

# Towards Re-enchantment of the Wayang Puppet Theatre: Puppeteers as Agents of Morality in the Contemporary Indonesian Society

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## Abstract

Wayang is a dynamic intangible cultural heritage that evolves with the times. The problem facing wayang performances today is the declining quality of the performing arts. The role of the puppeteer becomes immensely significant as a moral agent in the society. This research analyzes the creativity and innovation of puppeteers as moral agents in the contemporary Indonesian society.

The research employed a qualitative approach, using the phenomenological paradigm. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with puppeteers involved in polemics over the declining quality of Wayang performing arts. Subsequently, Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action is employed to analyze these moral and cultural polemics.

The results reveal the existence of two competing groups of puppeteers concerning the creativity and innovation of puppeteers as moral agents in contemporary Indonesian society. On the one hand, some puppeteers emphasize the aspect of *tontonan* (entertainment). On the other, some puppeteers emphasize the aspect of *tuntunan* (moral teaching). Puppeteers who prioritize the *tontonan* aspect attract a larger fan-base but often result in a decline in the quality of performing arts. It is concluded that puppeteers who focus on the *tuntunan* aspect preserve the traditional values of wayang. However, their performances often fail to captivate the audience. This is because each group of puppeteers staunchly defends its own opinions and beliefs.

**Keywords:** Wayang, Performing Art, Creativity, Innovation, Morality, Dialogue

## Introduction

Wayang puppet theatre is an Indonesian traditional performance art that has originated from the animist culture of the ancient times. Wayang performance art is one of the artistic works

of the Indonesian people inherited from their ancestors (Pandian 2020a). As to be expected, it changes with time (Storey 1993). However, one thing remains the same. That is that the role of the puppeteer who is essential as a moral agent in each era. During the New Order government, for example, the puppeteer had a role in conveying the moral message of national development (Nugroho 2019). Currently, the puppeteer still has a role in conveying moral messages in contemporary Indonesian society, such as messages about the nation's character, justice, diversity, *gotong-royong*<sup>1</sup>, tolerance, and the environment, as well as moral messages for other social issues. Puppeteers respond to and address the issues of contemporary Indonesian society through creativity and innovation. While Wayang is rooted in traditional symbols and often stands in contrast to contemporary and modern art (Sedana 2019), it is very flexible for creativity and innovation for puppeteers.

Wayang performances are different from other performing arts. This difference can be attributed to two key factors. First, it revolves around authenticity and the preservation of traditional values. Wayang performance art is considered a manifestation of the cultural identity of the Indonesian society. Therefore, it is crucial to preserve the distinctiveness of this intangible cultural heritage. Presently, the challenge for puppeteers lies in making Wayang relevant in contemporary Indonesian society and the global community (Cohen 2016).

Secondly, a dominant moral dimension characterizes Wayang's performance. It is what distinguishes Wayang from the other performing arts. Puppeteers are responsible for effectively conveying moral messages to the audience. In fact, the puppeteers, in essence, are educators and community teachers (Purnamawati, 2005). Through creativity and innovation, they have the capacity to shift societal paradigms or transform an immoral society into a virtuous one. They can use Wayang to shape the nation's character (Nurgiyantoro, 2011).

A significant issue concerning the role of puppeteers as moral agents in contemporary Indonesian society is the infiltration of the entertainment industry into the puppetry arena. Nowadays, the Wayang stage is frequently dominated by guest stars, comedians, dancers, singers, and other forms of entertainment. This phenomenon is nearly ubiquitous in every Wayang performance.

Puppeteers like other artists, cater to market demands (Soetarno 2010). Although they occasionally attempt to convey moral messages, these messages may not always have a discernible impact. Instead, entertainment has become dominant on the Wayang stage. However, while these entertainment stages are well-received by the audience, they can diminish the quality of the Wayang performance.

If the current state of Wayang performance art is left unchecked, it will have several consequences. Firstly, the younger generation may develop a misconceived perception of Wayang. Future generations may lose the proper understanding of Wayang as an *edipeni*<sup>2</sup> and *adiluhung*<sup>3</sup> art form. They may come to associate Wayang performances primarily with light-hearted humor. Secondly, the invaluable human intangible heritage might fade into obscurity due to the transformation of Wayang performances that overlook the moral dimensions.

UNESCO recognizes Wayang for its exceptional contribution to the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. However, when performances start featuring guest stars and resort to vulgar and comedic entertainment, the intrinsic heritage value of Wayang diminishes. This situation could harm the global perception of Wayang.

Research on the creativity and innovation of puppeteers as moral agents in contemporary Indonesian society is still quite limited. A bibliometric analysis of puppetry research in Scopus-indexed journals (see Fig. 1) shows that puppetry research on digital technology dominates the current trend. Some themes include animation (Barker,2019); data augmented (King,2018); convolutional neural networks (Prabowo et al.,2021); stereo image processing (Hasanah,2019) and other studies in the field of digital technology.

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<sup>1</sup> "Gotong royong" is a cultural concept or tradition in Indonesian society that refers to cooperation to carry out a task or activity together without expecting material compensation.

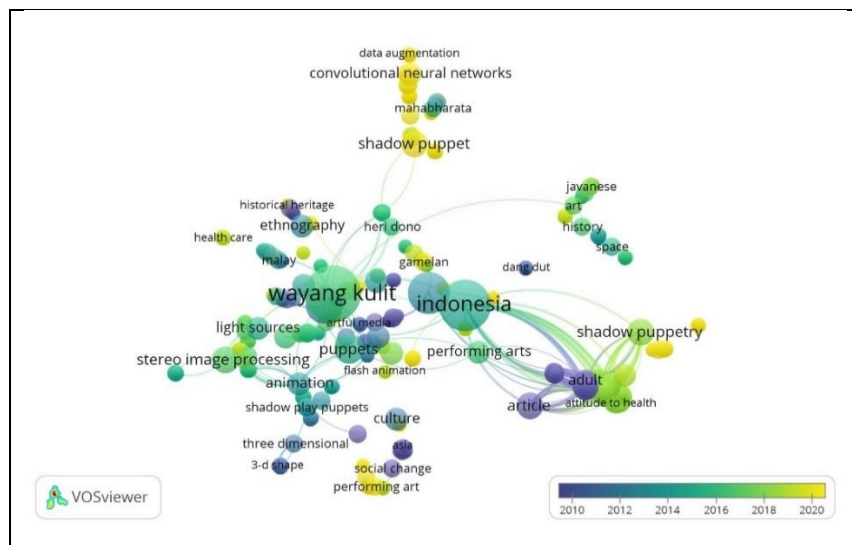
<sup>2</sup> It has a beautiful quality.

