

The Study of Semiotics Wayang Kulit Theatre in Malay Culture Society

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Abstract

The art of shadow play theatre is unique. This research is encouraged by the existence of shadow play which is loaded with important symbols and philosophy contained in it to formulate the direction and guidelines in human's life. So, researchers who are interested in describing the value of the reviewed symbolism helped to preserve the cultural semiotics for shadow puppets as one of the legacy that necessitate to be preserved by the young especially in Malay society. This study aims to describe the symbolic value of each form of engravings, symbols and puppets listed in the wayang kulit (shadow play) semiotics such as *Gunungan* (Pohon Beringin). Puppet characters design the semiotics review through qualitative descriptive method; researchers analyze data in the form of words and verbal statement of the observed behaviour of informants as well as documents related to wayang puppetry semiotics. Therefore, this research will hopefully provide more depth into aesthetic world of shadow play puppetry and give impact towards the Malay society since this art is starting to extinct due to new media technology existence and unpopularity of shadow play among young generations.

Keywords: Shadow Play, Symbols, Wayang Kulit, Malay, Semiotics, Puppetry

Estudio semiótico del Teatro Wayang Kulit en la cultura de la sociedad malaya

Resumen

El arte del teatro de sombras es único, rico en símbolos substanciales y con una filosofía que contiene directrices en la vida humana. Por lo tanto, el interés de los investigadores es describir y revisar el valor de su simbolismo para ayudar a preservar la cultura semiótica de las marionetas de sombra, una antigua cultura comunicativa que requiere ser conservada por los jóvenes, especialmente en la sociedad malaya. Este estudio tiene como objetivo describir el valor simbólico de cada forma de los grabados y de las marionetas del "Wayang Kulit" (teatro de sombras), y el diseño de los personajes de las marionetas a través de la semiótica como método descriptivo cualitativo. De este modo, esta investigación se propone ofrecer un estudio con profundidad en el mundo estético y comunicativo del teatro de las sombras de la sociedad malaya y contribuir a que la sociedad malaya preserve este tesoro cultural ante la amenaza de su extinción por la irrupción de las nuevas tecnologías de los medios de comunicación, y por el consiguiente desinterés hacia el arte del teatro de sombras entre los jóvenes malayos.

Palabras clave: Teatro de sombras, símbolos, Wayang Kulit, semiótica, títeres, marionetas.

Referencia normalizada

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Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Semiotics and Shadow Play Theatre. 3. Theatrical Conventions of Wayang Kulit. 4. Semiotics and Impact – Malay Society. 5. Conclusion. 6. References. 7. Acknowledgment.

1. Introduction

Southeast Asia has a rich tradition of puppetry, a theatre of varying style yet demonstrating many similarities. Apart from the generally accepted categories which most of Southeast Asian traditional theatre do, including those in Malaysia, that can be classified into: (a) puppet theatre, (b) dance-theatre and (c) operatic theatre forms, it is possible to distinguish several elementary activities clearly outside these categories which still legitimately qualify as theatrical events, by virtue of the fact that these lesser styles require for them to be considered as such. In Malaysia, according to Prof GHULAM SARWAR (2004), several forms of solo theatre exist in which the basic feature is storytelling by a single performer with or without musical accompaniment.

Yet, in certain communities in Malaysia, several storytelling verses debates and elementary theatre styles continue to be active. While many of these are secular in character, some have retained their past connection with mysticism described in shadow play theatre. Traditionally, the Wayang Kulit was staged as an entertainment medium during religious festivals and important occasions, such as weddings, births and circumcision. Believed to have strong ties with the spirit world, Wayang Kulit “was conducted to invoke the spirits, to seek blessings and to offer thanksgiving for favours received”. It used to be customary to make food offerings (*berjamu*) to the spirits. Apart from providing entertainment to the community, it also serves to impart moral values, as well as to pass down folklore and historical tales.

While foreign epics such as the Ramayana, found their way to Malaysia and became important, a repertoire of indigenous stories were expanded and these activities provide the opportunity for social interaction, entertainment, and preservation of tradition. The true importance of these genres, particularly of the more elaborate ones that incorporate ancient stories that becomes a remembrance of the deeds of a culture hero and the restating of the myth explaining the origins of event. Through narration and the use of performance as elementary theatre, such tales are kept alive and the bridge of communications of the past are maintained.

