

Cosmology and Satire: Symbolic Transformation in Javanese Wayang and Ottoman Karagöz

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Abstract

This article examines Wayang and Karagöz as two shadow theatre traditions that have long functioned as vehicles of cultural meaning, moral instruction, and social commentary. Although both forms are widely recognized in their respective cultural contexts, they are often studied separately, leaving limited comparative insight into how performance organizes cosmology, ethics, and public life across different traditions. The central question of this study is how Wayang and Karagöz transform inherited narrative materials into locally meaningful performative systems, and what this comparison reveals about the relationship between tradition, satire, and identity. To address this problem, the article uses comparative textual analysis of existing scholarly literature on both traditions. Previous studies have shown that Wayang localizes Indian epic materials within Javanese cosmology and ethics, while Karagöz develops within Ottoman urban culture as a form of satire and social critique. Building on this research, the article argues that Wayang emphasizes harmony, ritual order, and moral refinement through figures such as Semar and the *punakawan*, whereas Karagöz stages social plurality through the Karagöz–Hacivat relationship and comic mediation. The findings suggest that both traditions function not only as entertainment but also as culturally authoritative media for teaching, social critique, and communal reflection. The article further shows that their modern significance lies in their adaptation to national identity projects, with Wayang becoming associated with Indonesian cultural heritage and Karagöz with Turkish cultural memory.

Keywords: *Wayang, Karagöz, shadow theatre, folklore, cosmology, satire, cultural transmission, communal harmony*

Introduction

Almost every society in the world has its own forms of traditional performance. More than mere entertainment, these arts have long served as important vehicles for the transmission of cultural values and social meanings. Folklore studies emphasize their role in preserving cultural traditions and group identity (Dundes, 1965), while performance studies highlight their function as socially meaningful and repeated practices (Schechner, 1988).

Among the most influential performance traditions in Asia and the Islamicate world are Javanese Wayang and Ottoman Karagöz. Although these traditions emerged in distinct geographical, religious, and sociopolitical contexts, both employ shadow aesthetics, symbolic characterization, oral narration, and audience interaction as fundamental elements of performance (And, 1977; Öztürk, 2006). More importantly, both

traditions have functioned as cultural mechanisms through which communities transmit social norms, ethical principles, historical narratives, and collective identities.

Wayang developed within the ritual and cosmological framework of Javanese society and was profoundly influenced by Hindu-Buddhist philosophy, indigenous belief systems, and later Islamic reinterpretations (Geertz, 1960; Beatty, 1999). Through epic narratives derived from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, Wayang conveys moral teachings, spiritual values, and cosmological understandings while reinforcing social harmony and cultural continuity. Karagöz, by contrast, emerged within the urban environment of the Ottoman Empire as a popular theatrical form characterized by humor, satire, improvisation, and social commentary. Through the interactions of its stock characters, Karagöz reflects the multicultural structure of Ottoman society and provides a performative space for negotiating social tensions, cultural diversity, and everyday life.

Despite their differing philosophical orientations, both Wayang and Karagöz represent significant examples of how traditional performance arts contribute to the construction and preservation of cultural memory. While Wayang is primarily associated with ritual, spirituality, and cosmological order, Karagöz emphasizes social critique, coexistence, and public discourse. Their comparison therefore offers a valuable opportunity to explore how different civilizations employ performative traditions to communicate cultural values, reinforce communal identities, and sustain collective memory.

Examining Wayang and Karagöz comparatively is particularly important for understanding the broader roles of traditional performance arts in cultural heritage preservation, moral education, and identity formation. Despite the similarities between the two traditions, studies that examine Wayang and Karagöz together remain relatively scarce. Bringing these traditions into dialogue makes it possible to see how two different societies developed comparable ways of addressing social concerns, transmitting ethical values, and maintaining cultural continuity through performance. Furthermore, the recognition of both traditions within UNESCO's framework of Intangible Cultural Heritage highlights their significance not only as national cultural expressions but also as components of humanity's shared cultural legacy.

The comparative study of Wayang and Karagöz requires an interdisciplinary framework capable of examining performance traditions as complex cultural systems embedded within broader social and symbolic structures. This article therefore combines several perspectives such as folkloristic, symbolic, ritual, and performance approach to analyze how both traditions function as mechanisms of cultural transmission and moral mediation.

These theoretical perspectives are used together because each offers a different way of understanding Wayang and Karagöz. Dundes helps explain the social functions of traditional performances, particularly their role in transmitting shared values and social norms. Geertz provides a framework for interpreting the symbolic meanings and cultural worldviews expressed through performance. Turner and Schechner draw attention to performance itself as a social process through which relationships, tensions, and cultural practices are enacted and reproduced. Finally, Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity helps explain how both traditions adapted external influences and reshaped them within their own local cultural contexts. Taken together, these perspectives make it possible to examine the two traditions from several interconnected dimensions, ranging from social function and symbolic meaning to performance practices and processes of cultural transformation.

From the perspective of Alan Dundes, folklore functions as a mechanism through which societies transmit collective values, reinforce social norms, and maintain cultural continuity across generations (Dundes, 1965). Rather than viewing folklore as a passive remnant of the past, Dundes emphasizes its active role in regulating social behavior and preserving shared cultural understandings. Within this framework, both Wayang and Karagöz may be interpreted as folkloric systems that communicate moral principles and social expectations through performance.

In the Javanese Wayang tradition, values such as loyalty, self-discipline, justice, wisdom, and social harmony are conveyed through epic narratives and archetypal characters derived from the Mahabharata and Ramayana traditions. The performances serve not only as entertainment but also as educational and ethical instruments through which audiences engage with fundamental moral dilemmas and cultural ideals. Similarly, Karagöz functions as a vehicle for the transmission of social norms within Ottoman society. Through humor, satire, and the interaction of stock characters representing diverse social groups, Karagöz presents models of acceptable and unacceptable behavior while simultaneously critiquing social shortcomings and abuses of authority. Although the narrative structures and cultural contexts of these traditions differ considerably, both perform a pedagogical function by reinforcing collective values and contributing to the maintenance of social order.