<sup>3</sup> It has noble qualities and high value.

Another research related to digital technology is research on social media. Social media has an influence on creativity and innovation in puppetry. For example, Matthew Isaac Cohen has researched using social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. In his article entitled '*Wayang in Jaman Now: Reflexive Traditionalization and Local, National, and Global Networks of Javanese Shadow Puppet Theatre*,' he states that social media can serve as a medium to introduce Wayang as an alternative form of entertainment for today's younger generation, who are at risk of losing interest in Wayang (Cohen,2019).

Indeed, puppeteers use social media to adapt to social change, as evidenced by the research conducted by Meloni and Allasso. They demonstrate that the pandemic situation that occurred between 2020 and 2022 prompted puppeteers to create new works and innovations in the realm of online Wayang, such as Wayang Electric initiated by Ki Cahyo Kuntadi and Wayang Climen initiated by Ki Seno Nugroho (Meloni and Allasso,2023). These studies demonstrate that digital technology has influenced social and cultural changes in contemporary Indonesian society. Wayang, as an intangible cultural heritage, evolves in response to these social and cultural dynamics.

This research differs from previous studies. No research has been conducted or written regarding the moral and cultural debates surrounding creativity and innovation of classical Wayang performances in response to social and cultural changes in the contemporary Indonesian society. The bibliometric analysis (Figure 1) highlights social change themes related to performing arts; however, none are linked to the puppeteer as a moral agent. The unique aspect of this research is its aim to resolve the polemic concerning the creativity and innovation of puppeteers as moral agents in contemporary Indonesian society.



**Fig. 1:** bibliometric analysis of Wayang research trends in Scopus-indexed journals  
Source: Author

This research aims to offer insights into Wayang as a performance art in Indonesia. Its objectives are as follows.

1. To describe the types of puppeteers involved in the creativity and innovation of Wayang performance art today.
2. To analyzes creativity and innovation of classical puppeteers as moral agents in contemporary Indonesian society.

Creativity and innovation of puppeteers can enhance Wayang's popularity among a wider audience. However, they can also result in a decline in the quality of puppetry if traditional puppetry values are not carefully preserved.

## Theoretical Framework

All elements of Wayang performance art are symbols that contain deep meaning. Wayang lovers understand protagonist and antagonist characters. It serves as a guide for distinguishing good and bad behavior, symbolized by the characters played by the puppeteer (Dwi Susilo,2021). Symbols are essential in transmitting and reinforcing cultural values and understanding how people give meaning to their life experiences.

Geertz (2000) sees deep cultural meaning in sacred symbols. He says sacred symbols connect ontology and cosmology with aesthetics and morality (Geertz,2000). Wayang, as a sacred symbol, has a deep cultural meaning. As a sacred symbol, Wayang relates to the meaning structure of a fundamental view of reality. Wayang encapsulates fundamental ideas within the cultural framework of the supporting community. Therefore, if the symbol changes, it will change the paradigm of the supporting community (Dillistone,2002).

Symbols play a role in organizing social life (Dillistone,2002). Wayang performance is a symbol that has an essential influence in shaping harmonious social relations. During a puppet show, the audience internalizes the values conveyed by the puppeteer regarding goodness, justice, and truth. Internalization of shared values will then be carried into social relations, coloring the attitudes and behavior of individuals in their social life.

The puppeteer plays a central role in transmitting moral teachings to the audience. In the past, Wayang was a ritual offering to the *hyang* or spirits of ancestors (Mulyono,1989). However, in contemporary Wayang, the influence of the entertainment stage has shifted the function of Wayang from guidance to a dominant spectacle.

The guidance aspect of Wayang is the dominant symbol. Dominant symbols have an essential position in the social system. Wayang can be seen as a dominant symbol. The dominant symbol in the social system has a meaning that generally does not change from time to time (Dillistone,2002).

The dominant symbol becomes a reference when there is a crisis in society. Turner (1987) says that change and uncertainty shake the existing social structure in the crisis phase. It creates a situation where the norms and rules generally govern society become less apparent or temporarily distorted (Turner,1987). The dominant symbols in Wayang contain aspects of guidance that can be used as moral references.

However, the problem is that market influences have distorted wayang performance today. According to Habermas (1988), there has been a crisis of identity and values in modern society; market dynamics, technology, and rationalization are eroding traditional values. Modern society tends to lose cultural roots and values that can unite individuals in an ordinary world (Habermas,1988).

## Literature Review

Puppeteers play a crucial role as agents of social change in every era of Indonesian society. Soekarno, the President of Indonesia in the Old Order era (1945-1966), deeply appreciated Wayang. According to Setiawan (2020), his favourite puppeteer was Ki Gitosewaka. Every two months, Sukarno hosted a puppet show at the State Palace. Furthermore, Soekarno strategically used Wayang to project soft power internationally.

Nugroho (2019) highlighted that puppeteers were heavily involved in political propaganda during that time. They sought to influence the public, a stance driven by the perspectives of Nationalists and Communists who considered Wayang a highly adaptable and communicative traditional art form for conveying various interests. Nugroho further states, "Based on this idea, they competed to recruit puppeteers for their party's interests, leading to the division of puppeteers' unity" (2019;41).