There are several types of wayang puppetry or shadow play available in Malaysia such as the classical Javanese Wayang Kulit Purwa which is very well known in the southern section of the Malay Peninsula, particularly in Johor. Three other styles of shadow plays which are active in Malaysia include Wayang Kulit Gedek, which represents a southward expansion of the Nang Talung and continues to use the Thai version of Ramayana story, Wayang Kulit Melayu which developed as a result of ‘borrowing’ the influence of Javanese Wayang Kulit Gedek and the stories are based on Javanese hero *Panji*, and finally Wayang Kulit Kelantan or Siam, which is based on Ramayana epic. Kelantan is the undisputed state for wayang kulit in Malaysia which is a product of the Malay villages and is the pre-eminent form of shadow play theatre. Patricia MATUSKY (1997) described internal evidence suggests that the Wayang Kulit (shadow play) is possibly introduced into Kelantan from Hindu Java during 1293 - 1520.

In the beginning, the genres, shapes of the figures, puppets remained its originality and influences but with the funny agenda - “comic relief” which was incorporated together with the development of this cultural performance; Wayang Kulit Kelantan

today idiosyncratically reflects the Malaysian culture from its linguistic and revealed elements.

Wayang Kulit Kelantan in Malaysia is threatened with imminent extinction. It was solitary time fairly widespread and popular in Kelantan which according to Amin Sweeney's research in the late 1960's confirmed the existence of more than 300 Dalangs (shadow puppeteer and storyteller)¹. However, the number decreased to 37 in 1982 and 11 in 1999. This may have happened due to the prohibition of Wayang Kulit performances (Fig.1) in Kelantan for its Un-Islamic fundamentals by political Parti SeIslam Malaysia (PAS) in 1991 which further worsened the situation.



Picture 1: Wayang Kulit Performances

Although the shadow play is an ancient art, it suffered downfall due to several factors including economic, political and cultural. Nevertheless, wayang kulit has found its own new ways of maintaining by adapting to the changing conditions. While emerging modern forms have replaced the classical style, eventhough artistically less impressive, such forms may eventually be the ones keeping the Malay shadow play alive. Therefore, this research would like to explore the meaning of semiotics and its influence among the Malay society through the use of wayang kulit or shadow play theatre. This will address some issues related to human, religion, universe and others in the context of social Malay society cultural behaviour.

2. Semiotics and Shadow Play Theatre

Per Aage BRANDT (2004) defines the Semiotics as a study of signs, their forms of expression and contents. The elements of linguistic and gestural signs are involved as the speaker-signer shows to the listener-observer by performing it, namely by his grammatically organized words and his accompanying movements of fingers, hand, arm,

¹ Malay Shadow Puppets. Amin Sweeney. The Trustees of the British Museum, 1972

trunk, and face (especially his eye movements), that an individual wants to direct his addressee’s attention to an item present to his mind. Icons photographs, drawings, and the like, and gestures, ‘draw’ the contours of things in the air to represent the things, events and their circumstances. In a sense, objects can be signs or just objects. In a typical shadow play environment, places in space, slots in time, the presence or absence of people, and configurations of situations or coincidences of events, they can all be signs (intentionally arranged) or just states of affairs (casually and causally occurring).

Writers of human history are semioticians of (mainly) collective signs that occur through specified time and space. The puppet world is massively semiotic, there are signs almost everywhere anytime, and it may be tempting. Therefore let semiotics be the science or study of everything about human but let us introduce a caveat: between the world of signs and the world of things (also called Nature) surrounding the former, there is a world of meaning that signs have sediment and sign users can presuppose, refer to, retrieve arguments from, find authority in, but equally be stopped or inhibited by trying to think out or work out new concepts, and that people therefore have felt to be a ‘second Nature’, namely the Cultural realm of reality.

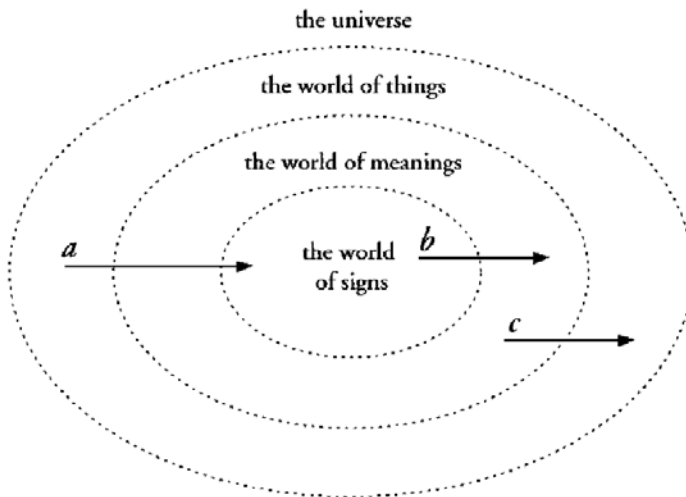


Fig. 1. The Per Aage BRANDT ‘Real Life’ Related to Real Life

The arrows *a*, *b*, and *c* in Per Aage BRANDT diagram shown in Fig 2., indicate different and very important processes at work simultaneously in the real ‘world’ we live in (shadow play theatre).

