

Transmitting the Ramayana Epic from India to Southeast Asia and the West through Shadow Puppetry and Visual Art

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Southeast Asian shadow puppetry was examined as a vehicle for transmitting *The Ramayana* across cultures. It was found that epic appears throughout Southeast Asian shadow theater and is a major element in Indonesia and Thailand, although shadow puppetry is struggling to survive Southeast Asia due to competition from modern forms of entertainment and restrictions placed by some conservative Muslim governments. In the Western shadow theater one company uses *The Ramayana*, but the epic is increasing its presence in Western cinema. As a visual art, Southeast Asian shadow puppets are being used as decorative art, and shadow puppetry and *The Ramayana* are providing inspiration to contemporary visual artists, including the researcher.

Introduction

The Ramayana is one of two major epics of Hindu mythology that have provided the material for the traditional Southeast Asian puppet plays, the other being *The Mahabharata* (Irvine, 16). There are many versions of this myth, but the best known version is believed to have been written by the Sanskrit poet Valmiki 300-500 BC. *The Ramayana* is the story of a noble prince, Rama, whose wife, Sita (Sinta in Indonesian) was kidnapped by an evil demon king, Ravana, and Rama's journey to rescue her. In the many episodes of the epic he is assisted by a white monkey, Hanuman, and his army of monkeys. Eventually Rama rescues Sita after a series of battles between Hanuman and his army and Ravana's demons and a final battle in which Rama kills Ravana.

There are many variations of this myth in addition to Valmiki's, particularly surrounding what happens between Rama and Sita after they are reunited. While the story is originally from Hindu mythology, it appears in several countries throughout Asia, and the meaning of the story changes. Rama is viewed as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu in Hinduism and as an incarnation of the Buddha in Buddhism (Major Characters). In any case, the story is about the triumph of good over evil. And it is a love story. As Larry Reed of ShadowLight Productions states, "Rama and Sita recognize each other in a glance and knew they were lovers in past lifetimes and forever (Dixit)."

The Ramayana has traveled across Southeast Asia from ancient India, and in countries where it has appeared, it has been performed by various forms of shadow puppetry, where shadows of carved puppets are projected on a screen. The most well-known and possibly the oldest form of shadow puppetry is Wayang Kulit of Java (Yousef, lone). Wayang Kulit arranged the many episodes from *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* into four cycles called the Wayang Purwa, with the third cycle being devoted to *The Ramayana* (Irvine). Other forms include Nang Yai and Nang Talung of Thailand and Wayang Siam of Malaysia, and each form has its own approach towards these two myths.

The chief concern of this paper is shadow puppetry and *The Ramayana*, and this relates to four questions. One is to what extent shadow puppetry has been used for transmission of *The Ramayana* in Southeast Asia. Two is the contemporary status of shadow puppetry in Southeast Asia as it relates to political and cultural changes in the region. Three is how shadow puppetry is used to present *The Ramayana* to Western audiences. The final question arises from the researcher's work in visual arts, and that is how Wayang Kulit and other shadow puppet forms and *The Ramayana* can be used as a visual art.

The first two questions require an examination of the traditional and contemporary Southeast Asian shadow puppetry through a literature survey. The third question involves examining Western performers of Southeast Asian shadow puppetry and presentations from *The Ramayana* through a literature survey and interview, including adaptations of *The Ramayana* in other media. The final question involves reviewing visual art interpretations of shadow puppetry and *The Ramayana* and presenting studio work by the researcher.

Shadow Puppetry in Southeast Asia

The actual origins of Wayang Kulit are still debated by scholars (Irvine, 129). According to popular belief, 3000 years ago, before the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism in Java, animist priests would tell stories to the local tribe about their ancestors as part of the ceremony to honor ancestors (Irvine, 129). These stories were set to music, and, to illustrate the stories, the priests would manipulate puppets to cast shadows on a screen based on the rhythms and sounds coming from the music. The belief behind these performed rituals was that the spirits of ancestors return at night as shadows.

Tracing the actual origins of shadow puppetry is complicated by the apparently independent development of this art form in countries in Southeast Asia and outside of this region, each which claim shadow theatre as their own. There are two basic traditions of shadow puppetry in Southeast Asia - those emerging from Indonesia and those from Thailand. Both of these traditions have many similarities but trace their lineage to different roots. In addition, although no timeline is determined shadow puppetry may have evolved in India, the source of *The Ramayana* myth, from scroll paintings, *chitra katha*, used to tell stories. (Helmi).

Indonesia

Nevertheless, it is in Indonesia, particularly Java and Bali that this art form developed and flourished under the name Wayang Kulit. In these regions, a multimedia art form evolved, which has been described as having seven elements or “faces” (Mulyano, 19). Mulyano lists these artistic “faces” as drama, painting, carving, literature, voice, instrumental music, and mimicry.

