

Cultural and aesthetic influences in the formation of Kelantanese Wayang Kulit characters: a visual analysis

Pengaruh budaya dan estetika dalam pembentukan karakter Wayang Kulit Kelantan: analisis visual

Mat Redhuan Samsudin^{1*}, Roziani Mat Nashir @ Mohd Nasir¹,
Nani Hartina Ahmad¹ & Arif Ardy Wibowo²

¹Faculty of Art & Design, MARA University of Technology (UiTM)

²Communication Department, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan

Address: ¹Kelantan Branch, Machang 18500, Malaysia

²Kapas No. 9, Semaki, Umbulharjo, Yogyakarta, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55166, Indonesia

E-mail: redhuansamsudin@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract

Kelantan Wayang Kulit is a traditional art form that embodies the cultural, aesthetic, and symbolic values of the local Malay community. As a form of shadow theatre, it merges narrative, music, and visual aspects, serving as a significant channel for expressing cultural and ethical values. This research seeks to examine the impact of culture and aesthetics on the design development of key characters in Kelantan Wayang Kulit like Seri Rama, Siti Dewi, Maharaja Wana, and Pak Dogol. Employing a qualitative method via visual analysis and semi-structured interviews, this research explores design features like shapes, lines, colors, and motifs that represent the social status, moral values, and cultural identity of the Kelantan community. The results indicate that the character designs are shaped by multiple external factors, including Thai culture and Hindu-Buddhist epics, yet they have been adapted according to local values through dialects, natural motifs, and Malay-Islamic aesthetic principles. Characters like Pak Dogol embody the people's wisdom through straightforward visual representation. This research highlights that Kelantan Wayang Kulit is more than a cultural heritage; it is also a vibrant and significant medium of visual communication. These results are significant in initiatives to protect and value traditional art, as well as to motivate modern visual art inspired by cultural heritage.

Keywords: character design; Kelantan Wayang Kulit; local culture; traditional art heritage; visual aesthetics

Abstrak

Wayang Kulit Kelantan adalah bentuk seni tradisional yang mewujudkan nilai-nilai budaya, estetika, dan simbolik masyarakat Melayu setempat. Sebagai bentuk teater bayangan, ia menggabungkan aspek naratif, musik, dan visual, yang berfungsi sebagai saluran penting untuk mengekspresikan nilai-nilai budaya dan etika. Penelitian ini berupaya untuk mengkaji dampak budaya dan estetika terhadap pengembangan desain karakter kunci dalam Wayang Kulit Kelantan seperti Seri Rama, Siti Dewi, Maharaja Wana, dan Pak Dogol. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif melalui analisis visual dan wawancara semi-terstruktur, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi fitur desain seperti bentuk, garis, warna, dan motif yang mewakili status sosial, nilai-nilai moral, dan identitas budaya masyarakat Kelantan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa desain karakter dibentuk oleh berbagai faktor eksternal, termasuk budaya Thailand dan epos Hindu-Budha, namun telah diadaptasi dengan nilai-nilai lokal melalui dialek, motif alam, dan prinsip-prinsip estetika Melayu-Islam. Karakter seperti Pak Dogol, sebaliknya, mewujudkan kearifan masyarakat melalui representasi visual yang lugas. Studi ini menyoroti bahwa Wayang Kulit Kelantan lebih dari sekadar warisan budaya, ia juga merupakan media komunikasi visual yang dinamis dan signifikan. Hasil ini penting dalam inisiatif untuk melindungi dan menghargai seni tradisional serta memotivasi seni visual modern yang terinspirasi oleh warisan budaya.

Kata Kunci: desain karakter; Wayang Kulit Kelantan; budaya lokal; warisan seni tradisional; estetika visual

Introduction

One of the most important traditional performance arts within Malay culture is Wayang Kulit, which is native to Kelantan. Wayang Kulit blends music, narrative, and visual presentation in the form of a shadow play. Storytelling is a medium for passing on cultural legacy and heritage from one generation to

the other, rather than being only for entertainment (Rentse 1936, Shukri et al. 2025). The show features a puppeteer who serves as the narrator and character manipulator, as well as providing the background score, which makes it a very complex intermingled art form.

Kelantan Wayang Kulit features distinctive characters in terms of their appearance and meaning (Yusof 2023). In addition to storytelling, they embody the cultural values and beliefs of multiple communities. It is in the visuals, in the clothes and how they all move that there is established the Malay Kelantan view of the world and social structuring, including the accepted norms. This personality is very important when it comes to learning about certain aspects of the local culture. The Islamic and Hindu cultures and local myths, along with the neighboring cultures from India and Thailand, have made the character design of Wayang Kulit itself unique and diverse (Yunita 2020). The incorporation of culture in such performances adds depth and artistic beauty to these acts.