The *a* arrow in the natural world, human beings spontaneously and individually have intentions and cognitive experiences of representing, wondering, imagining, believing, remembering, fearing and hoping, in short: thinking and feeling, and they (we) continuously generate sign expressions of these contents, by which they (we) establish mental contact with other individuals equipped with similar minds (brains

and bodies). The question is why is the liveliness of the puppet seems strange? The word 'strange' or mysterious precisely happens when a dead thing looks really alive.

Tillis (1992) mentioned that to animate something means, giving a character the breath of life even though non-metaphorically puppet does not actually live. The shadow play itself is capable to mesmerize audience with the Dalang or puppeteer puppet handling, who is also able to communicate the narrative to audience for hours. So communication and signification spontaneously pop up from nature. The b arrow sign shows inter human contact sediments in the human habitat and slowly builds up as an 'art factual' or circumstantial sphere, a 'semiosphere' of habitual routines or conventional communicative behaviours that individuals share without knowing it and without being able to directly experience its presence. In wayang puppetry this sediment mass of echoes of other echoes of signs constitutes a layer of objectified 'meanings', distributed all over the surface of communication and divided into more or less distinguishable lumps and clouds the single known as 'cultures'.

Often, in puppet theatre, a puppet's character is conveyed by its expression to define meanings. Shadow play is a kind of drama in which silhouettes made of hard paper are projected onto a white screen. The performer manipulates the characters behind the screen while singing the libretto to tell the story in cultural semiotics.

Based on cultural semiotics, this mass of 'unconscious' or, rather, unintended and passively accumulated mass of 'used meanings', meaning that puppets and human take for granted', then rely on, then consult, comparing new phenomena to, is often stably structured and form time-resistant and locally describable blocs of interrelated sub meanings, that characterize the 'mentality' or 'imaginary' or 'style' of given cultures, and thus make cultural analysis possible. It can be assumed that culture, or historically rectified. Meaning, as a sort of underlying epistemic bloc, it is beamed by the constant phenomenological principles of elementary intelligibility in wayang puppetry. A puppet is, of course, an object, and, of course, one that is animated, or manipulated, and performed with.

The *c* arrow is culture, in this sense it covers almost the entire surface of nature in the modern world. But culture nevertheless sinks slowly back into the physical world, not only when a culture or language disappear, but it remains constantly as traces are left in our habitats, bodies, and offspring. The cultural ruins of ideas, norms, ritual meanings, and in general ways of understanding the world, for example (maybe prototypically) in the lexical part of natural languages, can then be recycled by new emergent intentional sign-making. These recycling practices are proudly called Traditions; in reality, they neither trade nor transmit much if anything, that is: anything else than the mere impression or feeling of intention left in the decorative but inert ruins as attractive traces, almost scents, ghostly shadows, of human presence as such.

Arrow *c* leads back to arrow *a*, so that a constant flow of social inscription (*c*) and individual appropriation (*a*) of meaning permeates Nature, Culture, and ourselves. As we refer to a general study of Signs, Meaning, and the human and physical nature in wayang kulit or shadow puppetry, signs and meanings has its own style. The perception of the puppet as "other" and the need for the audiences' complicity in giving the puppet "life" suggest that the puppet cannot really imitate life as we humans know it.

3. Theatrical Conventions of Wayang Kulit

The basic needs and facilities of a shadow play are screen, lamp, puppet and a handler in centre stage known as the *Dalang* or a puppeteer as shown in figure 2. The shadow play is a form of theatre in which images are two dimensional and with any single performance puppet manipulation techniques are combined in various proportions with narration and instrumental music. But, Wayang Siam is commonly believed to have been used as a propaganda device to spread Islam throughout Malay community.

