

# **Seri Rama and Maharaja Wana in *Wayang Kulit Kelantan*: Visual Analysis of Their Puppets**

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## **Introduction**

*Wayang Kulit Kelantan*, currently one of the two remaining shadow play forms in Malaysia, remains active in the northern part of peninsular Malaysia in particular the state of Kelantan, up till southern part of Thailand. It performs mainly a localized Malay folk version *Hikayat Maharaja Wana* derived from the famous Indian epic *Ramayana*, in contrast to the other literary version *Hikayat Seri Rama*.

The origin of *Wayang Kulit Kelantan*, although much has been debated, could have possibly derived from the pre-Islamic or archetypal prototype of *Wayang Kulit Purwa* of Java, following the Majapahit Empire's collapse and the spread of Islam on that island in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2004, pp. 61-62). The introduction of the legendary nine saints (*wali Songo*) in Java (Ghulam-Sarwar, 1994, pp. 274-275) led to the migration of this proto shadow play from Java to Bali and other Indonesian islands as well as the Malay Peninsula. Strong influences of animism, Hinduism, traditional Javanese beliefs and Islam are evident in *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* performances (Ghulam-Sarwar, 1993, pp. 4-5), as well as in the conception of the epic's characters and their visualization on leather puppets.

This paper examines two principal characters in *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* that are the main protagonists of the story—Seri Rama, the hero, and Maharaja Wana, the villain—in the context of their characterization in *Hikayat Maharaja Wana*, and an analysis of their puppets from a visual art perspective, as well as from the perspective of the *halus-kasar* (refined-coarse) concept. This paper intends to examine the design motifs on the puppet designs, reflecting influences from animism, Hinduism, traditional Javanese beliefs and Islam. These influences and syncretism of cultures are reflected strongly in the puppet designs of the two most prominent characters in *Wayang Kulit Kelantan*, Seri Rama and Maharaja Wana. Although previous studies on *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* such as that by Sweeney (1972), Kingham (2006), and Rahimidin (2013) have, to a certain extent, provided descriptions of the puppets representing certain characters in *Wayang Kulit Kelantan*, however they were merely descriptive on the surface but not investigated or analyzed deeper from a visual art perspective, although there has been some analyses of characterization and to a certain extent the visual aesthetic of puppet designs from the perspective of *halus-kasar* theory (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2014 & 2015, pp. 22 -23). Hence, this paper shall attempt to conduct a visual analysis of the puppet designs of these two prime characters from two opposing camps based on their characterisation in the story and the syncretism of cultures and influences reflected in them.

## **Methodology**

This paper will first provide a characterisation analysis of the Seri Rama and Maharaja Wana in terms of their roles in selected episodes of the story. This paper will then proceed to examine the *wayang kulit* puppet figures representing these two characters in terms of their design using

the *halus-kasar* theory based on the refinement (*kehalusan*) and coarseness (*kekasaran*) of the characters. This paper serves to establish the syncretism and eclecticism of both indigenous and foreign elements, such as that of the Indian, Thai and Javanese as well as local Kelantanese design motifs that have helped shape the puppet figures.

## Results

### 1. Seri Rama

Seri Rama appears differently in various texts of the Indian epic *Ramayana*. He is the divine or semi-divine hero of Hindu mythology, also a character without all or some of his divinity in folk and regional versions of his story. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, he is depicted as a heroic human character, an image of the "ideal" prince then later a king of the "ideal kingdom of Ayodhya", in addition to being a "perfect husband" to Siti Dewi, the heroine of the story (Ghulam-Sarwar, 1994, p. 222). Rama is portrayed as a great hero who finally destroys the ten-headed Ravana (or Rawana), the king of Lanka, on the tenth day in the story.

In *Hikayat Maharaja Wana*, Seri Rama is born as the eldest son of the ruler of Siusia Mendarapura (or Java), Sultan Sirat Maharaja, and Puteri Cahaya Bulan. Seri Rama has been described as a perfect being in many ways and even heralded as a hero in the *Bilangan Seri Rama* of the *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* opening performance *dalang muda* prologue using poetic descriptions by Kelantanese puppeteers or *dalang*. However, truth be told that Seri Rama is in fact not all-too-perfect as there were times he displays moments of weaknesses and flaws at certain parts of the *Hikayat Maharaja Wana*. However, all these still do not diminish his role as the main character and hero of the story, but one that still portrays as one who possesses god-like, near-perfect, noble, heroic and charming qualities (Khor & Ghulam-Sarwar, 2017).

