

Tari Topeng Cirebon

Topeng Dance Workshop Education Resource



This Learning Resource has been developed for OzAsia Festival by Tari Topeng Cirebon and Indonesian language educator Jodie Edwards with the support of Adelaide Festival Centre's centrED Education Officer Renee Fort. We value your expertise as teachers. Please feel free to use and adapt these resources to suit your educational context.

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Introduction

The Topeng Dance Workshop aims to introduce participants to an indigenous masked performance from Cirebon (pronounced Chi-re-bon), West Java, Indonesia. Tari Topeng Cirebon, the Masked Dances of Cirebon, presents what has come to be known as the “Panji” cycle of masked dances.

Unlike other types of Indonesian traditional performing arts, Tari Topeng Cirebon is considered unique due to diversity and variation found within the art form itself. Throughout the coastal region of Cirebon, similar dances and music styles are found. Over time they have evolved, side-by-side, and are all classified as Tari Topeng Cirebon. Variation occurred over many years, primarily driven by artistic interpretation from key ambassadors of the art form, as well as creative influence from local communities. The style of Tari Topeng Cirebon you will experience in this workshop hails from the region of Slangit in Cirebon. The version performed there today was made famous both nationally and internationally by the now deceased mask performer, Ki Sujana Arja.





Inu Kertapati

Performers of Tari Topeng Cirebon are known as *Dalang* or Master; a performer highly-skilled in bringing masks to “life”, essential for this style of performance.

Artists throughout Indonesia are said to possess artistic gifts inherited through generations within families. Inu Kertapati is one such Dalang. His skill of bringing the mask to life is second to none.

Hailing from a long line of Dalangs, Inu, born in Cirebon in 1978, is the third child of Ki Sujana Arja. His formal training to become a Dalang commenced with his father when he was in Year 3. His father also lectured on the art form at the Indonesia School of Art (STSI) in Bandung, West Java.

Today, Inu is recognised internationally as a Dalang, and was appointed an Arts and Cultural Ambassador for West Java, representing Tari Topeng Cirebon. In 1998 he was acknowledged as “Champion” mask dancer at the West Java Mask Dance Festival. In 2004 he choreographed a Cirebon Dance Parade for the Asia Pacific International Culture Festival held in Taiwan. From 2006 – 2011, he toured the world performing Tari Topeng Cirebon visiting such countries as Australia, United States of America, Bangkok, Dubai, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Russia.

After the success of his Tari Topeng Cirebon performance in OzAsia Festival 2015, Inu returns to Adelaide to participate in OzAsia Festival 2018.

Creation of Tari Topeng Cirebon

In the history of civilisation, dance, drama and music have long been recognised as artistic elements, formed separately yet entwined for maximum impact. Recognised as central elements in human expression, these art forms continue to be popular today and maintain a prominent presence across all cultures. Historically, as belief systems evolved, so too did art forms to match the needs of communities.

When tracing the historical roots of Tari Topeng Cirebon there is evidence a synthesising of ideas resulted in a blending of concepts, triggering the transformation of religious practice. The re-purposing of existing art forms, with subtle modification, altered the intended purpose and ultimately led to the establishment of the new art form.

Religion

Animism is one of the oldest forms of religious belief in Indonesia. Central is the idea a soul or spirit resides in all living things, inanimate objects and natural phenomena. Notably, this “presence” influences the daily lives of people.

Religion in Indonesia is not practiced in isolation. It is considered to be at the very core of existence and so permeates all parts of everyday life. Over the past 2000 years, a variety of religions have entered Indonesia. Each has attracted interest which has resulted in the conversion of indigenous groups. Therefore, religious beliefs, handed down inter-generationally, have played a prominent role in the emergence of new art forms which, by blending traditional and contemporary ideas, have sought to provide contextual meaning and purpose in the lives of people.

Mask performance in Cirebon has existed since animistic times. Evolution in the art form occurred gradually, transformed as a result of exploration of religious beliefs and practice, along with the artistic interpretation from each generation.