The central figure in wayang kulit or shadow play theatre performance is master puppeteer. Apart from manipulating the puppets, he provides voices to all the characters in shadow play while simultaneously creating plots through the use of narration, dialogue or music. The puppeteer's prerogative and responsibility is to bring each and every figure to life. Since the audience know that the puppet is not really alive, a puppeteer has to bring life to the puppet. In a sense, the audience is as much the manipulator of the puppet as the puppeteer is.

The puppeteer, by means of his or her skill in performance, can make the invitation for the audience to invest. According to Cariad ASTLES (2009), Despite the puppeteers' so-called scenic 'invisibility', it signified semiotically in contemporary shadow theatre through several methods such as the wearing of 'blacks', covering the head with caps, not making eye contact with the audience, and so on. These actions are required for the dramatic purposes of the performance, to generate and transmit huge amounts of energy towards the inanimate figure, material or thing, to create a sense of presence beyond their own bodies.

Referring to Cariad's statement, it shows that the commitment and enthusiasm of a puppeteer providing hours of energy (mentally and physically) for entertainment purposes using puppets, music and narration to entertain such a large Malay society from various types of backgrounds. The puppeteer is like a leader or known as Sultan in Malay custom that each individual has to respect, obey and will be punished if defy. Here, the puppeteer himself as an icon with meaning. Malay tradition regards the Sultan as "sacred" because he possesses greater *semangat*, re-interpreted in terms of *daulat*, which means charisma, but given the cultural background of the Malays, it is certainly more than that.

The semiotics that is related to him between society and performances is entertaining and respectful. In order to achieve this, the puppeteer must therefore develop a dual mentality and purposes through training; neutrality within the body and expression through the manipulation of puppets or objects on stage such as shadow puppetry, with receiving and deflecting or directing energy. This essential dispersion of focus by the puppeteer towards several simultaneous actions clearly marks the difference between the play of the puppeteer and that of the actor'.

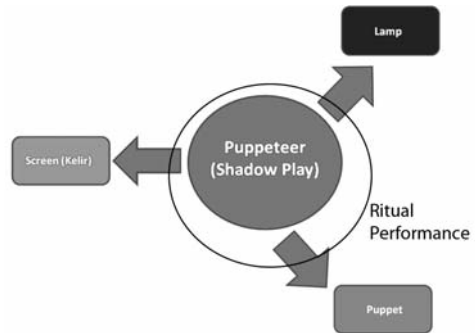


Fig. 2: The basic facilities required in the Traditional Shadow Play Entertainment

This *Kelir* is mounted on a wooden or metal frame in such a manner that it tilts inwards slightly, facing downwards to the Dalang. *Kelir* is usually completed with a decorated border, tassels or other decorative features. According to an interview with Dalang Eyo Hock Seng in Kelantan on January 2010, the *Kelir* is a symbol of the cosmology. The clean white cloth screen symbolizes the sky. The cloth separates mankind from the real world of the gods. The screen is his wall against their world. He teaches them but does not attend particularly to their response because he is able to control everything that is happening on his screen. It shows an expression of a higher world which influences him. It should only be touched by pressing the puppets towards it during battle scenes in order to show the correspondent's fighting effects and remain flat and calm throughout other scenes with mild occasional touches similar to visual effect which is not common to other Wayang Kulit Form. The *Kelir* itself is completely open in front of the panggung and is stretched with Muslin screen (*Kelir*) and on it shadows of the figures are projected and sometimes for an addition, decorative features of wayang kulit Siam troupe is displayed on the screen.

Here, the unique concept in Malay society is shown indirectly with the *Kelir* and *Panggung* concept of "togetherness" that has been taught in the religion of Islam and spectators are willing to sit on the grass in front of the *Panggung* at night to watch the shadow play projected. Night performances are held for auspicious occasions to promote good luck for the entire village and also serve to entertain the villagers.

The light source is a lamp suspended from the top roughly at the centre of screen reaching to about the height of the Dalang's face when he is doing his performance in his cross-legged sitting position. The oil lamp, which gives life and energy, represents the sun as semiotics. A single puppeteer (*dalang*) sits behind a shadow screen that is illuminated by oil lamp. In order to create visual effects, the performer swings the oil lamp. He manipulates the puppets, improvises the dialogue and gives voices to all of the puppets. The lamp is hold in position by a decorative wooden frame which is hanged by a string attached to the top of the border frame of the *Kelir*. The wooden frame also acted as a shield to prevent the direct glare and heat of the lamp falling onto the Dalang's face. Veteran wayang kulit fans think that the effect created by the oil lamp was aesthetically better-quality. It not only provides softer edged shadows to the *Kelir* but its gentle movements on the *Kelir* in concert with the flicker of the flame provided altogether a more pleasing appearance.