During the New Order era (1966-1998), Indonesia was under the rule of President Soeharto. Jones (2013) states, "Soeharto's government utilized a version of the command culture model. The state undertook the task of controlling cultural provision and exchange." It is further argued that "authoritarian justifications of cultural policy were more prevalent during the New Order" (Jones, 2013; 147). The cultural bureaucracy at that time had increased resources and scope to intervene and change cultural practices. Weintraub says that "the New Order regime

sought to enlist puppeteers as "information officers" to circulate official policy and discourse among the populace" (Weintraub, 2001).

In authoritarian rule, the New Order utilized performances to convey political messages and reinforce government ideology. Wayang's performances often conveyed the moral message of Repelita's (Five-Year Development Plan) development (Nugroho, 2019). Wayang was also used to support the government in spreading the ideology of Pancasila. Darmoko (2017) mentioned that Soeharto specifically ordered SENAWANGI (National Secretariat of Indonesian Wayang) and PEPADI (Indonesian Puppeteers Association) to mobilize the puppeteers to perform the play *Semar Mbabar Jati Diri*. This play conveys the unique message of the importance of P4 (Guidelines for the Cultivation and Practice of Pancasila). Behind the play was a hidden motive of portraying Soeharto as a complete human being in his socio-political role.

The post-Soeharto era began of a new phase known as the Reformation era. According to Jones (2012), cultural policy in Indonesia underwent significant changes following the resignation of Suharto in 1998. The absence of centralized power characterizes the Reformation era in Indonesia. The centralized role of the central government was replaced with a new, more decentralized system. This situation had an impact on Wayang's performance. During the New Order era, puppeteers were restricted in their creativity and innovation, but in the Reformation era, they gained more freedom to express themselves. Many puppeteers incorporated sharp social criticism into their performances, addressing various injustices. Puppeteers who presented their performances as social criticism include Wayang Cenik Blonk (I Wayan Nardayana), Wayang Kampung Sebelah (Ki Jliheng Suparman), Wayang Hip Hop (Ki Benyek Catur Kuncoro), Wayang Urban (Ki Nanang Hape), and many other critical puppeteers.

The public's interest in Wayang has shifted to the younger generation in the last two decades. The Wayang research has raised many themes on the issue of how to make Wayang popular with the younger generation (Lintang 2023a; 2023b). Lintang says that "efforts to develop modern art today certainly require its own challenges in presenting this classical culture in today's conditions, especially for generation Z who have different visual tastes and have several distinctive characteristics that are physically equivalent to digital and happy to do it yourself work" (2023a;1). Moreover, Cohen (2019), in his research, says there is a connection between Javanese shadow puppets and popular social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, which attracts the attention of the younger generation. It challenges the idea that traditional forms are only relevant when transformed for various modern artistic expressions.

Lintang further states that "the development of Wayang performances in the current format is also a priority in its development to accommodate the tastes of the younger generation of audiences" (Lintang, 2023b;1). For this reason, Lintang created an innovative Wayang for children called the Wayang Eblek Show. His innovation is based on the character of the Purwa shadow puppet with the story of Babad Wanamarto. The story sequence of Babad Wanamarto is visualized in several scenes. Each consists of panels that can be removed and assembled like a puzzle. Children can actively assemble these scenes under the guidance of the puppeteer using manual instructions. Performances can be done in multipurpose locations such as classrooms or school halls (Lintang, 2023).

Furthermore, Cohen (2024) highlights concerns raised by puppeteers globally, including those in Indonesia, regarding the potential impact of robot technology on the traditional role of puppeteers. Cohen refers to Murphey's research stating, "Murphey finds through his studies that puppeteers express significant concerns about the possibility of being replaced by robots in the future" (2017;278).

In the long run, the innovation and creativity of puppeteers through new media and digital media, as well as robotics technology, will undoubtedly shift the younger generation's perception of Wayang. Classical Wayang, full of symbols, will be further away from the younger generation's lives.

The penetration of entertainment to the Wayang stage will further reduce the quality of Wayang performance art. This condition will further distance the younger generation from classic puppets that contain moral teachings. According to Cohen, "Puppeteers today are typically

considered more as entertainers than moral guides and expert advisors in all manner of subjects from cosmology to farming" (2024;108).

Until now, no specific research has discussed solutions regarding the creativity and innovation of puppeteers that reduce the quality of puppetry. One practical approach to overcome this problem is Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative action. In communicative action, what is essential is dialogue.

The importance of dialog in overcoming cultural problems has yet to be done by many researchers. However, an article by Juniarta (2020) uses Jurgen Habermas' communicative action theory approach to solve and resolve problems, including social conflicts in Pakraman Village and Banjar Pakraman. Juniarta said that "*paruman* or dialogue as a communicative action is suggested so that the attitude of wanting to win alone in resolving conflicts is immediately changed into an attitude of wanting to win together" (2020;120). In the same context, the dialog can be used to overcome the problem of differences in moral views on puppeteer creativity and innovation that reduce the quality of Wayang performances in contemporary Indonesian society.

## Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing phenomenology as the research paradigm (Vagle,2019). Phenomenology directly investigates the experiences of puppeteers in their efforts to foster creativity and innovation in contemporary Indonesian society. Data was collected in Yogyakarta and Surabaya from June to July 2023, utilizing in-depth interviews with classical puppeteers.

The primary method of data collection was in-depth interviews with classical puppeteers. The in-depth interviews focused on the puppeteer's experiences, emphasizing cognitive and emotional aspects. The puppeteers actively developed creativity and innovation in Wayang performances in Yogyakarta and Surabaya. In June in Yogyakarta, in-depth interviews were conducted with five Yogyakarta-style classical puppeteers, namely Ki Udreka Hadiswasana, Ki Kasidi Hadiprayitna, Ki Junaidi, Ki Sri Mulyono, and Ki Edi Suwondo. Meanwhile, in Surabaya in July, in-depth interviews were conducted with five classical puppeteers, consisting of Jawatimuran and Mataraman style, namely Ki Wardono (Jawatimuran style), Ki Surwedi (Jawatimuran style), Ki Aji Tetuka (Jawatimuran style), Ki Tee Boen Liong (Mataraman style) and Ki Bambang Dwi Sumanto (Mataraman style).