Clifford Geertz's symbolic anthropology provides a complementary perspective for understanding these traditions. Geertz conceptualizes culture as a system of "webs of significance" through which people construct and interpret social reality (Geertz, 1973). From this viewpoint, performances are not merely artistic expressions but symbolic texts that embody and communicate broader cultural worldviews. Viewed through a Geertzian lens, Wayang symbolizes the cosmological and spiritual order of Javanese culture. Its narratives articulate relationships between humanity, the divine realm, and the universe, thereby expressing fundamental conceptions of morality, destiny, and social harmony. Karagöz, by contrast, symbolically represents the multicultural and socially diverse structure of Ottoman urban life. Through its comic dialogues and satirical encounters, it reflects everyday social relations, cultural diversity, and the tensions inherent in communal coexistence. In both cases, performance functions as a symbolic medium through which communities interpret reality, negotiate meaning, and reproduce cultural identity.

Taken together, the perspectives of Dundes and Geertz demonstrate that Wayang and Karagöz should be understood not simply as forms of entertainment but as dynamic cultural systems. Through narrative, symbolism, humor, and performance, these traditions contribute to the transmission of moral values, the preservation of cultural memory, and the construction of collective identity within their respective societies.

According to Güleç and Yalçın (2025), traditional performing arts play a significant role in the preservation and intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage. Performance traditions such as the Karagöz and Hacivat shadow plays, Japanese Noh and Kabuki theatre, and Indian Kathakali dance contribute to cultural continuity by preserving and conveying societies' historical experiences, moral values, religious narratives, and social norms. In this respect, traditional performances should be regarded not merely as artistic expressions but also as important cultural instruments that support the preservation, transmission, and sustainability of cultural identity (Güleç & Yalçın, 2025).

Kayahan and Çevik (2025) emphasize that Hacivat and Karagöz have long been recognized as important carriers of humor and satire within Turkish folk culture. Their

contrasting personalities, Karagöz as the outspoken and straightforward representative of ordinary people, and Hacivat as the more educated, refined, and socially adaptable figure, symbolically reflect social differences and tensions within society. The authors argue that these characters should not be viewed merely as sources of entertainment; rather, they function as instruments of social criticism that provide insight into power relations, social hierarchies, and cultural dynamics. By reinterpreting these traditional figures within a historical framework, the study demonstrates how Karagöz and Hacivat continue to serve as meaningful cultural symbols capable of conveying social commentary and cultural values across different periods.

In the Javanese context, *Wayang* constitutes one such symbolic system articulating cosmological balance, spiritual hierarchy, and communal ethics. Geertz's discussions of *slametan* and Javanese religious pluralism illuminate how social harmony becomes embedded within ritual and performative structures (Geertz, 1973). *Wayang* performances should therefore be interpreted not only as narrative entertainment but also as symbolic enactments of Javanese cosmology and ethical philosophy.

Similarly, Karagöz performances reflect Ottoman social symbolism. Through typified characters representing diverse ethnicities, professions, and linguistic communities, Karagöz dramatized the pluralistic structure of Ottoman urban life (Öztürk, 2006). Humor and satire became symbolic tools for negotiating coexistence within a socially heterogeneous empire.

Anthropologist Victor Turner argues that rituals and festivals strengthen social bonds and create a sense of "communitas," or deep togetherness, among individuals (Turner, 1982). This perspective helps explain why both *Wayang* and Karagöz frequently resolve conflicts through moral balance and social reintegration rather than total victory or annihilation. Even when performances involve satire, criticism, or political tension, their ultimate function remains restorative rather than revolutionary.

Meanwhile, Schechner argues that performance constitutes "restored behavior," namely the repeated enactment of culturally meaningful actions across time (Schechner, 1988). Traditional performances thus simultaneously preserve continuity and enable reinterpretation. This flexibility explains how both *Wayang* and Karagöz have survived across centuries despite dramatic political and social transformations.

The concept of cultural hybridity developed by Homi K. Bhabha is especially useful for understanding symbolic transformation within both traditions (Bhabha, 1994). Neither *Wayang* nor Karagöz merely reproduced imported cultural forms passively. Instead, local communities actively transformed external influences into new symbolic systems reflecting indigenous values and social realities.

This process of localization represents more than simple adaptation; it involves the reinterpretation and reconfiguration of cultural forms within new social and symbolic contexts (Bhabha, 1994). Imported narratives were reshaped according to local cosmologies, ethical systems, and communal practices. Consequently, both *Wayang* and Karagöz illustrate how performative traditions mediate between continuity and innovation within broader historical processes of cultural exchange.

Method

This study employs a qualitative comparative approach to examine the historical development and cultural significance of two performance traditions: Javanese *Wayang* and Ottoman Karagöz. Rather than treating these traditions merely as forms of entertainment, the study approaches them as cultural practices through which

communities express ethical values, social relationships, and understandings of the world.

The literature review was conducted through a systematic review of books, journal articles, and historical and ethnographic studies related to Wayang and Karagöz. The sources were selected based on their relevance to four main themes: historical development, folklore and performance traditions, symbolic meanings, and cultural transformation. The collected materials were then organized thematically and comparatively to identify recurring patterns, similarities, and differences between the two traditions. This process enabled the study to examine how each performance tradition functions as a medium of cultural transmission and symbolic negotiation within its respective social context.

The analysis focuses on several interconnected dimensions, including historical development, mechanisms of cultural transmission and localization, symbolic reinterpretation, ethical principles, and communal roles. Rather than seeking a direct historical relationship between Wayang and Karagöz, the study explores how each tradition developed distinctive responses to shared cultural concerns such as social order, moral education, authority, and peaceful coexistence. Particular attention is given to the ways in which both traditions transformed external cultural influences into locally meaningful symbolic systems. Whereas Wayang tends to articulate ethical concerns through cosmological narratives and spiritual symbolism, Karagöz addresses similar concerns through satire, humor, and urban social commentary.