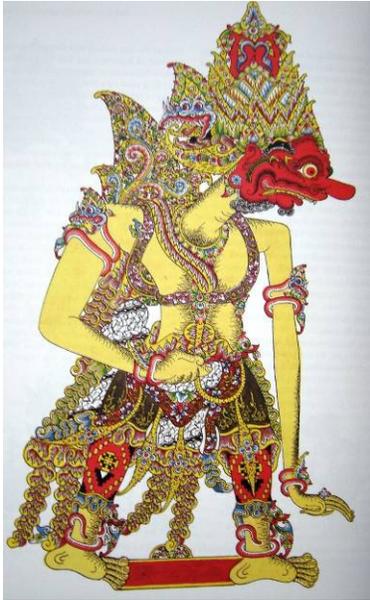
Drama refers to the story being told. Painting and carving refer to the construction and design of the puppets. The literature comes from Wayang Purwa cycles containing *The Ramayana* and, particularly, *The Mahabharata*. In addition, there are later indigenously Indonesian mythic cycles, *The Panji* and *The Damarwulan* grouped together as the Wayang Gedek (Irvine, 22). Voice is represented by the puppet master or *dhal'ang*, who gives each character a distinct voice and by the singers who accompany him. Instrumental music is performed by an orchestra called the *gamelon*. Mimicry refers to the actual manipulation of the *wayang* puppets that makes them move.

The puppets themselves are traditionally carved from water buffalo hide and are painted on both sides (Mrazek, 23). The forms of the puppets are traditional and readily recognizable by an audience who is familiar with the stories and Wayang Kulit performances. The iconographical program for the Javanese Wayang Kulit figures was established around the same time that Islam was increasing its influence in Indonesia. The puppets are not naturalistic (Irvine, 129-130). The size of the eyes, head, neck, and arms is exaggerated. The facial features are designed to define a character's status or level of refinement. Refined characters, such as royalty, typically have elongated, narrow, rice-shaped, and curving eyes. The nose is long and pointed, and the head is typically tilted downwards to reflect modesty and self-control. The

¹ Indonesian spelling. Spelled “dalang” in Malaysia. “Nai nang” in Thailand.

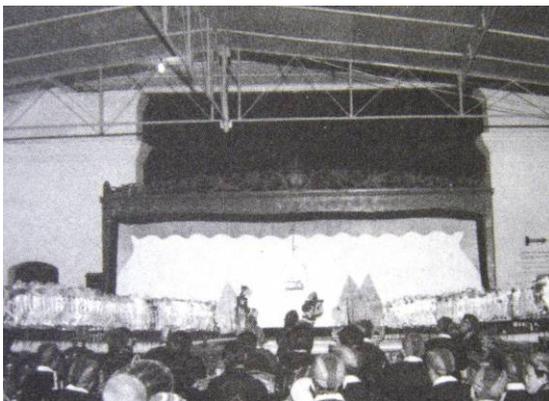
colors of the face are subdued, frequently white for purity or dark in the case of kings. Royalty is identified by the diadem or partial crown, with the crown of the king being larger and more elaborate. In general the size of refined characters tends to be smaller, with the king taller than the queen. The torsos of refined characters are narrow in proportion to the head. The torsos of all the characters are frontal, but the faces of refined characters are typically in profile, so that only one side of the face can be seen. On the other hand, unrefined characters such as ogres and demons have rounder faces, bulbous noses, and large round eyes. While not shown *en face*, both eyes are visible. The bodies of unrefined characters are rounder. The styles of Javanese puppets vary according to where they are from in Java, and Balinese shadow puppets vary considerably from Javanese, in that the figures are less detailed and the proportions more naturalistic.





Javanese Wayang Kulit puppets. Clockwise from top left: *Kayan (Tree of Life)*; *Rama and Sita*, *Hanuman*, and *Rahwana (Ravana)*. Top row and bottom left from Irvine, David. [Leather Gods & Wooden Heroes: Java's Classical Wayang](#). Bottom right from Simon Fraser University Museum < http://www.sfu.museum/uploads/page/09/Hanuman_white.jpg>.

The setting of the theater is an important visual component to Wayang Kulit. It consists of a screen made of white cotton cloth (Scott-Kemball), where the shadows are cast from an oil lamp as the light source (Long). The audience can sit either in front of the screen where they see only the shadows or behind the screen where they can watch the movements of the dhalang and the musicians.



Javanese Wayang Kulit theater. Left: front view with audience. Right: rear view with dhalang and gamelon. From Mrázek, Jan, [Phenomenology of a Puppet Theatre : Contemplations on the Art of Javanese Wayang Kulit](#).



Nadera Ida Made Bagus, *Wayang Kulit Performance* Undated painting, Bali, Indonesia. <<http://gustavothomastheatre.blogspot.com/2010/01/wayang-kulit-balinese-shadows-puppet.html>>.

