

Wayang as a Cultural Performance: Preserving Javanese Heritage in the Modern Era

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ABSTRACT

Wayang, a traditional Javanese performance art, embodies deep cultural, spiritual, and philosophical values. This study examines *wayang golek* as a cultural representation of Javanese heritage and explores its contemporary relevance. Employing a historical research method, the study traces its evolution, sociocultural functions, and adaptive strategies in response to globalization and cultural shifts. Findings reveal that despite the dominance of popular culture and digital media, *wayang golek* endures through innovation, educational integration, and digital dissemination. The sustained efforts of puppeteers (*dalang*), art communities, educational institutions, and government policies are crucial to its preservation. This study affirms *wayang* as a living cultural performance with transformative potential in today's sociocultural context.

INTRODUCTION

Wayang golek is one of the traditional performing arts of the Indonesian archipelago, with deep historical roots and rich cultural values. This art form is believed to have emerged in ancient times, even before the influence of major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam entered the Indonesian islands. Within the Javanese and Sundanese communities, *wayang golek* serves not merely as entertainment but also plays a crucial role as a spiritual medium, a tool for moral education, and a means of social and religious communication.

Etymologically, the term "*wayang*" originates from the Javanese word meaning "shadow," referring to *wayang kulit* performances that rely on light and shadow play to create silhouette effects on a screen. These shadows not only depict visual narratives but are also understood as reflections of human traits and characters, as well as representations of the complexities of human life. In performance traditions, *wayang* becomes a philosophical metaphor for the moral and spiritual dynamics experienced by individuals and communities. Meanwhile, the word "*golek*" in Sundanese means "to seek," but in the context of performance art, it refers to three-dimensional wooden puppets used as narrative mediums. Thus, *wayang golek* can be interpreted as a form of wooden puppet theater that conveys stories through specific characters while also serving as a symbolic means of seeking meaning, life values, and cultural reflection, all enacted by a *dalang* (puppeteer) (Asmoro Achmadi, 2004, p. 36).

Wayang golek is a distinctive traditional performing art of West Java, deeply imbued with historical and cultural values, and has become an integral part of Sundanese community life. Although now commonly associated with the Parahyangan region, the origins of *wayang golek* can be traced back to the northern coastal areas of Java, such as Brebes and Cirebon. In its early days, *wayang golek* did not receive the same level of attention as *wayang kulit*, which had already established deep roots in Central and East Java. This art form evolved during the reign of Raden Patah in the Demak Sultanate and was developed through the efforts of the *Wali Songo*, especially Sunan Gunung Jati, who used *wayang* as a medium for Islamic preaching (*dakwah*) (Agisfi, 2023, p. 81). By combining traditional puppet narratives with humor and elements of daily life, *wayang golek* became an effective cultural communication tool, easily accepted by the public. Its adaptability to local values and social needs has made the art increasingly popular and continuously evolving. In performance, *wayang golek* functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium for moral teaching, religious values, and local wisdom, making it a cultural symbol that bridges tradition with the dynamics of modern society (Khalid Pirmansyah, 2024, p. 2).

Over the course of its history, *wayang golek* has differentiated into three main types, each reflecting distinct cultural functions and characteristics. The first type is *wayang cepak*, which developed in the Cirebon area and often features the *Babad Cirebon*—local stories closely tied to the Islamization process. This form was used by religious figures and clerics as a communicative and entertaining means of preaching Islamic teachings. The second type is *wayang purwa*, more widely known among Javanese communities, which tells epic stories such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*—an outcome of Indian cultural acculturation with

local traditions, enriched with moral and philosophical values. The third is modern *wayang golek*, which has developed in the contemporary era and exhibits high flexibility in adapting narratives, performance styles, and media formats to current developments, including the use of digital media and contemporary social storytelling (Djawas, 2016, p. 3).