Wayang Kulit Kelantan is undoubtedly a prominent and integral part of culture, music, and folklore (Ghani 2012). Previous research relates to the history of the show itself, its musical structure and the narrative found in the Wayang Kulit performance. But one unfortunate mistake that researchers have made has been to overlook some of the X factor visually speaking, particularly the design of the Wayang Kulit characters (Hui & Abdullah 2024). This has created something of a muddle around this type of performing art regarding its global importance and, specifically, the visual and artistic attributes that make it unique.

The characters that are present in Kelantan Wayang Kulit are not mere decorations or symbols (Sharulnizam et al. 2024). They carry the weight of heavy cultural rituals. Yet the general absence of such detailed data in systematic studies about how culture and aesthetics have impacted upon the character design processes mean that while these visual elements are present, they remain difficult to record and seek out. Current studies are still too general and do not specify the visual features such as bodily form, decorative composition, coloration or the symbolic details related to the values and beliefs they are connected to (Yusof & Khor 2017). The Hinduism, Islam and Thai cultures have a huge influence on the Kelantan shadow puppets' character design (Nugroho et al. 2019).

Modernization and globalization have significantly impacted the longevity of these traditional visual values (Arifin 2017, Prahmana et al. 2025). Numerous visual aspects employed to represent local values have been modified or updated without proper documentation, thus eroding their cultural significance. Lack of preservation efforts, including systematic academic and visual records, has caused this important aspect to be forgotten by future generations.

This research aims to explore the culture's artistic impact on the development of Kelantan Wayang Kulit characters. Specifically, it seeks to analyze the impact and aesthetic value of the conventional culture that the figurines of shadow plays engage in. This study analyses the major visual aspects, such as form, line, color, and motifs, which differentiate each character. The study also investigates the customs and traditional Kelantanese culture, and analyzes the visual elements which represent, portray, and symbolize their beliefs and customs. Such an approach enables a better understanding of the visuals in Wayang Kulit.

This research is crucial to increasing the public understanding of traditional visual arts, which are declining in popularity due to modernization and global influence. Through the analysis and interpretation of cultural and aesthetic elements that are components of this traditional form, research facilitates the community in appreciating heritage that is often marginalized. The findings of this study enable us to appreciate the rich historical context of Malaysian art in novel ways, underscoring the significance of preserving intangible cultural heritage.

The findings of this study serve as a crucial guide. They provide educators, heritage experts, and legislators with the information necessary to promote a thriving long-term culture. It also provides graphic designers, painters, and entertainers with innovative concepts through the application of traditional aesthetics and a particular narrative. This research integrates traditional methods along with modern ones through an interdisciplinary approach. This promotes new ideas that are rooted in cultural heritage. In addition, this research significantly improves the academic records related to Malaysia's visual heritage. It fills a void in the academic writing and encourages wider cultural discussion by presenting local perspectives. By protecting and reinterpreting traditional art forms, this research promotes national identity and cultural pride.

Wayang Kulit is regarded as one of the oldest traditional performing art forms in Malaysia. Some scholars suggest that its origin can be traced from the 13th to 15th centuries, and that it was significantly shaped by ancient Javanese and Siamese (Thai) Wayang. As noted by Nor (1993), Wayang Kulit Kelantan is a stylistic performance and has undergone sufficient transformation to be considered its own. The Malay population residing in Kelantan initiates this performance, which is often done during social gatherings, religious functions, and the dissemination of moral and educational messages. Despite societal contemporary advancements, Wayang Kulit Kelantan is still preserved as a vital component of culture, particularly in the countryside.

As referenced by Setiawan (2020), the culture of a people is reflected in the narrative, characters, dialogues, music, and even the symbols of the visual design of a Wayang Kulit Kelantan. The characters of Seri Rama and Sita Dewi are taken from the classic story Ramayana and are tailored to suit the customs and belief systems of the people (Yousof 2023). The tale incorporates elements of Islam, Malay tradition, and even farming (Wright 1981, Grabar 2024). The use of the Kelantan dialect, the names of the characters from the region, and the social values of patriotism, courage, fidelity, and sage wisdom indicate the linkage of the art to the culture of the region (Sheppard 1972). The narrative architecture and performance are interwoven with Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, animism, and Malay perspectives.

The Wayang Kulit figures demonstrate the application of artistic principles and attributes such as line, form, color, balance, and rhythm (Nugroho et al. 2019). Each character is created in two dimensions and is intricately detailed, being carved on tanned cowhide. As noted earlier by Rahim (2010), the application of curvilinear lines, plants, and some geometrical shapes is often used to depict the refinement and class of a character's rank in society. Red is used to symbolize a fiery character or an anger, while black symbolizes an evil power, and gold shows greatness or divinity (Prakoso 2024). The way each character is created and depicted shows rank and their relation to the social hierarchy. Their roles in the story reflect the traditional Malay aesthetics of order and equilibrium.