The metaphor behind the light is not meant only for the performances, but also it replicates the concept for Malay society to seek knowledge and guidance from the one above. Here it refers to god which is (Allah SWT).

Dalang Seri Neng Buah said during an interview with the author, that light source should only be moved intentionally when there are no movements of the actual puppets during the performance, where several of the puppets are only placed diagonally on the *Kelir*. The movement of light source will give an impression of very diminutive movements of the characters which was placed on the *Kelir* from the audiences' view.

This visual style is also not seen in other Wayang Kulit forms. Wayang Kulit Siam puppet figures came from pre-Islamic Java with the spread of the proto-wayang kulit purwa itself from Java to the northern part of Peninsula Malaysia and the present de-

signs represent revolutionized designs with the integration of indigenous Malay and Thai influences. We have to take into account the scale of the puppet, what functions it needs to manage, its character, and its scale, in relationship to the world around it. A basic Wayang Kulit Kelantan set consists of 65-120 puppets representing the principal characters from the Ramayana.

Puppets are the human in a society. They represent the audience who come to watch a shadow play show. They might come from low, middle or upper group status. In wayang puppetry, the synonym groups are identical. For instance, Sita Dewi and Seri Rama originated from the upper group compared to Pak Dogol or Wak Long who are the opposite of it. The puppets are different in size; the shorter ones stand about six to nine inches in height while the taller one can be up to 36 inches high. Typically, the figure of the noble or refine characters such as heroes and heroines (Seri Rama, Laksamana, Sita Dewi, Sirat Maharaja etc.) are slim and tall whereas those of the rougher or coarser characters such as the villain Rawana, Indrajit and the ogre characters are large and bulky.

Colour symbolism or shape semiotics is used within the puppet design, especially in the case of noble characters: - Seri Rama is always painted in green; Laksamana pink or orange; Sirat Maharaja is yellow while Hanuman is white. These colours are derived from Hindu religious symbolism. The principal noble characters are carved so that they stand upon a boat-or-dragon-shaped “vehicle”. Noble characteristic defines the shapes in puppets figure such as slit or almond shaped eyes, bowed head, long pointed nose, no facial hair, little finery, no teeth showing, narrow stance (distance that feet are apart) and slim shapes such as Sita Dewi, Seri Rama or Hanuman shown in Fig 3. Evil characteristics can be seen in Wayang Kulit Siam’s puppets such as bulging eyes, defiant angled head, bulbous nose, facial hair, showy finery, bared fangs, wide stance (distance that feet are apart) fatter, bulgy shapes such as Bhota, Raja Bali and Ravana. Colours can be applied by puppet makers without much thought or consideration.

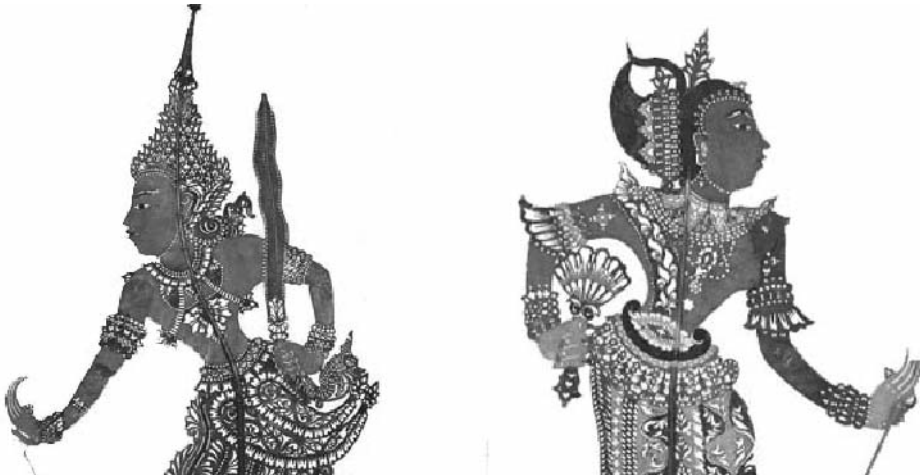


Fig. 3: The Characteristic shape of Noble puppet design and semiotics relationship in Wayang Siam Puppetry

The ogres in wayang puppetry are also designed with particular reason. The ogres are usually decorated with red faces based on a belief derived from the Holy Quran, which giants or ogres (jinn) originated from fire [12]. Apart from their size or bulk, refined or coarse characters are identifiable from the shapes and sizes of their nose, mouth, eye, the length of their fingernails and their overall stances. Both feet of each character point in the same direction. Most Wayang Kulit Kelantan characters have a single articulated arm especially for the main figures such as Seri Rama, Laksamana, Sita Dewi and Sirat Maharaja (Fig. 3). However, comic characters such as Pak Dogol and Wak Long have both articulated arms, and some have movable legs, jaws and eyebrows. The Dalang or puppeteer may use up to 90 puppets in one performance in Wayang Kulit Siam. It is no wonder that the dalang is not only a respected and skilled artist, but is also thought to have a special spiritual dimension.

