

Synopsis of the Hindu Epics

While the Sundanese versions of the Hindu epics follow the broad outline of the Indian versions, they include many variations. Performers may make up new stories about favorite characters from the epics. For example, a frequent plot innovation has Ravana (Rawana), the demon king from the Ramayana, reincarnated in the era of the Mahabharata and fighting against Arjuna, who in this later tale is the equivalent of Rama in the former.

Performers may make up new stories as long as they do not violate the givens of the heroes' lives. To understand this concept, consider *Hamlet* and *Faustus*, known works of the European tradition. Instead of playing the stories as we know them from Shakespeare or Goethe, a modern playwright or improvisatory theater company might write or perform a variation in which Faust taught at Wittenberg and Hamlet was a student there, one in which Gretchen is sought by both teacher and student as a lover. In keeping with the original work, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's school friends, would provide comic relief, and Hamlet would ultimately be summoned home on the death of his father. In the hands of a skillful *dalang*, the epic tales are consistently being spun into new material.

Traditional stories that cannot be changed are called *pakem* (set, or "trunk," stories). *Karangan* (*carangan*) are invented ("branch") episodes such as the Western example given above. The following précis are of episodes of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as they might be performed in Sunda today. The whole epic would never be presented in a single performance. It would take many nights to dramatize the entire story. Most performances focus on a single event within the larger sweep of the story.

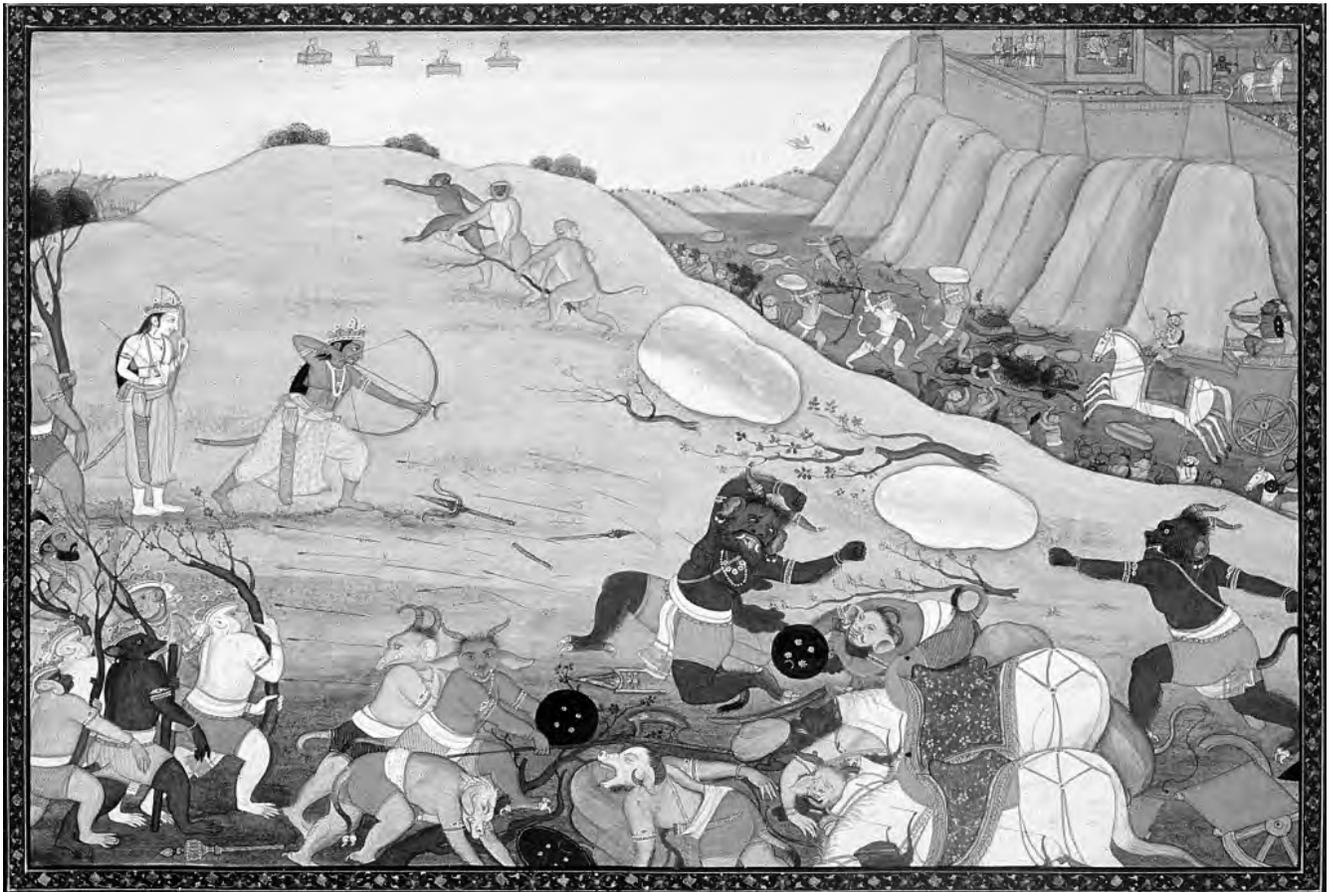
The Ramayana (Life of Rama)