In Wayang Kulit Kelantan, the four primary characters are the protagonist (hero), antagonist, sidekick, and jester. While the protagonist is Seri Rama, who is seen as a wise and perfect hero, Rawana serves as the malevolent and arrogant antagonist. The jester sidekicks Pak Dogol, and Wak Long serves a unique purpose. They exist in the liminal space between fiction and reality and synthesize humor, social critique, and moral instruction. Each figure serves a special purpose and holds unique symbolism. For example, Hanuman represents loyalty and courage. From this classification, it is evident that the performance was created using a dual narrative framework that is fundamental in storytelling, that of good versus evil (Sweeney 1972).

Visual Culture Theory relates to the interpretation of images and events in relation to culture and society (Hidajat & Ramadani 2021). Visual images in ethnocentric cultures cannot be treated as representation only; they are the very essence of meaning and identity as a social creature (Hui & Abdullah 2024, Shukri et al. 2025). In Kelantan Wayang Kulit, drawing a character is not merely an artistic venture but indicative of a worldview, a social order, and the beliefs of a society. The design theory of Donis Dondis (1973) broadened the scope to include the structural elements of communication in visual form and the impact of design elements on perception and imagination. From this angle, the design of the Kelantan Wayang Kulit characters is an elaborate integration of form, theme, color, and composition, and illustrates deep cultural values.

Before this study, some scholars have already looked at Kelantan Wayang Kulit. Matusky (2024) conducted an analysis of the music and performance pieces, while Noor (2002) investigated the role of the narrative and history present in the performance. From the fine art point of view, Naziree (1998) investigates the traditional art of shadow puppetry for its aesthetics. Most of these studies have not attempted to explore the blend of contemporary culture and aesthetics in the rendering of the Kelantan Wayang Kulit characters. This study seeks to fill this void by applying the theory of visual culture to conduct a more sophisticated visual analysis.

This study focuses on two primary theories, Visual Culture Theory by Evans & Hall (1999) and Visual Aesthetic Theory by Leder & Augustin (2004). Mirzoeff (1999) pointed out the cultural and social significance of images and visual objects through the concept of Visual Aesthetic Theory. In Wayang Kulit Kelantan, the character design results from the region's cultural transformation under the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, culminating in a visual representation. At the same time, the application of Visual Aesthetic theory serves to characteristically analyze the application of shape, line, texture, color, balance, and the design principles from the perspective of the character design. This study is an adaptation of the two theories as conceptualized in Figure 1.

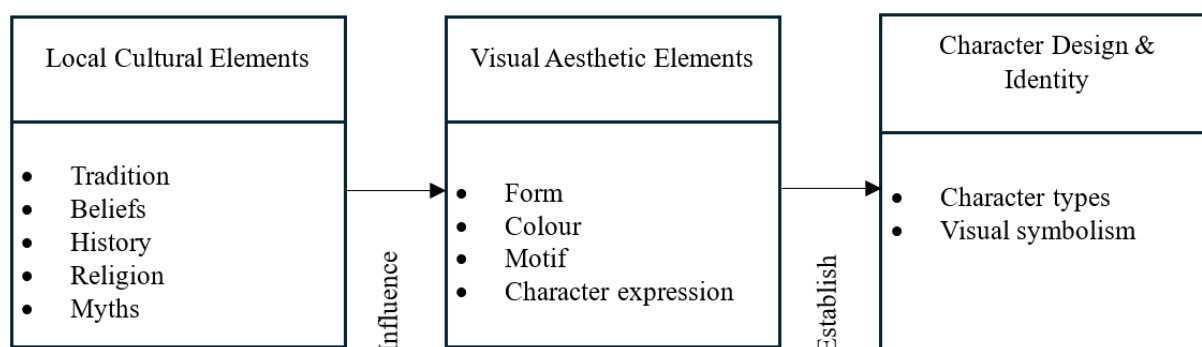


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework
Source: Created by the author

The figures from Wayang Kulit Kelantan are derived from the blending of the culture, social frameworks, and aesthetic paradigms of a given civilization. Culture offers a story, a metaphor system, and a symbolic system, while aesthetics focus on the visual design and interpretation of the work (Setiawan 2020). The culture aspect determines the setting and character dynamics. For instance, 'Seri Rama' epitomizes the archetype of a Malay hero. The purpose and identity of the characters are accented through the application of balance, contrast, and rhythm, which are aesthetic constituents.

This manner aids us in grasping the integration of culture, aesthetics, and character creation, and the ways in which they support each other. Culture imbues meaning into a work of visual art, and aesthetics does the opposite; it embodies cultural ethos in an observable form (Wang 2024). With these two concepts, it is possible to analyze how cultural aspects are portrayed in the costumes and make-up of Kelantan Wayang Kulit characters, together with the role these characters play in the transmission and conservation of cultural values amongst the audience. The application of technology in designing the shadow puppets and batiks should be seen as an effort to conserve cultural values (Widyani 2020).