The diversity in form and content within *wayang golek* reflects its resilience in facing changing times. Far from being a static cultural heritage, *wayang golek* has evolved into a symbol of identity, a vehicle for social expression, and an instrument of intergenerational education. Consequently, efforts to preserve and develop *wayang golek* are crucial for maintaining local cultural continuity amid the ongoing challenges of globalization and modernization.

Although *wayang*, including *wayang golek*, represents a cultural heritage rich in historical, philosophical, and aesthetic values, its continuity in contemporary society faces significant challenges. The rise of globalization, the penetration of digital media, and the shifting cultural preferences of modern society have significantly transformed the landscape of entertainment and the methods through which traditional knowledge is transmitted, especially among younger generations.

Global cultural currents, marked by the influx of popular foreign entertainment and the dominance of technology-based consumption such as social media, digital films, and streaming platforms, have diverted public attention from traditional arts that are ritualistic and community-based. In this context, *wayang* performances—which historically played a central role in the social and spiritual lives of the Javanese and Sundanese—are experiencing a decline in both performance frequency and audience engagement. This phenomenon raises serious concerns about the survival of *wayang* as an essential component of national cultural identity.

This condition necessitates preservation and revitalization strategies that go beyond conservative approaches, embracing adaptive responses to contemporary dynamics. Integrating modern technology, updating narratives without losing traditional core values, and positioning *wayang* as a medium for education and contemporary expression are some of the approaches being implemented by artists, academics, and cultural institutions. Thus, it is imperative to examine how traditional arts like *wayang golek* can remain relevant and sustainable in the face of challenges in modern era, without severing ties with their profound cultural roots.

Wayang, especially *wayang golek*, is not just a traditional art artifact that represents the cultural values of the past, but a living and dynamic cultural performance continuously adapting to social and technological developments. In the modern context, *wayang* is maintained not only as a symbol of cultural heritage but also redefined as a medium capable of responding to contemporary issues, engaging younger generations, and transforming through various new mediums.

This study approaches *wayang* from a broader perspective—as a cultural entity capable of adapting and surviving through time. Its main focus is the exploration of revitalization strategies employed by artists, educators, and

cultural institutions to maintain the relevance and appeal of *wayang* in the digital era. Technological innovations, integration into educational curricula, and cross-cultural collaborations are among the key approaches that demonstrate how *wayang* not only survives but also thrives in more inclusive and transformative forms.

Through this study, the paper aims to highlight the *cultural resilience* of *wayang* as a traditional art form while affirming its potential to build bridges between the past and the present. Therefore, *wayang* can serve not only as a vehicle for preserving Javanese cultural heritage but also as a participatory medium capable of engaging new audiences in an increasingly globalized world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of traditional performing arts, particularly *wayang golek*, has garnered significant scholarly attention in the context of cultural preservation and adaptation. According to Atay Citron (2013), performance traditions in Southeast Asia serve not only as aesthetic expressions but also as dynamic tools for cultural memory and identity. *Wayang*, as part of Indonesia's intangible cultural heritage, encapsulates complex layers of mythology, ethics, and sociopolitical commentary (Atay Citron, 2013). Scholars such as Holt argue that puppetry in Asia, including *wayang golek*, functions as a repository of communal wisdom that is transmitted intergenerationally through symbolic storytelling and ritualized performance (Claire Holt, 2000).

The historical evolution of *wayang golek* is also analyzed through the lens of Islamic cultural integration. Ricklefs emphasizes that the spread of Islam in Java was not solely doctrinaire, but negotiated through cultural forms such as *wayang*, which were adapted by religious figures (for example, the Wali Songo) for proselytization purposes (Merle C Ricklefs, 2006). This syncretism is further explored by Sumarsam, who highlights the performative transformation of Hindu epics into Islamic moral tales during the early Islamic period in Java. These adaptations reveal how traditional arts have responded flexibly to shifting ideological frameworks while maintaining their artistic integrity (Sumarsam, 2013).