Results

Wayang and Karagöz as Comparative Synthesis Between Cosmology and Satire

Wayang and Karagöz show two different ways performance can make culture think. Wayang turns inherited epic material into a Javanese cosmology of harmony and moral balance. Karagöz turns urban difference into satire, using humor to negotiate social life. In Wayang, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are reworked through Javanese hierarchy, *rukun*, and moral discipline, with the *punakawan* (especially Semar) showing that wisdom can come from marginal figures rather than rulers. The *dalang* and the symbolic stage also make the performance a miniature cosmos rather than simple entertainment.

Karagöz works differently: it grows out of Ottoman urban life, especially coffeehouses and Ramadan gatherings, and uses Karagöz–Hacivat dialogue, misunderstanding, and satire to manage social plurality. Its humor is not just comic but also ethical, because it teaches coexistence through criticism and recognition rather than cosmic order. Taken together, the two traditions show that performance can preserve social order in different ways: Wayang by integrating conflict into harmony, and Karagöz by making difference speakable through laughter. In modern times, both became symbols of national identity, with Wayang tied to Indonesian cultural heritage and Karagöz to Turkish cultural memory.



Image 1. Karagöz and Hacivat
Source: Kudret 1992, vol. 1, pp. 504-5.



Image 2. Semar
Source: Munjiyat and Sondari 2002, p. 16.

Dimension	Wayang	Karagöz
Main orientation	Cosmology and harmony	Satire and coexistence
Cultural setting	Javanese ritual and courtly tradition	Ottoman urban public life
Core figures	<i>Punakawan</i> , especially Semar	Karagöz and Hacivat
Ethical logic	<i>Rukun</i> , balance, moral refinement	Social negotiation through humor
Comic function	Moral correction from within hierarchy	Mediation of social difference
Performance space	Ritual, communal, night-long	Coffeehouses, Ramadan, public gatherings
Public created	Ritual public	Urban public
Modern role	Indonesian national heritage	Turkish cultural memory

Discussion

Historical Origins and Transregional Cultural Flows

Wayang and the Transformation of Hindu-Buddhist Cosmology

Wayang occupies a central position in Java's cultural history as both theatrical form and medium through which Javanese society articulated religious values, social hierarchy, and moral pedagogy for centuries. Though debates over its earliest origins remain unresolved, scholars agree that Wayang developed through sustained interaction between local Javanese traditions and Indic religious-literary influences rather than simple cultural borrowing. The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* became foundational narrative reservoirs, extensively localized in Java to fit Javanese courtly, ethical, and ritual sensibilities (Keeler, 1987).

From an early stage, Wayang expressed a cosmological order shaped by Hindu-Buddhist concepts (hierarchy, duty, sacred kingship, balance) but these ideas were never mechanically reproduced in their Indian form. Instead, they were absorbed into a specifically Javanese symbolic world where local ritual practice, ancestral orientation, and magico-religious understandings became inseparable from epic narration. The clearest example of this transformation is the emergence of *Punakawan* figures (Semar, Gareng, Petruk, Bagong), who do not originate from Indian epics but represent uniquely Javanese additions that fundamentally reshape Wayang's symbolic structure (Mulyono, 1982). Hatley argues that Indian epic social philosophy fused with Javanese magico-religious tradition and was elaborated in courts, where Wayang became both medium for communicating social ethos and mystical ritual sanctifying social order (Hatley, 1971; Magnis-Suseno, 1997).

This fusion transformed Wayang into a multilayered system where cosmology, ritual, ethics, and politics operated together, not merely story-performance but symbolic enactment of the relationship between ruler, community, and universe (Hatley, 1971; Korsovitis, 2001). Court patronage intensified this role by linking Wayang to royal legitimacy and hierarchical order, making performance a privileged medium through which ruler authority could be imagined and affirmed.

Within this structure, the *dalang* held an especially important position, not simply entertainer or puppet manipulator, but central ritual and interpretive figure who narrated, sang, conducted gamelan, performed ritual acts, and mediated between visible

and invisible domains. Cohen emphasizes that the *dalang's* authority derived partly from indirect relation to ritual sponsors, ancestors, and unseen world, explaining why puppeteers were often regarded as possessing exceptional spiritual power and sometimes worked as healers or shamans (Cohen, 2002). In this sense, the *dalang* functioned as performer, philosopher, ritual specialist, and cultural mediator at once.

Islamization of Java introduced another major phase of symbolic transformation without eliminating earlier cosmological layers. Instead, Islamic literary and mystical traditions frequently reinterpreted Wayang within new ethical and theological frameworks (Noorzeha, 2022). Cohen's study of *Suluk Wayang* is particularly important here, showing that Javanese Islamic mysticism appropriated Wayang as theological allegory through which relation between self, divine will, and sacred law could be conceptualized (Cohen, 2002). Wayang was not rejected as pre-Islamic relic but resignified as medium capable of carrying Islamic spiritual meaning while preserving older symbolic forms.

Weiss's work reinforces this interpretation by emphasizing historical layering of Javanese aesthetics and performance traditions. She shows that Central Javanese Wayang cannot be understood as timeless survival because it developed through ongoing processes of codification, reinterpretation, and interaction between court, village, colonial, and religious discourses (Weiss, 2006). The result was a distinctly Javanese symbolic tradition where Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, local spirituality, and Islamic ethics coexisted within shared performative structure rather than canceling one another out.

Javanese spirituality traditionally emphasized inner refinement, balance, and mystical harmony, concepts deeply embedded within Wayang symbolism. Wayang heroes' journeys represent not only physical struggle but spiritual transformation: battles symbolize inner ethical conflict, while wisdom emerges through patience, self-control, and spiritual discipline. Semar becomes central within this framework, his humble appearance concealing profound spiritual authority that reflects mystical ideas concerning hidden truth beneath external appearances. As Andrew Beatty (1999) documents, Islamic mysticism further enriched Wayang philosophy, with Sufi concepts emphasizing inner purification and ethical discipline integrated into existing Javanese cosmological structures. Consequently, Wayang evolved into performative synthesis of local spirituality, Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, and Islamic ethics.

