



COMPARISON BETWEEN WAYANG KULIT KELANTAN AND GRAFFITI ART IN GREATER KUALA LUMPUR: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES¹

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ABSTRACT: Comparisons between wayang kulit Kelantan and graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur show relations in the used apprenticeship system educating newcomers, in the strong inner motivations for newcomers to pursue these activities, in the process of creating the puppets/graffiti art works, in the usage of additional stage props/design elements to enlarge the expressivity, in the official authorities' imposed control and in the adjustment of these two activities to the local culture and norms.

Differences between wayang kulit Kelantan and graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur are seen in the legal outlets, in the respective decline and rise of these activities, in the usage/non-usage of music and in the underlying spiritual sub-contexts.

KEY WORDS: Malaysia – Shadow Play – Wayang Kulit – Graffiti Art – Seni Graffiti – Kelantan – Greater Kuala Lumpur – Puppets

Introduction

This paper explores and brings together two versions of Malaysian cultural phenomena as different as traditional shadow play and graffiti art. The preliminary idea for this paper came with the realization that there are noteworthy parallels between the *wayang kulit Kelantan*⁴ and graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur⁵. The paper does not raise any

¹ This paper is based on the conference submission by David Novak: "Similarities and Contrasts of Kelantan Shadow Play and Graffiti Art in Greater Kuala Lumpur." *Paper presented at the Tradition and Modernity in South East Asian Puppetry, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 30 October–3 November 2011, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.*

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⁴ *Wayang kulit*, translated from Bahasa Melayu means *leather puppet*. The word *wayang* refers to various forms of puppets and *kulit* means skin, as the shadow play puppets are carved from flattened cow skin. Kelantan is a Malaysian state in the north-east of Peninsular Malaysia. Its capital is Kota Bharu.

⁵ The area of Greater Kuala Lumpur is also known as Klang Valley. For further information see: "Official Website of Greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley. Ministry of Federal Territories and Urban Wellbeing," <http://www.kwpkb.gov.my/greaterklkv/>.

hypothesis, but rather points at hypothetical parallels between these two cultural phenomena. Even though the primary reason for the comparison might seem controversial or open for discussion, this current research presents new results from fieldwork in Southeast Asia, especially in regards to graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur.

Firstly, we shall introduce wayang kulit Kelantan, which is the best known and most studied form of shadow play in Malaysia. Secondly, we shall focus on graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur. Thirdly, we shall discuss several similarities and at least a few of the numerous significant differences between wayang kulit Kelantan and graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur before concluding this paper.

The research on wayang kulit Kelantan was done through fieldwork over several years resulting in the publication of articles as well as books on the subject (Yusof, 1997a; Yusof, 1997b). Graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur was researched similarly (Novak, 2011), whereby the main author used a variety of research methods including participant observation, interviews, photo elicitation and visual methods to gather data for this study. This paper cites in addition popular books and reports from the mass media for demonstrational purposes.

Wayang Kulit Kelantan

Shadow puppet theatre was once a very popular source of entertainment and spirituality, particularly among rural communities in many cultures. In some instances royal courts also provided patronage. One of the Malaysian shadow play forms, *wayang kulit Melayu* was developed through court support in Kelantan. According to some opinions, the shadow play probably came into being in Southeast Asia through the spread of Indian culture (Sweeney, 1972: 9). Other scholars have indicated that the shadow play of the region may have come into being indigenously, possibly with an origin in Java. In Malaysia shadow play puppet theatre is known as *wayang kulit*. There were four traditional forms of shadow play in Malaysia: *wayang kulit Kelantan* performed in the Kelantan region (also known as *wayang kulit Siam*⁶, because of its many interconnections with the Patani region in southern Thailand); *wayang kulit purwa* performed in Johor; *wayang kulit gedek* performed in northern peninsular Malaysian states – Kedah, Perlis, and Kelantan – near the Thai-Malaysia border; and *wayang kulit Melayu* which has now become extinct but was once common in Kelantan (Yusof, 1997b: 5-7; Yusof, 2004). Among these forms wayang kulit Kelantan “*is the most important*” one (Ramlan and Quayum, 2010: 158), the best known and the form that has received greatest attention from scholars. Since 1977 the Kelantanese shadow play, besides others, has been included in the curriculum of the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang. Since 1994 it has been part of the curriculum of the National Academy of Arts (Akademi Seni Kebangsaan) in Kuala Lumpur (Yusof, 1997a: 49). In Malaysia there are several modern forms of shadow play such as the one performed by *dalang*⁷ Saufi, who introduced the totally invented story *Demam Bollywood* as well as *Wayang Kulit Dewan Bahasa* and *Wayang Kulit Semangat Baru*⁸ (“Crafts and the Visual Arts,” 2007: 96).

⁶ To avoid geographical confusion the term *wayang kulit Kelantan* is used through out the paper.

⁷ *Dalang* is the Malay term for a puppeteer of the shadow play theatre.

⁸ *Wayang Kulit Semangat* was developed by the present co-author with the puppeteer Saari Abdullah in Kelantan.