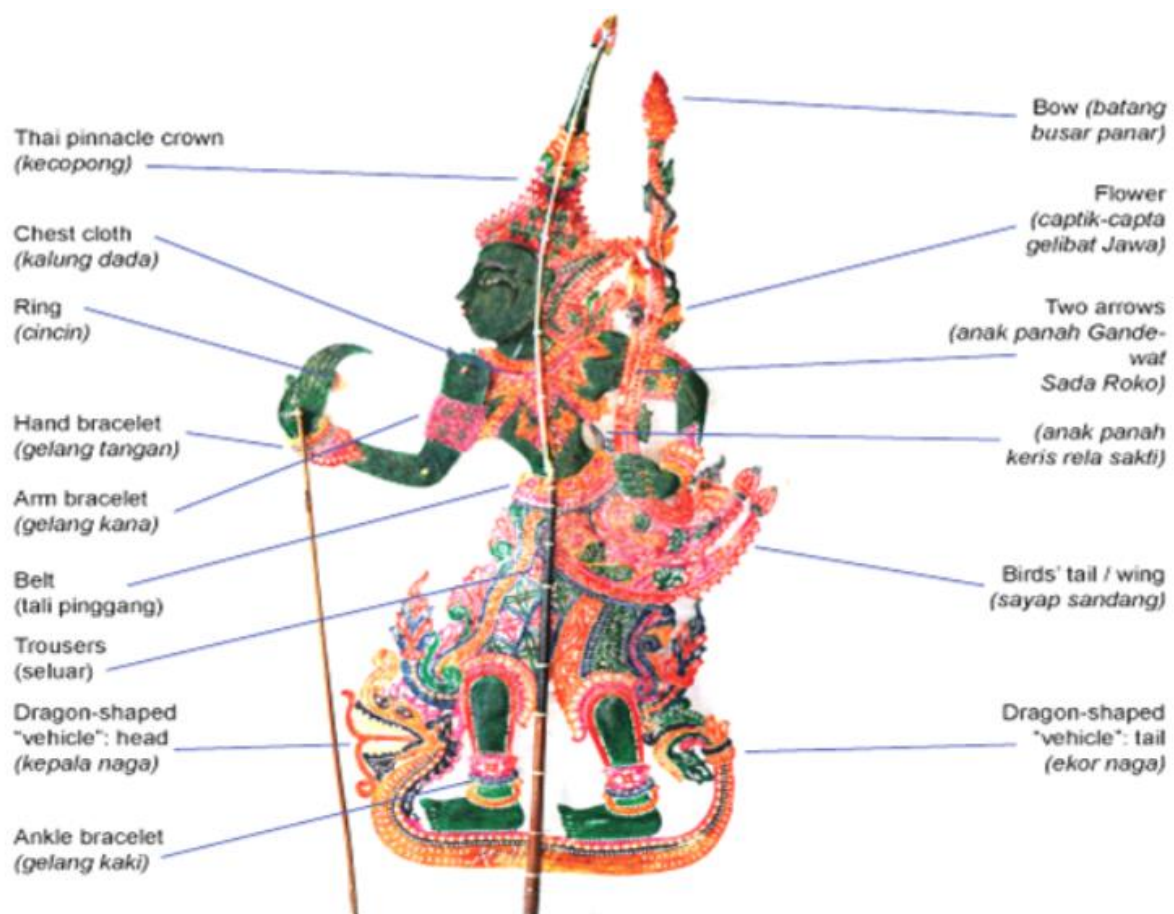
From a visual perspective, the stylized Seri Rama puppet displays a refined facial features and slender figure in a refined (*halus*) manner, adorned with accessories and ornamentation that accentuates his status as a Malay prince (Table 1). Syncretism of cultural influences in particular of Malay, Indian, Thai and Javanese aesthetic concepts can be discerned from Seri Rama's puppet design and motifs (Diagram 1) based on the respective interviews with puppeteers Pak Rahim<sup>1</sup> and puppet maker Pak Nasir<sup>2</sup> in Kelantan.