When teachers of Islamic faith entered Indonesia in the 13th Century AD, a generation of Moslem teacher-rulers rose to prominence in cities along the northern coast of Java. Islam could not remove the earlier influences of Animism, Hinduism and Buddhism, which, over thousands of years, shaped and guided the lives of people. Rather than advocating for the abandonment of past indigenous art forms, these leaders embraced them, knowing they would provide a prime method of communication to the masses in an already familiar format.

Sunan Kalijaga (1460-1513), considered to be one of the nine “saints” of Islam in Java, was credited with creating Tari Topeng Cirebon. Drawing on recognised art forms from the region, he took local dances and transformed them by incorporating the stylised movements of another known art form; Wayang (puppets). Using masks added another layer of characterisation and meant the Islamic aversion to direct representation of the human form in performance, was avoided. As the art forms of dance, wayang and masks were already popular with people of this region, the blending of artistic concepts was accepted and this new performance style came into being.

Cirebon had already been synonymous with mask performance before the emergence of Tari Topeng Cirebon. Although at this time the art form evolved to become a vehicle for spreading the messages of Islam to the masses, two animistic beliefs remained intact: masks used in the performance of Tari Topeng Cirebon had spirits attached to them, and Dalangs of the art form were only able to perform religious and cultural ceremonies when connected to the spirit residing within each mask.

Role of the Dalang

Unlike many dance forms that exist in the world today, Tari Topeng Cirebon has no defined gender specific roles. Dalangs fulfil an important role for the village and community in which they reside, being responsible for performing essential rituals and ceremonies. Historically, Dalangs were known to be wise and well respected members of the community. Families of Dalangs often consisted of skilled artisans which included musicians, artists, puppet performers and mask carvers. Families formed compact artistic group which could draw upon a variety of performance styles to meet the needs of villages, their own and those in surrounding areas. The artistic knowledge of a Dalang was handed down within families, younger Dalangs learning their skills through emersion in the art form.

Not all villages in these regions had their own Dalang. Therefore, Dalangs often travelled great distances to perform, sometimes even going "on tour" during peak times when many villages required traditional ceremonies to be performed. Accompanying a Dalang on these journeys would be members of their Gamelan (orchestra). In bygone times, Dalangs and their troupes were paid in rice (the staple food for many people across Indonesia), tobacco, batik cloth and money. Food and accommodation were also provided by the host village.

Offspring of Dalangs learned the art form by mimicking their elders. As a result of frequent observation and practice they could perform rough versions of the masked dances, from memory, from a relatively early age. Through constant emersion they developed an understanding of the composition of the music, the dramatic structure of the dance and the meaning of movements. The purpose of the art form was quickly comprehended as it was performed in their own community. In time, the younger generations of Dalangs received formalised mentoring, training with the older, experienced Dalangs. Often they would accompany them on tour, gaining insight into the practices of the different communities. They learned to play the music, internalising the meaning of sounds and phrasing. When ready to perform as Dalangs themselves, there was no expectation of "passing" (or failing) a test. Experience was gained from each performance and gradually the young Dalang would begin to assume more and more responsibility for what was required of them to serve their community.

In a performance of Tari Topeng Cirebon the Dalang acts as the "narrator" of the dances, even though no words are spoken. Communication with the audience occurs visually, expertly manipulating the masks and using defined body language to convey meaning.

Performing in the traditional format, even today, takes many days of preparation beforehand for the Dalang. It is thought cleansing the body, mind and spirit prior to a ceremony will enable a Dalang to connect strongly with the spirit of each mask. Therefore, it is not uncommon for a Dalang to fast and meditate for a few days prior to performing.

Dalangs often possess well developed psychic skills and it is not unusual for a Dalang to enter a trance-like state just prior to donning a mask during a performance. At the conclusion of a performance Dalangs often report they have little recollection of their performance; such is the strength of their trance-like state and strong connection to the spirit within the mask.

Location

The atmosphere of a Tari Topeng Cirebon performance is always lively, regardless of whether it is performed in the village for a traditional ceremony or in a theatre purely for entertainment. Performances may occur indoor or outdoor as the art form is not dependent on a specific location.

In the village, a performance will align more closely with the traditional format. It has great religious and spiritual value to the community, being performed for significant occasions, such as rice harvest. However, when performed for entertainment value alone, such as in a theatre, a somewhat condensed version of the cycle of dances is presented resulting in the religious significance being reduced.