The *Pohon Beringin* or *Gunungan* puppet figure in Wayang Kulit Siam or Kelantan is very important. It is the symbol of the cosmos and Tree of Life and marks the beginning and the end of a performance. This semiotic approach used in wayang kulit Siam appears in a variety of style and some were designed of entirely trees without depiction on them or other life forms. Typically, the *Gunungan* is a highly ornate, intricately carved tree or leaf shaped as shown in Fig 4. The higher half shows the branches of a tree where birds, monkeys, insects and snakes placed among them. The semiotic essence shown is the relationship between god and universe.



Fig. 4: The Gunungan shows the semiotics related between universe and god

The Gunungan itself represents the amount of life, with various creatures carved upon it, symbolising various level of creations. Animals for instance are representative of the lower creation, human being symbolised by the bird that is God's highest creation. The image of the soul as bird is central to the tradition belief of the Malays,

much of Malay shamanistic practice and its rituals and symbols reflecting this conception. According to GHULAM SARWAR (2004), *Gunungan* becomes a symbol of the manifested world, the microcosm. It provides a spiritual dimension; a path guarded by two giants who represents higher mysteries of the puppeteer-cum-God.

The metaphor opened to individual who overcomes obstacles confronting this world symbolised by various creatures in *Gunungan*. Patricia MATUSKY (1997) mentioned that the Pohon Beringin or *Gunungan* in wayang puppetry act as a mediator between good and evil elements.

The semiotic element in *Gunungan* is much appreciated by the puppeteers during and after performances as a sign of the beginning of the universe and the end of the world. Thus, it is very important for us to know that shadow play theatre is not just an ordinary performing theatre, but it has strong significance (relationship) between human, god and universe. The *Gunungan* in the Malay tradition encapsulates the essence in wayang puppetry, reflecting phenomena and objects in natural world.

Before the advent of the Indian cultural influence, the traditional theatre was animistic based and served as a mean of communication between the community and the spirits of the nether world. From its ritualistic beginnings, traditional Malay theatre is influenced by Hinduism and Islam. With the advent of Islam into Southeast Asia, a phenomenon for the commencement of dating from the 11th to 14th centuries have been indicated, various forms of cultural expression from the Middle and Near-East found their way into the region. Following various forms including semiotics of what is loosely termed animism, Hinduism and Buddhism, and that despite the overwhelming acceptance of Islam, influences from the previous religious and spiritual experiences continue to be significant to this day, albeit sublimated, in, at times, uncomfortable situations of assimilation or accommodation.

This is particularly evident in traditional rites and ceremonies, as well as in the performing arts such as shadow play theatre. The *berjamu* for instance (or feasting the spirits) is always a very costly event in terms of preparation of foods and other materials as well as the emotional and spiritual act done by the Dalang.

The question is, does each item prepared in context of ritualistic manner come with a symbolic meaning? In Roland BARTHES's "Rhetoric of The Image", he explained the denotation and connotation distinguishing the literal and symbolism between visual and communication such as shadow play theatre itself. For example, before the performance, the Dalang Tua (elder puppeteer) performs the buka panggung or opening ceremony of shadow play performance by chanting prayers (communicating) and making offerings (visual) of nasi kunyit (yellow rice), dadih (rice cakes), air tawar (consecrated water), several coins and Gula Melaka (palm sugar).

Each item used in the form of semiotics or literal messages in wayang puppetry world, can be depicted as offerings to good and evil spirits by paying his respect to mighty powers of the universe that consist of earth, air, water and fire that are assuring the performers good intention and request from the spirits to protect both the performers and the audience. The audience perceives and listens to the literal messages while interpreting the Dalang ritual performance. At the end of the ceremony, he invites them to partake in the feast. The cultural audience especially the Malay society

beliefs and cultural understanding are also involved in particularizing the symbolic (connoted) meaning, therefore becoming an active or believer spectator towards the wayang puppet entertainment.