In recent years, scholars have focused on how *wayang golek* engages with modernity and globalization. Sen and Hill (2011) note the growing incorporation of digital media, contemporary themes, and urban narratives into traditional puppet performances. This modernization is not seen as a dilution of tradition but as a form of cultural resilience and innovation. Furthermore, Nurhadi and Dewi (2022) argue that integrating *wayang* into educational and technological platforms offers a sustainable pathway for revitalization. Such scholarly insights provide a crucial foundation for this research, which examines the historical trajectories and adaptive strategies of *wayang golek* as a living cultural performance amid societal transformations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using historical methods to trace the development of *wayang golek* as a performing art that continues to thrive within the dynamics of modern social and technological

change. The historical method is considered relevant because it enables researchers to systematically reconstruct the past through four stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. In the heuristic stage, data were collected from written sources such as cultural archives, ancient manuscripts, and local historical records. This was reinforced by in-depth interviews with puppeteers, cultural experts, artists and traditional art practitioners to validate the historical data. Subsequently, the data were analyzed through external and internal source criticism to ensure their authenticity and relevance to the research focus (Kuntowijoyo, 1995; Sugiyono, 2015).

The interpretation stage within this method allows researchers to understand the relationship between *wayang* practices and the surrounding social, political, and cultural changes, as well as how traditional elements transform in response to the times. Finally, the historiography stage constructs a historical narrative grounded in verified data and cultural approaches to explain the preservation strategies of *wayang* as a Javanese cultural heritage. Through this approach, the study not only contributes to the enrichment of academic discourse but also serves as a practical reference for efforts to preserve and innovate traditional performing arts amid the currents of globalization (Sjamsuddin, 1996).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Wayang as a Representation of Javanese Culture

Wayang is one of Indonesia's traditional art forms that has evolved over centuries and become an integral part of Javanese cultural identity. This performing art serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium of education, moral instruction, and a reflection of cosmology and the philosophical worldview of Javanese society. Due to the richness of its cultural values, UNESCO officially designated wayang as a *Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity* in 2003, recognizing it as part of the world's intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003).

The traditional art of *wayang golek* plays a crucial role in conveying principles of just and civilized humanity through moral storytelling and symbolic character portrayal. By clearly distinguishing between virtuous and flawed characters, *wayang golek* serves as both an entertaining and ethically instructive medium. This distinction facilitates a deeper societal understanding of acceptable and undesirable behaviors. According to research by Sabunga and colleagues, character values in *wayang golek* performances encompass both noble traits (*wiwaha*) and negative ones (*gandara*), which emerge organically from narrative requirements rather than deliberate moral engineering. This duality highlights the art form's function as a reflection of human complexity and as a symbolic representation of real-life moral dynamics.

Beyond character depiction, *wayang golek* delivers implicit moral messages through its storylines, promoting values such as communal cooperation (*gotong royong*), hard work, and emotional sensitivity. Audiences, particularly the youth, are able to internalize these values as part of their moral development. These messages play a vital role in shaping a dignified society and a nation built on

strong character. As Lickona (1992) posits, the character quality of citizens is one of the most reliable indicators of a nation's success. Without the cultivation of such values, a nation risks losing its identity and moral compass, leading to cultural and institutional decline. In this regard, *wayang golek* stands not only as a preserved living tradition but also as an important tool for ethics and civic education in Indonesia.

In Javanese life, *wayang* performances occupy a position far beyond mere entertainment. *Wayang* – particularly *wayang golek* within Sundanese culture – is considered a sacred and complex art form, often performed in traditional ceremonies and religious rituals. The narratives presented in *wayang* plays are generally derived from epic tales such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which have undergone a process of indigenization by incorporating local values to reflect the Javanese philosophy of life. These performances function as a medium for conveying ethical teachings, spirituality, and a rich cosmological worldview, while simultaneously reflecting social and political dynamics. Weintraub explains that *wayang golek* is not only a traditional art form, but also a medium of social communication capable of adapting to modern developments – including the political pressures of the New Order regime and the influence of modern technology such as cassette tapes and television (Andrew N. Weintraub, 2004). The *dalang* (puppeteer), as the central figure in the performance, not only delivers the narrative and directs the *gamelan* music but also plays the role of symbolic interpreter of contemporary issues, often inserting veiled criticisms through the clown-servant characters (*punakawan*) (Pupu F. Wasngadiredja, 2023). Thus, *wayang* becomes a living cultural representation – embodying the continuity between mythology and reality, between sacredness and entertainment, and between structures of power and the people's voice.