The stories from *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* have been performed repeatedly over the centuries and audiences in Southeast Asian countries are very familiar with these stories. The result is that the stories are of secondary consideration for Asian Wayang Kulit audiences. Mrazek observes that when people ask for information about a Wayang Kulit performance, they do not ask about the story; rather they ask who the dhalang is (xv).

Wayang Kulit is primarily a performing art and the dhalang is the center of the performance (Mrazek, xiv-xv). He, or sometimes she, creates the puppets, manipulates their movements, speaks their lines, directs the orchestra (*gamelan*), and narrates and maintains a running commentary on the story and its meaning. In this sense, the traditional dhalang has evolved into a one-person multimedia performer. The dhalang can improvise through the clown servants (*punakawan*) who are not characters from these epics. These characters tell jokes and maintain a running commentary on the story. Thus, Mrazek describes the dhalang as the mastermind behind the performance (xiv-xv).

Thailand/Cambodia

Thailand has two forms of shadow puppetry. One is classical Nang theater, Nang Yai, which means big puppets. In this form, the puppets are of whole scenes from the stories, mostly *The Ramayana*. The puppets are so big that they each require one person to operate them (Bangkok Post, Sep 10, 2009). The shadows of the scene are cast on the screen by dancers holding the life size puppets to tell the story. This is reminiscent of the scroll paintings used to

tell stories in India that some believe are the origin of Wayang Kulit. Nang Yai has typically been performed before royalty and at large temples during special occasions and festivals.

Nang Talung is popular shadow puppetry and is much closer to Wayang Kulit. The puppets are small and the up to 30 characters can all be manipulated by a single puppeteer. However, the shapes and features of the puppets differ considerably from those of Java and are derived from the conventions of Nang Yai classical puppets. (Broman). For instance, members of the royalty, such as Phra Ram (Rama) and Nang Sida (Sita), wear a typically Siamese peaked crown with a halo. When the king or prince is descended from a deity, the peak will be lightly bent. The style of headdress applies to all royalty, Thosakan (Ravana), as the king of Lanka, also wears the peaked crown of royalty. However, monkey officials only wear a small crown, a coronet, which applies to Hanuman. Characters are also identified by the objects they carry, usually weapons. Phra Ram is identified by a bow and arrow, Hanuman by a trident, a three-pronged spear and dagger. Thosakan carries a bow, a spear, and/or discus. Hermits are shown with a walking stick while sages carry fans. While much more naturally proportioned than Javanese figures, they are highly decorated with stylized stances, such as standing on one foot. This is again borrowed from the stationary Nang Yai figures. Only one arm of the Nang Talung puppets is articulated and can move, with the exception of the clowns, who have multiple moving parts. While Wayang Kulit shadow puppets are almost always profiles, female Nang Talung puppets are almost always shown *en face* as are, occasionally, male figures. Less refined characters are not portrayed with the decorative details of the refined characters, and the clowns are identified by their rougher crude designs and are frequently shown with potbellies.



Thai Nang Talung puppets. Clockwise from the top left: *Phra Ram* (Rama), *Nang Sida* (Sita), *Thosakan* (Ravana), *Hanuman*, *Phra Ram* posed for battle, and *Hanuman* posed for battle. From Broman, Sven. Shadows of Life: Nang Talung.

The structure of the stage also differs considerably from Wayang Kulit. Unlike the Wayang Kulit theater, which is more open and allows the audience to go behind the screen to observe the dhalong and orchestra, the Nang Talung stage or *Rong nang* is an enclosed wood and bamboo hut mounted on six-foot posts. Thus, the audience cannot go behind the screen to observe the puppeteer and the orchestra.

Classical Thai shadow theater probably can be dated back to the Sukhothai period, 1238 to 1350 (Broman, 3). The first Nang Talung popular shadow theater appeared in southern Thailand in the 17th or 18th century (Broman, 4). Broman states that Chinese shadow theater

was also being performed in Thailand at that time and that it probably influenced the development of Nang Talung. More significantly, he also states that there is little evidence that it was imported from either India or Java (3). The name comes from Phattalung, which was once the center of this art form. However, it can be found in almost every province in southern Thailand.

A major difference between Nang Talung and Wayang Kulit is the source of the stories. In Indonesia the most common and popular mythic component of Wayang Kulit is *The Mahabharata*. The major sources of plays for Nang Talung performances are episodes from *The Ramakien*, the Thai version of *The Ramayana*. As in all the instances in which the original epic has been adopted by another culture, there are changes in *The Ramakien*. Phra Ram (Rama) is now ruler of the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya rather than the Indian mythological kingdom of Ayodhya. The story follows his struggle with Thosakan (Ravana) over his consort Nang Sida (Sita). Other classical plays are based on Thai folk tales and stories from the Buddhist Jataka tales, although there is some overlapping here since Thai people see Rama as an earlier incarnation of the Buddha, and at least one of the Jataka tales is an episode from *The Ramakien*. In any case, in Thailand we see traditional popular shadow puppetry as a vehicle for transmitting *The Ramayana*.