Table 1: Visual Analysis of Seri Rama

Character	Characterization	Visual Aesthetic	Cultural Influences & Symbolisms
<b>Seri Rama</b>	Human; Royal (Prince); Noble; Hero (the most prominent "good" character) who fights the villain Maharaja Wana and saves the heroine Siti Dewi	<p><b>Halus (Refined)</b></p> <p><b>Face:</b> small mouth and nose; small almond-shaped eye; high forehead; leaf-shaped ear; wears a tall pinnacled crown (<i>kecopong</i>) on the head.</p> <p><b>Upper Torso:</b> long curvy fingers; thin slender waist line; slender arms and legs; wears an ornamented chest cloth; wears armlets and bracelets on both arms; left arm holding a long bow and arrows, as well as a short</p>	<p><b>Hindu influence:</b> Figure in green colour; physical features resemble stone carvings on Hindu temples, particularly Vishnu.</p> <p><b>Thai influence:</b> tall pinnacled crown (<i>kecopong</i>) signifies Siam/Thai royalty; chest cloth, trousers, ornamented leaf-shaped ear, armlets, bracelets and anklets, winged tail (<i>sayap sandang</i>) and long curvy fingernails (<i>canggih</i>) reflective of Thai</p>

		<p>dagger; both hands have long curvy finger covers (<i>canggih</i>); right hand wears a ring.</p> <p><b>Lower Torso:</b> knee-length loose patterned trousers; winged tail (<i>sayap sandang</i>); anklets; dragon-head (<i>naga</i>) head vehicle.</p>	<p>traditional costumes and accessories.</p> <p><b>Javanese influence:</b> Certain motifs on his trousers resemble nature.</p> <p><b>Kelantan influence:</b> Certain motifs on his trousers resemble flowers.</p> <p><b>Animistic influence:</b> <i>naga</i> motif vehicle.</p>
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Diagram 1: Seri Rama



## 2. Maharaja Wana

In the main Indian versions of the Ramayana, Maharaja Wana represents the height of evil, commonly maintained by Kelantanese puppeteers. He has 10 heads and 20 arms as well as the ability to shape-shift into any form he desires.

In *Hikayat Maharaja Wana*, Maharaja Wana is the demon king of Langkapuri and Seri Rama's arch enemy. He belongs to the category of ogres (*raksasa*) in South Asian mythology.