During a village performance, the audience will not be seated on chairs watching with devoted attention. Instead, the atmosphere is lively, much like that of a festival, with people seated on mats on the ground, talking together, buying and eating snacks from vendors. There are still many people who take an interest in watching the performance, as the ability of the Dalang to bring the mask to “life” is engaging, but enjoyment of the communal and festive atmosphere dominates.

Masks

Tari Topeng Cirebon consists of 5 hand-carved, painted wooden masks. Interestingly, the masks and dance styles, performed in different regions across Cirebon, do not vary in form. Minor differences to the styles of mask can be detected, as variation between mask carvers does occur, but the overall design and intention for use remains the same.

A Dalang does not so much tell a story of the character, but rather represent key stages within the life cycle of humanity. This is why the set of masks dances performed is recognised as “cyclic”. Each mask is performed separately and will feature identifiable characteristics associated with various stages of a human life cycle. The names of the characters and the stages they represent can also vary, but are generally recognised as follows:

- Panji: child
- Samba: adolescence
- Tummungung: adulthood
- Klana Raja: elderly
- Rumyang: spirit or angel

In a performance of Tari Topeng Cirebon, one Dalang may wear all 5 masks individually, or multiple Dalangs may share the responsibility of bringing the characters to life. Each mask though, is performed separately as an individual dance.

These masks have expressive faces and whether considered attractive or not, they are certainly eye-catching. Cirebon masks differ greatly from masks found in other parts of Java or Indonesia, where emphasis is placed on beauty within the design. Difference can be identified in particularly in the ornamentation around the head and refinement of facial features. Their expressive faces can be attributed to the purpose of the art form, to present stylised characters and not actual representations of human form.



The first mask, **Panji**, is white and free of excessive detail or decoration. The eyes are slit-like and focused downwards. There is a faint smile on the lips. The character of Panji is considered innocent, holy and pure and is presented with an emphasis on subtlety and refinement. The character is not defined as male or female. The dance consists of minimalistic movements that are gentle, slow and controlled. The Dalang never leaves the solitary position at the centre of the performance space for the duration of the dance.



The second mask, **Samba**, is white like Panji but with an addition of carved, black hair. A smile plays on the lips, revealing an inner zest for life. The eyes, still slitted, are focused straight ahead and interpreted as looking towards the future. The character is child-like, experimenting with emotions which are expressed throughout the dance, at times cute, flirtatious, courageous, curious or daring. There is an underlying sense of joy as this character hovers between childhood and adolescence. The character is not defined as male or female, but there is a definite sense of youthfulness and energy. The Dalang must be agile, bouncing and twirling across the space throughout the performance.



The third mask, **Tummungung** displays a character in adulthood. This character is male and seen as responsible, dependable, an experienced decision maker. The emphasis of this character is on stability and determination and this is reflected in the movements. The mask is a deep pink in colour and has a moustache made from plaited hair, attached under the nose. The large eyes suggest the emphasis has shifted from concentration on “self” to now focusing on the surrounding environment, embodying the concept of “eyes wide open”.



The fourth mask, **Klana Raja**, is male and displays a marked difference in temperament from the previous characters. The mask is a deep red with carved black hair and a crown resting upon the temples to denote his status as a king, or at the prime of his life. He has a painted beard and an attached (hair) moustache. His most distinguishable and prominent features include a long nose and protruding teeth. His smile is not one of happiness, rather of high emotion. With bulging, wild eyes, he is seen as unpredictable, arrogant, greedy, ambitious and wrathful. He can be overbearing, demanding respect as is reflected in his movements. Throughout this dance an inner emotional turmoil is conveyed, with the dance seen as a dramatic climax within the collective cycle of dances.



The fifth and final mask is **Rummyang**. This mask is symbolic of an angel or spirit. When performed as part of the cycle of dances it is thought to function as “purification”, the character seeking to rebalance harmony and energy within the surrounding environment. The mask is not defined as male or female. Painted salmon pink, the features return to the style of Panji. Eyes are slitted, but open more widely and focused straight ahead. However, the focus is not on the “real” or physical world but rather connected to the unseen metaphysical world.