In Cambodia, shadow puppetry can be seen as parallel to that of Thailand (Broman, 3), with Sbaek Thom being the large classical puppets and Sbaek Touch being the small popular puppet theater (Sbaek). However, Cambodia has developed its own legends about the origins of Cambodian shadow theater, one dating back to the crafting of the shallow reliefs from *The Ramayana* at Angkor Wat, when a craftsman was using a sheet of leather to outline the relief. After punching holes in the leather he held it to the sun and was struck by the shadows this piece of leather made. Nevertheless, the forms of the Sbaek Thom and Sbaek Touch shadow puppets and performances are essentially the same as Nang Yai and Nang Talung respectively.

Malaysia

In one way, a discussion of Malaysian shadow puppetry should immediately follow that of Indonesia. Both countries call their shadow puppetry Wayang Kulit, with specific variations in Malaysia. However, Malaysia lies between Indonesia and Thailand, and its Wayang Kulit is equally influenced by both countries. In fact, one form, Wayang Jawa, is essentially an import

from Indonesia performed by and for Javanese immigrants in Johor (Azlee), while another form, Wayang Gedek, is an imported version of Nang Talung that is performed in both Thai and Malay.

Despite its misleading name, Wayang Siam is an indigenously Malaysian form, performed in Malay by Malaysians (Sweeney). This form has been almost exclusively performed in Kelantan, which Sweeney described in 1972 as the "heart of Wayang Siam country." As an indigenous form, it is influenced by both Java and Thailand. And the iconography of the puppets is a mix between Java and Thailand. The faces of the refined royalty in Malaysian are distinctly Thai. The faces are more naturalistic with a small, well-shaped nose and mouth. The eyes are narrow like those of Java refined characters. The peaked royal crowns are clearly Thai, but the shoulders are square and broad and the feet are placed close together like Javanese. Sometimes royalty is portrayed standing on a naga. The unrefined characters are much closer and sometimes indistinguishable from the Javanese. The eyes of the ogres are round, and Mabraja Wana (Ravana) is similar to the same character in Javanese Wayang Kulit except that he wears the peaked Thai crown. The lesser princes wear a variety of crowns, including a Western crown. Like Nang Talung puppets, the main characters have one articulated moving arm. In terms of stage construction, the Wayang Siam theater structure is a slightly scaled down version of the *rong nang*.

A major distinguishing feature of Wayang Siam from Indonesian Wayang Kulit is the emphasis on *The Ramayana* as the basis of the plays. Indonesia tends to emphasize *The Mahabharata* for their performance. Malaysia, on the other hand, has developed its own version of *The Ramayana*, which is called *Raja Seri Rama* (Sweeney). The basic story, *Cherita Mahraja Wana* follows the story of Mahraja Wana's (Ravana) abduction of Seri Rama's wife, Siti Dewi (Sita or Sinta), and Rama's quest to rescue her. There are some variations, such as Hanuman's being Rama's son from a previous incarnation. Malays tend to use a tree metaphor to describe *Raja Seri Rama*. The main story, *Cherita Mahraja Wana*, is the trunk, roots, and main branches or *pokok* (Malay Shadow Play). Then there are a large number of minor stories, twigs or *rantings* that are part of *Raja Seri Rama* and the repertoire of Wayang Siam. For the most part the *rantings* are not from the original Sanskrit texts. Some of them are from the *Panji* tales that have a similar story line to *The Ramayana* with a king searching for his missing queen. Others

are the improvised inventions of dalangs, which again emphasizes the freedom and power of the dalang in Malaysia.



Malaysian Wayang Siam puppets. Clockwise from top left: *Pobon Beringen* (Banyon Tree), *Seri Rama* (Rama), *Siti Dewi* (Sita), *Mahraja Wana* (Ravana), and *Hanuman and Hanuman Ikan*, Hanuman's son by the Fish Princess. From Sweeney, Amin. Malay Shadow Puppets.

These are stories that are handed down from one dalang to another, and each dalang puts his own touch on the story, particularly the *rantings*. For these dalangs, the performance is personal and emotional, and they are sometimes in tears at the end of a performance.



Left: Malaysian Wayang Siam puppet stage “props.” Right: Kelantanese operating hut. From Sweeney, Amin. Malay Shadow Puppets.

Shadow Puppetry in Contemporary Southeast Asia

To this point, the discussion has been on the traditions of shadow puppetry that have evolved over 3000 years. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries there have been major changes in politics and culture that have affected the Southeast Asian countries that have traditions of shadow puppetry. The question arises as to how these changes have affected the current status of shadow puppetry in Southeast Asia.

Shadow Puppetry continues in Bali, Java, and Thailand and is going through a revival in Cambodia following the reign of Khmer Rouge, but its status in Malaysia is questionable. This is partly due to the influence of Islam. Both Kathy Foley and Larry Reed have commented on this influence during interviews, and Reed went so far as to describe Wayang Kulit as “endangered” in Malaysia. When asked whether this was a factor in Muslim Indonesia, Reed said that it had not been but it could be. “It (Indonesia) changes every five years.”

