

The Shadow Plays of Southeast Asia: relationships between the various forms

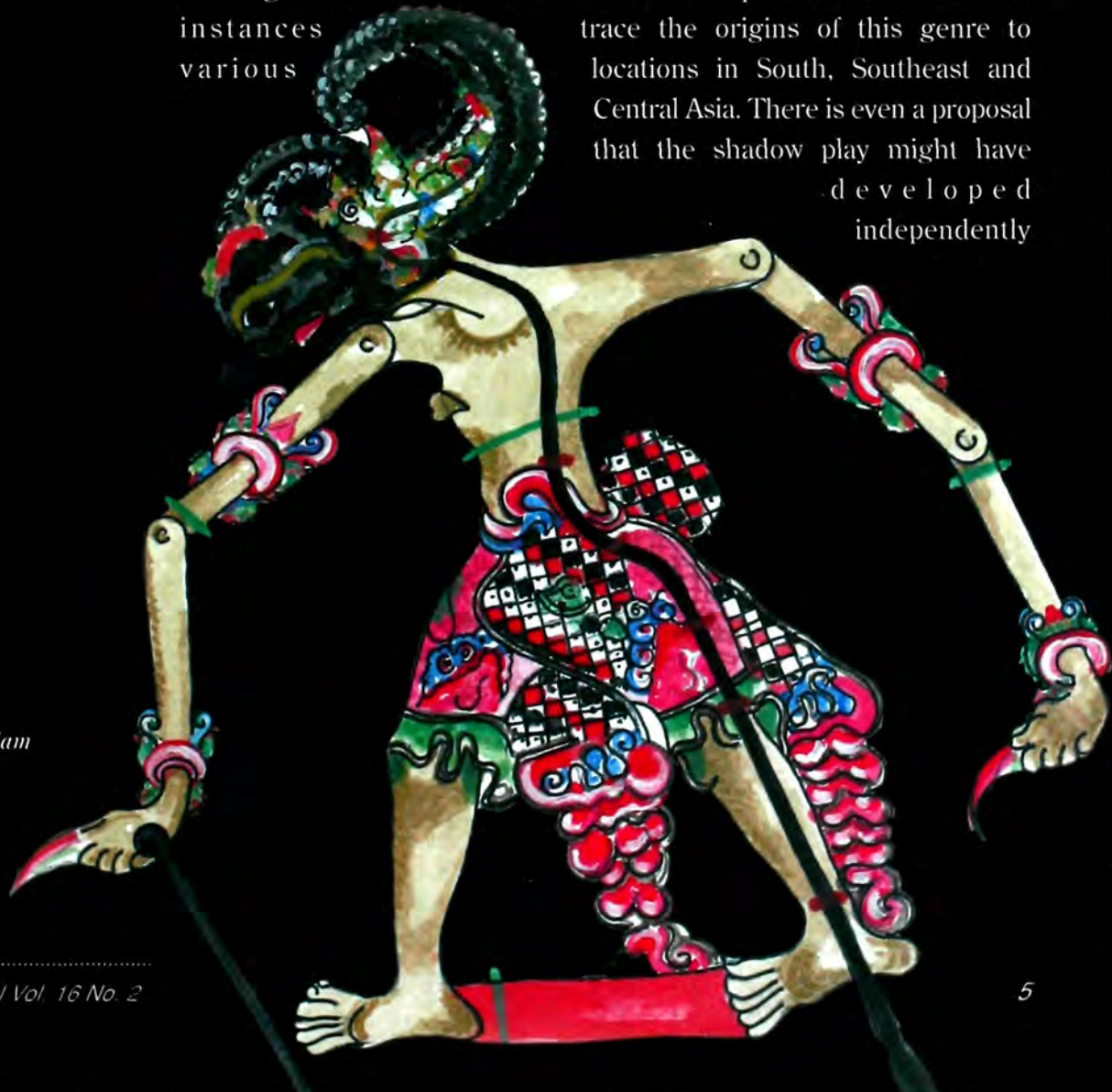
Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, whose field of specialisation is Asian Drama and Theatre, sheds some light on the similarities and differences between various shadow plays in the Southeast Asian region.