In an overall context, the Malaysian traditional shadow play theatre is in a state of continuous decline. According to Amin Sweeney (1938–2010) in the early seventies there were around 300 wayang kulit Kelantan puppeteers (Sweeney, 1972: 12). This may have included puppeteers in Kelantan as well as Patani. Since then, there has been a continuous decline for various reasons indicated below. Today there are “less than a dozen” active puppeteers (Yousof, 1997b: 8). One of the reasons for the decline in number of puppeteers is the modern lifestyle which has contributed to the decline of all traditional theatre forms including the shadow play through the introduction to the rural areas of televisions, videocassette recorders, and DVD players with their broadcasts and playback productions. In the rural areas where the shadow play used to be traditionally performed, these new forms of media introduced alternative and modern forms of entertainment (Ramlan and Quayum, 2010: 161-162). As a result of that, the artists performing shadow play began to lose their audiences as well as their means of earning whatever little income this art form provided. In general such performances were done on a part-time basis.⁹ One other important factor was the arrival of orthodox Islam, which according to traditionalist interpretations, views performing arts as prohibited. The State government in Kelantan led by the Islamic PAS party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia¹⁰) which has strong objections to performances of the shadow play, instituted an official ban upon this art form, as well as others such as *mak yong* and *menora* once commonly performed in Kelantan (Yousof, 1997a; Wright, 1981; Plowright, 2004; Yousof, 2011). Nowadays there are only rare opportunities to see live performances and the current situation also does not give much hope for the shadow play in the near future.

Graffiti Art in Greater Kuala Lumpur

Seni graffiti is the translation of the term *graffiti art* into the Malay language. Other terms used as an equivalent for graffiti art would be: *writing* (Mai and Remke, 2003), *aerosol art* (Jacobson, 2001; Schmidlapp and PHASE 2, 1996), *spraycan art* (Chalfant and Prigoff, 1987) or as the Malaysian graffiti artists¹¹ often shorten the term, simply *graff*.¹² Graffiti art itself is a modern, controversial and expressive urban art form. If not created with the consent and necessary permissions from legal owners of the locations, sites or objects on which it appears, the main controversy of graffiti art is the fact that many original works which can be labelled as such are unlawful.¹³

⁹ For the many struggles of one of the most famous wayang kulit Kelantan puppeteers Hamzah Awang Amat refer to: Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, *Angin Wayang: A Biography of a Master Puppeteer* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism Malaysia, 1997a).

¹⁰ The *Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party* is a Malaysian Islamist political party, which wants to establish Malaysia as a country based on *Islamic Law*. The population of the state of Kelantan is nearly entirely Muslim and PAS has ruled Kelantan between 1959–1977 and since 1990 till present. PAS attempted to impose a strict interpretation of Islamic Law on Kelantan, including restrictions on the traditional shadow play.

¹¹ The term “*graffiti artists*” is used throughout the paper, as this term is commonly used by Malaysian journalists (Aziz, 2012; Valentano, 2008). An alternative and equally often used technical term would be “*graffiti writers*”.

¹² *Graffiti art (Writing)* should not be confused with *street art*, which includes less aggressive approaches such as stickers, posters or street installations to create forms of visual art in public spaces.

¹³ There are *four forms of graffiti art*: tags, throw-ups, pieces and characters. *Tags* (monochrome signatures) and *throw-ups* (two-coloured, abstracts’ of letterforms) are more associated with vandalism. However, *pieces* (large scale, polychrome works, focusing on letterforms) and *characters* (paintings of scenes and objects) are closer to art.

Graffiti artists are typically young people – predominantly males – from various social backgrounds. In Malaysia graffiti art started appearing in 1999 in the southern peninsular state of Johor and simultaneously in the area of Greater Kuala Lumpur (Novak, 2012). The pioneering graffiti art groups of the first five years of graffiti art in Malaysia were: *K'OZ*, *DRAKE CREW*, *PHOBIA KLIK*, *PHIBER WRYTE*, *SATE TOWN CREW* and *SEMBUR WITH STYLE* (Novak, 2011: 108).

Due to relatively positive media coverage, graffiti art in Malaysia – and partly also in other Southeast Asian countries – is accepted, even trendy (Shahar, 2013; Lim, 2013). Malaysian graffiti artists were asked on several occasions to create spray painted artworks for the Malaysian National Visual Arts Gallery (*Balai Seni Visual Negara*) (“Lukisan Mural Dinding Balai Seni Lukis Negara,” 2010; Ayob, 2009). The Kuala Lumpur City Hall (*Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur*) also agreed and participated in the organization of major international graffiti art gatherings named *Kul Sign Festival* in December 2010 and February 2012 (“Monsoon Washes Away Graffiti Contest and Festival,” 2011; ROSZA and Road, 2010; Venugopal, 2011; “Opening Speech by Mayor of KL: Launch of Kulsign Festival 2012 & Graffiti Art Book “Hembusan Seni Kuala Lumpur,” 25. February 2012; “Golongan Muda Dapat Perhatian Dbkl,” 2010; Aziz, 2012; Nathan, 2012; Jayaraj, 2010; “Beautiful Works of Art on Walls,” 2010; Rodrigues, March 2011).