Indonesia has gone through periods of colonialism, independence, authoritarianism, and, most recently, democracy. Throughout these periods, Indonesia has had Islam as its official religion but with religious freedom. As an archipelago, it consists of islands that have had some degree of isolation from each other, and Bali is predominantly Hindu rather than Muslim. As such traditional Wayang Kulit thrives in Bali. On Java, the other island with a strong history of Wayang Kulit, it also thrives but more because of how it functions as communication. During the years of political change, Wayang Kulit has been used as a tool for political propaganda (Pausacker). One way this is done is using characters from *The Mahabharata* and *The*

Ramayana as metaphors For instance, as opposition to Suharto increased, Hanuman, and his army of monkeys from the *Ramayana* were presented as a metaphors for this opposition. But is mainly through the clown puppets, the *punakawan*, that Wayang Kulit's function as political propaganda is carried out. One popular *punakawan* is Semar, who is portrayed as wise and compassionate

In Malaysia, Islam is a special case. This stems back to the National Cultural Policy (NCP) established by the Malaysian government following race riots between Malays and Chinese there in 1969 (Rowland, 52-53). This policy was based on three principles:

- (1) National culture would be based on that of the indigenous inhabitants of the region;
- (2) Elements from other cultures, which were suitable and reasonable, might be incorporated into the national culture; and
- (3) Islam would be a crucial component of the national culture (Rowland, p. 48).

The third principle is not particularly a problem for the country as a whole since the Malaysian national government tends to embrace a moderate form of Islam. But some provinces are controlled by the fundamentalist Islamic Party of Malaysia. This includes Kelantan "the heart of Wayang Siam country." In 1990 Kelantan banned Wayang Siam because of its "non-Islamic" elements (Azlee) along with the traditional Malay dance, *Mak Yong* (Yusof Culture). However, Wayang Siam is popular. Following the ban on this particular form, Wayang Siam increased its popularity (Azlee) and several new variations emerged in Kelantan (Yusof, lone). Zubaidah Abu Bakar reports in a 1999 article in Malaysia's *New Straits Times* that the Wayang Kulit Seri Asun troupe in Kedah is keeping a form of Wayang Kulit, Wayang Gedek, which is essentially Nang Talung imported from Thailand (Samsudin looking outside).

So, Islam, as such, may not actually be a particular danger to shadow puppetry in Malaysia, certainly not Indonesia, and is not an issue in Thailand. The danger across Southeast Asia relates to its status as a popular form of entertainment, one of the few in some isolated areas. However, with modern technology and entertainment, such as television and movies, shadow puppetry is being challenged as a popular art form. Jermadi notes that in fields where forms of Wayang Kulit were once performed in Malaysia, the new practice is simply to set up a screen to project movies outdoors, along the lines of Western drive in movies. So, shadow puppet plays are being replaced by Bollywood and Hollywood movies in rural areas. In modern

metropolitan areas, such as Kuala Lumpur, it is television that provides the alternative, so, according to Jermadi, people in those locations “just don’t care” about shadow puppetry.

Shadow puppetry has responded to the threat of modernity by adopting popular forms of entertainment. In Java, Wayang Kulit is broadcast weekly on television and the performances incorporate Indonesian popular music and guest stars (Mrazek). The route to doing this with shadow puppetry is the freedom of the puppeteer to improvise, particularly using clown servants, characters that appear in all of the forms of shadow puppetry discussed. Where these figures traditionally have been used for brief interludes to carry the main story forward, now they comprise the main story. In Java they sing, portray modern popular figures, such as American boxer Mike Tyson, and utilize popular dramatic forms, such as car chases (Mrazek). In Thailand there are similar adaptations to modern popular culture in a new form of Nang theater, Nang Samai (Brown). The music incorporates elements of modern popular music and flashing lights. *The Ramayana* is still performed but it is seen as a key to themes closer to modern urban life, and new stories are borrowed from modern novels, movies, and television, such as romances, mysteries, and Westerns. This modernization is seen as the key for shadow puppetry’s survival in Southeast Asia.



Contemporary Javanese shadow puppets by popular Dhalang Enthus Susmono. On the left is George W. Bush (<http://portals.kit.nl/-FAB/34/747.html>). On the right is Batman (<http://www.echo.nl/ecno/uitgaan/foto/880212/>).