Introduction

Many general theories have been advanced to suggest the possible origins of the shadow play, a tradition that goes back to prehistoric times, but as yet there is no significant consensus on the issue. Existing theories – and there are several important ones – in most instances trace the origins of this genre to various

locations in South, Southeast and Central Asia. There is even a proposal that the shadow play might have developed independently

Wayang kulit Siam



in the various regions or countries, and that a search for a single source makes no sense. Existing origin theories are based on the essential form of the shadow play itself in which skin figures are cast upon a screen by means of a light source. They are also based on the sources of repertoire, technical terminology used, the function and purpose of the genre, or a combination of these elements. Direct or indirect references, often imprecise, to puppetry in literature, principally in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*¹, have been interpreted as having links to shadow plays. This view would place the genre before the beginning of the Common Era. The vagueness of the theories themselves, however, has led to continuing debates, with verifiable and clear references coming several centuries later, along with precise dates that vary from country to country.

The first clear mention of the art form in Southeast Asia appeared in the *Kakawin Arjunawiwaha*², 10th century Javanese poetic versions of the Indian epics, which attests to the continuous performance of the shadow play in Java from that early time to the present. Elsewhere in the region, references to shadow play appeared much later; the Thai *nang yai* was mentioned in the 1458 Palace Law of King Boromatrailokanath of Ayutthaya. No date is available for Cambodia. This is also the case with the Malay *wayang kulit Siam*, the most important of four styles that are active in Malaysia, for which no early literary or documented evidence is available.

Nang Yai and Nang Sbek Thom

One convenient way of examining the types of shadow play in Southeast Asia is to distinguish the genres in terms of whether they use large, multi-character composite figures, or smaller puppets each representing a single character. The two forms of shadow play using large figures – *nang sbek thom* and *nang yai* – that are active in Cambodia and Thailand have no parallels elsewhere in the region. Comparisons have

¹ Both the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are Sanskrit epics of India. The *Ramayana* tells of the exile of Rama; the abduction of his wife, Sita, by a demon; her rescue by Rama with the help of Monkey God, Hanuman; and Rama's eventual return to his kingdom to become King. The *Mahabharata* is a story concerned with theology, morals, and statecraft, and contains the ancient *Bhagavad-Gita* text, narrating the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas in the kingdom of Kurukshetra sometime during the 9th century B.C..

² Written in Java, the *Kakawin Arjunawiwaha* narrates the procurement by Arjuna, one of the major characters of the epic, of a divine weapon to attack a demon.

been made between these and the Andhra style of Indian shadow play, known as *tholu bommlata* in which the build of the larger figures may reach a height of more than six feet (Tilakasiri, 1999:38).

Historically, there is a strong relationship between *nang sbek thom* and *nang yai*, with the general view amongst scholars being that the Cambodian form probably came into being before its Thai counterpart, and that the latter was a derivative of the former. Any stylistic comparisons can therefore be made only between these two genres in Southeast Asia, although for their repertoire, they share the *Ramayana* as a principal source of dramatic material, like the shadow plays in many other countries. In addition to the plot that derives from this epic, the two genres also include other stories taken from indigenous sources. As far as performances go, there are differences in the musical styles of the two as well as in some of the dance movements.

Wayang Kulit Purwa and Other Indonesian Styles

Shadow play using single-character figures are highly popular in Southeast Asia. These performances represent the mainstream of the extremely important tradition of shadow puppetry (*wayang kulit*). There are dozens of diverse styles, particularly in Indonesia, in which some of them were created in recent centuries or even recent decades for specific purposes, such as the promotion of religious teachings, general education for children or for the purpose of political propaganda as well as nationalistic aims. This is, however, not the case in Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia.

In chronological terms, the place of the prehistoric proto-*wayang kulit purwa* was replaced by the classical *wayang kulit purwa*, with a mixed repertoire of animistic epic and other stories. *Wayang kulit gedog*, which uses the Panji³¹ story for its repertoire, came next. It is believed to have been created in the year 1485, by Sunan Giri, one of the famous nine Muslim saints (Wali Songo) who preached Islam in Java. Following this came *wayang kulit madya*, which



Wayang kulit purwa

³¹ One of Indonesia's most well-known literature about four kingdoms, Panji is a tale of the major character's search for his lost love, the battle with kings, and overcoming challenges, in numerous twists and turns in the story. Eventually, Panji returns to his kingdom to succeed his father as king of Kunipan, and reunites with his loved one.

was created during the reign of Pangeran Mangkunagara IV (eighteenth-nineteenth centuries). In historical terms, it was meant to fill the gap between the two earlier forms. The three, *wayang kulit purwa*, *wayang kulit madya* and *wayang kulit gedog* represent the history of the Javanese people, or at least the Javanese kings, from ancient times to the arrival of Islam.