This was complemented by structured Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in each location, inviting ten classical puppeteers to explore the puppeteers' experience of creativity and innovation in Wayang performance. Data from the FGDs were used to complement and deepen the collective experiences of the puppeteers.

Experimental data on creativity and innovation in classical puppetry was complemented by direct observation of a puppet show performed by Ki Faizal Noor Singgih at Omah Wayang on June 20, 2023 (Tuesday night - 8:30 pm - until Wednesday morning-02:30 am) by completing the play *Wahyu Manik Anjali*.

Furthermore, data were analysed using the phenomenological analysis method. First, detailed textual and structural descriptions of the puppeteers' experiences were developed. It closely examined how the puppeteers experienced a quality decline in classical performing arts. The structural description aims to identify patterns in the experience of the puppeteers and how they give meaning to the experience of the declining performing arts.

Secondly, a structural description of the composite texture is conducted, which includes elements such as the puppeteer's characteristics, the staged story, the music, the stakes involved, and the props used in the Wayang performance. These elements interact with one another and contribute to the overall Wayang performance experience.

Thirdly, the meaning and essence of the experience are synthesized. It combines the researcher's interpretation of the meaning expressed by the puppeteer in the interview or observation with the essence of the experience itself. In this analysis, researchers also utilize Jurgen Habermas's theory of communication actions as a conceptual framework to address moral

debates that may arise from the creativity and innovation of puppeteers conflicting with traditional values.

## Findings and Discussion

Three categories emerged based on interviews and direct observations of puppeteers from the Special Region of Yogyakarta and Surabaya, East Java. The first, the classical Wayang style. Puppeteers in this category are oriented towards the classical Wayang style, adhering to the conventions and standard rules of traditional puppetry from the past. Second is the new classic Wayang style. Puppeteers in this group still follow classical performance rules but also develop creativity and innovation on the stage, in line with contemporary society's preferences. Third is the deconstruction style of Wayang. This style is performed mainly by the puppeteers who are oriented towards the new classical Wayang style. However, these puppeteers bravely introduce changes by incorporating creativity and innovation, often deconstructing traditional Wayang.

### 1. Morality in Classical Wayang Style

In the contemporary Indonesian society, performances of Wayang in the old classic category are almost non-existent. However, some distinctive characteristics of the old classic Wayang can still be recognized, including traditional equipment like the gamelan *slendro*<sup>4</sup> and a *blencong*<sup>5</sup> for lighting, which relies on fire. The *sinden*<sup>6</sup> (female singers) typically comprise only one woman seated behind the puppeteer. Old classic Wayang adheres to a standard performance structure, and the musical accompaniment follows traditional puppetry music. The narratives are based on the traditional Mahabharata and Ramayana stories.

Moreover, the duration of these performances can extend up to eight hours. The language used often incorporates the old Javanese language (Kawi), which is not commonly used in everyday conversation. While this language adds beauty and profoundness to the performance, it is no longer well-understood by the contemporary audiences (Subroto, 2013).

Although it is no longer performed, many people still yearn for the old classics. The ambiance of the performance, illuminated by the *blencong* lights, is reminiscent of a time when these shows were held in rural settings, far from the noise of vehicles and the hustle and bustle of urban life. The puppeteers' voices can be heard clearly, even without a microphone. A Yogyakarta puppeteer with the initials (B) expressed that classic Wayang should remain unchanged. If one wishes to introduce innovations in classic puppetry, it is suggested to create one's Wayang and stories that differ from the traditional Wayang performances (Interview, June 12, 2023). Classical Wayang embodies performance elements while preserving the essence of culture and values passed down from generation to generation.

Ki (U), a lecturer at ISI Yogyakarta, once received a project from the Yogyakarta Cultural Value Preservation Center to perform classical Wayang from the 1970s. This Wayang performance aimed to capture that period's social and cultural milieu within the community. The puppeteer who staged this performance was Ki Margiyono, one of the puppeteers in the classical Yogyakarta Wayang style. According to Ki (U), this Wayang performance was chosen to convey to the younger generation the importance of preserving traditional Wayang. Presenting Wayang performances using *wewaton*<sup>7</sup>, ensures that the development of Wayang can be controlled by traditional values (Interview, June 14, 2023).

As one of the managers at PEPADI (Indonesian Puppetry Association) Special Region of Yogyakarta, Ki (U) remains dedicated to staging classical Wayang performances. Whenever the PEPADI Special Region of Yogyakarta organizes these performances, he encourages puppeteers to continue presenting the traditional Wayang shows. He advises that *sinden* should not perform standing but remain seated. Wayang performances should avoid incorporating modern equipment

<sup>4</sup> Javanese gamelan that has five tones

<sup>5</sup> Lighting lamps in Wayang performance serve to cause the effect of shadows in the dark. In the past, they used coconut oil as fuel, but now the lighting in the performance is replaced with electric lights.

<sup>6</sup> Female singers in Javanese classical music

<sup>7</sup> The rules and guidelines for staging Wayang puppet theatre in Indonesia

such as pianos, guitars, or other contemporary musical instruments. Moreover, there should be no guest stars in the Cangik Limbukan<sup>8</sup> and Goro-Goro<sup>9</sup> scenes.

According to Geertz, sacred symbols hold special significance within a culture, and their use reflects a profound understanding and shared experience within a society. These symbols are often associated with aspects of religion or belief systems in society, but they can also encompass other symbols that carry deep meanings (Dadosky, 2010). Therefore, if the puppet symbol were to change, it could alter the societal paradigm.

One of the essential symbols in puppetry is the puppeteer. According to Holt (2000), the puppeteer is the puppetry world's central force. The puppeteer is the story writer, producer, main storyteller, and conductor (Holt, 2000). Meanwhile, the Javanese poet R.M Noto Soeroto declared God the Supreme Puppeteer (Mangkunegara VII, 1957). The puppeteer must preserve the authenticity of these symbols to prevent any shift in their meaning.

