Indonesian Shadow Puppets

The earliest evidence of shadow puppets comes from ancient China, with India, Thailand, Turkey, and Indonesia all subsequently developing their own distinctive traditions. Indonesian puppets—such as those displayed here—were used for religious ceremonies. Since the 1600s, they have been an important part of festivals, weddings, births, initiation ceremonies, and funerals.

Indonesian shadow puppet performances often last all night. In general, the theater is the center of the village, where a screen is erected and a single lamp suspended on the puppeteer’s side of the screen. The puppeteer, called the *dalang*, operates all the puppets and makes the voices of all the characters, which can number as many as 57.

The *dalang* is a performer of rare ability who is expected to be not only an accomplished puppeteer and artist but also a storyteller, a source of current local news, and a satirical commentator.