupadi then becomes the wife to the five brothers.

Meanwhile, Duryodhana, of the Korawa family was the new leader of the kingdom. He realised the Pandawas had made an important ally with Dupadi's father and so gave them the west of the kingdom. This was a wilderness but the Pandawas cleared the forest and built a new capital. Yudistira declared his rule over the kingdom. Again the Korawas were angered. They sought the help of a an expert at loading dice called Sukani. Dice is a gambling game and loading the dice is a way of cheating.

Yudistira had a weakness for gambling and soon he had lost everything including the kingdom. The Pandawas were banished for twelve years and spent another year living among the common people.

When their exile finished they returned but Duryodhana declared they should be given no land, 'not even a spot which a needle's point can cover'.

The Pandawas declared war on the Korawas. For eighteen days, the skies were dark with clouds of arrows, and the earth thundered with clashes of charioteers and cavalry. Although the Pandawas won and Yudisira was crowned the battlefield was covered in bodies. The women of the Kuru clan visited the battlefield and mourned the millions of dead on both sides.