Wayang Kulit Kelantan is a folk art that reflects the local culture. Of tremendous importance is the etiquette of the Kelantan people, who admire vernacular respects like obeying social norms, collaboration, and meriting their elders. People frequently act and interact in accordance with these norms, even if they do not openly admit it. This is precisely true for Pak Dogol, a comedian who represents the folk wisdom of the common man.

Islam and indigenous beliefs are some of the most prominent cultural influences of shadow puppet performances (Yunita 2020). The story is based on Hindu epics like the Ramayana but adapted to fit the Islamic customs of Kelantan. The characters Seri Rama and Sita Dewi are retained but are Islamized. The portions of the story that pertain to worship and rituals are greatly reduced or eliminated. At the same time, primitive Islamic symbols, some spirits, and legends highlight the uniqueness of local culture (Wright 1981).

Through the shadow puppet performance, folk stories and local history become accessible to the wider community (Noorzeha et al. 2022). Fantastic fictional and local tales such as the Young God are added onto the central epic story as modifications. These storytelling sessions are not purely for enjoyment; they help the youth learn about their identity. These local cultural factors elevate the Kelantan shadow puppets beyond solely being an art display. They are turned into an intricate showcase of the shared identity of the people.

The intricate visual effects of Kelantan perform artistry are the key visual hook for the audience that grabs their attention (Hui & Abdullah 2024). Shapes, colors, and lines as mentioned by Ayuswantana et al. (2021) are some of the elements which form the characters, which are carefully and artfully crafted. Lines are very important as they form the shape and detail of the facial features and garments. The clothes and character's features can be expressed through soft and gentle rounded lines or stronger, sharper and pointed lines. Through shadow theatre, forms are expressed in an unrealistic manner. For example, large heads and curved noses. Color is very important as well. Valiant characters are gold and white themed, while villains, comical characters, and supernatural beings are black, crimson, or green.

Balance, harmony, and contrast are major elements in the design of Kelantan shadow puppets (Hui & Abdullah 2024). Symmetry in good characters, and asymmetric in funny or evil characters achieves balance. Harmony is achieved when the theme and form of the body, clothes, and decorations flow together. The differences in characters are highlighted by their contrasts. The characters must still be distinguished through the sizing, coloring, or detailing of the carving, even if the audience can only see their silhouette.

Unlike other art forms, the making of Kelantan shadow puppet figures is unique. The figures are crafted through a complex piercing technique applied to dried cowhide to create unique light and shadow effects (Nugroho et al. 2019, Widyani 2020). While this carving embodies traditional craftsmanship, it also represents one's status and moral aspirations. More intricate engravings in the character's design signifies a higher status in the narrative. This allows people to showcase their cultural identity by blending minimalist traditional customs and shadow theater performance arts (Cahaya et al. 2019). In Kelantan, shadow puppet shows use visuals to beautify the show and express feelings, emotions, and the culture to the audience. The puppets, shadows, projection screen, and light constitute the four major components that form the visuals and movement of Kelantan shadow puppets (Ghani 2011).

The way characters are made shows beauty and a lot of culture at the same time. Every character in the story has a distinct look that corresponds to their actions and role in the story. They are differentiated through head and eye shape, posture, dress, and even the adornments on the character's clothing (Baihaqi et al. 2023). As an example, a main character like Seri Rama has a balanced face, an upright posture, and complex features indicating noble wisdom and royal lineage. On the other hand, evil characters like Rawana are portrayed as fearful and brutal looking with fangs, large eyes, and an angular face that shows cruelty and dark power.

In designing a character, one needs to think about what colors can be used and what they can mean. For instance, gold symbolizes glory, red symbolizes anger or courage, and black could mean strength or evil. Comedic Pak Dogol and Wak Long's heads are plontos with angular faces, and they wear ordinary clothes. This reveals their purpose as the community's voice and the deliverer of social satire. The voice of the puppeteer and his style of movement, as well as the roles acted during the performance, are part of the character's personality (Ardehali 2021). The social and cultural aspects of a community are important in the depiction of Kelantan shadow puppet characters.

Aesthetic design is often labeled as 'surface value' or something that 'looks pretty.' However, it is an identity mark of the values and beliefs of the community we are looking at, in this case, the community of Kelantan (Hui & Abdullah 2024). The application of traditional images and motifs is meant to illustrate the underpinning thoughts and make each puppet meaningful as an identity of accumulation in Malay 'performing art'. The purpose of applying batik motifs to shadow puppets figures is to beautify them and strengthen their personalities. Finding the right shadow puppet is quite interesting because it involves searching for an appropriate character (Widyani 2020).