One of the focus points of the Malaysian mass media towards graffiti art is often naturally the issue of whether it represents vandalism or art (Bernama, 2011; Yee, 2008b; Yee, 2008a; Chen, 2008a; Valenteno, 2008; Chen, 2008b; Vandal or Art?, 01 November 2008). At this point it is necessary to state that the majority of local, Malaysian graffiti art practitioners are artistically oriented in their actions (YouTube, 08 March 2012). Historically all together there have been less than 200 graffiti artists since the emergence of graffiti art in Malaysia.¹⁴ Approximately 50 artists may be considered to be constantly active in Greater Kuala Lumpur.¹⁵ These graffiti artists are also relatively young, most of them being born in the 1980s or 1990s.¹⁶ The colourful, large scale graffiti art works created by them often imitate imagery from popular culture (Chen, 2008b). This makes graffiti art attractive and appealing especially to younger audiences.

Similarities

Wayang kulit Kelantan and graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur are activities practiced usually by amateurs outside the art world with no higher education in their fields and both these communities are loosely organised.¹⁷ We can consider both to be forms of folk art. There are similarities in the way knowledge is passed down among the practitioners, in the way practitioners find their way to the art form, in the way puppets/

¹⁴ The main author reported in his previous research in 2011 a list composed of 123 graffiti artists' names. At this current point the list is larger due to new emerging graffiti artists and several older names not listed before. A realistic estimation of graffiti artists in Malaysia between the years 1999 and 2013 would be around 150-180 people.

¹⁵ In addition to these 50 local graffiti artists there are also short term visiting or transiting foreign graffiti art tourists, who create graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur.

¹⁶ Many graffiti artists perform graffiti art only in their teenage years or in their twenties.

¹⁷ In the case of wayang kulit Kelantan, university courses did not strongly contribute to the preservation of this art form. At present there is no graffiti art course in any academic institution in Malaysia so far as is known.

graffiti art works are produced, in the use of stage props or additional decorations, in the attempts to control the activities and there is also a similarity in the search for expression of local identity.

Traditionally the knowledge or the know-how to perform wayang kulit Kelantan was handed down by a master puppeteer to an apprentice. In similar fashion, the artistic principles, codes and rules of graffiti art are passed down to new graffiti artists by their older, more experienced peers (Stewart, 2009: 144-146; Thompson, 2009: 10, 32-36). One of the last great wayang kulit Kelantan puppeteers, Hamzah Awang Amat (1940–2001), learned to perform the shadow play – with its puppet handling techniques and the musical repertoire – from his teacher Pak Awang Lah. In a similar fashion, other puppeteers learned the art of shadow play from their own masters. The close relationship between the shadow play apprentice and his teacher led, in Hamzah’s case, to his routine attendance at his guru Awang Lah’s performances. There he learned from observation, by playing as a musician in the musical ensemble, and later by playing the opening part of the performance (Yousof, 1997a:17). Similarly novice graffiti artists commonly learn graffiti art’s sub-cultural codes and behavioural models from their seniors. Graffiti artists are taught the artistic principals of graffiti art through art criticism from other graffiti artists whether it occurs in the course of personal contact or through internet social networking groups.¹⁸ A similar scenario to the case of the Kelantanese shadow play performers can be seen for example in the case of the graffiti artist DWANE2 who started following his friend SIEK around the year 2006-2007. SIEK “helped and guided” DWANE2 during his first encounters with graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur (DWANE2, 2008). The graffiti artist SIEK (b. 1984) himself perceives his role more as an advising friend than as a mentor, but said also that he had to “mention” to the newcomer DWANE2 that he has to “do this, this, this” (SIEK, 2008). Furthermore, the pioneer Malaysian graffiti artist from Greater Kuala Lumpur Mohd Faiz Omar (b. 1983) aka NENOK taught – besides many others – the younger graffiti art newcomers Muhammad Aiman Jamal (b. 1990) aka KURN and Muhamad Khaliq Khosim aka KOLA in the art and ways of graffiti (Yee, 2008a).¹⁹ The shadow play puppeteers began their training early in their teens or early twenties (Yousof, 1997b: 43). Both the shadow play performers and the graffiti artists learn their art through an unofficial system of apprenticeship, where the newcomers train with an experienced member of the community before they can join the ranks of established artists.²⁰ As a result of the close bond between the apprentice and the master, the teachers expect their apprentices to pay respect to them.

The primary motivation for performing shadow play or painting graffiti art is very similar. The individuals, before they become practitioners themselves, first take a great deal of pleasure in and inspiration from the practice and develop a strong desire to perform the shadow play/paint graffiti art once they become aware of the art form. This initial intention is very powerful, because the novices have to overcome many obstacles in the beginning before performing/painting for the first time in their lives. In context of the Kelantanese shadow play the strong desire for performing the shadow

¹⁸ Malaysian graffiti artists widely use the internet as an exchange platform.

¹⁹ KOLA was 14 years old in the time of Yee’s newspaper report.