Indeed, the puppeteer must have a benchmark or guideline in puppetry performances. According to a traditional Yogyakarta puppeteer with the initials Edi Suwondo, classical puppetry of Yogyakarta possesses characteristics including *prasaja* (simplicity), *wijang* (clarity), *regu* (grandeur), *nges* (emotional), *renggep* (solid), and *regeng* (festive) (Interview, June 15, 2023).

### Moral Values

According to Ki (U), classical Wayang in the past was more effective in conveying moral messages to the audience. They still hold significant values as an intangible cultural heritage. People are genuinely connected with the characters when they watch Wayang. Wayang became a topic of casual conversations at *gardu ronda*<sup>10</sup>, gathering spots, and social meeting places. People discuss Wayang, the personalities of the Wayang characters, and who is the puppeteer (Interview, June 14, 2023). The puppeteers of that time indeed served as moral agents in society. Thus, Wayang's performances have impacted the audience's moral outlook, addressing issues of good and evil. The puppeteer's advice and wise guidance influence the audience's daily lives, contributing to the harmony of society.

Efforts to preserve classical Wayang continue to this day, spearheaded by Pepadang (Ngayogyakarta Style Puppetry Activist), led by Kasidi Hadiprayitno, a professor of puppetry at the Indonesian of Arts Yogyakarta. This performance received support from Gusti Bendera Pangeran Haryo Yudanigrat<sup>11</sup>, one of the sons of Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX. Pepadang stages a Wayang puppet theatre show every month at Sasana Hinggil Dwi Abad. All puppeteers performing there are required to adhere to the classic Yogyakarta Wayang style. Some of the puppeteers who have had the opportunity to perform include Ki Suwondo, Ki Radyo Harsono, Ki Sutono Hadi Sugito, Ki Sutoyo, Ki Sutedjo, and the late Ki Sutikno (Interview, June 15, 2023). There is no art of stage entertainment, such as dance, *campursari*, *dangdutan*, and jokes in their performances. The Cangik Limbukan and the Goro-Goro scenes do not feature guest stars, jokes, and gags. The puppeteer can play a full role in conveying moral values in each scene. In classical wayang performances, the puppeteer becomes a moral agent for the audience.

The challenge of classical Wayang in adapting to changing times revolves around the aesthetics of the performance. Traditional performances often feature repetitive elements, leading to a sense of monotony. This repetition is evident in scenes adhering to the standard structure of the classical performances, as well as the Wayang accompaniment, *catur*<sup>12</sup>, and the *sabet*<sup>13</sup>. These performances often have an exceptionally long duration. Moreover, using esoteric literary references accessible only to academics can render classical Wayang performances uninteresting.

<sup>8</sup> One of the scenes in the Wayang performance depicts a chat between Cangik and his daughter named, Limbuk.

<sup>9</sup> One of the scenes in the Wayang performance that depicts the climax or peak of the Wayang performance is marked by the catastrophe of the universe.

<sup>10</sup> Surveillance posts are utilized for security and surveillance purposes.

<sup>11</sup> Gusti Bendera Pangeran Haryo is the highest noble title under the king in Yogyakarta.

<sup>12</sup> Narration of puppeteer

<sup>13</sup> Wayang movements and dances



This situation risks diminishing the support for classical puppetry. Ki (ES), the chairman of the PEPADI Special Region of Yogyakarta, emphasized that old classical puppets have transformed into a cultural heritage that has become a cultural memory of the past (Interview, June 14, 2023).

## 2. Morality in the New Classic Wayang Style

Research shows that today, many puppeteers have shifted from the conventional attitude of rigidly upholding tradition to a more moderate approach. These puppeteers want to express creativity more freely by incorporating new elements and presenting fresher stories, aiming to offer a more exciting experience for the audience (Emerson, 2012). Puppeteers still strive to uphold the traditional values of puppetry. A puppeteer must be flexible and able to adapt to the context and the needs of the audience (Kenzhetaeva, Aitkaliyeva, and Amreyeva, 2023). Many puppeteers still strive to uphold the traditional values of Wayang, ensuring the essential elements of the tradition that endure.

The emergence of the new classic Wayang style has been one of the most captivating developments in recent decades. Beyond being a form of entertainment, the new classical Wayang also carries a strong moral dimension. Traditional morals and values are a significant content source for puppeteers to present to their audience (Pandin, 2020b)

The underlying ideology behind the new classic Wayang performances is to create a form of puppetry that preserves traditional values while adapting to the information age, making it more appealing to the younger generations (Azis, Komalasari, and Masyitoh, 2020). It represents an effort to maintain the relevance of puppetry in an ever evolving and changing society while preserving the existing cultural richness.

However, many puppeteers perform with economic motives. By delivering creative shows, puppeteers can gain greater recognition with contemporary audiences. This recognition can lead to increased income, donations, or sponsorship support. Interestingly, the demand for puppetry continues to grow, positioning Wayang as a part of the creative industry that can be leveraged for economic development (Warsina et al, 2021). Creative industries can utilize the puppeteers' creativity, skills, and talents for productions.

The creativity and innovation of puppeteers in the new classic Wayang can be observed in six elements. First is the creative storyline. This means developing characters and events must be oriented toward conveying moral values and meaningful content (Solichin, 2010). According to Ki (ES), puppeteers should not merely recite scripts or replicate stories from tapes during performances but bring their unique ideas and creativity into the wayang performance (Interview, June 14, 2023).

Second are the creative scenes. This means that the puppeteers showcase their creativity in scenes like the scenes of Cangik Limbukan. Nearly all puppeteers in Yogyakarta and Surabaya capitalize on these scenes by incorporating *sinden* performances to enhance the vibrancy of the stage. According to Yusuf Anshor's manager, the teenage puppeteer going viral always strives to infuse creativity, ensuring that the audience remains captivated (Interview, June 16, 2023).