The Ramayana tells the story of Prince Rama—the son of Dasharatha (Dasarata), the king of Ayodhya (Ayodya)—an incarnation of the god Vishnu, the preserver god. Vishnu comes into the world periodically in different forms to save it from destruction. In this story; when Rama's wife, Sita (Sinta) is abducted by Ravana (Rawana), the demon king of Lanka (Alengka), Rama enlists the aid of monkey troops to fight and reclaim his wife.

Dasharatha promises one of his wives that he will grant her anything she asks. To his chagrin she asks that his eldest son, Rama, be banished to the forest for fourteen years and her own child, Bharata (Barata), be placed on the throne instead. Bharata, who knows his mother is misguided, decrees that he will merely rule in his brother's place for the fourteen years, and he anxiously awaits Rama's return.

Meanwhile Rama, Sita, and Rama's faithful brother Lakshmana (Laksmana) retreat to the forest where demons roam. The demoness Shurpanakha (Sarpakanaka) encounters the handsome Lakshmana and Rama in the forest and wants them to marry her. When they spurn her and cut off her nose, she plots their destruction. She tells her brother Ravana about Rama's wife. Sita, Shurpanakha says, is the most beautiful woman in the world. Ravana, desiring Sita for himself, sends the demon Maricha (Marica) disguised as a golden deer into the forest.

At Sita's request, Rama goes hunting for the deer. Sita hears a cry and thinks Rama is in danger. She forces Lakshmana to search for Rama, saying that should Lakshmana refuse to go, she will know he wants Rama to die so as to marry her himself. Lakshmana leaves her after drawing a protective circle around her feet.



Battle scene from a manuscript of the Ramayana (Life of Rama), approx. 1790
India; Himachal Pradesh state, former kingdom of Guler
Colors on paper
Gift of Margaret Polak, 1992.95

Alone in the forest, Sita is no match for Ravana. He comes to the hut disguised as a hermit and tricks her into leaving the circle. With pity for the hermit, Sita steps out of this protected space to get food for him. Ravana kidnaps her, carrying her back to Lanka. En route he kills the heroic vulture Jatayus, who has valiantly attacked Ravana's flying chariot. In Lanka, Sita languishes in the garden of the *ashoka* (*asoka*) tree. Ravana comes each day to ask her to be his wife, and each day she responds that she can love none but Rama.

Rama, distraught, seeks his wife everywhere. He goes to Kishkindha (Guha Kiskenda), the kingdom of the monkeys, where he befriends King Sugriva (Sugriwa) and helps him defeat his unrighteous brother, Valin (Subali), who has stolen Sugriva's wife. The monkeys help search for Sita. Eventually Hanuman (Hanoman), the white monkey warrior and Rama's most loyal follower, finds Sita. As the son of a god, Hanuman can fly, so he crosses the ocean to the island of Lanka, where Sita is imprisoned, and gives her Rama's ring to prove to her that her husband still lives. Hanuman is captured by the demons, who set his tail on fire, but the punishment backfires as Hanuman frees himself and sets the city aflame with the sparks from his tail.

Hanuman returns to Rama, and with all the animals he helps build a causeway from mainland India to the island of Lanka. The great war rages for many days. Ravana's demons fall before the monkey army. Finally, Ravana faces Rama and is defeated. Rama and Sita are reunited and return to Ayodhya in triumph.