The mystical dimensions of Wayang are especially visible in the symbolic relationship between visible world and unseen realm. The shadow functions as important metaphysical metaphor: human existence appears transient and incomplete while deeper truth exists beyond immediate perception. Ward Keeler (1987) explains that this symbolism parallels broader Javanese mystical concepts emphasizing inner reality (*batin*) over outward appearance (*lahir*). Wayang narratives frequently portray heroes undergoing spiritual tests before attaining wisdom or legitimate authority, physical strength alone insufficient; moral discipline and spiritual maturity necessary for restoring cosmic balance. Such themes reflect fusion of courtly ethics, indigenous spirituality, and Sufi-influenced Islamic philosophy within Javanese culture.

The *dalang* also possessed quasi-spiritual authority within traditional society. His mastery over narrative, symbolism, and ritual language elevated him beyond ordinary entertainer. In many communities, the *dalang* was regarded as mediator capable of bridging visible and invisible realities through performative knowledge. Consequently, Wayang performances often generated contemplative experiences extending beyond aesthetic enjoyment, where audiences encountered ethical reflection, spiritual

symbolism, and metaphysical imagination simultaneously. The performance space became temporary cosmos where philosophical and religious meanings could be collectively experienced.

Karagöz and Ottoman Urban Performance

Karagöz emerged as the most influential form of shadow theatre in the Ottoman world but, unlike Wayang, took shape primarily within urban public culture rather than court-centered ritual cosmology. Though distant origins of shadow theatre remain debated, Ünver Oral repeatedly situates Turkish shadow theatre within wider transregional currents while insisting that Karagöz became specifically Ottoman form through development in Istanbul and other Ottoman social settings (Oral, 2009). Karagöz should be understood less as simple inheritance from Asian prototype than as Ottoman transformation of shadow performance into popular urban art.

Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi records Karagöz's popularity within Ottoman social life, particularly during Ramadan, when coffeehouses and public venues became central theatrical spaces and the city itself was effectively transformed into stage for traditional performance (Çelebi, 2006). This urban setting is crucial because it shaped the genre's social orientation: Karagöz was less concerned with cosmological order than with comic representation of everyday coexistence, conflict, and negotiation within imperial city.

At Karagöz's center stand dialogic exchanges between Karagöz and Hacıvat. Karagöz was considered figure derived from ordinary people, defined by spontaneity, realism, directness, and comic vitality, while Hacıvat embodies refinement, education, verbal elegance, and cultivated manners. Their interactions dramatize persistent tension within Ottoman urban society between vernacular practicality and elite rhetorical culture through humor rather than open rupture. The point is not simply to oppose two social types but to stage their friction as repeatable form of comic social mediation.

Karagöz is also remarkable for diversity of supporting cast. Oral stresses that Turkish traditional theatre, and Karagöz especially, reflected an "Ottoman neighbourhood" populated by representatives of many ethnic and communal groups, Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Arabs, Albanians, Bosnians, Persians, and others (Oral, 2009). These figures appeared on curtain through recognizable accents, professions, habits, and social roles, making performance stylized mirror of Ottoman urban plurality. The screen did not organize these differences into sacred cosmic hierarchy as Wayang tended to do; instead, it turned them into theatrical material for satire, recognition, and negotiation (Demir and Özdemir, 2013).

For that reason, Karagöz is best understood as theatre of pragmatic coexistence rather than metaphysical integration. Its dominant symbolic mode is satire, allowing hypocrisy, pretension, ignorance, and abuse of authority to be exposed without dissolving communal life itself. Oral's discussion of Karagöz's humor techniques and social role makes clear that laughter functioned as way of containing tensions within Ottoman society, not as purely destructive force (Oral, 2009). Satire therefore acted as mechanism of social criticism that could register pluralism and conflict while still preserving possibility of shared public culture.

The contrast with Wayang becomes especially illuminating here. If Wayang localized epic and cosmological materials through ritual mediation and symbolic layering, Karagöz localized shadow theatre by embedding it in Ottoman urban speech, public festivity, and multicultural social life. Wayang's symbolic center lies in relation between cosmos, ethics, ritual, and kingship, while Karagöz's lies in comic management of difference among city inhabitants. Both are products of long transregional cultural flows,

but each transformed inherited materials into new and historically specific performative order.

Symbolic Transformation and Localization

The presence of the *punakawan* constitutes the clearest evidence that Wayang is not simply a Javanese repetition of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, but a tradition that underwent genuine symbolic transformation in its localization. While Wayang narratives derive from Indian epics, they were adapted to the Javanese setting through the addition of clown-attendants, the only major figures with Javanese rather than Indian names (Hatley, 1971). This localization occurred not at decorative margins but within the very social structure of the dramatic world, which is precisely why the *punakawan* function as more than incidental characters: they are the mechanism through which an imported epic universe was reorganized around Javanese ethical and social categories. The *punakawan* alter the symbolic center of the epic universe. In classical heroic narrative, authority gathers around rulers, sages, and warriors, but in Wayang, wisdom often emerges through figures who are socially humble, comic, physically grotesque, and positioned at the edge of elite power. They function as servants, advisers, and protectors, but also as agents through whom commentary, criticism, and interpretive adjustment become possible. Their existence marks a major epistemological shift, introducing a Javanese conviction that truth may appear indirectly and that ethical insight may emerge from figures not outwardly exalted. In this respect, the *punakawan* are not merely evidence that Wayang absorbed local color; they are the structural proof that the tradition's moral and cosmological order was rebuilt around specifically Javanese terms.

Among these figures, Semar occupies the most philosophically charged position, and his character makes the case for symbolic transformation most concretely. He is deeply revered despite his grotesque bodily appearance and earthy manner, understood as a powerful god in clown form (Hatley, 1971). This paradox is essential to the Javanization of Wayang: Semar embodies a worldview where oppositions between low and high, servant and deity, ridiculousness and wisdom do not remain fixed. Knowledge is not monopolized by kings; indeed, kings and nobles often require correction through a figure who stands symbolically beneath them while exceeding them in insight. The *punakawan*, especially Semar, make Wayang symbols more intelligible to common audiences, and through humor and criticism they soften the weight of aristocratic ideology. Their function is not to abolish hierarchy but to mediate it: they domesticate grandeur, translate cosmology into recognizably human terms, and permit distance, laughter, and adjustment without dissolving the symbolic order altogether. It is precisely this mediating function, absent from the Indian source material and generated entirely within the Javanese reception of the epics, that demonstrates transformation rather than mere transmission.