In a full cyclic performance of the Panji masks, the Dalang, before ending the performance, will briefly don to the mask of Panji once more. Placed briefly on the face prior to the end it represents a continuation of the cycle of Life.

Performance structure

A performance of the complete Panji cycle of mask, in a traditional context, can take between 5 – 8 hours. The Dalang and musicians perform, without break, working through each mask in its entirety.

In an entertainment context, such as a theatre performance, a Dalang will present a “sample” version for the performance, a reduced rendition of either one shortened mask dance or an abridged version of all 5 mask dances. This is presents in 90 – 120 mins. A Dalang will not usually fast and meditate before this type of performance and so their ability to connect with the spirits of the masks is considerably weaker or even non-existent.

At the start of each dance the Dalang sits centrally with their back to the audience, close to a large wooden box. The box is said to represent the resting place for spirits and is where all masks are stored for the duration of the performance. Each mask is wrapped in a cloth.

When the music begins the Dalang will often meditate until mentally prepared and ready to commence dancing. At that time they will stand and begin to move, dancing as themselves at this point. When ready, the movements of the Dalang will alter and the music will begin to reach a crescendo. The Dalang will dance over to the wooden box, select the appropriate mask and, still wrapped in cloth, begin to parade the mask around the performance space. The Dalang continues to prepare mentally for wearing the mask and now connects with the mask spirit. When ready, the Dalang will place the mask onto their face but still hiding the mask. Suddenly they will remove the cloth, revealing the mask now in place on their face. It is at that moment the mask “comes to life” and the Dalang is no longer performing as themselves. The connection is established, the Dalang feeling at one with the spirit, and so proceeds to embody the character of the mask.

Mask Carving

Masks are worn in many countries for a variety of reasons and in contrasting performance styles. Masks can be constructed from range materials but mostly are worn tied to the head.

In Cirebon, masks are carved by skilled mask carvers using Albasia, Lame or Jaran wood. To ensure the fit of the mask is snug, a mask carver feels the contours of a Dalang's face and then carves the wood accordingly, tailoring the inside to fit well. Once the masks is carved, it is sanded before additional fine carvings are added. It is then sanded again and painted. This entire process can take up to a year to complete.

Challenges of wearing a Tari Topeng Cirebon mask

On the inside of each mask, a leather strip is attached to the wood just behind the carved mouth. This is known as the "bit". The Dalang takes the bit into their own mouth and clamps their teeth down on it for the duration of the mask performance. To release the strip mid performance would make the mask fall from their face. Therefore, a Dalang must be able to grip well with their teeth, which can present a challenge for older Dalangs. Each Dalang has their own set of masks and these are not shared with other people.

The design of the masks makes them challenging to wear, as the eyeholes are either thin slits or contain "eyeballs" carved as part of the design. This means a Dalang can never see straight ahead through the eyeholes of the mask. Dalangs develop their performance skills through inner feeling; knowing how each movement feels as they perform rather than visually knowing how it looks. When mastering movements of dances a Dalang often dances with their eyes closed to gain better insight into how it "feels".

The emotions of each character are conveyed to the audience via body language. Wearing a masks means all facial expression of the Dalang are lost when viewed. So to compensate for this, fine and detailed head movements are crucial for the Dalang to bring the mask to "life".

Costume

Costumes worn for a performance of Tari Topeng Cirebon are a unique component of the art form. Dalangs from across Cirebon wear variations on the style, and this style has remained relatively unchanged, aside from a few modern adaptations, since creation of the art form.



The “Sobrah”, headdress, is worn covering the head and is made predominantly from human hair. The cap section is constructed from a frame of woven cane with clumps of human hair sewn into place, giving it a felt-like appearance. The erect section of the headdress has human hair attached strand by strand, to form the unique shape. A hand-carved, gold painted leather crown and flowers are attached to the headdress. A different Sobrah is worn for each character, except when performing Tummungung.