Third is creativity in character development. It entails the puppeteer's creativity in portraying the inner essence of the characters, which is then reflected in actions. Ki Seno Nugroho excels in portraying the character of Bagong as a critical, open, and forthright *ponokawan* (clown). Meanwhile, in Surabaya, Baladewa, the king of the Mandura kingdom, became an idolized figure among the audience. According to Ki (R), a puppeteer who performs in Surabaya must master the portrayal of Baladewa as a resolute and fearless character. Portraying Baladewa as a defeated character would infuriate the audience (Interview, July 11, 2023).

Fourth is creative narration. This aspect involves linguistic expressions within the performance, such as *janturan*<sup>14</sup>, *ginem*<sup>15</sup>, and *pocapan*<sup>16</sup>. Classic Wayang performances typically follow a standardized content structure and pattern. The script must be prepared before the

<sup>14</sup> The narration genre of a puppeteer is presented in the form of coded discourse accompanied by soft gamelan music.

<sup>15</sup> Dialogue of Wayang puppet characters with each other.

<sup>16</sup> The puppeteer's narrative without being accompanied by *karawitan* (Javanese traditional music)

performance, and puppeteers should aim to include dialogues addressing the contemporary issues (Solichin, 2010)

Fifth is the creative Wayang movement. The puppeteer's creativity in choreographing Wayang puppet movements from the beginning to the end of the show, includes their attention to shadows on and off the screen. The puppeteer demonstrates creativity by designing engaging Wayang puppet movements, avoiding repetitive movements between the characters, and employing various motion vocabularies (Solichin, 2009).

Sixth is creative musical accompaniment. This aspect involves the puppeteer's creative selection of *gending* (musical compositions) to accompany the puppet performance. In Wayang's new classic performances in Yogyakarta and Surabaya, puppeteers incorporate modern musical equipment such as drums, cymbals, violins, organs, and other contemporary instruments. According to Ki (BDS), a puppeteer instructor, musical accompaniment creativity is also integrated into *sanggar* (puppeteers' education and training) at "Sanggar Baladewa" in Surabaya (Interview, July 12, 2023).

However, the classical Wayang art had started losing its audience due to monotony and tedium. Consequently, concerted efforts are essential to reinvigorate traditional arts, making them more appealing to the community (Sulton et.al., 2020). The pervasive influence of popular and contemporary culture has infiltrated the realm of puppetry. A noteworthy transformation that has impacted Wayang's new classic is infusing elements from the entertainment world into Wayang's performance.

The emergence of Ki Seno Nugroho, who introduced the entertainment world to the Wayang stage has brought about significant changes. Consequently, Wayang has gained popularity among young people. Seno Nugroho has become an idol for many young puppeteers, including Gadhing, Gadhang, Elisa, and Yusuf Anshor. Many puppeteers have been inspired to incorporate entertainment elements such as *campursari*<sup>17</sup>, *ketoprak*<sup>18</sup>, *jatilan*<sup>19</sup>, *dangdut*<sup>20</sup>, music, dance, singing, humor, and other forms of entertainment. Notably, Wayang scenes like Cangik Limbukan and Goro-Goro are widely embraced by puppeteers for entertainment purposes.

Although this group of puppeteers engages in creativity and innovation freely, they still adhere to the cultural norms of the East regarding decency. They exercise caution in their expressions, recognizing that Wayang is a distinct performing art compared to the other forms of performing arts. As Yusuf Anshor, a viral teenage sensation, pointed out, he desires complete freedom in his performances, but the puppeteer must also exercise caution (Interview, June 16, 2023).

It is notable that the entertainment industry has replaced the once solid and profound moral messages. The allure of entertainment has degraded the quality of Wayang's performance art. Thus, Wayang is now viewed more as a spectacle for entertainment rather than a source of moral guidance (Margono, 2017). Comedians, dancers, singers, and guest stars dominate the Wayang stage. Furthermore, the influence of the entertainment world on the Wayang stage has led to efforts to deconstruct the art of Wayang performance. Unfortunately, Wayang has been transformed from an art form that combines spectacle and guidance into a form of trivial entertainment (Boivin, 2005). In the new classical Wayang performance, the puppeteer does not fully become a moral agent for society, due to the influence of the entertainment market.

The phenomenon of Wayang becoming trivial entertainment indicates a process of commodification. Indeed, it has become a commodity sold in the market. Barker (2009) says that in the process of cultural commodification, it no longer matters whether an artistic attraction is authentic or manipulative. If necessary, artistic attractions are packaged to cater to market tastes, with the primary goal being consumer purchase. In commodification, there is no longer concern

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<sup>17</sup> One type of music entertainment is a mixture of several genres of contemporary Indonesian music, such as *dangdut*, *keroncong* (a genre of Indonesian popular music), pop, and rock.

<sup>18</sup> The traditional Javanese performing art that combines elements of theater, music, dance, and comedy.

<sup>19</sup> One type of traditional Javanese art that features dance and music with dancers are in a trance.

<sup>20</sup> One of the popular music genres that utilizes *tabla* (percussion instruments) and drums as its distinctive musical instruments.

about whether a sold cultural element contains *adiluhung* (noble) values. The distinction between high culture and popular culture is blurred in commodification.

### 3. Morality in Deconstructionist Wayang Style

Contemporary puppeteers adapt their performances to contemporary conditions. Indonesian society today is influenced predominantly by a generation that is more receptive to change and openness. They are open to technology and globalization in their daily lives. These changes are evident in consumption patterns, lifestyles, and ways of thinking that diverge from the previous generations. In fact, the contemporary Indonesians are increasingly engaged in the digital realm, with communication technology exerting a significant influence, particularly on the younger generation (Untari et al.,2020)

The Wayang performances require development that aligns with the demands of the times (Suardana et al.,2019). The dynamic state of contemporary Indonesian society substantially impacts the aesthetics of Wayang performance art, including the reduction of performance duration.