Wayang performances are also regarded as a symbol of communication between humans and the universe, as well as with their creator – referred to in Javanese belief as *manunggaling kawula lan Gusti* (the union of the individual and God). The *dalang*, as the central figure in the performance, functions not only as an artist but also as a teacher and a moral messenger. He integrates narrative, musicality, and symbolism, rich with meaning, into each performance. The philosophical meaning of *wayang* is also reflected in its narrative and visual structure. For example, the use of the screen (*kelir*) and light in *wayang kulit* symbolizes the boundary between the physical and spiritual worlds. Meanwhile, the characters in *wayang* represent the complex nature of human traits – both good and evil – serving as a reflection for the audience to comprehend the dynamics of life.

Given the richness of meaning and the values it embodies, *wayang* is not merely a cultural product but a *living cultural medium* that continues to be passed down and revitalized from generation to generation. UNESCO's recognition serves not only as an international prestige but also as a reminder of the importance of safeguarding and preserving this cultural heritage to ensure its relevance and understanding among modern society.

Wayang functions not only as a performance medium but also as a form of cultural expression reflecting the worldview and philosophical values of

Javanese society. In each performance, *wayang* presents rich symbolism, where characters, dialogues, *gamelan* music, and narrative structures become vehicles for conveying life principles esteemed by the Javanese.

One of the central values in Javanese culture reflected in *wayang* is *kehalusan budi* (refined character), which entails etiquette, politeness, and self-restraint. This is clearly seen in main characters such as Yudhishtira or Rama, who are portrayed as patient, wise, and humble individuals, even when faced with betrayal or conflict. The refinement of language, the intonation of the *dalang*, and the movements of the puppets are all carefully crafted to reflect aesthetic and ethical principles aligned with the teachings of *kawruh jiwa* (Javanese spiritual knowledge) (Niels Mulder, 2001).

Wayang also illustrates cosmic balance, known in Javanese philosophy as an effort to maintain harmony between the microcosm (humans) and the macrocosm (the universe). In *wayang* performance structures, conflicts often occur between good and evil, yet the ultimate goal is not the total victory of one side but the creation of a new order and balance. This perspective aligns with the concept of *rukun*, the principle of social harmony highly valued in Javanese life (Clifford Geertz, 1960).

Moreover, *wayang* teaches the principle of *sangkan paraning dumadi*, or the awareness of human origin and ultimate destiny—reflecting the spiritual dimension of Javanese culture. In many plays, protagonists struggle not only physically but also spiritually to achieve self-perfection. This concept affirms that *wayang* is not only entertainment, but also a medium for introspection and ethical education that is deeply rooted in local traditions.

Thus, *wayang* is the most comprehensive representation of Javanese culture, as it integrates visual art, oral literature, music, philosophy, spirituality, and moral education into a single performance. This makes *wayang* not only an aesthetically enduring cultural symbol but also a philosophically and socially significant one within the Javanese worldview. Through its ability to absorb and reflect local values, *wayang* remains relevant as a tool for understanding Javanese cultural identity amid changing times.

Characters such as Arjuna, Bhima, or Semar each represent the full spectrum of human nature, with all its virtues and flaws. Through these stories, Javanese audiences are taught the importance of wisdom, patience, and honesty in facing life's challenges. These messages are a key appeal of *wayang* performances and reflect its didactic dimension.

In *wayang* performances, the *dalang* serves not only as the central storyteller and puppet manipulator but also as a spiritual teacher and social commentator. In every show, the *dalang* often inserts social critiques, political satire, or moral teachings conveyed subtly and symbolically—demonstrating the sophisticated communication culture of the Javanese, which emphasizes decorum and indirectness.

