

# INTERPRETING THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF MALANG COMMUNITIES IN THE WAYANG KULIT PERFORMANCE IN MALANG

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## Abstract

This research aims to interpret the cultural and social dynamics of the Malang communities through the Wayang Kulit performance. Wayang Kulit is a traditional Indonesian art form that involves shadow puppetry and has been practiced for centuries, holding significant cultural and social value. By studying the Wayang Kulit performances in Malang, this research seeks to understand how this art form reflects and shapes the cultural and social dynamics of the local communities. The research will utilize a qualitative research methodology, employing ethnographic methods such as participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. The study will focus on the Malang communities actively involved in Wayang Kulit performances, including the puppeteers, musicians, and audience members. By immersing in the community and observing the performances, the researcher will gain insights into the cultural and social aspects of the Wayang Kulit tradition in Malang. The research findings contribute to Wayang Kulit literature, deepening understanding of cultural and social dynamics in Malang. It reveals how Wayang Kulit fosters cultural expression, community bonding, and values transmission. The study explores its role in addressing social issues, fostering cohesion, and identity formation. This research illuminates cultural practices, social dynamics, and community development. Examining Wayang Kulit in Malang promotes traditional arts, informs policymakers, and empowers communities sustainably.

**Keywords:** Wayang Kulit, Malang communities, cultural dynamics, social dynamics, traditional arts, community development

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Wayang Jekdong is a part of the diverse art form of wayang kulit that has developed in the province of East Java, particularly within the cultural scope of the "Arek" community, which includes Bojonegoro, Probolinggo, Situbondo, Lamongan, Gresik, Jombang, Mojokerto, Pasuruan, Surabaya, Malang, and Sidoarjo [1]. In Malang, this form of wayang kulit is commonly known as Wayang Kulit "*Malangan*."

The geographical and cultural conditions of the Arek community, mostly situated in the metropolitan centers of East Java, position it as a gateway for trade and the influx of foreign cultures, including being the main entry point for acculturation between the local and immigrant populations [2].

The prominent location of the Arek community within the urban hubs of East Java has facilitated its role as a significant hub for trade and cultural exchange with foreign influences. This has led to the emergence of a dynamic cultural milieu, where interactions between the local populace and incoming communities have given rise to a process of acculturation.

The process of acculturation in the Arek region has resulted in the blending and mutual influence of various cultural elements. The community's cosmopolitan setting has

allowed for the incorporation of foreign practices, traditions, and beliefs into the existing local culture, creating a unique and diverse cultural landscape.

The strategic location of cities in East Java as trading centers indeed offers advantages, as these urban areas serve as melting pots of cultures. The easy accessibility and constant movement of people in and out of rural regions have contributed to the dynamic and diverse character of the communities in these urban areas compared to more remote inland populations.

The cultural domain of Arek, situated in the heart of East Java, has been a prominent center of culture for centuries, even standing out as one of the earliest multicultural regions in comparison to other parts of East Java. In essence, Arek's culture has played a central role in the establishment and evolution of cultural civilization in Java. Consequently, the cultural assimilation values are deeply ingrained within the Arek community, and one can observe their influence on various aspects of the traditional puppetry performance, Wayang Kulit, for example, the use of puppet characters representing diverse styles and the incorporation of various cultural influences in the attire of the puppeteer (dalang), among other assimilations.

These elements exemplify the intricate interplay between culture, art, and heritage within the context of the Arek community's cultural identity. The dynamic nature of the region, fueled by extensive trade and cultural interactions, has led to the incorporation and blending of diverse cultural elements in the traditional art form of Wayang Kulit.



**Figure 1. Map of Tribes in East Java**

As part of the distinctive artistic heritage of the Arek culture, Wayang Jekdong is an art form that has received limited attention in academic contexts, particularly within the realm of performing arts. As an art form produced and preserved by a community far from the concentric Javanese cultural core, it becomes intriguing to investigate the intertextuality of Arek's socio-cultural conditions as reflected in the artifacts of the Jekdong puppetry.

Through this research, it is expected to contribute to the wealth of knowledge regarding the semiotics of signs, social values, and their relevance to the visual culture of the Nusantara (East Java). Furthermore, this study aims to shed light on Wayang Jekdong's significance, encouraging it to become a subject of academic discourse in the fields of arts and design, thereby ensuring the enduring preservation of Wayang Jekdong within the cultural landscape.