It is generally acknowledged that the classical Javanese *wayang kulit purwa*, historically regarded as the oldest of all the shadow plays in the region (due to both to its content, functions, as well as the confirmed evidence indicating its early existence), represents the epitome of Southeast Asian shadow play. There were several phases in the stylistic development of *wayang kulit purwa*: the pre-Islamic phase, the period of Islamic consolidation, and the post-Islamic period. These shadow plays reflect the highly important political and social changes that took place in Javanese society over the centuries.

Evidence of what the earliest figures might have looked like is found in the form of temple sculptures from East Java, demonstrating that the figures were fairly realistic in design. The view is that following the introduction of Islam, which disallowed realistic representation of human beings, the figures in the early phases became amorphous. Later, with the relaxation of the rules, extreme stylization was seen as a way out during the period when Islam, having been established, began to spread throughout the island of Java. Parallel to the major changes that this period brought into the religious life of the Javanese, radical shifts took place in all the performing arts, and not just in *wayang kulit*. New art forms appeared, and existing ones, including the gamelan orchestra, consolidated and developed in new directions.

Although the three principal styles of Javanese *wayang kulit* represent a continuum in some ways, the specific aims, apart from providing entertainment, were to consolidate religion or enhance national or communal ethos. In addition, the Javanese *wayang kulit* in essence represents, from the very beginning, the fusion of the visual and performing arts as well as the spiritual disciplines. This factor, if it existed in pre-Islamic times – and it appears to certainly have existed – was given a tremendous boost with the new perspective introduced by Islam. Beyond Java, the land of its origin and development, *wayang kulit purwa* has moved to Kalimantan and Sumatra as well as to the southern region of peninsular Malaysia.



Wayang kulit gedog

The style of *wayang kulit purwa* remains to this day, although essentially the local conditions have, in Malaysia at least, brought about certain changes, including the replacement of Old Javanese with local languages or dialects. This is also the case that is seen in *wayang kulit gedog*. With its spread into the Malay peninsula, this shadow play changed its performance style, making use of the Kelantanese dialect instead of Javanese, and, following its transformation, acquired a new name, *wayang kulit melayu*.

The dozens of newer shadow play forms which developed in Indonesia, following the consolidation of the three principal ones already mentioned, served a number of specific purposes. Although based on established aesthetic principles of *wayang*, they were created independently of each other, even if in some instances common sources provided the inspiration or impulse. These genres do not have any thematic relationship in terms of subject matter despite having similarities in iconography, performing techniques, instrumentation and even the musical repertoire. Any discussion, even of selected examples of these newer forms, lies beyond the scope and range of this article, in the latter part of which references are made to the most important Indonesian *wayang kulit* styles, in terms of their functions.

Beyond Java and Bali, the creation of newer forms that serve specific purposes did not take place. In Thailand, there is *nang talung*; while in Malaysia, four forms have been established: *wayang kulit purwa* (which came from Java), *wayang kulit melayu*, and *wayang kulit gedek*, and *wayang kulit Siam* (which is indigenous). Cambodia has the *ayang* or *nang kaloung*, which may have been a variant of *nang talung*, and was active until recent times. In this aspect, Indonesia or more particularly Java, has demonstrated the ingenuity and creativity of the puppeteers, and the viability of using *wayang kulit* for a number of very clear objectives.



Wayang kulit gedek

Wayang Kulit Siam

Wayang kulit Siam is the most important of the four forms of shadow play performed in the Malay Peninsula. Although popular tradition, passed through the puppeteers themselves, maintains that this form of *wayang* developed approximately two hundred and fifty years ago (during the reign of Long Yunus in Kelantan), evidence and its performance context suggest that it is probably much older. It is very likely that, like the Balinese shadow play, it represents an offshoot of the pre-Islamic *wayang kulit purwa*, in its present style (following changes to figure designs as well as its music). The principal figures – particularly those of Seri Rama, Laksamana and their father, Sirat Maharaja (Dasaratha) – show very strong Thai influence in design, which came from the *menora* or *nora chatri* dance theatre of Thailand. In the simplicity of its performance, *wayang kulit Siam* resembles the Balinese *wayang kulit Ramayana*, and *wayang kulit parwa*.

Further obvious links between the Javanese, the Balinese and the Kelantanese shadow plays are found in the ritual elements connected with theatre consecration (*buka panggung*, *buka tanah*) rituals, such as the opening section of the *wayang kulit Siam* when the *kayon* or *gunungan* figure is removed. These links are also found in non-ritual

Leyak



and dedicated ritual performances that are held for a variety of purposes, including the avoidance of evil, the salutation of teachers (*sembah guru*), and what in Malaysia is called *semah angin* or bandishment of the winds. The use of the *Murwakala* story in ritual performances, and

the overall system of symbolism connected with the shadow play are the other links. The similarities and parallels are so obvious that one has little choice but to take seriously the clear possibility of a single origin for the principal forms of the Javanese, Balinese and Kelantanese shadow play.