²⁰ The system of apprenticeship is known from many other crafts and arts. Nevertheless, in the case of graffiti art this system is unorganized and the mentors are often teenagers.

play is known as *angin*.²¹ It is believed that if the *angin* is not fulfilled, it could lead even to psychological problems (Sweeney, 1972; Swiders, 1983; Yousof, 1997a). A similar term to *angin* would – or could – be in the graffiti art terminology *getting up* (Castleman, 1980; Castleman, 1982). Getting up means to write and spread the self-given graffiti art name in public spaces around the globe. Getting up represents one's desire to repeatedly leave personal marks on as many surfaces as possible to gain fame in the graffiti art community – and if possible also outside of it. Graffiti art aesthetic strongly relies on triggering in the observer "*a state of visual shock and physical excitement*" (Jacobson, 2001: 5), which can secondarily lead – after seeing graffiti art for the first time – a young person, not familiar with graffiti art, to the desire to pursue this controversial art form. Around the years 1999-2000, this initial excitement and state of visual shock was the reason for many of the pioneer, Malaysian graffiti artists – PHOBIA, NENOK, VDS, MIST149, SAINT, SONA (Novak, 2011: 106-107) – to decide to start getting up in the first place. As strong inner desires, *angin* and *getting up* are the motivations leading an individual to the decision to acquire the skills necessary for performing the shadow play or graffiti art. It might be concluded that these strong desires represent a motivation close to a form of obsession or addiction, where the emotions experienced when practicing such an activity are so strong that the person becomes dependent on the activity for pleasure and a sense of wellbeing.

Another parallel between shadow play and graffiti art is the process prior to the crafting of a shadow play puppet or the process prior to creating a graffiti art work. In a way, it is natural that these two art forms resemble each other in their production steps. First the drawing of a shadow play puppet (Sweeney, 1972: 35-41) or of a graffiti art work (Fig. 1) is sketched onto a sheet of paper. The second step is the transfer of the drawing onto a flattened cow skin in the case of the puppet (Yousof, 1997b: 17) or the transfer of a graffiti art sketch onto a selected surface (wall, canvas...) (compare Figs. 1-2).²² The puppeteer Hamzah Awang Amat highlighted the importance of first starting with the mouth and eyes of a human, divine being or ogreish character in the designing process of a puppet, because these are the most significant elements for the expression of a character's identity and emotions (Yousof, 1997a: 21). On several occasions it was observed that the graffiti artist Khor Zew Wey (b. 1983) aka BIBICHUN (Figs. 11; 12) was also working on a character's eyes very early on in the process of creating an artwork, in order to achieve the wanted expression of his characters.²³ The third step is

²¹ A literal translation of *angin* from the Malay language into English is *air* or *wind*.

²² The graffiti artist Zulkifli Salleh aka KIOUE (b. 1984) created in the city centre of Kuala Lumpur a shadow play puppet (Fig. 2) as a reference to the Malaysian cultural identity. In KIOUE's representation the shadow play puppet is depicted from the front view facing the observer. In this case, the artist did not use the typical shadow play representation, but used his own personal style. The clues for the audience that the viewer is looking at a shadow play puppet are the puppet's typically bent arms with a thin stick attached to the wrist. KIOUE also adorned his shadow play artwork with an interesting item of headgear created from letters representing his tag name "*KIOUE*" and he also dressed the puppet in a traditional Malaysian textile pattern (KIOUE, 2008). Two days before KIOUE created this work he drew a sketch of the above discussed shadow play artwork into the main author's field journal (Fig. 1).

²³ These observations were recorded during two live painting sessions organized by the National Visual Arts Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. BIBICHUN has been for years paying special attention to the eyes of his unique characters; BIBICHUN stated: "*the eyes are [a] sort of [my] trademark. Eye's are the best way to bring out one's expression* (BIBICHUN, 2011)."

the colouring of the puppet or the filling-in of colours in the case of a graffiti art work. The production of a shadow play puppet and of a graffiti art work thus has similarities in the preparation phase.

The Kelantanese shadow play, as with some other forms of shadow play, uses figures of human, divine and ogreish characters (Fig. 3). Besides these are also used additional *stage props* such as trees (Fig. 4), palaces (Fig. 5), and weapons (Fig. 6). The most important puppet in wayang kulit Kelantan is the tree or leaf-shaped *pohon beringin* ("tree of life") puppet which is the first and last puppet to be seen during a performance (Fig. 4). Graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur also uses, besides Latin alphabet letters (Figs. 2; 8; 10), figures of humans (Figs. 2; 9) and supernatural or *dark* characters (Villoriente and James, 2007: 46-51) (Figs. 7-8). Additional design elements include arrows²⁴ (Fig. 10), spray cans and markers (Fig. 9), chains, heart symbols (Fig. 2), star shapes, bits²⁵ (Figs. 8; 10) and other typical graffiti art design elements. Many of the objects just listed are used as additions to graffiti art lettering styles²⁶. The *pohon beringin* puppet is interesting, besides its significance in shadow play performances, because this puppet can also be used as a substitute symbol for forests, mountains (Yusof, 1997b: 64) or caves (Sweeney, 1972: 35). Graffiti artists also occasionally substitute a letter – it is generally the letter "O" (Novak, 2011: 132) – with a human face (Stewart, 2009: 71) or other objects and scenes (see Fig. 8 where the letter "I" is substituted by a hand). The stage props in shadow play allow the puppeteer to expand his visual possibilities while performing the story he is telling and give him the extra edge during the performance. The same applies to the graffiti artists who use various design elements while creating their works to make their graffiti art works more expressive and aesthetically pleasing.