Research Method

This study utilized qualitative design and visual analysis as the primary method to explore the impacts of culture and aesthetics on character design creation in relation to Kelantan shadow puppets. This approach was beneficial for the researcher to better consider the cultural, symbolic, and visual elements of this traditional performing art in a holistic manner. This study focused on the characters to understand

the intersection of design, character craftsmanship, and the Kelantan culture. The main approach to the data collection was a visual analysis of several key characters in Kelantan shadow puppets. This analysis was conducted based on visual records, photographs and artefacts from museum collections and private puppeteer collections. The characters were assessed based on artistic elements and design principles such as line, shape, color, balance, unity, harmony and contrast.

Visual content analysis was used for the data analysis in this research. This method examines the meaning of a picture by categorizing it according to pre-established themes. The analysis encompasses the recognition of consistent motifs, visual symbols, and motifs within their cultural context and the story of shadow puppets. Knowing interpretations of the visual motifs strengthens and complements the analysis. This analysis highlights the interconnectedness of the cultural and aesthetic factors in the design and identity of Kelantanese shadow puppetry, aiding the forming of an understanding of their interplay.

Results and Discussion

The design of Seri Rama's character as shown in Figure 2 indicates the significant influence by the Thai culture, although many elements still reflect their origins from Kelantan (Hui & Abdullah 2024). Kelantan, a state adjacent to Thailand, shares numerous historical and cultural similarities with the Siamese culture (Kijdumnern 2022). It is a performing arts tradition that encompasses local adaptations of the Ramayana narrative. Seri Rama is the main character in each performance; its physical design resembles Thai art but its function in the Kelantan Malay-language of the shadow puppets and the influence of local narratives make it an integral element in Kelantan's cultural heritage.

Table 1.
Analysis of the character design of Seri Rama

Category	Character design & identity	Visual esthetic element
Costume	Crown	Thai pinnacle crown (<i>Kecopong</i>) - tall, pinnaced crown (<i>kecopong</i>) signifies Siam/Thai royalty
	Chest Cloth	Reflective of Thai traditional accessories
	Cloth	Reflective of Thai traditional costumes
	Belt	-
	Shoulder shawl	-
	Long/short pants	Certain motifs on his trousers resemble nature
Accessories	Ear accessories	-
	Earring	-
	Chess necklace	-
	Arm bracelets	Reflective of Thai traditional accessories
	Hand Bracelets	(Gelang tangan) - reflective of Thai traditional accessories
	Ankle Bracelets	Reflective of Thai traditional accessories
	Ring (cincin)	(Cincin) - reflective of Thai traditional accessories
	Back accessories	-
Weapon	Bow	(<i>Batang busar patah</i>)
	Arrow	(<i>Anak panah Gandewat Sada Roko</i>)
	Arrow 2	(<i>Anak panah Keris Rela Sakti</i>)
Others	Vehicle	(<i>Kepala naga</i>) - Dragon vehicle's head
		(<i>Ekor naga</i>) - Dragon vehicle's tail

Source: Created by the author



Figure 2.
The character of Seri Rama
Source: Own collection

The visual originality pertaining to the trousers of Seri Rama’s garments correlates with the cultural creativity of Kelantan. Folklore, leaves, and reminiscent plant motifs are integral to traditional Kelantan textile crafts like batik and songket, serving to convey beauty and balance. While the Thai essence mostly constitutes the foundational outline of Seri Rama’s trousers, the addition of natural motifs serves as decorative elements. This displays the adaptation of regional beauty. This captures how the incorporation of traditional motifs incorporates the artistic signature of Kelantan.

Table 2.
Analysis of the character design of Siti Dewi

Category	Components	Description
Costume	Crown	Kecopong (elaborate Thai-style crown, gold and sharp detailing).
	Chest Cloth	Richly patterned floral/geometric chest cloth.
	Cloth	Flowing Thai-style skirt, vibrant and intricate patterns.
	Belt	Wide golden belt, heavily ornamented.
	Shoulder shawl	Embroidered long shawl, detailed patterns.
	Long/short pants	Worn as full-length skirt, no pants.
Accessories	Ear accessories	Intricate ear cuffs matching costume.
	Earring	Long dangling earrings, gold-plated.
	Chess necklace	Ornate gold necklaces with intricate carvings.
	Arm bracelets	Wide, golden arms with decorations.
	Hand Bracelets	Embellished gold hand jewelry.
	Ankle Bracelets	Golden anklets with intricate carvings.
	Ring	Worn on multiple fingers, often decorative.
	Back accessories	Flowing backpiece, matching royal attire.
Weapon	Waist accessories	Broad gold waistband, heavily decorated.
	Bow	N/A (No weapon depicted)
	Arrow	N/A.
	Arrow 2	N/A.
Others	Vehicle	Depicted standing or walking; no vehicle shown.