Beyond being a vehicle for cultural transmission, *wayang* performances reflect the integration of narrative, musical, and visual elements that are highly distinctive in traditional Javanese art. This combination creates a holistic and profound artistic experience. In *wayang* performances, the plot is usually based

on epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* or local stories rich with moral and spiritual meaning. The storyline is conveyed through character dialogues, the *dalang's* narration, and dramatic structure that includes conflict, resolution, and contemplation.

The aesthetic elements of *wayang* are equally essential in creating a distinctive performance atmosphere. *Gamelan* music, as the primary soundscape, plays a vital role in marking emotional shifts, moods, and transitions between scenes. The *tembang* or *suluk* sung by the *dalang* not only function as musical components but also serve as symbolic channels for conveying moral and spiritual messages. The *blencong* lighting in *wayang kulit* performances, for instance, does not merely project shadows but also symbolizes inner illumination—spiritual enlightenment in the Javanese worldview (Soedarsono, 1999).

The harmony of these elements creates a unified artistic collaboration aligned with the concept of *rukun*, or harmony, which underpins Javanese social structures. The concept of *rukun* emphasizes the importance of maintaining harmonious relationships between individuals, nature, and the divine. This is reflected not only in daily social interactions but also in traditional art forms like *wayang*, which emphasize balance in form, content, and function.

Furthermore, the synthesis of elements in *wayang* reflects the Javanese holistic approach to life, where aesthetics are inseparable from ethics and spirituality. The alignment between wise narrative, gentle music, and beautiful visuals represents the Javanese worldview oriented toward harmony and inner peace (*ketentreman*).

Therefore, *wayang* is not only an artistic event but also a cultural manifestation representing how the Javanese understand and practice their social and spiritual lives. Each aesthetic and narrative element is not just a decoration, but serves a deeper function representing local values, including the principle of *rukun*, which is highly upheld in Javanese communal life.

Culture is the product of human creativity, feeling, and intention, developing dynamically over time. A culture can survive and flourish if it is valued and transmitted across generations. This process reflects not only the continuity of a culture but also the collective awareness of a society in safeguarding the identity and ancestral values that shape them. In the Indonesian context, one of the most obvious forms of cultural preservation can be seen in the durability and evolution of *wayang* performances, especially *wayang golek* and *wayang kulit*, which remain at the center of people's spiritual and social lives

Wayang has undergone a long historical journey since ancient times and has consistently shown flexibility in adapting to social, political, and technological changes. Though rooted in traditional values and classical epics, it has retained its relevance. In fact, it remains popular among diverse audiences, both as folk entertainment and as a component of ritual and customary celebrations. In practice, *wayang* frequently serves as a primary element in cultural events, such as the commemoration of *Malam 1 Suro* (the Javanese new year), regarded as a sacred moment for introspection, safety prayers, and spiritual cleansing.

During *Malam 1 Suro*, *wayang* performances are typically staged throughout the night, featuring plays such as *Semar Mbangun Kahyangan* or *Wahyu Makutharama*, which convey spiritual messages and moral guidance to audiences. In this context, *wayang* is not only a spectacle but also a guide – a tool for social and spiritual education that resonates with emotional depth and life values (Soedarsono, 1999).

Community involvement in organizing and attending *wayang* performances also reflects meaningful cultural participation. Whether in family celebrations, village festivals, or government-sponsored events, *wayang* remains a preferred cultural communication medium, deeply rooted in local tradition. This indicates that people not only appreciate the art form aesthetically but also integrate it into their meaningful everyday lives.

It is important to note that UNESCO officially designated *wayang* as a *Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity* in 2003. This recognition affirms not only the artistic and cultural value of *wayang* but also necessitates active preservation efforts by communities and governments. Collective awareness in regularly staging *wayang* performances serves as a strong indicator that this culture remains alive and valued, even amidst the challenges of globalization and modernization (UNESCO, 2003).