In the entire shadow play traditions of India and Southeast Asia, the ritual elements indicate their relationships, antiquity and spiritual significance. This will become even more apparent in an examination of their performance contexts.



Calamarong

Wayang kulit Siam is not only popular in Kelantan and other Malaysian provinces, but also in Southern Thailand, where it is known as *wayang kulit melayu*, but not to be confused with the Kelantanese *wayang kulit melayu*, which is developed from *wayang kulit gedog*.

Nang Talung and Wayang Kulit Gedek

On examining *nang talung* and *wayang kulit gedek* figures, it is evident that these two forms of shadow play are unrelated to *wayang kulit Siam* or to the Javanese and Balinese forms. The figures used are smaller and flimsier; and some puppets are carved *en face*. The principal differences between *nang talung* and *wayang kulit gedek* lie in the language used and in the repertoire of stories, which once again, has the *Ramayana* as its basic literary source. Although the connections between the two variants of basically the same style of shadow play are apparent, and *wayang kulit gedek* is quite a recent development (evolving from *nang talung*), the origin of *nang talung* is unclear. It is believed to have come from the southern province of Phattalung, which gave it its name.

Chinese shadow plays were performed in Thonburi during King Taksin's time (1769-1782), and while certain elements of resemblance between

the Thai and the Chinese shadow plays exist (i.e. the “lightness” and flimsiness of the puppets), the relationship between the two types of shadow play remains to be further established (Rutnin:1975:130). Smithies mentioned that during the reign of King Rama III (1824-1857), “the hero is referred to as being as ugly as *nang kaek mua reng*, perhaps indicating the Malay origin of the shadow play in Thailand” (Rutnin: 1975:130). Available evidence indicate that *wayang kulit gedek* is certainly a transformation of *nang talung* during the last century or so.

In performance, the two styles have obvious similarities. In the Malay states, style variations with respect to culture and religion were made, incorporating many stories derived from Malay romances just as local Thai stories, such as *Suwannasang* and *Phra Abhai Manee*, have been used in the *nang talung* repertoire even though it is based on the *Ramakien* (Thai epic derived from the *Ramayana*). In *nang talung* performances, following the theatre consecration rituals, three figures appear on stage in succession. These are the hermit (*rusee*), who prays for the protection of the performance and the audience, Phra Isuan or Shiva, and a young prince (*roop naa bot*) who pays respects to the gods, angels, house ghosts, the owner of the house where the performance takes place and so on. He thanks the audience for their attendance and hopes the performance will be protected. The elements have survived almost unchanged in *wayang kulit gedek* performances. Further study of the two forms of shadow play, *nang talung* and *wayang kulit gedek*, will undoubtedly reveal the deeper connections between the two genres. With the transformation of *nang talung* into *wayang kulit gedek*, the two forms of shadow play diverged, but did not totally go their separate ways.

Relationship Factors

It can be seen that the principal manifestations of the Southeast Asian shadow play, apart from *nang sbek thom* and *nang yai* reflect clear regional commonalities and relationships. Altogether, the possibility of a connection with the Indian shadow play exists, in the perspective of Indian influences within a broader framework – the spread of South Asian cultural influences in the region. These influences affected the way of life in Southeast Asian communities. In the performing arts, the use of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as source materials has



Semar, a non-traditional version

been studied. Some of the theatre rituals also have parallels to those used in the folk traditions of India. In Southeast Asia, these rituals contain earlier animistic beliefs and practices, including those of Buddhism and Islam. Within the region, several other elements indicate solid relationships and connections between the shadow play genres. Briefly, it may be said that the two most important symbols of this relationship – symbols not derived from South Asia or the Middle East – are the immensely important figure of the *kayon* or *gunungan*, the



Nang sbek thom

leaf shaped puppet which opens and closes all performances of shadow play in Java, Bali and Kelantan; and the other is the figure of Semar (also known by several other names), the god-clown in the shadow plays of the three countries. Beyond these symbols, the relationship can be established in the spiritual context of performances, the use of these performances for purposes of initiation of puppeteers, healing or cleansing the environment, and the use of the story of the demon Murwakala in ritual performances in these three areas.