Source: Created by the author



Figure 3.

The character of Siti Dewi
Source: Own collection

In the case of Seri Rama's character, the way he is presented in Kelantan's shadow puppets serves as a powerful manifestation of the state's identity. In addition to epic characters like Seri Rama, the shadow puppets performance in Kelantan is geared towards capturing the local culture, dialect, and mode of thinking. While the plot is based on Indian Hindu epics or the Thai Ramakien, the performance is distinct because of the style of delivery and the use of the Kelantan Malay dialect during the interactions. The authenticity of the delivery style and the ethnographic knowledge embedded within the Sotai performance illustrates the degree to which adaptations are possible to strengthen a local identity.

In summary referring to Table 1, the analysis of the character of Seri Rama shows the significant visual influence due to the Thai culture. The Kelantan identity is clear through its use in the Kelantan leather dolls, the application of natural motifs found in traditional textile art, and the way that narrative and presentation are integrated with the local culture (Xiaochun & Shanat 2024). This shows that Kelantan people can adopt new ideas from other cultures while still appreciating their own identity.

Figure 3 shows the character of Siti Dewi whose design has Thai cultural influences, which can be clearly seen in the ornaments and clothing. The delicate and ornate gown alongside the beautifully carved crown reflects the attire of the Thai royal family. Siti Dewi's long earrings, gold belt, chest necklace, and armbands further add to the grandeur of her majestic and divine figure. This is especially evident considering Kelantan's proximity to Southern Thailand.

The character analysis based on Table 2 shows that the design of Siti Dewi goes beyond mere physical depiction; it embodies the ideals of local modesty and beliefs that women fulfill the noble ideals of elegance and grandeur. The luxurious clothing and jewelry depict not only the social status of the individual but also offer the complexity of form and line required to suit the shadow puppets and symbolize the character to the audience. This showcases the synergy of visual art techniques from various cultures coupled with local wisdom that characterizes the performing arts culture in Kelantan. This is why Kelantan shadow puppets are considered to be a very profound and valuable art (Ghani 2012).

The Malay tradition and influence of the Hindu-Buddhist culture converge to shape the character of Maharaja Wana as shown as Figure 4. His tall, layered crown, decorated with songket fabric and gold designs, is a brilliant example of the relationship between Hindu-Buddhist design and textiles with deities or rulers. Elaborately designed gold necklaces, bracelets, and belts denoted that he was a powerful individual, like a king or warrior in Hindu epics such as the Ramayana.

Table 3.
Analysis of the character design of Maharaja Wana

Category	Components	Description
Costume	Crown	Tall, tiered crown with sharp and intricate detailing, often gold.
	Chest Cloth	Embroidered royal chest cloth, vibrant colors and rich motifs.
	Cloth	Flowing <i>songket</i> -style cloth, gold accents.
	Belt	Wide, ornate golden belt with embellishments.
	Shoulder shawl	Long shawl, embroidered with gold patterns.
	Long/short pants	Worn as a long flowing skirt, no visible pants.
Accessories	Ear accessories	Large, decorative ear cuffs with gold patterns.
	Earring	Dangling earrings, highly ornate.
	Chess necklace	Heavy gold necklace with intricate carvings.
	Arm bracelets	Wide golden armlets, heavily ornamented.
	Hand Bracelets	Bold, embellished gold bracelets.
	Ankle Bracelets	Golden anklets, intricate carvings.
	Ring	Worn on multiple fingers, decorative and gold-plated.
	Back accessories	Flowing royal backpiece, matching costume.
Weapon	Waist accessories	Golden waistband, heavily adorned.
	Bow	Mace (<i>batang begada/cokmar</i>) – a symbol of authority
	Arrow	N/A.
Others	Arrow 2	N/A.
	Vehicle	Depicted with a chariot or standing, symbolizing grandeur.
		Big rounded eye (<i>mata timbalan rebana</i>) - represents the look of demons Canine teeth - represent the look of demons

Source: Created by the author



Figure 4.
The character of Maharaja Wana
Source: Own collection

Based on Table 3, the character design incorporates numerous demonic elements, particularly in their physical traits, featuring exceptionally large round eyes and sharp teeth. These characteristics indicate that he is malevolent or formidable, along with his role as the antagonist of the narrative. The utilization of many colors and weaponry, such as the mace, to signify his power renders him more intimidating and authoritative.

The luxurious embroidered shawls and songket textiles richly adorned with gold threads elucidate the ancient Malay aristocracy's influence, alongside representing modern affluence. The chariot depicting the form of a dragon blends the Malay cultural grandeur with ancient Hindu parallels. To summarize, the design of Maharaja Wana integrates robust spiritual symbolism and local tradition, alongside a sculptural narrative which imbues Kelantan shadow puppets with a powerful and profound visual identity.