Wayang historically functioned as art form, ritual, and medium of instruction, its development involving the fusion of Indian epic philosophy and Javanese magico-religious traditions elaborated in courts (Hatley, 1971). Every major element of the Wayang stage carries symbolic significance: the screen symbolizes the universe, the light source symbolizes the sun, the banana log symbolizes the earth, the *dalang* serves as the medium between the gods and humans, and the *gunungan* symbolizes the cosmic order in balance (Korsovitis, 2001). The performance is not just narrative representation but a ritualized miniature of the cosmos itself. The *dalang* coordinates cosmology, aesthetics, and social event into a single performance field, functioning as ritual mediator whose authority depends on coordinating these dimensions (Cohen, 2002). Study of Suluk

Wayang shows how Wayang became a theological model within Javanese Islamic mysticism, appropriated as allegory of selfhood, divine will, and the relation between outward form and inward reality (Cohen, 2002). Islamization did not erase Wayang's older symbolic structures but deepened them by providing new interpretive vocabularies. Javanese performance traditions developed through codification, reinterpretation, and long-term historical sedimentation, with older aesthetic principles surviving through new forms and discourses (Weiss, 2006). Yet it is the *punakawan*, not these later theological layers, that supply the clearest and earliest evidence that transformation, not mere retention, defines Wayang's history.

Karagöz, on the other hand, developed through the transformation of shadow theatre into an Ottoman urban theatre of satire, plurality, and social encounter, and here too the clearest evidence of that transformation lies in a single structural innovation: the pairing of Karagöz and Hacıvat. Turkish traditional theatre found its richest development in Istanbul, where different peoples, languages, professions, and habits were brought into living proximity (Oral, 2009). Karagöz emerged from this environment not as ritual cosmology but as a comic public mirror. Istanbul was not merely Karagöz's setting but its social matrix: different communities lived side by side, and these visible and audible differences provided the material out of which the theatre built its world. Karagöz is therefore localized not through the sanctification of inherited myth, as in Wayang, but through the dramatization of everyday plurality, and the Karagöz–Hacıvat pairing is the device through which that plurality was made theatrically legible.

The central pair crystallizes this social logic and stands as the primary structural evidence of Karagöz's own localization. Hacıvat is associated with verbal polish, civility, educated speech, and mediating formality; Karagöz is direct, impulsive, practical, grounded in the idiom of ordinary people. Their scenes stage social opposition between elite and popular speech, cultivated and spontaneous manners, rhetorical discipline and vernacular immediacy. This opposition should not be misread as simple rebellion; theatrical pleasure comes from the friction itself. Hacıvat's refinement becomes vulnerable to puncture, while Karagöz's rough spontaneity remains dependent on the discursive structure Hacıvat helps create. The performance enacts conflict without demanding resolution through revolution; difference is rendered playable. Ottoman society appears on the curtain through representatives of many communities, Turks, Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Arabs, Persians, Albanians, Bosnians, and others (Oral, 2009), and the screen works as a theatrical condensation of imperial urban life, transforming difference into shared theatrical material precisely because Karagöz and Hacıvat had already established, as a pair, a working template for staging difference as dialogue rather than as conflict.

The Karagöz curtain functions as a "mirror" of Istanbul, selecting, framing, distorting, and stylizing what it reflects (Oral, 2009). It reveals the plurality of Ottoman life while organizing that plurality into shared public spectacle; social difference becomes legible through comedy. Satire in Karagöz is better understood as mediation than negation: it criticized vanity, hypocrisy, pretension, and abuse of power, yet performances remained tied to collective enjoyment rather than partisan destruction. The theatre allowed criticism to circulate because criticism itself had been converted into an aesthetic of coexistence, an achievement that traces directly back to the Karagöz–Hacıvat dynamic as its originating structure. Karagöz's performative conditions reinforce this, since coffeehouses, Ramadan festivities, and public show locations are social and urban contexts where collective spectatorship matters, not sacred ceremonial contexts. Language plays a central role, as humor depends on the expressive possibilities of Turkish

and on differentiated voices. Karagöz localizes shadow theatre by placing it in an urban epistemology where knowledge comes from social recognition rather than metaphysical revelation.

Taken as a whole, the *punakawan* in Wayang and the Karagöz–Hacivat pairing in Karagöz perform the same evidentiary function for each tradition: both are the concrete structural innovations, absent from any external source material or precedent, through which an inherited or imported theatrical form was reorganized to speak in local ethical and social terms. Wayang's deeper significance lies in inviting the audience to contemplate order through cosmological drama, made intelligible by the *punakawan*'s mediation; Karagöz's deeper significance lies in inviting the audience to negotiate order through laughter, made possible by the Karagöz–Hacivat pairing's dramatization of plurality. In both cases, it is these character-level innovations, more than any other single feature, that constitute the primary evidence of symbolic transformation.

Moral Philosophy of Wayang and Karagöz

One of the central ethical ideas in Javanese culture is *rukun*, a principle of harmony that entails not only the absence of open conflict but also active accommodation, self-restraint, and the maintenance of social balance. Wayang repeatedly reinforces this ethos by staging conflict as something that must ultimately be reintegrated into order rather than permitted to destroy the social world. Even when plots include warfare, rivalry, or moral polarization, their deeper aim is not the glorification of violence but the restoration of equilibrium. Conflict is embedded within a larger patterned sequence, moving audiences through a cycle in which disorder is recognized but then contained by the broader performance form (Becker, 1980).

This ethical field finds a compelling parallel in the Ottoman shadow play tradition of Karagöz. As Avcı (2020) argues, Karagöz should not be regarded solely as a form of comic entertainment; through its distinctive characters and dialogic structure, it serves multiple social and cultural functions, including moral instruction, social criticism, and the transmission of cultural values. Much of the humor in Karagöz emerges from the protagonist's misunderstandings, direct speech, lack of formal etiquette, and inability to fully grasp linguistic subtleties. Hacivat, in contrast, functions as the character who maintains communication, mediates conflicts, and restores social balance. This dynamic not only generates humor but also provides audiences with lessons about communication, social behavior, and interpersonal relations. Consequently, Karagöz operates as a performative medium through which educational messages, ethical principles, and satirical critiques of society are conveyed while simultaneously entertaining audiences (Avcı, 2020).