4. Semiotics and Impact - Malay Society

Malay society had experienced several changes in several aspects of its basic cultural pattern. The meeting of Malay and other cultures is the main process which caused this to happen. Abdul Maulud YUSOF (1986) described Malay society as classic peasantry during colonial times, but before the arrival of the west empowers, The Malay society was basically entrepreneurs and seafarers who conducted trading in the Indian Ocean and China seas.

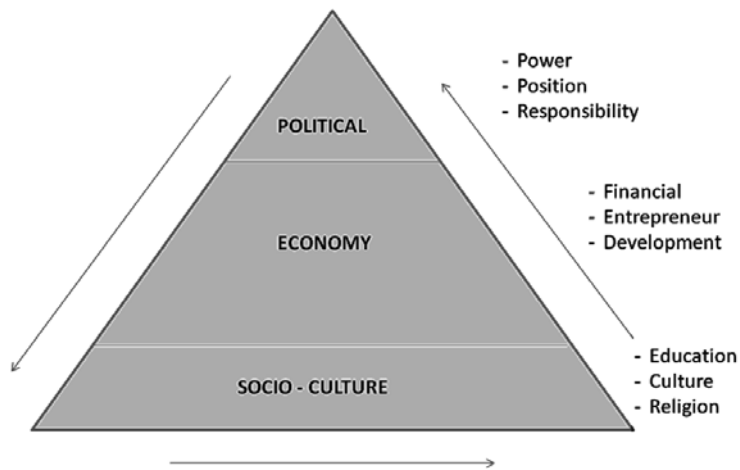


Fig. 5: The Malay Society Today's Impact From Wayang Kulit Semiotics

One of the facts is that the largest political party which had been governing the country draws its support and membership from rural and peasant Malays. In wayang puppetry, the semiotic of puppeteer relates to the support given by the audience. As long as the puppeteer performs, the community will always support.

The same goes to Malay society today and it is proven. For example, Timbalan (deputy) Ketua Kampung (Chief of the Village) will learn and assist Ketua Kampung (Chief of the Village) in carrying out his duty. Sultan is the leader for every state in Malaysia. Also, the Prime Minister and many other Ministers holds a portfolio and mostly are elected among the Malay society. Also, The Yang Dipertuan Agong (King) is selected from Sultan's descendent.

Puppet semiotics in wayang puppetry can be elucidated in related scenario by referring to Seri Rama puppet character. If hero prince Seri Rama is painted in green, the official color for royal (King or Sultan) in Malaysia is yellow. Seri Rama's dress colour and ornaments on the puppet vary greatly, with the noble characters always wearing clothing highly filigreed with gold paint. In Malaysia, if a King attends an official *Istana* (palace) function, the King will need to wear similar concept that is used

to dress wayang puppets colour dress and ornaments. The semiotics in relationship between icon and figure are stated clearly and until today this tradition is still being practiced. In other words, the Malay community respects and honour this practice by obeying to their leader as been taught by Islam religion and also as the *masyarakat peribumi* or people originating from the country (Malaysia). The Malay society are described as hardworking, humble and also a patriotic race, and this can be described indirectly by the means of puppets performed by the Dalang.

Each puppets movement slide between the screen (kelir) with slow or fast rhythm depending on the narration and handling of the puppets, and this indicates the Malay aura and personality. For example, the semiotics in *Pohon Beringin* puppet placed in the middle before each performance shows that everything starts from the heart or neutral. If the *Pohon Beringin* puppet moves in a fast momentum, it shows that a battle that is about to begin. Until today, the beauty of moral and heartening society is still shown among the Malay society. The social lifestyle may be seen in at least two very broad styles of existence, city life with technology based urban environment (modern building, gadgets, and vehicle) and country life with foundations in an agriculture-based rural dependent on rice (padi) cultivation, rubber, palm oil and this dichotomy has reflected the economy values.

The emergence of the *makan gaji* (salaried jobs) in economic environment mentality during colonial times becomes strongly embedded in the value system. During post independence period; the Malays had some difficulties changing into another vocation such as entrepreneurship. In an interview with Prof GHULAM SARWAR in 2010, he described the reason of why wayang kulit is slowly dying is because of economic factor. Earlier observers of Malay society indicated that poverty among the Malays was partly due to this social value, that is, the preference of educated Malays to become government servants or salaried workers. From economic standpoint, involvement in traditional art activity or popular culture did not provide reasonable income. It did not attract the young people to get involved. This can be explained in terms of semiotics available again from puppeteer believes to communicate with spirits before, during and after each performance.