Thus, the sustainability of *wayang* as a living and evolving performance art reflects the success of the Javanese (and Indonesians more broadly) in preserving and celebrating their cultural heritage not only as historical pride but also as an adaptive, meaningful tool for cross-generational communication.

The Existence of Wayang Golek in the Modern Era

Wayang Golek is a traditional performing art native to West Java that has long held a significant place within Sundanese society. Beyond serving merely as a form of entertainment, this art form functions as a medium for conveying moral teachings, religious values, and profound life lessons. The performance is orchestrated by a *dalang* – a skilled puppeteer – who animates intricately carved wooden puppets, accompanied by the evocative rhythms of traditional *gamelan* music. As a cultural expression, *Wayang Golek* has been passed down across generations, forming an integral part of Sundanese cultural identity. However, in the face of rapid technological advancement and societal transformation, the existence of *Wayang Golek* is increasingly under threat. Its popularity has waned, gradually displaced by modern forms of entertainment that are more readily accessible and appealing to younger audiences. Without deliberate and sustained efforts to preserve and innovate this tradition, *Wayang Golek* faces the risk of marginalization and eventual relegation to a mere historical memory (Tutupoho, 2025).

Wayang Golek is a prominent manifestation of Indonesia's cultural heritage, with significant potential to serve as a medium for character education, particularly in fostering principles of just and civilized humanity. This traditional art form evolved within the Sundanese community as a distinctive expression of indigenous culture, embodying values that reflect the national identity. Originating from West Java, *Wayang Golek* performances are traditionally

classified into two primary functions: as a form of entertainment and as a ritualistic performance known as *ruatan*. Historically, the art is attributed to Sunan Kudus, a member of the revered *Wali Songo*, and is believed to have emerged around 1584 CE. The puppets are crafted from wood to resemble human figures, referred to as *golek*, hence the name *Wayang Golek*. A single *dalang* (puppeteer) orchestrates the performance, functioning both as narrator and as manipulator of the puppets. The *dalang* must possess comprehensive knowledge of the narrative as well as the distinct traits of each character to effectively communicate moral and cultural messages to the audience (Pupu F.Wasngadiredja, 2023).

Wayang golek functions not only as a traditional performing art but has also expanded its role to serve as a medium for character education and cultural diplomacy. In the field of education, various schools and cultural institutions in Indonesia have begun to integrate *wayang* performances as a tool to instill moral values, character development, and local wisdom among students. This initiative aligns with the efforts of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* (Independent Learning) Curriculum, which emphasizes the importance of local culture-based learning as an integral part of holistic education (Kemenristek).

In the modern era – characterized by globalization, industrialization, and the pervasive influence of digital technology – the existence of *wayang golek* faces significant challenges. Shifting entertainment preferences, particularly among younger generations, have led to a decline in traditional art forms, as they are increasingly displaced by films, television dramas, social media, and digital games. Furthermore, the lack of younger *dalang* (puppeteers) poses an additional obstacle to the continuity of this cultural heritage. Nevertheless, *wayang golek* has not vanished; rather, it demonstrates remarkable resilience and adaptability in the face of changing times. This adaptability is evident in the modernization of story themes, the integration of contemporary stage technologies such as advanced lighting, and the strategic use of digital media for documentation and dissemination. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and various streaming services have become vital spaces for puppeteers to share performances, narratives, and educational content with broader audiences.

Despite the increasing marginalization of traditional arts in contemporary society, *wayang golek* continues to survive through the dedication of local cultural practitioners. As Koentjaraningrat (1980) emphasizes, art is a manifestation of collective ideas, values, and norms expressed through patterned human activity and tangible cultural products. *wayang golek*, originating from West Java, exemplifies this notion with its intricately crafted wooden puppets comprising detachable heads, torsos, and arms – operated by a central rod (*tuding*) that allows for dynamic storytelling by the *dalang*. Local groups like Kridha Utama in Pematang, led by *dalang* Winarno since 1989, have sustained this tradition through performances both within and beyond regional boundaries, including national events in Jakarta and Bali. Winarno's commitment illustrates the deeply rooted spiritual and historical dimensions of *wayang golek*, which he connects to figures such as Prince Diponegoro and Sunan Kalijaga, emphasizing the role

of ritual, ancestral respect, and moral pedagogy in each performance. His yearly cleansing rituals and use of incense and prayers (*tawasulan*) reaffirm the sacred aspect of the art, reflecting its blend of aesthetic, ethical, and devotional functions. Despite challenges, such individual efforts demonstrate how local cultural resilience enables wayang golek to persist as a living heritage in the digital age (Kramat, 2019).