Semar occupies a similarly pivotal position in this ethical field, giving voice to wisdom that does not belong exclusively to elites. The *punakawan*, especially Semar, domesticate Wayang and make its moral universe intelligible to ordinary people. Semar's grotesque appearance and comic speech do not diminish his importance; rather, they render visible a deeper moral truth, that authority must be tied to humility and ethical responsibility. Magnis-Suseno (1997) makes this point explicit, describing Semar as a moral check on political arrogance, a figure whose low social position licenses him to speak truths that more formal characters cannot voice without disrupting the very hierarchy they are meant to uphold. Wayang thus teaches that insight often comes from marginal figures who can see through the illusion of status. In both Wayang and Karagöz, then, the comic or "low" figure functions not merely as a source of laughter but as a vital ethical agent who sustains social order.

The moral world of Wayang did not remain frozen within a Hindu-Buddhist framework. Javanese mystical writing appropriated Wayang imagery to articulate Islamic ideas about the self, divine will, and the relationship between law and inner experience, as documented in Cohen's (2002) analysis of Javanese literary sources. Rather than replacing the earlier cosmology, Islam was layered onto existing symbolic structures, a pattern that allowed Wayang to persist as a moral medium even as the meaning of its symbols shifted. Concepts such as patience, humility, and inner discipline were absorbed into Javanese performance without erasing older ethical orientations toward balance and harmony. Semar again becomes central within this framework: his humble appearance conceals a profound spiritual authority, reflecting mystical ideas about hidden truth beneath external form. Beatty's (1999) ethnographic data further show how Sufi concepts emphasizing inner purification and ethical discipline were integrated into existing Javanese cosmological structures, enriching Wayang's philosophical repertoire. Consequently, Wayang evolved into a performative synthesis of local spirituality, Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, and Islamic ethics.

This capacity for change is not unique to spiritual content. Javanese performance traditions are historically cumulative rather than static (Weiss, 2006): what is heard as "old" style today may contain layers of refinement, codification, and reinterpretation produced through prolonged contact between courts, villages, religious traditions, and colonial institutions. Moral philosophy in Wayang is therefore not a simple inheritance from a single origin but an evolving cultural achievement.

Wayang narratives frequently portray heroes undergoing spiritual tests before attaining wisdom or legitimate authority; physical strength alone is insufficient, and moral discipline and maturity are necessary for restoring cosmic balance. These recurring narrative structures reflect a fusion of courtly ethics, indigenous spirituality, and religious philosophy within Javanese culture. The *dalang*, correspondingly, held quasi spiritual authority within traditional society: his mastery over narrative, symbolism, and ritual language elevated him beyond the role of an ordinary entertainer, and in many communities, he was regarded as a mediator capable of bridging visible and invisible realities through performative knowledge. Wayang performances thus often generated contemplative experiences extending beyond aesthetic enjoyment, in which audiences encountered ethical reflection alongside spiritual symbolism. The performance space became a temporary cosmos in which philosophical and religious meanings could be collectively experienced.

Karagöz, by contrast, works with a different ethical imagination, one grounded in the social realities documented by Oral (2009). Karagöz flourished in Ottoman urban life, particularly in coffeehouses and festival settings, where diverse groups gathered and social interaction was highly visible. This urban setting matters because it makes pluralism the normal condition of performance rather than an exception to be resolved. Comic exchanges between Karagöz and Hacıvat turn difference into dialogue, and dialogue into laughter; rather than expressing cosmic harmony, the theatre stages coexistence as a practical problem to be managed.

Characters in Karagöz are not merely individual personalities but social types. As Oral's (2009) data on character composition indicate, the genre functions as a theatre of communal recognition in which different ethnic, religious, and occupational figures become visible on stage. The point is not to erase difference but to make it speakable, legible, and humorous. Satire allows performers to expose arrogance, hypocrisy, and pretension without pushing the social world toward collapse, which is precisely why the genre can remain deeply critical while staying socially functional.

The performance of Karagöz belongs to world of quick exchange, civic visibility, and shared commentary rather than sacred ritual frame. This does not make it morally shallow; it simply means that its ethics are urban and conversational. The structure of Karagöz performance supports this public orientation: comic pacing, improvisational energy, and reliance on recognizable social types make it responsive to current life. The genre could absorb contemporary references while still preserving its basic form, making Karagöz a flexible vehicle for civic reflection. The theatre teaches audiences how to laugh at themselves, at bureaucrats, and at oddities of urban coexistence without abandoning possibility of common life.

Performance Contexts and Communal Functions

The ethical meanings of Wayang and Karagöz cannot be separated from the spaces in which they are performed. Wayang traditionally belongs to ritual and communal contexts, including all-night performances, life-cycle ceremonies, and gatherings structured by social obligation, while Karagöz belongs to the urban public sphere, particularly coffeehouses, Ramadan entertainments, and festive settings where social types mingle more openly. These different environments shape not only what each theatre means but also how it teaches.

Wayang is part of a ritual complex that includes *slametan* and other communal events. It is not simply watched but experienced as part of a social rite, in which the audience, the *dalang*, the *gamelan* ensemble, the nighttime setting, and the ritual space together constitute a single communal event rather than a performance observed from a distance. In this setting, performance does not merely represent harmony; it enacts it through shared attention, prayer, food, and prolonged coexistence. The audience is never simply a passive public: people move around, talk, listen, and participate in a social atmosphere that is itself morally meaningful. The *dalang* mediates between visible and invisible worlds through song, narration, ritual action, and interpretive authority (Cohen, 2002), while the *gamelan* functions not as incidental accompaniment but as integral ritual architecture, structuring the pacing of the night and reinforcing the audience's sense of being inside the event rather than in front of it. Wayang's plot is highly structured but not in the Aristotelian sense; rather, it is organized through patterned scenes, repetitions, coincidences, and multiple epistemologies coexisting within a single event (Becker, 1980). The moral lesson of performance is thus embodied participation in cosmological order rather than abstract doctrine, ethics becomes something heard, watched, and collectively inhabited, made possible only because audience, *dalang*, *gamelan*, and ritual night are bound together as one communal experience.