Table 4.
Analysis of the character design of Pak Dogol

Category	Components	Description
Costume	Crown	No crown, bald head, symbolizing simplicity and wisdom.
	Chest Cloth	Simple plain cloth, reflecting humility.
	Cloth	Plain cloth, often dark or neutral in color.
	Belt	Simple belt, tied to hold the sarong in place.
	Shoulder shawl	Not present, emphasizes simplicity.
	Long/ short pants	Worn as long cloth, no visible pants.
Accessories	Ear accessories	None, reflecting a humble character.
	Earring	None.
	Chess necklace	None.
	Arm bracelets	None.
	Hand Bracelets	None.
	Ankle Bracelets	None.
	Ring	None.
	Back accessories	None.
	Waist accessories	None.
Weapon	Bow	Not applicable.
	Arrow	Not applicable.
	Arrow 2	Not applicable.
Others	Vehicle	None, often depicted as walking or sitting.

Source: Created by the author

The character of Pak Dogol in Figure 5 shows simplicity and depth in their depiction of Wayang Kulit. Pak Dogol's appearance in the character analysis in Table 4 shows his anti-materialistic attitude; his appearance includes a bare head without a crown and simple clothing. Baldness, a legacy of Hindu and Buddhist practices, in addition to asceticism, are signs of wisdom in traditional Malay culture. In this context, Dogol's exposed appearance displays the inner values and religious aspirations of Malay Muslims.

Unlike the Pak Dogol members, characters like Maharaja Wana or Seri Rama are stylishly dressed and carry emblems of authority. Pak Dogol stands without any brandished arms or vehicles, simplifying him, as he is an average man. His portrayal underscores a disengagement from physicality and a preference for thought and spirit, differentiating him from Pak Dogol's folkish company. Eyes are not the only means through which this design creates dramatic silences for the readers; the portrayal of a truthful and just heroic figure does so too.

The depiction of Pak Dogol in Kelantan's shadow puppets is both fascinating and dense with sociocultural and religious connotations. The simplicity of his character is a hallmark of traditional Malay rooted in modesty and the virtuous. The absence of opulence aligns with Islamic denouncements of pride and arrogance. Thus, Pak Dogol serves as a vessel of sociocultural wisdom, encapsulating profound moral teachings in simple iconographic forms.

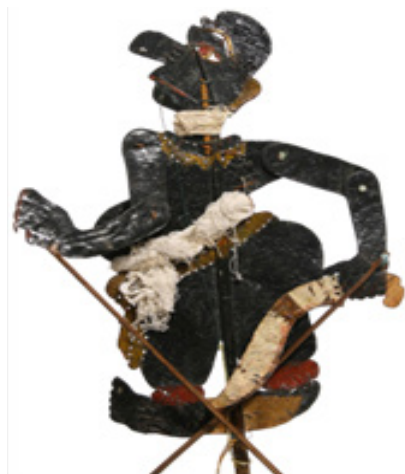


Figure 5.
The character of Pak Dogol
Source: Own collection

Shadow puppets are a unique form rooted in many cultures such as Thai, Hindu-Buddhist, and local Malay. Thai influences are apparent in the costume and jewelry of the characters Seri Rama and Siti Dewi, and the Hindu-Buddhist impact is visible in the character Maharaja Wana (Hui & Abdullah 2024). The use of the Kelantan dialect and the integration of local nature motifs into the story shows the external influences being brought together while retaining the Malay-Islamic character. This approach shows the wisdom of the Kelantan people in adapting external influences into their context.

In an artistic sense, Kelantan shadow puppets apply the use of visual differences and symbolism to expound the expectations of the characters (Hui & Abdullah 2024). The Lord of the Sky, Seri Rama, and Maharaja Wana are brutal and egocentric, while Pak Dogol is simple, calm, and humble. These traits represent different regional virtues like modesty and wisdom. The use of nature-inspired designs in costumes grounds the practice of shadow puppetry in the traditional textile arts of Kelantan, such as batik and songket. These costumes are not mere embellishments; they support narratives and add to important cultural messages.

This study enlightens us on Kelantan shadow puppets as an area of ongoing development, rather than as a historical relic. It illustrates how the people of Kelantan adapt and internalize elements of foreign cultures, bestowing significance upon them (Abd El Salam 2025). This explanation emphasizes the need to preserve history by understanding the processes involved in creating traditional art. It also affects modern design as it can draw from the distinctive fusion of traditional and modern elements found in shadow puppets.