Before a performance begins, the puppets are arranged on the screen in a particular formation, depending on whether it is the Javanese, the Balinese or the Kelantanese *wayang*. The initial movement of the intricately carved *kayon-gunungan*, the most important figure in a *wayang kulit* set, sets the world as well as the performance of a particular story (*lakon*) into motion. Without this, there can be no

performance. In the play finale, the *kayon-gunungan* is once again placed at the centre of the screen. This character plays an important function as a symbol of the cosmos within which creatures appear and disappear like the characters of the *wayang* plays themselves. It also serves as an important link between the human plane and the higher spheres.

Semar is believed to be an ancient pre-Hindu deity in Java, whose role was relegated to a lesser one after the arrival of Hinduism, and its hierarchy of gods and goddesses. By the time Islam spread through the region, Semar was a clown figure in the *wayang kulit* of Malaysia and Indonesia. However, and this needs to be stressed, he is not merely a clown figure; in the Javanese traditional theatre, particularly in *wayang kulit purwa*, and to a certain extent in Indonesian reality as well, Semar continues to maintain his erstwhile connections with the spiritual. Numerous stories in *wayang* lore confirm his origins from the higher or spiritual realms. The stories (*lakon*) in the *wayang kulit purwa* repertoire, also reflect his continuing significance as a supernatural being. As the wise clown, guardian of and counselor to the heroes of the shadow play, his presence is vital, and many a misfortune is averted through his intervention.

In the spiritual context in Java, Bali and Kelantan, the shadow play is not merely a form of entertainment, but often a highly important form of ritual activity. *Wayang kulit purwa* may take place for important occasions, including the birth of a child, and the celebration of a wedding. In Bali, where several ritual varieties of shadow play exist, the connection between shadow play and ritual is much more dramatically evident. These include *wayang kulit calonarang* and *wayang kulit leyak*. The first of these is performed near graveyards as well as other places believed to be regularly visited by spirits, as a means of appeasing spiritual beings during the Balinese New Year period. It is based on the immensely important story of the witch Calonarang and her conflict with the powerful priest, Mpu Baradah. *Wayang kulit leyak* deals with spirits and the souls of the dead, and is performed in graveyards (G.S.Yousof: 1994:281).

In Kelantan, an elaborate form of *wayang kulit*, known as *wayang kulit berjamu*, involves making offerings to a host of invisible beings, and is performed for the purpose of confirming a puppeteer upon his completion of training. This ritual involves two principal activities,

bandishment of the winds (*sembah angin*) and salutation of the teacher or teachers (*sembah guru*). The first of these, involving spiritual cleansing before the actual graduation ceremony, serves as a sort of preparation for the second function in which the *dalang* (master puppeteer) pays homage to the teachers he studied under. A *dalang*, as a master of the art of *wayang*, is entitled to start his own troupe, and train apprentices (G.S.Yousof: 1997:53-58). In most of these ritual performances, in particular when done in the full elaborate style lasting three nights, the story of the demon, Murwakala, is particularly important. This story, also featured in Javanese and Balinese *wayang kulit* that are performed for ritual purposes, is enacted with selections from the Ramayana repertoire.

Conclusion

These are some of the salient features of the shadow plays that are related to each other within Southeast Asia. The links are traced to the earliest phase, the animistic, and the period of South Asian, Hindu and Buddhist influences in the region. The coming of Islam provided a new dimension to the shadow play by exploiting its potential for symbolism, and by introducing mystical meanings derived from Sufism, as seen, for instance, in the *wayang kulit purwa* story of Dewaruci, which deals with Bhima's search for the meaning of reality, an episode not originally found in the *Mahabharata*.

Through examples of the various connections between the different styles, it is thus possible to demonstrate that Southeast Asian shadow plays have been continuing, over the centuries, to exert strong mutual influences. The highly important relationships existing between different manifestations of the genre resulted in its continuous adaptations in increasingly sophisticated ways and renewal to serve new needs and contingencies. These factors have altogether served to make the region's shadow play a vibrant artistic tradition.

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Theng, Nang Talung clown

Culture and Human Development, Bangladesh 2001, is currently the Director of Asian Centre, Penang, Malaysia. His research interests include Traditional Theatre of Southeast Asia; Malay Theatre Genres; Indian Drama; and Sufism and Comparative Religion. Professor Ghulam also continues his academic interests in Asian Classical and Folk Theatre; Indian Drama; Traditional Southeast Asian Theatre; History and Theories of Western Theatre; The Epic Tradition in Asia and the West; Malaysian-Singapore Writing in English; Islamic Poetry; and Non-Western Literature in English. He has published a large number of books, including the Bibliography of Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia; Punggung Semar: Aspects of Traditional Malay Theatre; Dictionary of Traditional Southeast Asian Theatre; Angin Wayang: Biography of a Master Puppeteer; and The Malay Shadow Play: An Introduction.

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