Karagöz occupies a comparably central place in its own social world, though the terms of that centrality differ. Anameriç (2014) emphasizes that Karagöz functioned as an important medium of social communication and cultural transmission within Ottoman society: by reflecting diverse social groups, their relationships, and shared values, the shadow theatre contributed not only to entertainment but also to the socialization and dissemination of knowledge. Prior to the emergence of modern mass media, Karagöz performances occupied a central place in communal life and were frequently staged during weddings, circumcision ceremonies, Ramadan festivities, and other social gatherings, making Karagöz one of the most significant components of Ottoman popular culture and collective memory. This embedding within life-cycle events echoes Wayang's own ritual complex, suggesting that despite their different cosmological premises, both traditions anchored ethical instruction to occasions the community already recognized as significant. The terms of that anchoring, however, differ substantially: unlike Wayang's

ritual public, bound by shared hierarchy and communal obligation within a single night-long, cosmologically framed event, Karagöz's coffeehouse and festival settings were defined by open sociability, transient gathering, and the constant mixing of different social groups. Karagöz therefore did not need cosmological narration to organize its public; its comic form worked instead through recognition, laughter, and shared commentary on a plurality already present in the room.

Karagöz was also not confined to amusement alone. As Çolakoğlu (2006) notes, the tradition functioned as a vehicle for satire and social criticism: through humor, caricature, and symbolic representation, Karagöz performances addressed social problems, criticized public officials, and commented on political developments. This critical dimension transformed Karagöz into a performative platform through which audiences could reflect upon social realities and power relations. Consequently, Karagöz should be understood not merely as entertainment but as a medium of cultural transmission, public communication, and social critique, functioning for the Ottoman public much as Wayang's ritual embeddedness functioned for its Javanese audience: as a means by which performance became inseparable from the ongoing moral and social life of the community.

A useful way to synthesize this comparison is through the different publics each tradition creates. Wayang creates a ritual public temporarily unified by night-long attention, cosmological narration, and social hierarchy softened by shared participation, an experience made possible by the convergence of audience, *dalang*, *gamelan*, and ritual time and space. Karagöz creates an urban public that is already heterogeneous and learns to coexist through laughter, parody, and social recognition, an experience made possible by the openness of the coffeehouse and festival setting. Wayang tends to bind people into a moral cosmos; Karagöz tends to negotiate social plurality in the city. Both are public arts, but they imagine the public differently because they are staged in fundamentally different kinds of space, one organized around ritual community, the other around urban sociability, and this difference in imagined public is also what allows each tradition to retool its inherited material for new historical conditions: Wayang by absorbing new religious and political meanings while retaining its cosmological form, and Karagöz by absorbing new social references while retaining its satirical, dialogic structure.

Wayang as Indonesian National Identity and Karagöz as Turkish National Identity

Encounter with colonialism, nationalism, modernization, and globalization did not simply weaken Wayang and Karagöz but compelled both traditions to renegotiate their place in rapidly changing political and cultural orders. Survival depended not on preserving an untouched past but on sustaining symbolic continuity through adaptation. The modern histories of Wayang and Karagöz should not be narrated as stories of decline alone but as histories of transformation where older performative logics were selectively reworked in response to new publics, institutions, and media (Mrazek, 2014).

Both traditions came to function as condensed cultural signs of collective identity. Wayang became legible as marker of Javanese depth, Indonesian heritage, and civilizational legitimacy, while Karagöz stood as emblem of Ottoman Turkish theatrical memory and urban wit. This symbolic elevation is central to understanding how each form came to represent a nation: a living, regionally rooted practice was gradually read as evidence of a broader national character.

Wayang and Indonesian Cultural Nationalism

During the late colonial period and into the era of Indonesian nationalism, Wayang increasingly came to be read not only as ritual theatre but also as proof of indigenous cultural sophistication (Wibawa, 2024). This mattered in a colonial setting where Dutch scholarship and administration attempted to classify, textualize, and regulate Javanese culture while simultaneously subordinating its living authority to colonial structures. In that context, the antiquity and complexity of Wayang could be mobilized by Indonesian intellectuals and cultural actors as evidence that local civilization possessed philosophical depth and artistic refinement independent of Europe.

At the same time, the colonial period reshaped the internal terms by which Wayang was defined and transmitted. Dutch scholarly preferences and court institutions encouraged the codification of a particular, purified, and textualized model of Wayang that downplayed the more fluid, political, and improvisatory dimensions of village performance (Schechner, 1990). The result was paradoxical: colonial mediation helped elevate Wayang as classical art but also narrowed the range of what counted as legitimate tradition. Wayang proved symbolically flexible enough to enter multiple ideological projects at once. Courts continued to value it as medium linked to hierarchy, etiquette, and sacralized political order; Muslim interpreters could read it ethically or mystically; and nationalist movements could present it as sign of cultural continuity across historical rupture. This plurality of uses explains why Wayang could survive dramatic political transition without losing its prestige altogether.

Even when Indonesian society was changing rapidly under pressures of democracy, urbanization, and nationalism, Wayang did not simply disappear. Rather, it retained an altered but still recognizable place in Indonesian life, especially because ritual occasions, political sponsorship, and cultural prestige continued to sustain its relevance. Attempts to make Wayang speak directly to new national concerns through innovations such as “Wayang Suluh” and “Wayang Pantjasila” reveal both the attractiveness of Wayang as political medium and the resistance of its deeper symbolic structure to abrupt ideological rewriting (Hatley, 1971).

Wayang's role in cultural nationalism did not come mainly from modern propaganda alone. Wayang remained compelling because audiences continued to recognize it as medium through which questions of order, legitimacy, ethical conduct, and collective memory could be staged in culturally authoritative terms. Nationalism did not erase the older cosmological and courtly layers of Wayang but recontextualized them within the project of Indonesian nationhood. After independence, this process deepened as state institutions, educational programs, and cultural policy increasingly presented Wayang as part of national heritage. If the colonial state had sought to regulate and frame Wayang, the postcolonial state sought to domesticate and nationalize it, elevating Wayang further while also raising new questions about who had authority to define authentic performance, which regional forms should represent the nation, and how much innovation could be tolerated before tradition was judged compromised.