In conclusion, Kelantan shadow puppetry demonstrates that the Malay culture absorbs and adapts foreign influences, a phenomenon best understood through Visual Culture Theory. This positions shadow puppetry as a space of cultural mediation and identity formation (Kia 2014). Simultaneously, the theory of Visual Design illuminates the aesthetic strategies realized in the character formation, motifs, and costumes in which visual choices like batik and songket patterns go beyond surface beauty and can also represent symbolic and/or philosophical messages.

This twofold theoretical lens shows that Wayang Kulit Kelantan is more than a performative tradition. Rather, it is a living cultural text and aesthetic product whose impact on contemporary designs cannot be overlooked. What is original about this work is the articulated framework that connects cultural–aesthetic criticism and the design thinking informing dialogue on culture sustainability, creative reappropriation and global sharing. In the end, this research not only provides an integrated view of heritage appreciation and design discourse but also locates Kelantan shadow puppetry as a rich resource for new, suitably oriented innovations.

Conclusion

This particular research attempts to elucidate Kelantan shadow puppetry beyond the confines of a traditional art form. It explores Kelantan shadow puppetry as a cultural text that can be analyzed using Visual Culture Theory and Visual Aesthetic Theory. The incorporation of Thai, Hindu-Buddhist, and Malay-Islamic cultural components, as analyzed using Visual Culture Theory, showcases the cultural negotiation, identity, and society construction that the Wayang Kulit puppets has enabled. Characters such as Seri Rama, Siti Dewi and Pak Dogol reflect the Kelantanese visual culture degree of cultural hybridity. This is where external cultural elements are accepted and transformed to fit the Kelantanese culture. Visual Aesthetic Theory for the costume and character construction indicates the underlying principles of Kelantanese design creativity. These principles cover the batik and songket elements. It enhances the design beyond a decorative form, offering a visual commentary that upholds the performing arts and textile artistry related to the Kelantan philosophy and aesthetic. The two principles of the theories discussed above shed light on the use of shadow puppets as cultural icons and aesthetic artifacts, further advocating the elements to be included in the design discourse of the modern day.

The uniqueness of this research lies in its conceptual framework, which connects cultural-aesthetic criticism to less conventional design thinking. This study merges Visual Culture Theory with Visual Aesthetic Theory, which expands the scholarly discourse to areas beyond heritage preservation to cultural sustainability, design innovation, and global creative interchange. This research establishes the groundwork for a framework in which traditional art forms can be modernized, especially in the case of Kelantan shadow puppetry, which can serve as an endless reservoir for design thinking and strategies for the future. Like any study, the limitations of this study are its selected characters and motifs. This discourse could be further advanced by future research utilizing critical performative analysis and comparative methods. It is clear that this study has still made important strides regarding cultural policy and education which includes the digitization of shadow puppet iconography, the integration with contemporary design courses, and advocacy for cultural sustainability. This inquiry shows that the shadow puppetry of Kelantan is not merely a remnant of the past but a living tradition with rich theoretical, aesthetic, and design relevance in the contemporary and future world.

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Author Biographies

Mat Redhuan Samsudin is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Machang Campus, Kelantan, Malaysia. He holds a PhD from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, a Master of Education (Multimedia) from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, and a Bachelor's degree in Multimedia from Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan University College. His research expertise focuses on multimedia applications within media and communication, particularly computer-assisted and web-based approaches. Dr. Mat Redhuan is actively involved in several national and institutional research projects related to cultural heritage, creative arts, and digital education. His scholarly work includes numerous journal publications on visual communication, emotional design, packaging design, and mobile learning technologies. He also supervises postgraduate students in areas such as graphic design innovation, social media advertising, and digital pedagogy.

Roziani Mat Nashir @ Mohd Nasir is a lecturer at the Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Machang Campus, Kelantan. She holds a Master of Visual Communication and New Media and a Bachelor's degree in Graphic Design from UiTM. Her area of expertise is in visual communication, with a focus on media and cultural studies. She is actively involved in research and creative work related to character design, cultural heritage promotion, and digital illustration. Roziani has presented and exhibited her work both locally and internationally and has published in journals and proceedings related to art, media, and design.

Nani Hartina binti Ahmad is a lecturer at the Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Machang Campus, Kelantan. She holds a PhD from Universiti Putra Malaysia and a Master's and Bachelor's degree in Art & Design from UiTM Shah Alam. Her expertise focuses on traditional textiles, including batik, and cultural art practices. She is actively involved in research, publication, and creative works related to textile design, cultural heritage, and visual arts education. Dr. Nani has published in local and international journals and regularly contributes to exhibitions and academic programs.

Arif Ardy Wibowo is a lecturer at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He has extensive experience in the fields of photography, visual communication and media & culture. He focuses on images as a medium of visual communication in shaping public perception, identity development, and the dissemination of images and cross-cultural dialogue. Meanwhile, my involvement in the field of visual media and culture includes critical research on the intersection of technology, society, and aesthetics in such a way that visual forms function and those who use them respect culture.