The Mahabharata

The Mahabharata is a much more complex tale, dealing with the exploits of the five Pandava (Pandawa) brothers as they struggle to regain their kingdom from their cousins, the hundred Kaurava (Kurawa) brothers. This rivalry culminates in a great war that brings destruction and sorrow to both clans. The story takes place within the frame of a larger narrative that originates in heaven eons earlier and moves through many generations of the Pandavas' ancestors and descendants.

Much of the epic revolves around the families of two brothers, Pandhu (Pandu Dewanata) and Dhritarashtra (Destarata). Pandhu had five sons, who were noble and well-behaved. Yudhishtira (Yudistira), the oldest, was so honest and noble that his blood ran white and he floated above the earth when he walked. Bhima (Bima), the second, was huge and strong. He was straightforward and direct in his speech. Arjuna, the third son, was the handsomest man and the best warrior ever born, and to see him was to love him. The twins Nakula and Sahadeva (Sadewa) were upright and refined.

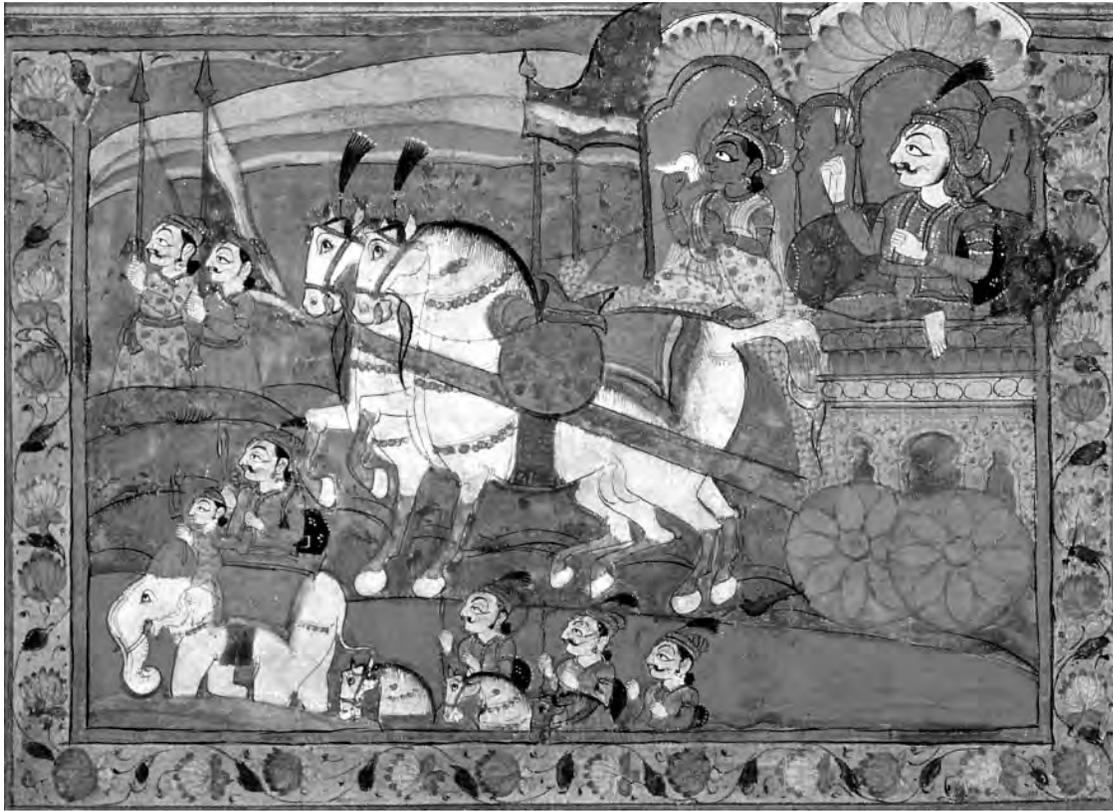
Though Pandhu raised them, each was actually the son of a god. They were born via a favor that Kunti, one of Pandhu's two wives, had obtained from a hermit. She had tried this once before her marriage, and was shocked to find that it had summoned the sun god, Surya, who left her pregnant with a son. Karna was miraculously born through Kunti's ear, a circumstance that preserved her virginity. Fearful that people would learn she was an unwed mother, she put the child in a basket with jewels from his father and set him afloat in the river. A humble charioteer discovered the child and raised him as a son. Later, Karna would be the only warrior who could rival the prowess of Pandhu's five sons.