The puppeteer is willing to provide various types of offering to seek protection from evil spirits. The spirits can be depicted as *makan gaji* (salary earn) perception, even in reality as a normal human, would not be able to see or believed. And as long as spirit protects, the puppeteer will provide all the necessary requirement or reward. Today, many Malay individuals are willing to involve in self employment and also some are already successful entrepreneurs compared to the previous *makan gaji* phenomena. The format on playing wayang kulit contains lots of entertainment and education essence in the stories passed down from the old folks and is a legend to the Malay society. Ritual performance, puppets movement, speech, songs, background music, and visual are all important elements in the playing format for the performance. As a solo actor, Dalang plays a lot of character in a single show, acting as part of the story, dialogue, singing and as a group leader in the show. The Dalang is also capable of playing most of the musical instrument, becoming a good reference for ritual performance and also as a shaman or bomoh that helps to contribute to the society.

According to SHAHNON (2004)², knowledge that is gained will be cultivated, gathered and mixed to create a quality performance. The Malay society frequently believes that the play conducted by the Dalang is self improvise. Even though the play is based on improvising, but it is a guided improvisation. The *Dalang* acted spontaneously towards unexpected situation while the show is on and improvise towards the actions vocally and physically.

The guided *Dalang* technique is still being followed and passed down from generation to generation until today. Ramayana epic helped to mold concepts of state and kingship in Malaysia. The epic probably reached Malaysia with the help of Javanese traders who brought their shadow play, or Wayang Kulit. Many changes developed in the Malay version of Ramayana and those changes depended upon the local traditions and politics. Religious beliefs also influenced these changes since the Malays were followers of Islam. There are literary and folktale versions of Ramayana for shadow play theatre in Malaysia. The Hikayat Seri Rama exists in both written and oral form, and the Wayang Kulit Siam is a shadow play from Kelantan which is located near the border of Malaysia and Thailand (Siam). The *Ramayana* in Malaysia is used more for entertainment and social education rather than for spiritual or religious purposes.

Kelantan is strongly Islamic, but it is also the main base for the Malay shadow puppet theatre. The main purpose of the *Hikayat Seri Rama* play is to show the ideals of righteousness, love, loyalty, and selfless devotion. This Malay version has combined elements of the Indian Sanskrit Ramayana with local traditions and beliefs to create a highly developed story which is popular among Malay society. Most of the Kelantan Dalangs (shadow puppet puppeteers) are Muslims. For example, the 52-year-old Eyo, who is from Chetok, is also a wayang kulit master and is one of the state's top Tok Dalang (puppeteers) who has performed to packed crowds in Kelantan and Kuala Lumpur. He is the only non-Malay Tok dalang in Kelantan and probably the whole country and he is fluent in Chinese-Hokkien and he maintains the beliefs and practices of his Chinese ancestors who sailed across the South China Sea in the early 19th century to settle in Kelantan.

The wayang (shadow play) is disliked by the conservative Muslims in Malay society. They criticize the rituals and practices associated with the art which appear to them is prohibited in Islam. The religious conservatives are also concerned with the effect that the music has on the people and the Dalang during the performance.

The Malays do not give the impression of accepting the Hindu/Buddhist concepts of *dharma*, *karma*, and *moksha* of the hero Rama. They only view him as a righteous and virtuous model for mankind. With these traits he was able to triumph over evil. When comparing the *Sanskrit Ramayana* and the *Hikayat Seri Rama*, they basically contribute to the basic universal theme of goodness, righteousness, and justice. Overall wayang kulit entertainment needs to be aware that wayang is in a state of continual flux. Its origins are obscure, and its destination perhaps vague, but there are interesting things happening today and in the recent past that will always be remembered.

² [Online Resource] : <http://www.shahnon.com/shadowplay/design.htm>

5. Conclusion

Wayang Kulit or shadow play puppet theatre today is both the most ancient and most popular form of puppet theatre in the world. It has given an impact towards the socio-culture lifestyle of the Malay society. Dalang Eyo Hock Seng in an interview quoted “The beauty of the past is that it is the past. The beauty of now is to know it. The beauty of the future is to see where one is going.” The Malay society today can be proud of the culture and start thinking of becoming a developed human race towards the growth of the country by learning from wayang kulit influence. Hopefully, the generation of today will always preserve and appreciate this attractive performing arts heritage in future.

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