For Tummungung the Dalang wears a “Bendo” (traditional cap) with “Peci” (visor) around the brim. Interestingly, when Bendo and Peci are combined, the appearance is not unlike that of a Dutch army cap and it is thought that this is where the inspiration came from for this modern adaptation. Additionally, a Dalang will wear a pair of glasses from the start of this dance, removing them just prior to transforming into the character of Tummungung when the mask is placed on the face. Tummungung’s costume also features collar and shoulder yoke of a white shirt, worn on top of the regular costume.

On each side of the Sobrah, near the temple area, large pom-poms known as “Eron” or “Bunga” are displayed. These are said to represent flowers. From each side hang two strands of “Sumping”, dangling to the waist and comprising of long tasselled strings of beads and smaller pom-poms. These are tossed about by the Dalang during the dances.

The Dalang wears a short-sleeved jacket with matching knee-length trousers. These are overlaid with a batik “Kain” (length of material approximately 3 meters in length, 1.5 meter wide). This is wrapped ornately around the waist to drape around one leg before being hitched into the back waist. The pattern on the batik is usually the “rock and cloud” motive, a vibrant Chinese-inspired design most often associated with the batik motifs of the Cirebon region.

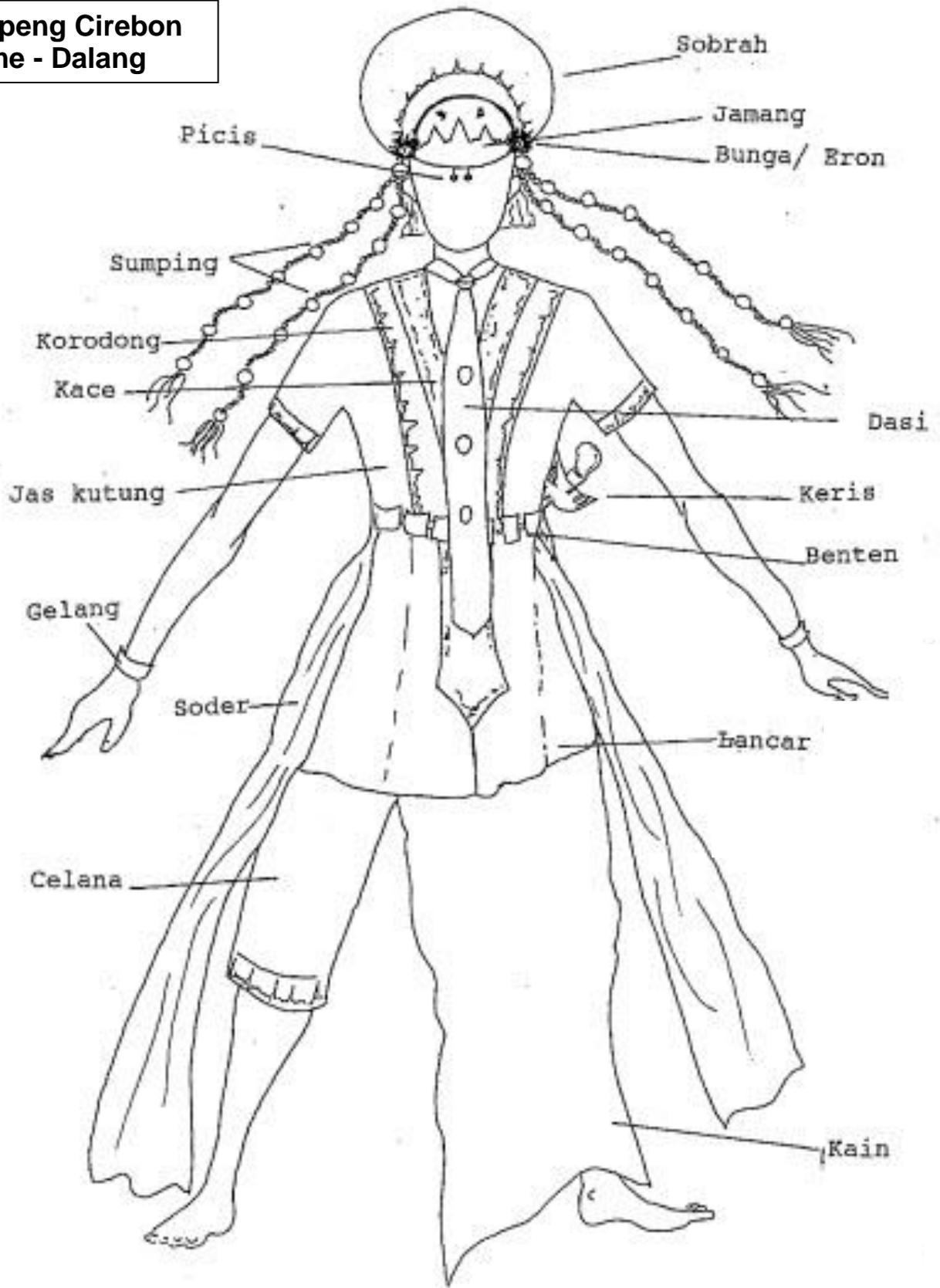
A hand-carved golden leather belt is worn around the waist with a “Keris”, dagger, tucked inside the waistband and worn across the back. A scarf is tucked beneath the belt and draped to the floor, longer on the right side than the left. In certain dances the scarf is lengthened to drag on the floor and, as part of the dance, is grasped in the toes of the Dalang and tossed up in the air and over the shoulder.