An interesting resemblance can be also discovered in the attempts to control and regulate these two folk art activities. The most important issue in the case of wayang kulit Kelantan is the content of the performances. The story of the Kelantanese shadow play is based on the Hindu epic *Ramayana* (Yusof, 1997b: 22). This fact represents a problem for the Islamist authorities in Kelantan as was already highlighted in the beginning of this paper and attempts have been made to bring the Kelantanese shadow play at least under control (Yusof, 1997a: 60-61). This was achieved through regulations which significantly influenced the scheduling of performances, because each performance needed to be first approved. In the case of graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur, the dilemma is more obvious. Graffiti art is by law very often classified as vandalism, because of its *use* – modification – of public and private space alike without the permission of the spaces' legal owners. Therefore the attempts to keep graffiti art under control come as no surprise (Valentino, 2008). The Malaysian/Kuala Lumpur authorities approached graffiti art in a unique and original (Bavani, 2012; "City Hall

²⁴ Arrows in particular are typical iconographical elements for "Wild" style pieces: Lisa Gottlieb, "Applying Panofsky's Theories of Iconographical Analysis to Graffiti Art: Implications for Access to Images of Non-Representational/ Abstract Art" (PhD. Thesis, University of Toronto, 2006), p. 252.

²⁵ The term "bit", used for a small loose particle of a letterform, was probably first explained by the US American graffiti artist SEEN (b. 1961). In: Henry Chalfant et al., "Style Wars," (1983). 16:55min. See further the explanatory diagram of a piece in: Steve Grody, *Graffiti L.A.: Street Styles and Art* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2007).

²⁶ For an unique study identifying 14 graffiti art styles see: Lisa Gottlieb, *Graffiti Art Styles: A Classification System and Theoretical Analysis* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2008).

Welcome Creative Graffiti Designs," 2012), much less offensive and less aggressive manner than did for example the authorities in New York City (Castleman, 1982; Stewart, 1989; Austin, 2001; Kramer, 2009) or in other countries. It seems that this approach was quite successful and fruitful. The graffiti artists were approached in a smart way. In Kuala Lumpur – and in other Malaysian cities – governmental organizations, non-profit organizations and the corporate sector organized events and competitions for graffiti artists. The artists were approached by well known government supported youth movements, such as *Rakan Muda*²⁷ (Chin, 2008; "For Youth, by Youth," 2010; Tan, 2010; "Youth Festival - Youth'10, 28-30 May 2010 @ Pwtc," 2010; "Youth 08," 2008), which aimed to spread and disseminate positive messages among Malaysian youth.²⁸ The Malaysian National Visual Art Gallery also approached some graffiti artists and asked for their cooperation on different graffiti art projects. As a result of this embracing approach, the majority of local – Malaysian – graffiti artists were perhaps oriented less towards vandalism and more towards art (Novak, 2011: 180-191).²⁹ It can be stated that an original approach to graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur partly contributed to a *reasonable* amount of graffiti art in the city. This can be contrasted to the all out war in New York City in the 1970s, which only relocated graffiti art from New York City's subway system to the streets of the globe (Austin, 2001).³⁰ Graffiti artists in Greater Kuala Lumpur used their opportunity and they started to pursue graffiti art related careers.³¹ To do so, they left their anonymity behind and became publicly known graffiti artists. In this way is graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur also under some control by the local authorities and the graffiti artists self-censor themselves.

Finally, there is within these two art forms a similar intent to express local cultural identity. As was briefly implied, wayang kulit Kelantan uses the Ramayana story in its repertoire. However, in this theatre form the Ramayana story is used more for its dramatic material than its Hindu religious context. In fact, many "*Hindu themes and teachings have been downgraded or altogether eliminated, while Islamic and Malay features have been incorporated into it*" (Yousof, 1997b: 22). A similar intent can be observed in the case of graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur. Although graffiti art is a Western notion in Greater Kuala Lumpur it was slightly transformed and altered into something localized (Teh, 2012: Foreword, *Thalanjang Movement*; Lee, 2013). Some graffiti artists incorporated into their works local cultural art forms and crafts (Novak, 2012) such as

²⁷ The English translation of *Rakan Muda* from the Malaysian language would be "*Young Friend*".

²⁸ For example, graffiti art was introduced to Malaysian youth during several events: Youth'08 We Are The Trendsetters (18-20 January 2008), Malaysian Youth Lifestyle Festival Youth'09 (09-11 January 2009) and Youth'10 (28-30 May 2010). [For video see: efferstine, *Youth'08 Launch* (YouTube, 22 November 2007). Time: 2:51-2:53 min; 4:49 min.]