## **2. RESEARCH MENTHODS**

The research methodology for examining the cultural and social dynamics of Malang communities in the Wayang Kulit performance involves a qualitative approach [3]. The study design incorporates various data collection methods, including observation, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Through attending Wayang Kulit performances, observing interactions, and conducting interviews with key stakeholders such as performers and audience members, valuable insights into the cultural significance and social impact of the art form can be obtained. Focus groups and document analysis further contribute to understanding the community's perspectives and historical context. Thematic analysis will be applied to the collected data, identifying recurring patterns and themes that shed light on the cultural and social dynamics. The interpretation of these findings will be informed by existing literature, cultural theories, and social frameworks. Ethical considerations will be adhered to throughout the research process, and the study's limitations will be acknowledged.

In summary, the research methodology involves a qualitative design, utilizing observation, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. The study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and social dynamics of Malang communities in the Wayang Kulit performance. Thematic analysis will be employed to identify patterns and themes, and interpretation will be informed by existing literature. Ethical considerations will be followed, and the research limitations will be acknowledged.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 The Role of Shadow Puppets in the Preservation of Malang's Cultural Heritage**

For centuries, in the villages of the Malang region, East Java, a noble tradition has thrived and evolved from one generation to another. This tradition is the Wayang Kulit performance, a traditional Javanese art imbued with a distinctive and profound cultural charm. Wayang Kulit is a type of shadow puppetry presented behind a screen of darkness by a skilled puppeteer known as a dalang. It serves as a vehicle for narrating legendary stories and myths from the folklore of Malang.

Undoubtedly, this phenomenon extends beyond mere entertainment. Through Wayang Kulit performances, noble values and moral teachings deeply rooted in the local wisdom of the Malang community are beautifully reflected. Behind each hand gesture and the voice of the dalang, Wayang Kulit becomes a powerful medium for conveying moral and social messages to its audience. Themes of bravery, loyalty, morality, and ethics are intricately woven into the stories accompanied by the distinctive rhythms of the gamelan orchestra.

It is essential to acknowledge that the role of Wayang Kulit Malang goes beyond entertainment and the dissemination of noble values. It also stands as a strong pillar in preserving the cultural identity of the Javanese and, specifically, the Malang community. This performance art has portrayed a vivid representation of the local wisdom that has lived and evolved over time. Wayang Kulit Malang has become an inseparable part of the cultural heritage and identity of the Malang community. The continuity of Wayang Kulit Malang throughout the ages has successfully safeguarded this cultural heritage, enabling it to adapt to the changing times that continue to progress.

The influence of Wayang Kulit extends to the language and oral traditions of the Javanese community in Malang. The distinctive regional Javanese language, enriched with traditional expressions and vocabulary, serves as the primary language in this performance. Through the consistency and continuity of Wayang Kulit Malang, the regional-flavored Javanese language is preserved and remains relevant amidst the development of modern

languages. Additionally, the oral traditions in the form of songs and dialogues by the dalang (puppeteer) further invigorate the vitality of this spoken language, serving as a marker of the existence of this increasingly rare cultural heritage.



**Figure 2. Punakawan Puppet in Kidal Temple Relief (left) Punakawan Puppet in Malang Leather Puppet Show (right)**

Cultural and artistic experts also acknowledge the significant role of Wayang Kulit in preserving Malang's cultural heritage. Satoto [4], an expert in performing arts, emphasizes that Wayang Kulit is a powerful cultural symbol and essential in raising awareness of local cultural heritage. Pradani [5], adds that Wayang Kulit reflects the local wisdom and values of the Malang community, fostering feelings of pride and social solidarity within the community. By understanding the role of Wayang Kulit in preserving Malang's cultural heritage, steps can be taken to involve the community, especially the younger generation, in efforts to preserve Wayang Kulit and ensure the continuity of this valuable cultural legacy for the future.

Previous research has provided a deeper understanding of Wayang Kulit's role in preserving Malang's cultural heritage. A study conducted by [6] found that Wayang Kulit has a significant impact on maintaining the cultural identity of the Malang community. Through these performances, the younger generation can learn and internalize the inherited cultural values, building a strong sense of attachment to their cultural heritage. This research also highlights that Wayang Kulit can serve as a bridge between generations, connecting older generations with cultural knowledge to younger generations who seek understanding and appreciation of their cultural heritage.

Another study by [7] focused on the influence of Wayang Kulit on the social identity of the Malang community. Their findings show that Wayang Kulit can strengthen social bonds and solidarity within the community. The performances create spaces for interaction between the audience and performers, providing opportunities for the Malang community to collectively experience and celebrate their cultural heritage. This research also underscores that Wayang Kulit's presence in the daily life of the Malang community helps build a sense of togetherness and mutual support, making the performance an essential pillar in the community's social structure.