A conventional tie is worn around the neck. It is adorned with coins, brooches and trinkets handed down through the family, generation to generation.

The “Korodong” is a length of batik material attached at the front to the waist and draped over the shoulders to hang loosely down the back, much like a cape.

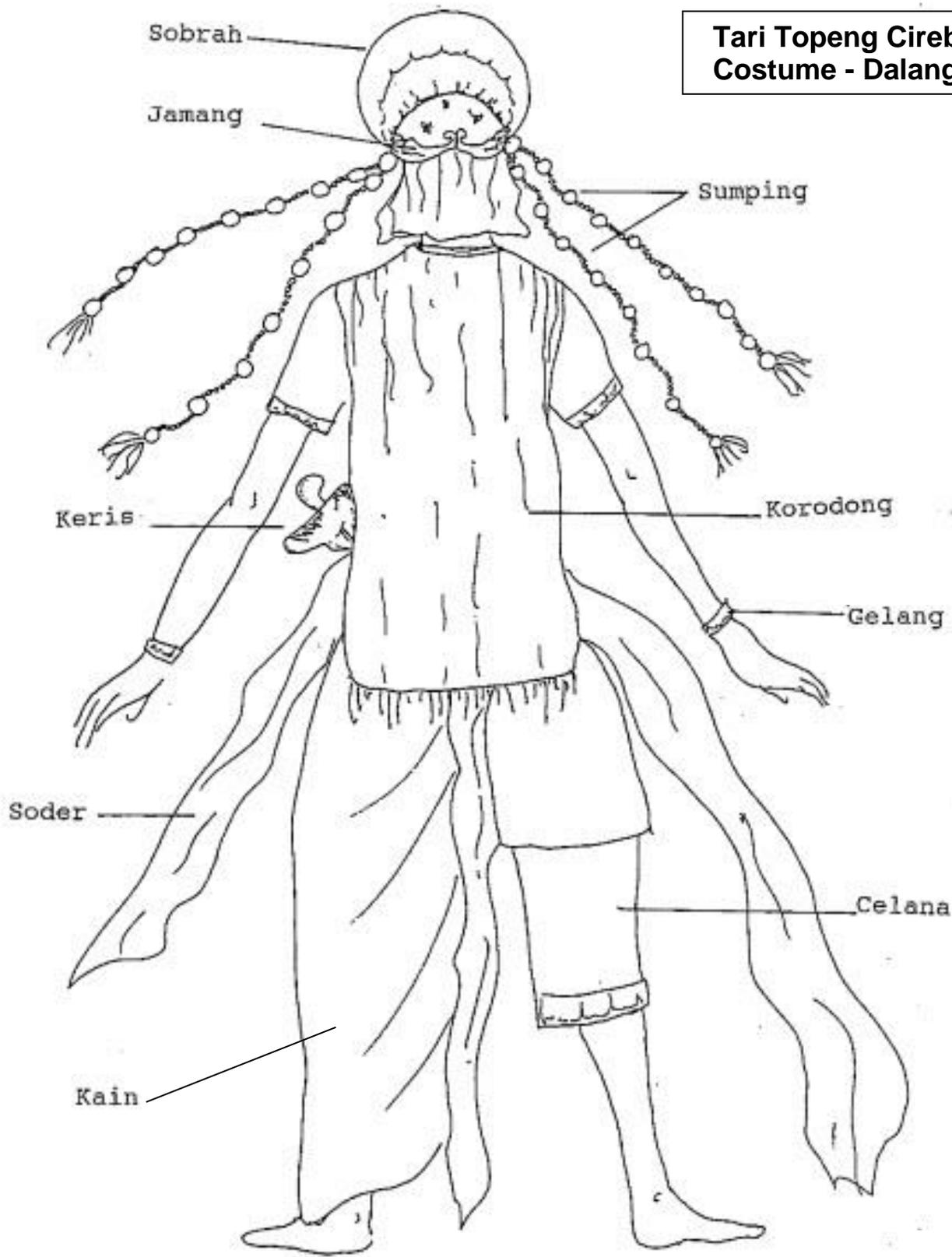
Wrapped around each wrist is a material or leather band. It is said this is to focus attention on the movements of the hands, wrists and arms.