²⁹ Since the end of 2009 there has been an increase in the amount of graffiti art in the streets of Greater Kuala Lumpur which is generally negatively perceived by the public and is commonly represented by *tags* and *throw-ups*. This increase in *tags* and *throw-ups* has partly been caused by visiting graffiti art tourists who have been entering Malaysia from different countries and therefore often have different backgrounds and motivations.

³⁰ There must be other reasons why Malaysian graffiti artists are as moderate as they are, but exploring this question would need a more focused sociological research, which is beyond the aim of this paper.

³¹ Career possibilities of graffiti artists were studied by: Richard Lachmann, "Graffiti as Carrer and Ideology," *The American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 2 (1988); Gregory J. Snyder, *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

the shadow play puppets in Figs. [2;] 11; 12; 14.³² The graffiti artists intended to represent the Malaysian cultural heritage by depicting shadow play puppets.³³

Differences

Some of the differences between wayang kulit Kelantan and graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur, highlighted below, are the legality of both the activities, the locations of appearance, the decline of one and the rise of the other, the differences in the association with music and finally the differences in the spirituality of the activities.

One of the most striking differences between wayang kulit Kelantan and graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur is their respective lawfulness. Traditional Kelantanese shadow play is a recognized cultural activity – disapproved of only by the orthodox Islamic world view – unlike graffiti art which balances on the edge between legality and illegality. The latter’s legal status can be attributed to its closeness with vandalism, a result of its usage of public space (regardless of whether it is private or public property). However, graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur was until recently more oriented towards art than vandalism (Novak, 2011: 195-197).

The spatial locations are also very different. Kelantanese shadow play has been performed in rural areas in the state of Kelantan, in contrast to graffiti art which occupies the urban areas of Greater Kuala Lumpur with a population of 6 million people. The shadow play audiences were represented by few hundreds of people from villages whereas the graffiti art works passively present themselves in urban public spaces to audiences as large as hundreds of thousands of people including those who pass by these works everyday.

Another unfortunate contrast between the Kelantanese shadow play and graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur is the fact that the traditional shadow play theatre is in Malaysia in decline. In sharp contrast, graffiti art in Malaysian urban spaces is constantly growing and becoming more and more visible to the Malaysian population. It is the

³² BIBICHUN is the author of works depicting shadow play puppet motifs in Figs. 11 and 12. Together with other graffiti artists from the TLG group (Teh, 2012) BIBICHUN seeks to explore in his works local Malaysian “roots and cultural backgrounds” (BIBICHUN, 2011), which was the reason for the representation of shadow play puppets in Figs. 11 and 12. One of the first Malaysian graffiti artists to elaborate on the identity of *Malaysian graffiti art* was SUGA52 (b. 1976), who is one of the senior graffiti artists in Malaysia. SUGA52 was probably the first Malaysian graffiti artist to depict a shadow play puppet (Fig. 14).

³³ BIBICHUN used references from the internet to represent the six shadow play puppet figures in Figs. 11-12. The references represented Javanese shadow play puppet designs. Via email on the 6th of April 2013, BIBICHUN provided the main-author with his reference images. Follow up research by the main-author showed that the figures in Figs. 11-12 represent: 1) Pratipa, 2) Panyarikan, 3) a combination of Prabakesa and Kala Pracona, 4) Petruk [see Fig. 13 (Inv. no. A 4.007)], 5) Putut Supawala, and 6) Prabawa. In general the figures represented in the graffiti art works are minor ones derived from the Indian epic Mahabharata as performed in classical Javanese shadow play (*wayang kulit purwa*, which is also performed in Johor, Malaysia). They have been taken at random, and are thus not linked in any manner. The second graffiti artist discussed in here, SUGA52, depicted the shadow play puppet in Fig. 14 on a large-scale canvas painting, several meters high and wide, after being commissioned by the Malaysian National Art Gallery on the occasion of Malaysia’s Independence Day celebrations in 2006. The puppet bears modern features, such as headphones and a guitar (Fig. 14) (SUGA52, 2009). It can be observed that SUGA52 represented the shadow play puppet with the same features as are common in Javanese puppet designs (Fig. 15).

local youth of Greater Kuala Lumpur who are spreading and keeping alive this new urban art form actively or passively through its support. Graffiti artists in Greater Kuala Lumpur are aware of the fact that the shadow play represents a part of the Malaysian cultural heritage and therefore some of them have included shadow play subject matters into their works.³⁴ That the *soul* of shadow play is continuing to exist in graffiti art works might be also the answer to the rhetorical wish voiced out by Norliza Rofli in 1997 (then Registrar Of Akademi Seni Kebangsaan in Kuala Lumpur): “*We want wayang kulit to be ingrained in Malaysians. Malaysians should not treat it as a foreign art form*” (Yusof, 1997a: 91).