Contemporary Nang Talung puppets showing popular characters, from the right. A nanny, in the middle a cowboy, and two bargirls on the left.

http://www.tribal-art.biz/index.php?cat=c116_NANG-TALUNG.html&page=3Tribal Art

Yet, not all observers of shadow puppetry go along with these innovations. Mrazek has critically analyzed these trends in Java, in which he describes the contemporary era for Wayang Kulit as “the age of comedy.” Yousof, commenting on the effects of restrictions of the arts in Malaysia, sees these restrictions in combination with modernity as leading to a watered down popular Malaysian culture. In Thailand there are puppeteers who decry the movement to modernity and call for a return to the puppets assuming their traditional social roles. From the point of view of the focus of this study, this trend to modernization has had an effect. By modernizing and “jazzing up” the performances, shadow puppetry may be surviving in Southeast Asia, but declining as a means of transmitting *The Ramayana*. Rama, Sita, and Ravanna are being replaced by cowboys, bar girls, and gangsters.

Also there are other approaches to preservation, particularly in Malaysia, where shadow puppetry is threatened on two fronts. One approach is a direct defense of traditional Malaysian art forms by recognized scholars such as Dr Ghulam Sarwar Yousof, a theater historian and critic as well as a poet. Another approach is to reinterpret shadow puppetry from the perspective of other art forms. One example is Aris A. Yaacob, a leader of the Doo Lali avant garde arts group composed of expatriate Malays living in London, who brought their art performance *Simulcara* to Malaysia in 2004 to receive favorable reviews (Bhatt, 2005). Yaacob and Doo-Lali draw their inspiration from Wayang Kulit and *The Ramayana*, which Yaacob describes as an important element in Malay culture.

Another Malay who approaches shadow puppetry from the perspective of another media is Fikri Jermadi. He is a university affiliated film maker and film critic who presents his views

in his blog “Thoughts on Film.” Actually, from Jermadi’s perspective, it is not entirely accurate to say he approaches shadow puppetry from another media since, like others (Reed interview, Thalang), he sees shadow puppetry as the original form of cinema. He is in the process of publishing a book, *Kelir Kaku: Behind the Seen of Wayang*, in which he writes extensively about the contemporary status of Wayang Kulit in Malaysia and has posted two chapters on his blog spot. He also has produced a movie, *Wayang*, about a young blind boy who seeks to become an apprentice to a dalang in Malaysia.

Southeast Asian Shadow Puppetry in the West

Although shadow theater in general has its own indigenous history in the West, such as Turkey and France (Tan), in terms of Asian shadow puppetry in the West, the pioneer is Pauline Benton, who in the 1930s and 40s presented Chinese shadow Puppet Theatre to American audiences, not as an exotic curiosity, but as an art form (Kaplin). While Chinese Puppet Theatre is outside the tradition of Wayang Kulit, Kaplin observes that Benton’s career opened the door for other Americans performing in the Indonesian Wayang Kulit tradition, such as Tamara Fielding, Maria Bodman, and Larry Reed.



Tamara Fielding, *Tamara and the Shadow Theatre of Java*
<<http://www.indonesianshadowplay.com/artist.html>>.

Of these three performers, Tamara Fielding is from Indonesia, (Cox). Fielding was born in Java. Her mother was Indonesian and her father was a Dutch owner of a rubber plantation where Tamara spent her childhood before World War II. She saw her first all night performance of Wayang Kulit as a child on the rubber plantation. She describes her experience, “This almost-mystical experience proved to be a great force in my artistic development (Fielding).” Fielding eventually settled in New York and brought with her a few old wayang puppets, which had been given to her as a child. She built a screen and started to assemble a Wayang Kulit theater, Tamara and the Shadow Theatre of Java, based in Northport NY in 1977. Since then, her

collection of puppets has grown to 400. She performs all the functions as a female dhalang based on her vivid childhood memories of Wayang Kulit.

As a partially native Indonesian, Fielding performs traditional Wayang Kulit stories (Cox). She follows traditional Javanese Wayang Kulit with two changes. One is that her performances are shorter than the nine-hour performances she saw as a child. Also, Fielding uses a rotating stage to allow audiences to see both the shadows on the screen and the performance of the dhalang and musicians from one position (Fielding). Her performances are directed towards a broad audience of Eastern and Western people throughout the U.S. and on cruise ships in Southeast Asia.



Maria Bodman, *Bali and Beyond*
<<http://www.balibeyond.com/cover.html>>.

One of the native-born Westerners with no roots in Southeast Asia, Maria Bodman, founded Bali & Beyond in Los Angeles with gamelon musical artist Cliff DeArmant, in 1988, following their two years' studying and working in Bali. In the U.S. and Canada, Bodman produces traditional Wayang Kulit plays adapted to Western audiences, such as *The Mahabarata in Shadow* (Bali). The adaptation is in the form of presenting the play in English as well as the ancient Kawi language of Bali, and cutting the performance time down to 2 1/2 hours. In other ways, their performances are quite traditional, such as using an oil lamp as the light source. They also put on shadow productions of Western stories, such as *Alice in the Shadows* based on Lewis Carroll's characters and stories (Walton).