**Tari Topeng Cirebon
Costume - Dalang**



FRONT

**Tari Topeng Cirebon
Costume - Dalang**



BACK

Music

Tari Topeng Cirebon is performed accompanied by a Gamelan (orchestra). The composition of instruments is unique to Cirebon and different from Gamelans found in other parts of Indonesia.

Tari Topeng Cirebon Gamelan consists of:

- one - two Saron (metallophones)
- Ketuk (small gong chimes)
- Kendang (drums, strapped together on a stand)
- Klenang (wooden xylophone)
- Bonang (set of small kettle gongs)
- Kemanak (small, metal, hollow tube held in the hand and struck with a mallet)

Today, it is nearly impossible for a musician to live self-sufficiently on an income earned through performing. It is necessary for additional income to be sourced, often from farming. In villages, many members of the community know how to play the songs of Tari Topeng Cirebon and so musicians become interchangeable, particularly when additional work commitments need to be prioritised.

In a performance of Tari Topeng Cirebon, the Dalang leads the Gamelan. Musicians take their cues from the Kendang (drum) player. Uniquely though, the Kendang player takes their cues from the Dalang. As performances are most often presented live with musicians, if the Dalang wishes to improvise or extend parts of the dance, it is not a problem as the way the music is structured it can accommodate such occurrences. This concept is in complete contrast to Western styles of musical performance, where a conductor leads musicians and dancers follow cues in the music to perform their dance. Only when a Dalang uses recorded music are they restricted to following the composition of the music from start to finish, the music dictating their movements within the dance.

The songs used for each mask dance are interlinked, the songs a variation of a central theme. At the start of a traditional performance, with the dance of Panji, a medley of all songs from the Panji cycle can be heard, much like an overture.

Each village has its own version of the songs and variations between villages can be significant.

Dances and Movements

The choreography of Tari Topeng Cirebon cannot be found in any other dance style in Indonesia. Although there is great diversity between the personal dance styles of Dalangs, due to individual artistic interpretation, the overall presentation has similarities which enable the art form to be classified as belonging to Tari Topeng Cirebon.

The art form is based on a stylised collection of dance moves. However, like the music these movements are not required to be performed in a specific order. There are sequences of movements which fit together, but the dances are not designed in a specific linear order that must be adhered to throughout the dance. Dalangs develop their own individual preference, technique and style which evolves from their own familiarity with the collection of movements. Emulating the exact style of a Dalang is a way to learn the movements, much like attending a ballet class to learn ballet, but interpreting the movements internalises the meaning of the dance and informs the way each step is presented to an audience.

The dance movements found in Tari Topeng Cirebon – Slangit style, place emphasis on strong upper body, shoulder and arm movements. A Dalang must be light and agile on their feet to perform this style well.