Another difference is that the shadow play performances are accompanied by music. A shadow play puppeteer does not perform alone. He tells the story and handles the shadow play, but he also has his musicians with whom he forms a team. The puppeteer is the leader, but he has to have his musical ensemble, his orchestra (Yusof, 1997b: 20-22). However, the graffiti artist is by himself – unless he teams up with other graffiti artists for collaboration (*production*). Graffiti art is very individual, even though graffiti artists also form loose groups – known as *crews*. The important point is that there is no regular musical accompaniment to graffiti art. The only exception is when graffiti art is performed at an official or semi-official event; then it will be accompanied very probably by live hip-hop rap performances or by reproduced hip-hop rap music played by a DJ. It is worth mentioning that the senior graffiti artist Mikhael Adam Mohd Rafee aka SONA (b. 1988), from Greater Kuala Lumpur, is known also as a music producer and as an MC (Flizzow, 2011).³⁵ The shadow play is hardly imaginable without music, but graffiti art is.

Wayang kulit Kelantan is known to be strongly spiritual. The performance itself is entertaining for the audience, but in the background there is a lot of spirituality accompanying this folk art form. The performances known as *berjamu* are very spiritual (Yusof, 1997b: 47). Contrast this to graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur, which is not consciously spiritual, even though one may have a feeling of spirituality when observing graffiti artists painting complex large scale works.³⁶

Conclusion

Wayang kulit Kelantan and graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur share similarities. The more surprising ones are represented in the apprenticeship system, in the motivations to pursue these activities and in the authorities’ intent to control these art forms – especially in the case of wayang kulit Kelantan. The traditionally rural folk art form represented by wayang kulit Kelantan is having a difficult time surviving in the modern age of satellite television broadcasts and other information technology innovations like the internet. By contrast, graffiti art in Greater Kuala Lumpur is growing thanks to these technologies just mentioned and modern media.

³⁴ These graffiti artists were: SUGA52, Zulkifli Salleh aka KIOUE, Sharane Mat Zaini (b. 1977) aka THA-B, Khor Zew Wey aka BIBICHUN, Mohd Mahfudz b. Abd Rashid (b. 1988) aka SNOZZE and Mahathir Masri (b. 1982) aka THEY.

³⁵ Another known Malaysian hip-hop musician and graffiti artist is SCHIZZOW.

³⁶ The spiritual aspects of graffiti art works among some of Oakland’s graffiti artists were discussed in: Susan Alice Lundy, “Aerosol Activists: Practices and Motivations of Oakland’s Political Graffiti Writers” (PhD. Dissertation, University of California, 2008). pp. 196-202.

Even though the Malaysian shadow play is in decline, it is of interest to note that other art forms, graffiti art in this case, are drawing their inspiration from this shared Malaysian cultural heritage.

Photographs by Jiří Vaněk and David Novak
Diagram by David Novak

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Fig. 1: KIOUE's shadow play puppet as a sketch. Pencil on paper.
Page size: 24.7 cm; 18.8 cm.
Photo: 24 September 2008.



Fig. 2: KIOUE's shadow play puppet graffiti art work in his personal style. Spray paint on wall.
Greater Kuala Lumpur, Pasar Seni – Google Maps coordinates: [3.143409,101.695335].
Width: 383 cm; height: 176 cm.
Photo: 26 September 2008.



Fig. 3: Kelantanese shadow play *ogre* puppet. Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof's private collection.



Fig. 4: Kelantanese shadow play *tree of life (pohon beringin)* puppet. Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof's private collection.



Fig. 5: Kelantanese shadow play *palace* puppet. Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof's private collection.



Fig. 6: Kelantanese shadow play *weapons (arrows)* puppets. Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof's private collection.



Fig. 7: *Dark graffiti art characters by BONE. Spray paint on wall. Greater Kuala Lumpur, Wangsa Maju – Google Maps coordinates: [3.197099,101.744856]. Photo: 03 April 2013.*



Fig. 8: *Dark graffiti art character by BONE - the hand next to the letterform 'E' substitutes the letterform 'I' in SIEK's piece. Spray paint on wall. Greater Kuala Lumpur, Pasar Seni – Google Maps coordinates: [3.142956,101.694884]. Photo: 27 February 2012.*



Fig. 9: *Hip-hop style graffiti art characters with spray cans and a marker by KATUN. Spray paint on wall. Greater Kuala Lumpur, Wangsa Maju – Google Maps coordinates: [3.19719,101.744701]. Photo: 03 April 2013.*



Fig. 10: *Arrows as additional elements of a wildstyle piece by CARPET (See also the bullet whole in the letter "C"). Spray paint on wall. Greater Kuala Lumpur, Pasar Seni – Google Maps coordinates: [3.142956,101.694884]. Photo: 27 February 2012.*



Fig. 11: BIBICHUN's shadow play puppet representations. Spray paint on wall. Greater Kuala Lumpur, National Visual Arts Gallery – Google Maps coordinates: [3.173591,101.704736]. Size: the wall segment is ca. ~573cm wide. Photo: 19 February 2011.



Fig. 12: BIBICHUN's shadow play puppet image in between other "Stacked up side-view faces". Spray paint on wall. Greater Kuala Lumpur, National Visual Arts Gallery – Google Maps coordinates: [3.173433,101.705071]. Photo: 19 February 2011.