Some puppeteers have taken an unconventional approach by incorporating entertainment elements into Wayang performances. The Wayang stage has thus become a platform for various forms of entertainment, including *campursari* and dangdut music, *jatilan*, and other forms of entertainment. The symbolism in Wayang no longer serves as the primary reference for performances. A Chinese-Indonesian puppeteer from Surabaya, whose initials are TBL, said that such performances are acceptable if they help the puppeteers gain community recognition. However, once they achieve fame, they must return to the classic performances (Interview, July 14, 2023).

This deconstruction of traditional Wayang performances characterizes contemporary puppetry. It affects both the interpretation of Wayang stories and the traditional symbols associated with the Wayang performances, which, in turn, influences the perception of the audience and understanding of the narratives being conveyed by the puppeteers (Widijanto, 2020). The deconstruction of the puppeteer's symbol can be observed in various performances, including those of a puppeteer known by the initials 'Y,' who is quite popular on the Eastern Java Island. In these performances, he intentionally directs the comedian to take over his role as the puppeteer. In this case, the puppeteer is no longer the ultimate symbol of authority in the performance. In a deconstructionist wayang performance, the puppeteer is far from being a moral agent for society.

Social media is pivotal in accelerating Wayang performance art's transformation (Meloni and Allasso,2023). It significantly shapes the image of Indonesian puppetry today. Some YouTube channels featured Wayang performances that use inappropriate and disrespectful subtitles. They aim to create content that will attract people to like and subscribe. Their attitude can further tarnish the reputation of Wayang as a respectable art form. Unfortunately, these performances continue to grow and expand without any effort to restore the reverence of Indonesian puppetry as a distinguished part of humanity's oral and intangible heritage.

Moreover, the proliferation of Wayang performance videos with high view counts has created a hyperreality. Hyperreality is a concept from Baudrillard that refers to simulacra and simulation (Faulkner,2022). According to him, simulacra is a representation or imitation that no longer refers to the original reality. Simulacra is an image, sign, or display that has lost its reference to the real world. Thus, it is only an imitation. Meanwhile, simulation is a process in which the original reality becomes increasingly replaced by signs, images, and representations created in consumerism and media culture. Viewers are given images and information that are repeatedly reproduced, blurring the lines between reality and fiction. Audiences increasingly accept vulgar Wayang performance as reality. Hyperreality is a consequence of the cybernetic digital world, where videos transform abstract concepts into something concrete. Ironically, these video images are often perceived as essential (Ritzer,2003).

## Discussion: The Fading Charm of Wayang

The puppeteers in Yogyakarta feel the decline in the quality of wayang performance art. Ki (U) said that the current wayang performance, "its progress is its decline" (Interview, June 14, 2023). It means that wayang performances are experiencing significant progress due to the creativity and innovation of the puppeteers but, at the same time, experiencing a decline due to the appearance of the uncontrolled entertainment stage.

Ki (U) also expressed his frustration with the current development of wayang performances. He said, "I feel confused seeing the phenomenon of wayang performances today. To heal my heart, I often watch wayang performances from previous maestros on YouTube, such as Ki Nartosabdo, Ki Timbul Hadiprayitno, and Ki Manteb Sudarsono" (Interview, June 14, 2023).

The results of FGDs conducted in Yogyakarta, the puppeteers (Ki (S), Ki (HS), Ki (ES), Ki (ST), Ki (SD), Ki (M), Ki (SR), Ki (SM), and Ki (K) also said that they felt very concerned about the development of puppet shows today. Ki (M), for example, said, "I feel annoyed about the situation. If the performer gives me a guest star, I will remain silent and let the guest star take over the conversation. Because if I respond, it will lead to something dirty. If no one responds to me, I leave it alone. I do this because I am annoyed with the situation" (Focus Group Discussion, June 18, 2023).

The social and cultural conditions of contemporary Indonesian society influence the authenticity of intangible cultural heritage (Kono,2022). Adapting Wayang performances to contemporary conditions has led to wayang losing its exoticism as an Eastern world performance art. Several indicators point to the fading allure of puppetry, including the disappearance of moral teaching in Wayang performances, the decline in the spirituality of Wayang performances, and the deconstruction of the Wayang symbols.

As an artistic medium, Wayang can effectively convey moral messages about the virtues of life (Widyokusumo,2023). Through a range of media, the Wayang supporting community always strives to preserve the heritage of polite character education (*unggah-ungguh*) (Subiyantoro et al.,2023). The puppeteer plays a pivotal role in conveying moral messages to the audience. However, puppeteers often find themselves challenged in catering to the preferences of the respondents and spectators who tend to have superficial tastes. Therefore, restoring the exotic essence of Wayang as Eastern performance art with profound morals is paramount.

The exoticism of Wayang is intricately intertwined with morals, spirituality, beliefs, and art in Wayang's performances (Pandin,2020a). Wayang narratives frequently carry specific religious values. Stories like Lord Ruci, Partakrama, Jamus Kalimasada, and Mbangun Candi Saptarga convey messages rooted in Islamic values. Similarly, local characters such as Wisanggeni, Antareja, and Antasena embody Islamic values and monotheism.

Wayang is an authentic performance art with deep symbolism and profound meaning. Virtually all elements of the performing arts are rich in symbolic meanings. The equipment, costumes, movements, and sensory elements are meticulously selected to convey symbolic messages, including love, justice, and harmony, among other virtues.

The interpretation of Wayang symbols may vary among different audiences, reflecting the essence of human beings in diverse historical contexts (Tayibnapi et al.,2022). Human beings are meaning-seeking creatures; life becomes empty and hopeless without meaning (Supriyatna et al.,2023). The role of the puppeteer becomes crucial in interpreting Wayang symbols and conveying their meaning clearly to the audience. The interpretation of these symbols forms a hermeneutic circle (Lengyel,2018). Hermeneutic circles, bringing old values, will provide *insight* into the present. On the contrary, the present values will enrich the old values.