Considering the consistent findings from previous research with the observations presented in this paper, it can be concluded that Wayang Kulit plays a significant role in preserving Malang's cultural heritage. By recognizing and understanding this role, further efforts can be made to develop preservation strategies and programs involving the broader community and strengthening intergenerational relationships to safeguard and carry forward this valuable cultural heritage for the future of the Malang community.

However, Wayang Kulit still faces challenges in preserving Malang's cultural heritage. The era of modernization and globalization brings significant impacts on the influence and role of Wayang Kulit in society. Traditional values upheld by Wayang Kulit may be eroded by the rapid currents of modernization. The increasing interest of the public in modern entertainment can also affect the presence and appreciation of Wayang Kulit performances.

Therefore, active participation from both the community and the government in supporting and promoting Wayang Kulit performances becomes crucial. Through education and socialization efforts, the younger generation can be empowered to appreciate this traditional cultural art. Organizing cultural events involving Wayang Kulit performances can also attract public attention and raise awareness about the importance of preserving cultural heritage.

### **3.2 The Social Impact of Shadow Puppet Performances in Malang Society**

Apart from its strong cultural impact, Wayang Kulit Malang also plays a crucial role in the lives of the community. The performance is not merely entertainment; rather, it has profound social implications in the daily life of the local people. For centuries, Wayang Kulit has shaped and brought various social changes that have become deeply rooted in the culture and everyday life of the residents of Malang.

The enchanting sound of the gamelan resonates in the evening, marking the beginning of the Wayang Kulit performance. People of all ages gather in the village hall to witness this captivating spectacle. In the center of the stage stands a skilled dalang, bringing the beautifully adorned leather puppets to life with delicate finger movements. These puppets dance gracefully on the white screen, creating mesmerizing shadows.

In the Wayang Kulit performances, stories from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, or legendary tales from Javanese folklore fill the enchanting night. Wayang Kulit acts as a moral teacher for the community, imparting virtues such as honesty, loyalty, and resilience. Through the roles portrayed in the performance, the community learns about ethics and proper conduct.

In addition to being a source of moral values, Wayang Kulit serves as a medium to convey social and political messages. Dalangs often present stories that depict the social and political situations in the community. Subtle criticisms of actions that harm the community are cleverly woven into the puppet dialogues. In this way, Wayang Kulit becomes a platform for voicing aspirations and seeking justice.

Wayang Kulit performances also serve as a meeting place for the community. Through these events, the local community can gather and socialize. Interactions among the audience during the Wayang Kulit performance create strong bonds among them. Beyond being passive spectators, the community actively supports and appreciates the dalang and local artists who carry out the performances. This sense of togetherness and ownership of the tradition strengthens social ties among the people of Malang.

The impact of Wayang Kulit performances on Malang's society is extraordinary. Through observation and research, it has been revealed that these performances foster social solidarity, strengthen community bonds, and convey profound cultural values.

Wayang Kulit has the power to unite communities and build strong bonds of togetherness. Through the performances, people from diverse backgrounds can come together in a magical and profound experience. Wayang Kulit provides a medium for the audience to actively engage, share the same emotions, and cherish unforgettable moments. In this modern era of rapid technological advancements, Wayang Kulit offers a precious opportunity to reconnect with cultural roots and experience authentic social connections. Thus, preserving Wayang Kulit means safeguarding social ties, local wisdom, and the cohesion of a strong community.

The social impact of Wayang Kulit performances in Malang's society has been the focus of research and the opinions of experts in recent years. Previous studies have shown that Wayang Kulit significantly contributes to building social solidarity and strengthening community ties in Malang. A study conducted by [8] found that through Wayang Kulit performances, the audience from various social strata experiences a strong sense of togetherness and mutual support. These performances become moments where people from different backgrounds can come together and share experiences, thereby reinforcing social relationships among them.

Experts also emphasize that Wayang Kulit is not merely a means of entertainment but also a platform for delivering moral messages and social values to the community. According to Professor Anwar, an expert in arts and culture, Wayang Kulit imparts moral lessons to the audience, teaching them about justice, brotherhood, and loyalty. Wayang Kulit becomes a powerful medium to convey these messages in an enjoyable and entertaining manner, thus shaping more positive social behaviors in the community.

Another research conducted by [9] underscores the significant role of Wayang Kulit in strengthening the social identity of the Malang community. Through these performances, cultural values and traditions handed down from generation to generation can be preserved and celebrated. This research demonstrates that Wayang Kulit reflects local wisdom and serves as a potent cultural symbol for the people of Malang. The performances help instill a sense of pride in their own culture and reinforce social solidarity among community members.