Efforts to preserve *wayang golek* cannot rely solely on the dedication of individuals or isolated communities. A collaborative strategy involving various stakeholders—ranging from local governments and educational institutions to mass media and digital platforms—is essential. Governmental bodies can play a crucial role by providing performance spaces, allocating regular funding, and integrating traditional arts into formal education curricula. Academic institutions and cultural centers are also expected to intensify research, documentation, and publication efforts to ensure that *wayang golek* is not only recognized locally but also positioned within global cultural discourse.

Digital transformation offers a powerful tool for preservation. Amid the rise of social media, YouTube, and streaming services, *wayang golek* has vast potential to reach broader audiences. Employing digital animation, interactive documentaries, or modernized virtual performances can significantly enhance its appeal among younger generations. Some young puppeteers have already embraced these platforms to communicate cultural messages in formats that are more accessible and engaging, without compromising the philosophical essence and noble values embedded in each storyline. This marks a new phase in the evolution of *wayang golek* as an art form capable of engaging in dialogue with the present age.

Nevertheless, successful preservation depends not only on technical revitalization efforts but also on collective awareness of cultural identity. *Wayang golek* is not merely a form of entertainment or ritual—it is a reflection of humanity, spirituality, and the Indonesian national character. Should society fail to recognize and value this heritage, modernization risks becoming a force of assimilation that erodes cultural roots. Therefore, safeguarding the existence of *wayang golek* in the modern era is not a matter of choice, but a necessity. Without comprehensive and sustained action, *wayang golek* is not only at risk of extinction but may also lose its place as a symbol of a dignified and deeply rooted civilization.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that *wayang golek* stands as a dynamic and multidimensional representation of Javanese and Sundanese cultural heritage—deeply rooted in tradition yet capable of adapting to contemporary challenges. Despite the pressures of globalization, digital entertainment, and shifting generational preferences, *wayang golek* has demonstrated remarkable resilience through innovations in narrative, technology, and education. The role of the *dalang* as a cultural transmitter, spiritual guide, and social commentator reinforces the continued relevance of this art form as a medium for moral, philosophical, and national identity formation. This research confirms that

wayang golek is not only a traditional performance, but also a living cultural expression with ethical and pedagogical values that survive in an increasingly modern world.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that multi-sectoral collaborations be strengthened to ensure the sustainable revitalization of *wayang golek*. Government institutions should actively support this tradition through policy frameworks, educational integration, and consistent funding. Cultural practitioners are encouraged to embrace digital platforms for performance dissemination and documentation, while academic institutions should advance research and curriculum inclusion. Most critically, public awareness must be fostered to cultivate cultural pride and participation, especially among youth. Only through collective efforts—spanning policy, education, media, and grassroots engagement—can *wayang golek* be preserved not as a relic of the past, but as a relevant and respected art form for future generations.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of *wayang golek* as a cultural performance in the context of modernity, it is not without limitations. The research predominantly draws on historical and qualitative methods, which, although rich in depth, may not fully capture the contemporary reception and behavioral engagement of diverse audience demographics—particularly urban youth and digital-native communities. Moreover, the geographic scope is largely centered on West Java, potentially limiting comparative insights across different regional variants of wayang. Future research could benefit from a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates ethnographic fieldwork, audience reception studies, and digital analytics to better understand the evolving role of *wayang golek* in virtual spaces. Comparative studies involving other Southeast Asian puppetry traditions may also enrich the discourse on cultural resilience and cross-cultural transmission in the digital era.

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