Dhritarashtra, Pandhu's brother, was blind and had given the kingdom to his brother to rule. However, Pandhu died before Dhritarashtra did, and the blind brother became regent while his offspring, the hundred Kauravas, and their cousins the Pandavas were growing up. This passing of the kingdom back and forth caused confusion about who was the rightful ruler. Dhritarashtra's sons greedily maintained that their father was the elder brother so the kingdom should be ruled by them under Duryodhana (Duryodana), the eldest of Dhritarashtra's hundred children. The Pandavas, the sons of Pandhu, were clearly more honorable and high principled. They were favored by the people and, since their father had ruled, many felt they should succeed him.

The Kauravas had been born under odd circumstances. Dhritarashtra's wife had given birth to an odd lump of bloody flesh rather than a child; she took the strange entity, divided it into sections, and put them in pots. The vessels moaned and groaned, and, eventually, out came the hundred Kauravas. Theirs was not an auspicious birth.

The Kauravas had always been jealous of the Pandavas, and plotting against them became a favored pastime. The rivalry between the cousins grew as quickly as they did. After a marriage contest in which the Pandavas won the hand of the Lady Draupadi (Drupadi) from the Kauravas, she became the wife of Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava. Now, the Kauravas discussed how they could ruin the Pandavas once and for all. Luckily, during the marriage contest for Draupadi, the Kauravas met Karna. The Pandavas insulted Karna by refusing to fight him because he was not, they felt, of noble birth. Unbeknownst to them, he was their elder half-brother. Ill treated by the Pandavas, Karna became the best friend of Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas. Karna would turn out to be the Kauravas' best protection against the strength of the Pandavas.

The Kauravas continually tried to set traps for their cousins, but their plots always backfired. One time they prepared a magnificent palace of lacquer for the Pandavas. When the Pandavas moved into the palace, the Kauravas set it afire, but the Pandavas managed to escape. In an attempt at reconciliation Dhritarashtra gave the Pandavas half the kingdom, and they built a great capital city at Indraprastha (Amarta). Their jealousy still unrestrained, the Kauravas fixed upon a plan to strip the Pandavas forever of their power. Duryodhana and his brother Duhshasana got their uncle, Shangkuni, to play a game of dice with Yudhishtira, who loved to gamble. The eldest Pandava, in the intoxication of gambling, bet his kingdom, his brothers, his wife, and even himself. He lost all to the loaded dice that Shangkuni rolled.



Krishna driving Arjuna's chariot, approx. 1775–1825
India; Kashmir
Colors on paper
Gift of Margaret Polak, 1996.6

Draupadi was called to the gambling hall, and a gloating Duhshasana tried to remove her clothes. The chaste wife of Yudhishtira, distraught that her husband could have thought to gamble with her honor, called on the god Vishnu, who miraculously made a garment appear for each one Duhshasana pulled off Draupadi. Finally an accord was reached about how to resolve the situation: The Pandavas left their homeland for thirteen years, and the Kauravas became its rulers.

The Pandavas had various adventures during their period of exile. When the Pandavas returned, there was a reckoning: The Pandavas asked for only five villages of the vast kingdom that was once theirs, but the Kauravas only laughed.

The enmity led to a great war in which brother clashed with brother, and father confronted son. Arjuna killed his elder brother Karna, and Kunti mourned the death of her eldest son, while Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, served as a charioteer. After a long period of fighting, the Pandavas won, but so many were dead that they could take no joy in the victory. War and death were one and the same. The Pandavas retreated to the Himalayas, leaving a grandson of Arjuna to rule. Walking toward the heavens, one by one they died. Finally only Yudhishtira, the purest of the pure, remained. He was allowed to enter heaven, but there he saw the Kauravas feasting and his brothers cast into hell. He wept at this reversal, but then realized that this was the final test. All the things of the world, including passion and attachment, were bonds that must fall away. At last, Yudhishtira's spirit reached its destination: enlightenment. His brothers appeared and the heavens were full of rejoicing.

The Mahabharata is the longest epic known. If the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Bible were combined, they would only begin to approach the length and complexity of the Mahabharata. Yet, with the dancing puppets of wayang golek, exciting episodes from these great tales are enacted night after night in Sundanese villages.