Therefore, Fielding and Bodman share the mission of establishing Wayang Kulit as a vibrant art form in the U.S. However, the most noteworthy Western contributor to Wayang Kulit in the west is Larry Reed of Shadow Light Productions in San Francisco whose work has been reviewed and discussed worldwide (Jungwiwattanaporn, Templeton, Sack, and Winn). He has been involved with Wayang Kulit from Bali since 1974 when he first started training as a

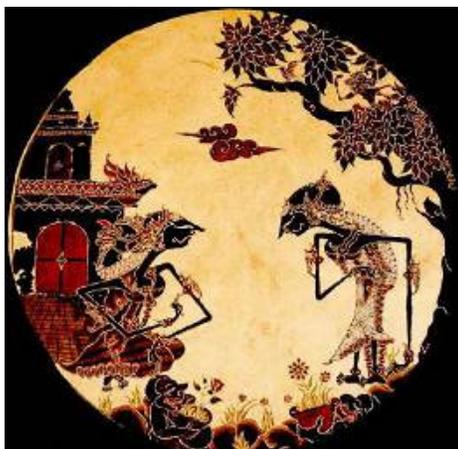
dhalang with I Nyoman Sumandhi, a Balinese dhalang in the U.S. and with Sumandhi's father, I Nyoman Rajeg, in Bali, the only of these three performers to go through the apprenticeship process. He fully immersed himself in Balinese indigenous culture for over ten years (Jungwiwattanaporn). At the end of this period Reed stated in his interview, "I realized that my student period was over, and for now I'd figure out what did I know actually, and that's when I started doing the large scale [productions]."



Larry Reed, *Shadow Light Productions*
Photo by S. Lim

Reed moved beyond traditional Wayang Kulit to what he describes as Shadow Theater and founded Shadow Light Productions in San Francisco (Reed interview). Besides manipulating the traditional Wayang Kulit puppets, Reed also uses live actors in two faced masks that he designed, simple objects, and cut out scenery pieces to cast shadows on the screen. He has also moved beyond Indonesian culture by adapting stories and myths from all over the world. While Reed has deep roots in Indonesian culture, his work has been multicultural, with the mission of establishing this multimedia performing art tradition from a single island in Indonesia in the West, with its crosscurrents of different cultures. Thus, while Bodman and Fielding also have the mission of establishing the Wayang Kulit in the west, Reed has taken the most significant steps towards this goal.

Since all of these three artists received their training in Indonesia, it would be expected that their Wayang Kulit performances would be drawn from *The Mahabharata*. One of these artists, however, gives performances based on *The Ramayana*; Tamara Fielding, performs *The Abduction of Sinta* from *The Ramayana* (Cox, Fielding). Neither Bodman nor Reed perform stories from *The Ramayana*, although, as mentioned previously, Reed has served as narrator for a dance performance of this epic (Winn), and it is used by Shadow Light Productions for teaching (Shadow Light).



Ramayana puppets from Tamarra Fielding's collection
www.indonesianshadowplay.com

In terms of puppet theaters that do not specialize in Southeast Asian shadow puppetry, Figures of Speech's touring production, *Jester Kings of Java*, is based on *The Ramayana* but is directed towards children (Jester). Instead of Sita being kidnapped, it is her pet dog. Prince Rama wants to marry her, but until the dog is returned, her mind will not be at peace. The story follows Prince Rama's quest to get the dog back, so that he and Princess Sita can get married.



The Jester Kings of Java, Figures of Speech Theater
<http://www.figures.org/java/java.html>

One reason that *The Ramayana* is not performed by Western theaters specializing in Southeast Asian shadow puppetry is that none are based on Nang or Malaysian Wayang Kulit, which traditionally have emphasized this epic. However, if one were expand shadow theater along the lines of Jermadi's thinking of shadow puppetry as the original form of film, *The Ramayana* is making its way into Western cinema. *Sita Sings the Blues* is a 2009 animation piece by independent filmmaker Nina Paley, who has made her film available to the public for free (Paley). Furthermore, a Hollywood film directed by Chuck Russell, *Hanuman*, is in production starring Keanu Reeves as Rama, Aamir Khan as the title character, and Gary Oldman as Ravana, with the role of Sita to be determined (One India).



Nina Paley, *Sita Sings the Blues*
www.sitasingstheblues.com

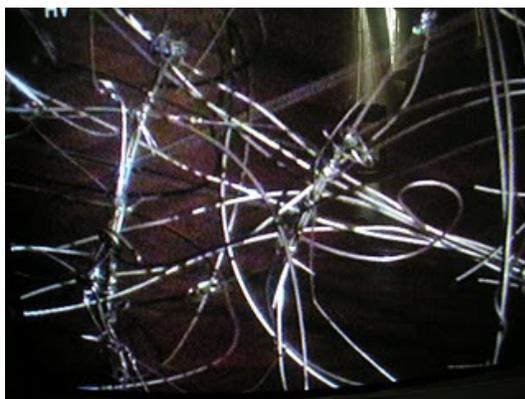
Shadow Puppetry and *The Ramayana* in Visual Art

As mentioned previously, shadow puppetry is a multimedia art form with seven “faces” (Mulyano, 19). Along with the visual image of the shadow on the screen, two of these faces are definitely visual arts - painting and carving. Typically the puppets have been crafted by the puppet master in Asia, although some puppeteers would have craftsmen create puppets. The traditional puppets require a high degree of craftsmanship. As such, museums, such as the British Museum (Sweeney, Kemball), maintain collections of shadow puppets. With the declining venues for shadow puppet performances in Southeast Asia, leather shadow puppets are now being produced for sale for online sales sites, such as Baanmoradoktaksin on Phuket Island, Thailand. Collectors purchase these fully functional puppets as decorative art for their homes.