When watching a full traditional performance you may observe movements common across all dances. Arms are dynamically positioned to emulate the jointed movements of wayang puppets. Scarves are flicked behind the dancer, by hand and sometimes over the shoulder using feet. Long tassels attached to the headdress, akin to those worn by wayang puppets, are tossed about in a stylised repetitive pattern throughout each dance. A core, asymmetrical stance, with feet wide apart and one leg bent appears across all dances in this style.

To bring the mask to life, minute movements of the head are required to produce a life-like element in the presentation. Often people report feeling as if a mask is “looking” at them. A well carved mask and skilled Dalang can produce this effect on an audience. Body language in this dance form is important for giving each mask a defined “character”. However, the secret of the art form is how the Dalang presents the movements.

A performance of Panji is seen at the start of each cycle of dances. It acts as a meditation for the Dalang and features minimalistic movements and internalised emotions. A Dalang rarely moves from the central spot in the performance space and the dance, at times, can feel static. The light, fast and bouncing movements of Samba are a contrast to the heavier, methodical and conservative movements of Tummungung or the wild, flamboyant and expansive movements which define Klana Raja. Rumyang projects an ethereal element through the movements, with floating arms and gentle head movements creating a sense of peace.

To become a Dalang takes many years of training, watching, practicing and understanding the art form. A Dalang must know the characters well so as to bring the mask to life. The power from the spirit of the mask must surge through the body of the Dalang to give energy and charisma to a performance. It is not enough to just dance wearing a mask!

Pre-workshop:

Discussion

What dance performances have you seen where a mask or face paint is worn?

Discuss the purpose of the performance. What country was the performance from?

Why are masks used in performance?

What could be the benefits of wearing a mask to perform?

What could be the challenges of performing in a mask?

There are 5 different masks worn by the Dalang for a complete performance of Tari Topeng Cirebon. Why do you think the dancer wears different masks?

How might a Dalang convey the emotions of a character to the audience if their face is covered by a mask?

What could be some of the challenges to living and performing as a Dalang?

Activities

Research what the Cirebon batik “rock and cloud” motif looks like. Find out where it originated from and perhaps how it came to be in Indonesia.

Design your own batik motif that could be worn as part of a costume.

Research what a wayang puppet looks like and if there is more than one type?

Find out information about Cirebon:

- Locate the region on a map.
- Find out about places you could visit there.
- How would you travel there to visit?
- What are some of the local industries?
- Research information on the history of the region.
- Is Indonesian spoken in Cirebon or a dialect?
- What foods do people enjoy eating there?
- How many people and schools are located there?

Prepare a list of interview questions for Inu to answer during his workshop.

After the workshop write an article to share with your school about the workshop.

Workshop Activity:

During the workshop (template can be distributed to class) - Optional

During the Topeng Cirebon workshop, Inu will discuss different dances from the Panji cycle and how each character is performed through specific hand, arm and foot movements. He will discuss how the mask is worn and brought to life. There will be a short demonstration of some dances and then participants will be able to learn a sample of choreography and experience wearing a mask.

Participants can make notes about the art form in the below tables.

Note something interesting you learned about:

Mask	Hand/Arm Movements	Body positions	Leg/feet movements	Music

When learning the dance, what challenges did you discover about:

Mask	Hand/Arm Movements	Body positions	Leg/feet movements	Music

What skills or experience of your own helped you to understand about:

Mask	Hand/Arm Movements	Body positions	Leg/feet movements	Music

Post-workshop discussion questions and activities

Discussion

What did you notice the Dalang did to bring the mask to life?

What would be some of the challenges of performing a dance wearing a mask?

Describe some of the unique dance movements you learned and what you thought they symbolised.

Creative thinking

If you could design your own Cirebon mask:

- What would it look like?
- What would your character be like?
- What movements would you use in your dance?
- What would be the purpose of performing your masked performance?
- What would you wear?
- What type of music would you use to dance to?
- What would you call your “new” performance style? Why?

Can you think of any other performances that combines more than one art form? What are they?

If you could combine 3 different types of performance styles that you know of, which would you choose? Why?

What would a performance be like for an audience? How would they understand it?

Activities

Using the costume templates, design and colour your own Cirebon style costume for a Dalang.

On paper, design and colour your own Cirebon style mask. Then, make your own mask using papier mache or cardboard.