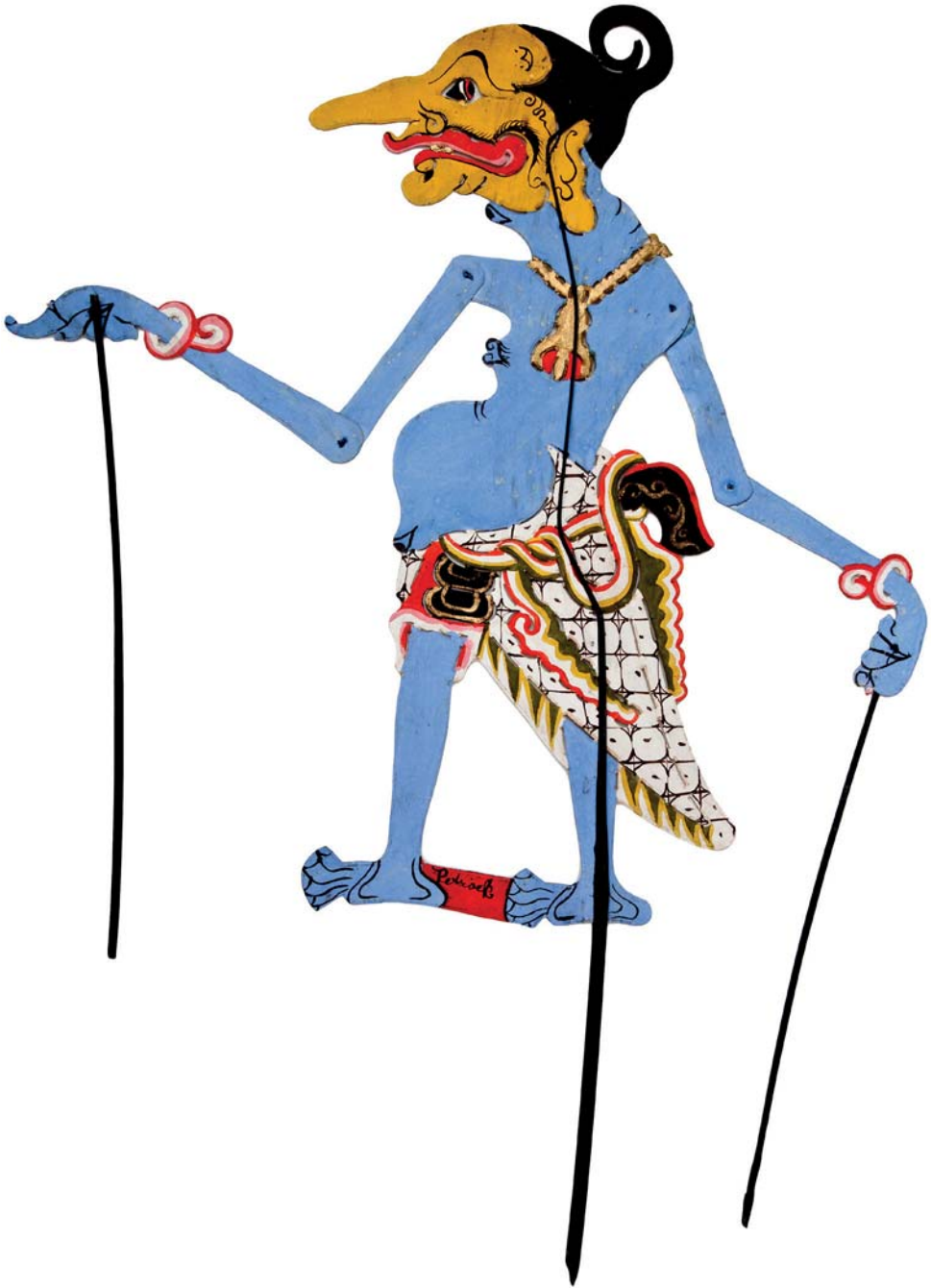


Fig. 13: Shadow play (*wayang kulit*) puppet: *Petruk*. Indonesia, Java. Bought in 1959. Painted paper and wood. High: 54.5 cm. National Museum – Náprstek Museum: Inv. no. A 4.007. Compare with Fig. 11: 4.



Fig. 14: Diagram of SUGA52's graffiti art work representing a shadow play puppet playing guitar.³⁷



Fig. 15: Shadow play (*wayang kulit*) puppet: *Arjuna*. Indonesia, Java. Given to the museum in 1901. Collected by the Czech traveller Josef Kořenský (1847–1938). Painted leather and horn. High: 51.5 cm. National Museum – Náprstek Museum: Inv. no. 9.304. Compare with Fig. 14.

³⁷ Original painting was at National Visual Arts Gallery, Greater Kuala Lumpur – Google Maps coordinates: [3.173369,101.705211]. Line drawing based on photograph accessed at: <http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_s6GvUEzX3Zs/Sj5dyaOG5nI/AAAAAAAAABQA/dRLip3_ErHw/s1600-h/216089929_d745b9b2c8_o.jpg>