**Figure 3. Various puppets in a shadow puppet show in Malang: Wayang Dursasana Sala (left), Wayang Antasena Yogyakarta (center), and Wayang Werkudara Gresik (right)**

Taking into account the findings of previous research and the opinions of experts, it can be concluded that Wayang Kulit has a significant social impact on the community of Malang. The performances not only strengthen social bonds and solidarity but also serve as an effective medium for conveying moral messages and social values to the society. Through Wayang Kulit, the cultural values and social identity of the Malang community can be reinforced and preserved. Therefore, it is crucial to continue supporting and appreciating Wayang Kulit performances as an integral part of the social and cultural dynamics of the Malang community.

### **3.2 Challenges and Issues Related to Cultural and Social Dynamics in Shadow Puppet Performances**

One of the main challenges faced is the declining participation of the younger generation in Wayang Kulit performances. Research conducted by [10] found that the younger generation tends to be less interested and prefers modern entertainment offered by digital media and global popular culture. This indicates the need for creative approaches to introduce and engage the younger generation with Wayang Kulit. Ki Soleh Adi Pramono, an expert in performing arts, emphasizes the importance of adapting Wayang Kulit performances to remain relevant and appealing to the younger generation, for example, by incorporating contemporary elements and technology.

Another important issue to consider is the preservation and maintenance of the Wayang Kulit tradition. A study by [11] revealed that there are fewer Wayang Kulit performers who are capable of carrying on this tradition due to a lack of interest and understanding of this cultural heritage. This highlights the need for more active efforts in documenting, training, and encouraging the younger generation to take part in Wayang Kulit performances. Mujiah [12] emphasizes the importance of support from the government, educational institutions, and the community in ensuring the continuity of this performance through training and skill development programs.

This research has unveiled the challenges and issues related to the cultural and social dynamics of Wayang Kulit performances, which require attention and action. The decline in participation among the younger generation and the preservation of the tradition are two main issues affecting the sustainability of this art form. However, the opinions of experts and research findings suggest that there are potential solutions, such as adapting performances to appeal to the younger generation and supporting training and skill development for future generations. With awareness, support, and collaborative efforts from all stakeholders involved, Wayang Kulit can continue to be a vibrant part of the culture and society in Malang, preserving its valuable cultural heritage for generations to come.

In line with the challenges faced by Wayang Kulit, [13], a renowned cultural historian, highlights the significance of government initiatives in promoting traditional arts. He argues that allocating funding for workshops, educational programs, and cultural festivals could attract the interest of the younger generation. Additionally, involving Wayang Kulit in school curriculums and extracurricular activities could foster a deeper appreciation for the art form among students.

Building on past research, I Nyoman Sedana [14] an expert in cultural studies, suggests that collaboration with local artists and cultural institutions could facilitate the documentation and transmission of knowledge about Wayang Kulit. By conducting fieldwork and engaging with the community, researchers can better understand the challenges faced by Wayang Kulit practitioners and propose sustainable solutions.

Furthermore, a study by Suryanto [15] emphasizes the potential of digital media to revitalize interest in traditional arts. Creating engaging content related to Wayang Kulit on social media platforms and online streaming services may attract a wider audience, including the younger generation. Incorporating interactive elements and storytelling techniques could further enhance the appeal of Wayang Kulit in the digital age.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

This research has revealed the significant role of Wayang Kulit in preserving the cultural heritage of Malang and the significant social impact it generates. Wayang Kulit performances serve as a powerful medium to strengthen the cultural identity of the Malang community, convey moral messages and social values, and foster social solidarity and togetherness within the community. However, there are challenges that need to be

addressed, such as the declining participation of the younger generation and issues related to tradition preservation. Therefore, collaborative efforts from all stakeholders, including the government, educational institutions, communities, and the younger generation themselves, are necessary to ensure the sustainability of Wayang Kulit and keep this cultural heritage alive and relevant in the future.

In conclusion, Wayang Kulit plays a crucial role in preserving the cultural heritage of Malang and enhancing the social cohesion of the community. These performances are not merely entertainment, but a potent cultural communication medium that conveys social values and fosters solidarity within the community. However, challenges such as the declining participation of the younger generation and issues related to tradition preservation need to be actively and collaboratively addressed. With the support and joint efforts of all parties involved, Wayang Kulit can continue to be a vibrant and relevant part of the cultural and social dynamics of the Malang community.

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