



Kelantan Arts and Islamic Tourism

Kelantan is a land with colourful traditions and scenic beauty. Not only popular for its natural attraction, cuisine and shopping heaven, it is also known as the birthplace of some ancient Malay cultural arts in Malaysia such as *Wayang Kulit* (shadow puppet show), *Mak Yong*, *Menora*, *Dikir Barat* and others. These performing arts are not only popular in Malaysia, especially in east coast states such as Kelantan and Terengganu but have been recognized internationally. Some of the cultural arts such as *Mak Yong* and *Wayang Kulit* have been recognized by UNESCO and are an important part of the cultural tourism industry. Due to the prohibition of performing arts such as *Mak Yong* and *Wayang Kulit* when PAS came into power in 1990, these performing arts faced extinction.

Islamic elements in traditional performing art (*Wayang Kulit*)

Wayang Kulit is a unique theatre form that uses the principle of light and shadow to bring its characters to life, depicted by intricate beautiful hand-crafted puppets. The master puppeteer (*Tok Dalang*), is the only one responsible to make the wayang alive by controlling the movements of the puppets and provide each one with a different voice, and at times, to sing. When PAS came into power in 1990 in the state of Kelantan, *Wayang Kulit* and *Mak Yong* have been banned due to elements and beliefs from Hinduism and Buddhism that contrary to Islam. Due to that, these performing arts faced extinction. The ban was later uplifted with strict guidelines and performances were prescribed to comply with Syariah.

Despite the issues, historically *Wayang Kulit* performances have gone through the Islamisation process. Professor Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, a distinguished scholar and one of the world's leading specialists in traditional Southeast Asian theatre in his research highlight the significant element of Islamic culture that has shaped Malay and Indonesian traditional theatre. *Wayang Kulit* is believed to

be existed in East-Asian countries, especially Java prior to the 10th century. Following the coming of Islam on the island in the 11th century, this art was threatened with extinction due to elements of animism, Hinduism and Buddhism that contradict the belief in Islam. It was the role of *Wali Songo* (nine saints) in the 15th century, especially Sunan Kalijaga and Sunan Bonang that reversed the trend. Instead of suffering death, *Wayang Kulit* became greatly popular and experienced “the most artistic transformation” that aligned with Islamic values. According to Professor Ghulam, through the spread of Islamic teaching from Java to East Coast Malaysia as well as Southern Thailand which all three countries were previously known as Malay Archipelago (*Nusantara*), it is believed that puppeteers of *Wayang Kulit* Siam and *Wayang Kulit* Kelantan too were influenced with Islamic values from *Wayang Kulit* Java. Sunan Kalijaga was tolerant of local tradition when applying arts and culture as a medium for his *dakwah*. He believed that people would run away from *dakwah* if their personality and their way of life is questioned. Due to that, he considered a step-by-step approach to using local arts to influence local people toward Islam. To him, if Islam is truly and fully understood, then people will gradually give up their old habits. His approach was proven successful when *Wayang Kulit* was considered the key success in the spread of Islam in the archipelago, especially in Java.

During the Islamisation process of these arts, Sunan Kalijaga made alterations through physical changes to the figures of the characters, the reinterpretation of traditional plots, the creation of the new story and lastly making the performance available to Javanese Muslim communities. As a consequence, the transformation process of the traditional theatre turned to serve as a vehicle for the propagation (*dakwah*) of Islam. Reinterpretation from the traditional plot to suit Islam so that the shadow play is acceptable to the Muslim community. Shadow play entitled *Wahyu Nugroho*, as an extension from *Mahabharata* (Hindu epic) was created by several involvements of *Wali Songo* (nine saints), particularly Sunan Kalijaga. In this show, the Pandawa brothers, heroes of the *Mahabharata*, five in number, were interpreted symbolically as the five fundamental principles (*rukun*) or pillars of Islam. Sunan Kalijaga himself performed as the puppeteer, using different names in different districts to suit the local culture. The interpretation given by the nine saints to the *Wayang Kulit* is particularly interesting. The *Wayang Kulit* show is seen as a symbol that reflects the “image of law” or shari’ah. “The wayang reflects all humanity, the puppeteer (*dalang*) corresponds to Allah, Creator of the universe.” Another reinterpretation from the original frameworks of the Hindu epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* is *Cerita Jimat Kalima Sada* (*Cerita Azimat Kalimah Shahadah*). This story is about a weapon or charm (*jimat*, *azimat*) named *Kalima Sada*, and when one possesses this weapon, he or she will be safe forever. *Kalimah Shahadah* is, of course, the Muslim affirmation of faith that means accepting Allah as the one and only God, and Muhammad is His last prophet and messenger. Thus the character of Pundatewa (local java name) as Yudhistira (name in Hindu epic), the eldest of the five Pandawa brothers does not die because he possesses

this charm. His end finally comes when he has clearly understood the meaning of the *jimat* (*azimat*) that he attains freedom. The moral of the story is no matter how low one’s position or status is in life, he or she can become ennobled and highly respected with the ownership of *Kalimah Shahadah*.

Way Forward

Arts and cultural activities have long been considered as important elements that spur not only the tourism industry but also educational platforms and excellent mediums for propagating values and religion, especially Islam. For that reason, the conservation of this cultural heritage is essential as a symbol of the identity of the Malays. In order to do that, it is wise that performing artists as well as enforcement authorities to work together on the reinterpretation of the work of art. Recently, performing artists in Kelantan take the initiative to incorporate Islamic values into their artistic activities. As an artist, their creativity to improvise their artworks to be in line with Islamic teaching and values would help preserve this cultural heritage from facing demise.

Awareness and knowledge of the origins, development and philosophical meaning behind these ancient artistic performances will provide better understanding and evaluation. Only with proper knowledge and a broader understanding of the meaning both literally and symbolically can these forms of art be preserved and appreciated. To instill actual values of Islam in these arts in various forms demand all parties involved to understand Islam in a real way. By doing so, the audience can see the beauty and perfection of Islam behind the art performances. Finally, continued appreciation of these art forms not only provides preservation of our cultural heritage, but it is also a platform to spur tourism and is no less important as an excellent medium of *dakwah*.



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