

About the Artist

The members of the shadow puppet troupe, Wayang Kulit: The Shadow Play of Kelantan, are native villagers from the Malaysian state of Kelantan. The northeastern state borders Thailand and is the cradle of traditional Malay music and performing arts, including *wayang kulit* shadow puppetry.

In Malaysia, the group is known by its full name: Kumpulan Wayang Kulit Sri Warisan Pusaka. The artists in the ensemble range in age from 13 to 70, with elder members of the troupe passing down the tradition to the younger generations. The puppetry and music are often taught within families, and this troupe of performers includes five members of one family. The troupe is led by puppeteer Tok Dalang Nawi and lead musician Abdul Rahman Dollah.

Wayang Kulit

Wayang means “theater” and *kulit* means “skin,” referring to the leather that is used to create the intricately carved leather figures that are pressed against a screen to create the shadow play. The puppeteer, or *tok dalang*, sits behind the screen and animates the voice and movements of all of the characters—up to 40 in a single performance. The rest of the ensemble sit on mats behind the *tok dalang* and play traditional Malay percussion and wind instruments, including barrel drums, gongs, cymbals, and a traditional oboe.

In Kelantan, these performances are typically very long, and the entire village comes to watch the show. The “show” actually includes more than just what is projected on the screen: audiences are invited to come behind the screen and watch how the *tok dalang* and musicians make everything come alive.



Tok dalang behind the screen during a performance. Photo by David Fraher.

The Hikayat Maharaja Wana

The *wayang kulit* of Kelantan most often tells stories of the *Hikayat Maharaja Wana*, an oral epic poem derived from an ancient epic from India called the *Ramayana*. The stories of the *Ramayana* traveled through Southeast Asia to Malaysia, where they were adapted over time to include Malay folk stories as well.

The main story is about two brothers, Seri Rama and Laksmana, who are the sons of a king. Instead of either one becoming the next king, both brothers along with Rama’s wife, Sita Dewi, are banished from the kingdom.

During their many years of exile in the forest, a demon king and rival of Seri Rama named Maharaja Wana comes to the forest to lure Sita Dewi away from Seri Rama. This demon kidnaps Sita Dewi and takes her back to his faraway home in another kingdom. Seri Rama and Laksmana then set out to search for Sita Dewi and encounter the brave monkey warrior called Hanuman. Together, the three of them must rescue Sita Dewi by battling evil Maharaja Wana.

Resources

“What is Wayang Kulit?” featuring Malaysian cultural expert Eddin Khoo
<http://vimeo.com/28117996>

New Straits Times
www.nst.com.my/node/30881

Malaysia Culture and Lifestyle
www.malayculture.com.my/hikayat-maharaja-wana/

Learn more at www.caravanserai-arts.org



Shadow puppets during a *wayang kulit* performance. Photo by David Fraher.



Pohon Beringin

The *pohon beringin* is the mountain-shaped symbol for the “tree of life.” It appears at the beginning of each performance during the *buka panggung*, or the “opening and consecration of the stage.” It represents the elements of fire, earth, air, and water.

Photo courtesy of PUSAKA



Photo by Eddin Khoo, courtesy of PUSAKA

Seri Rama

Seri Rama is the protagonist of the *Hikayat Maharaja Wana*, an epic poem of Kelantan derived from the *Ramayana*. Seri Rama embarks on a journey to rescue his wife Sita Dewi after she is kidnapped by Maharaja Wana.



Photo by Mahesan Selladurai, courtesy of PUSAKA

Sita Dewi

Sita Dewi, the wife of Seri Rama, is one of the main characters in the *Ramayana*. She is kidnapped by Maharaja Wana and taken to live in his kingdom, Langkapuri.



Photo by Eddin Khoo, courtesy of PUSAKA

Hanuman Kera Puteh

Hanuman Kera Puteh is the valiant monkey warrior and the son of Seri Rama and Sita Dewi. He leads his monkey army to rescue Sita Dewi from Maharaja Wana’s kingdom in Langkapuri.



Photo by Eddin Khoo, courtesy of PUSAKA

Maharaja Wana

Maharaja Wana is the demon king of Langkapuri and Seri Rama’s archrival. One of the biggest battles in the *Ramayana* is the battle between Seri Rama and Maharaja Wana when they fight for Sita Dewi.