Puppeteers can be pivotal in reshaping society's paradigm from negative character traits to more positive ones. Present-day Indonesian society grapples with complex and multifaceted challenges, including diversity issues, declining nationalism, diminishing solidarity, law enforcement and justice problems, environmental concerns, and other pressing issues that require immediate solutions. One of the central issues revolves around justice and the equitable wealth distribution (Munandar,2022). Puppeteers have a role in providing wise solutions to address these social and cultural problems.

## Communicative Action

Puppeteers in a deconstruction style often ignite controversy. They challenge established norms, blurring the lines between the good and the evil; traditional and non-traditional; and *adiluhung* (noble) and the trivial. One of the deconstructive perspectives on Wayang can be seen through the views of Seno Gumira Ajidarma, who portrays the deconstruction of the warrior myth. According to him, characters like Rama, the Laksmana, and the Pandavas no longer conform to the ideal warrior myth, representing truth, justice, and power. Seno describes these warrior figures as being malevolent and ridiculous (Widijanto,2020). Puppeteers of deconstructionism stage performances that challenge the established paradigm of traditional art.

Jürgen Habermas proposed that the communication theory of action is vital for mutual understanding. This theory emphasizes the importance of mutual comprehension and consensus in communication (Jeziarska,2019). Habermas distinguishes between two types of rationality: instrumental rationality (aimed at achieving individual goals) (Joas, 2020) and communicative rationality (aimed at attaining mutual understanding in the communication process) (Blau, 2022). Action communication theory underscores the significance of communicative rationality in addressing social and moral issues. It is thus argued that the ongoing debate between traditional and modern values in Wayang can be bridged through rational communication.

Practically, the theory of communicative action proposes the importance of dialogue (Blau,2022). Dialogue can facilitate discussions among groups engaged in polemics within the puppetry societies. Rational dialogue can aid in understanding each side's perspective, with the expectation of reaching a consensus that combines modern elements with traditional values in Wayang performances. Until now, there has been a lack of dialogue among those involved in the polemics regarding performance. It indicates insufficient efforts to preserve the intangible cultural heritage of Wayang, which is rich in human values.

In dialogue, Habermas (year) describes an "ideal communication situation" wherein all participants have equal access to information, hold good intentions, and adhere to communication norms that enable free and rational discourse. Habermas advocates for the power of communication, which involves non-violent and non-instrumental modes of interaction and co-existence in language (Mackin,2022)

Dialogue necessitates an integrative approach to reach a consensus or mutual understanding. Habermas posits that managing the relationship between diversity and consensus can help alleviate conflicts of values that characterize the modern society (Ashenden, 2020). All Wayang community stakeholders must convene in a forum to address the deconstructionist puppeteer's phenomenon.

When faced with moral dilemmas within a culture, referring to the *lifeworld* is essential. Habermas asserts that the *lifeworld* encompasses both reason and intuition and a struggle for the spiritual amidst various rational and infra-rational forces in individuals, cultures, and societies (Giri 2019). Puppeteers carry the dharma (duty) and ethics in the *lifeworld*. Puppeteers must be reminded of their responsibilities not only as entertainers but also as teachers and educators of the community.

This dialogue aimed at reaching a consensus aligns with the principles of deliberative democracy. According to Habermas, deliberative democracy comprises deliberation and consensus. Habermas argue that political decisions should be grounded in rational public discourse and active participation (Jeziarska 2019). Wayang organizations like SENAWANGI which serves as a coordinating secretariat for Wayang puppet theatre organizations, institutions, and agencies, play a significant role in shaping the direction of national Wayang puppet theatre policy. Considering this dialogue, it becomes imperative to establish a forum representing Wayang artists' diverse interests.

This forum will also be a public education. According to Habermas, this public education emphasizes reason and rationality in promoting social and political emancipation (De Angelis 2021). The public can be educated about Wayang performances' meanings and essential values. Through public discussion and counseling, the Wayang community and Wayang artists can better understand the importance of the extraordinary content of Wayang as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity. The Wayang community will also realize that Wayang's transformation is

necessary in contemporary society. This understanding will lead to maintaining the authenticity of Wayang traditions and efforts to make creativity and innovation of Wayang performances relevant in contemporary Indonesian society.

## Conclusions

This research discovered that there are two groups of puppeteers competing in creativity and innovation related to moral agents in contemporary Indonesian society.

1. Puppeteers who engage in creativity and innovation tend to emphasize the aspect of *tontonan* (entertainment). They believe that Wayang must change according to the times. The performance of this group of puppeteers is in great demand from the audience. However, some puppeteers carry out creativity and innovation that run afoul of morals and traditional values. Even among them, there is a tendency to deconstruct the meaning of Wayang symbols.
2. Groups of puppeteers tend to emphasize the aspect of *tuntunan* (moral teaching). The puppeteer of this group can play his role as the guardian of the morals and values of the Wayang tradition. However, the performances they do tend to make the development of Wayang stagnant. Wayang becomes boring because it cannot keep up with the times.

It is also discovered that the two groups, which are pro and con, contest each other to defend their respective opinions and beliefs.

In this context, this paper proposes that Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action offers a practical conceptual framework for addressing polemics surrounding the rise of deconstructionist puppeteers who challenge traditional values, as well as a group of puppeteers dedicated to consistently defending these values. Habermas promoted rational, participatory, and democratic communication. Its framework practically proposes facilitating dialogue among those involved in moral polemics. This approach is expected to help art actors and Wayang communities maintain their traditional values while opening space for creative and innovative experiments for Wayang artists. The dialogue forum will increase the awareness of the puppeteers that they have a role as moral agents. In carrying out their profession, puppeteers must adhere to the ethics of puppetry, namely as educators and teachers for the community.

The strength of this research lies in the pragmatic aspect of knowledge. The knowledge generated in this research has practical power. This research has benefits in everyday life, namely being a solution to cultural polemics in the puppet community. Meanwhile, the weakness is that Jürgen Habermas' approach may not always effectively overcome polemics in the puppet community. If there is a figure from them who is dominant in the dialogue, the consensus may be influenced by the decision of the influential person.

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