The impact of modernization on performance itself was equally profound. Encounter with electronic media altered not just distribution but performance structure, rhythm, and aesthetic emphasis (Mrazek, 2014). Long all-night performances increasingly had to compete with the speed, fragmentation, and variety of television, encouraging expansion of comic interludes, inclusion of guest stars, use of popular music, and greater emphasis on spectacle and attraction. Wayang did not simply appear on television but also learned from television, becoming in some respects more fragmented,

more entertainment driven, and more visibly oriented toward modern publics (Mrazek, 2014).

These changes should not be dismissed as mere dilution. They reveal the long-standing elasticity of Wayang as performative system. Javanese performance considered as layered rather than linearly replaced helps explain how new media forms and modern tastes could be incorporated without fully obliterating earlier performative sensibilities. Even when performances became shorter, more humorous, or more televisual, they often continued to retain older ethical, emotional, and symbolic frameworks in altered form, which is precisely what allowed Wayang to function credibly as a national symbol rather than a static relic.

For that reason, the modern history of Wayang should be understood as a history of strategic adaptation rather than straightforward continuity. Its nationalization did not simply preserve an old tradition, and its modernization did not simply betray it. Rather, both nationalism and modernization forced Wayang to articulate, again and again, what in its older cosmology could still speak to a transformed Indonesian public and stand as an emblem of that public's identity.

Karagöz and Turkish National Identity

Karagöz experienced a comparably complex, though structurally different, process of transformation in the transition from the late Ottoman world to the Turkish Republic. If Wayang's modern negotiations were shaped by colonial codification, anti-colonial nationalism, and the politics of Indonesian cultural plurality, Karagöz was shaped by the disintegration of the Ottoman imperial world, the rise of modern urban entertainment, and the re narration of Ottoman inheritance within Turkish national culture. Its history reveals not a cosmological theatre adapting to mass media but an urban comic theatre repositioning itself after the loss of the social world that had once animated it.

Karagöz was deeply rooted in Ottoman public life, particularly in Istanbul, Ramadan festivities, coffeehouses, and communal entertainment settings. It brought onto the screen a densely peopled social universe where representatives of different regions, professions, religions, and ethnic groups appeared as recognizable urban types. In this sense, Karagöz did not merely entertain Ottoman audiences; it staged the empire's social plurality in miniature, often through comic friction and accent-based dialogue (Oral, 2009). This Ottoman context is essential because the modern fate of Karagöz cannot be separated from the shrinking and reorganization of that imperial public sphere. As modernization advanced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and as Western style theatre, cinema, and later television spread, the older environments that had sustained Karagöz lost centrality.

Yet decline in centrality did not mean disappearance. Rather, Karagöz gradually shifted from being a common urban entertainment into a conscious sign of cultural memory. Intellectuals, cultural officials, and performers increasingly treated it as specifically Turkish art, even though the social world it represented had been Ottoman, multilingual, and imperial in scope. This shift resembles what happened to many traditional forms in the modern nation state: the living plurality of the past is selectively condensed into a national emblem.

That symbolic condensation produced its own tensions. Ottoman plurality could not be carried forward unchanged into modern Turkish nationalism. The multiethnic and multireligious urban life that gave Karagöz much of its material had to be reframed within the language of Turkish heritage, and this inevitably altered how the form was interpreted. Even so, the very plasticity of Karagöz's stock characters and comic situations

allowed the form to survive ideological repositioning better than might otherwise have been expected.

Karagöz remained adaptable precisely because its dominant mode is improvisational and satirical rather than doctrinal. Dialogue, improvisation, humor techniques, and practical knowledge of the puppeteer make the form especially open to topical reinvention. Unlike highly codified sacred theatre, Karagöz could absorb new references, modern professions, contemporary anxieties, and altered social habits without completely abandoning its recognizable structure (Oral, 2009). This is why modern Karagöz continues to address political, social, and technological change. Discussion of Karagöz and politics, Karagöz and television, scriptwriting, and updating of the show indicates that the tradition is understood by its own modern custodians as something that must be actively renewed, so that it can continue functioning as a living marker of Turkish identity rather than a fixed reference to an Ottoman past.

The question, then, is not whether Karagöz has changed too much but whether its modern transformations still preserve the principles that made it socially meaningful. If humor remains dialogic, if recognizable social tensions are still rendered theatrically manageable, and if improvisation continues to connect the screen to contemporary life, then symbolic continuity persists even amid formal change. Karagöz survives, and continues to signify Turkish identity, not because it repeats the Ottoman past exactly but because it can still organize laughter around the frictions of collective life.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Wayang and Karagöz are more than traditional shadow theatres; they are distinct cultural frameworks through which societies think about order, authority, and collective life. Wayang transforms inherited epic material into a Javanese cosmology of harmony, where Semar and the *punakawan* mediate hierarchy, correct power, and express moral truth through humility and comic form. Karagöz, by contrast, turns Ottoman urban plurality into satire, using the Karagöz–Hacivat relation to manage difference through humor, dialogue, and social critique.

Together, the two traditions reveal that performance is not only aesthetic expression but also a way of organizing social thought. Wayang does this through ritual, symbolism, and the ethical discipline of *rukun*, while Karagöz does it through satire, improvisation, and the public negotiation of social diversity. Their different settings reinforce this contrast: Wayang belongs to ritual and communal occasions that produce a temporary moral cosmos, whereas Karagöz belongs to coffeehouses, Ramadan entertainments, and other urban spaces where coexistence is enacted through laughter and recognition.

The modern histories of both traditions also show that cultural endurance depends on adaptation rather than preservation alone. Wayang became a symbol of Indonesian cultural heritage through colonial, postcolonial, and nationalist reinterpretations, while Karagöz survived the decline of the Ottoman world by becoming a marker of Turkish memory and identity. In both cases, what persists is not a fixed form, but a flexible tradition capable of speaking to changing historical conditions while retaining its cultural authority.

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