Nang Yai “puppets” for sale by Baanmoradoktaksin
 <<http://phuketdir.com/baanmoradoktaksin>>

Beyond carved traditional leather shadow puppets for collections, visual artist Aris A. Yaacob has been producing 2D and performance art inspired by Wayang Kulit and *The Ramayana* from his homeland, Malaysia. (Aris). His performance art, or live art as he calls it, is produced by his London avant-garde art group, Doo-Lali, consisting of Italian-Swiss puppeteer Patrizia Adami Sutter and poet Mansor Ibrahim. Together they have performed *Simulacra* in London and Malaysia. This performance consists primarily of Yaacob producing 2-D and 3-D work spontaneously in front of an audience using materials like polythene sheets, Perspex, liquids and wire mesh. Making the art is the performance as opposed to pre-constructed puppets being manipulated by a puppeteer. His 2-D paintings tend to be abstract impressions, including his lino-cut silk screen. Thus, Yaacob does not draw on the form of the Malaysian Wayang Kulit puppets for inspiration but on the total experience of a Wayang Kulit performance.



Aris A Yaacob, *Visual Interpretation of Wayang Kulit* (2007)
 <www.arisayaacob.blogspot.com>



Sri Rama (1995)

Likewise, this researcher, an emerging visual artist working in sculpture, has been crafting figures based on Wayang Kulit puppetry using alternative materials and techniques such

as stitching and sewing on repurposed plastic and thin repurposed metal. However, the images are based on the forms of traditional characters from *The Ramayana*. Besides conveying concepts directly from *The Ramayana*, the materials highlight contemporary Western gluttony and waste, behaviors that Lord Rama, as an incarnation of Vishnu and the Buddha, would discourage in his kingdom. Overall, the work is intended to convey the concept of balance, a central concept of the Wayang Kulit stories. Thus, the contribution of the work of this researcher, to paraphrase Reed, is meant to free us from our own stupidity of excessive consumption that harms our health and destroys the environment.



Siew Lian Lim. Life-sized *Rama and Sita* Indonesian Style using repurposed refuse (2010).



Siew Lian Lim. *Rama and Sita* Indonesian Style using repurposed plastic (2010).



Siew Lian Lim. *Rama and Sita* Malaysian style using repurposed plastic (2010).

Conclusions

It is clear that shadow puppetry has been a vehicle for transmission of *The Ramayana* in Southeast Asia, but the extent that it has varies. In Indonesia, the other Hindu epic, *The Mahabharata* is more popular and prevalent. In Malaysia, Thailand, and Cambodia, most of the traditional shadow puppet plays have been based on their own versions of *The Ramayana*.

Shadow Puppetry has been threatened in contemporary Southeast Asia by the increasing influence of modern media and technology, particularly from the West. Shadow Puppetry has responded, particularly in Java and Thailand, by bringing elements of modern popular culture into their performances. In addition, shadow puppetry in Malaysia has been threatened by conservative Islam, and Wayang Siam has been banned in its home province, Kelantan. But shadow puppetry appeals to the rest of Malaysia, and Wayang Gedek imported Nang Talung from Thailand, is popular.

Other than Chinese shadow puppetry introduced in the U.S. earlier in the 20th century by Pauline Benton, Shadow Puppetry has been performed by three artists in the Indonesian Wayang Kulit tradition - Tamara Fielding, Maria Bodman, and Larry Reed. Since all three were exposed to the Indonesian forms that emphasize *The Mahabharata*, their traditional performances are of that epic with the exception of Fielding who presents a play from *The Ramayana*. There are no theater companies in the U.S. working in the Wayang Siam or Nang Talung tradition. However, *The Ramayana* has been presented by at least one general puppet company, as well as in cinema.

Finally, shadow puppetry has been presented as a visual art in two ways. One is traditionally crafted shadow puppets being made available to collectors as decorative art. The other is by using shadow puppetry as inspiration for contemporary visual art. One artist is Aris A. Yaacob, an expatriate Malay living in London who produces 2-D and performance art

interpreting Wayang Kulit and the Ramayana in a modern context. The other is work by the researcher, who uses the forms of the traditional shadow puppets with nontraditional repurposed materials and techniques to produce figures based on traditional Wayang Kulit forms from *The Ramayana*, and using these forms as metaphors that relate to contemporary Western society.

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