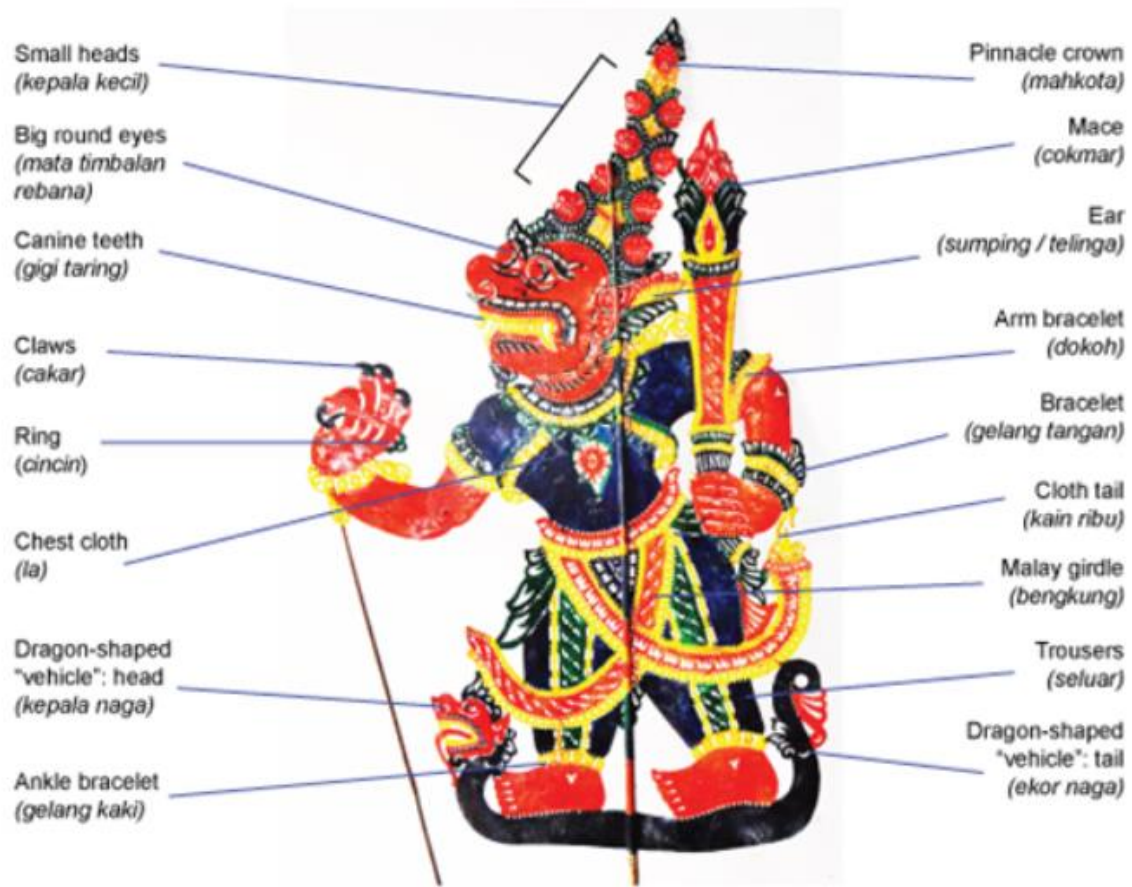
He is huge in size, powerful and uncivilized, and possesses the ability to become invisible, change to any form he wishes, powers to destroy. Prior to becoming king of the demons, he was known as Rawana. Appearing in various forms, Maharaja Wana has relationships with females of various species who bore him offsprings of strange mixed-breed creatures to fill the kingdom and build his army (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2017, pp. 62-64).

From a visual perspective, the stylized Maharaja Wana puppet displays a refined facial features and slender figure in a coarse (*kasar*) manner, adorned with accessories and ornamentation that accentuates his status as a demon king (Table 2). Like Seri Rama, syncretism of cultures and influences from Malay, Indian, Thai and Javanese aesthetics can be discerned from Seri Rama's puppet design and motifs (Diagram 2) based on the respective interviews with puppeteers Pak Rahim and puppet maker Pak Nasir in Kelantan.

Table 2: Visual Analysis of Maharaja Wana

Character	Characterisation	Visual Aesthetic	Cultural Influences & Symbolisms
<b>Maharaja Wana</b>	Demon; King; Villain (the most prominent “evil” character) who kidnapped Siti Dewi and fights the hero Seri Rama	<p><b>Kasar (Coarse)</b></p> <p><b>Face:</b> big mouth and bob-nose; huge round-shaped eyes in three quarter view; bushy eyebrows; leaf-shaped ear; wears a tall pinnacled crown consisting of 10 heads on the head.</p> <p><b>Upper Torso:</b> rougher broad figure; long claw-like fingers; thick arms and legs; wears an ornamented chest cloth; wears armlets and bracelets on both arms; left arm holding a sword; right hand wears a ring.</p> <p><b>Lower Torso:</b> knee-length loose patterned trousers; anklets; dragon-head (<i>naga</i>) head vehicle.</p>	<p><b>Hindu influence:</b> Figure in red and black colour; physical features resemble stone carvings on Hindu temples</p> <p><b>Thai influence:</b> tall pinnacled crown signifies Siam/Thai royalty, however it consists of 10 heads signifying his strength, powers and perseverance; chest cloth, trousers, ornamented leaf-shaped ear, armlets, bracelets and anklets reflective of Thai traditional costumes and accessories.</p> <p><b>Javanese influence:</b> big round fierce eyes, big teeth and fangs that look like demons.</p> <p><b>Animistic influence:</b> <i>naga</i> motif vehicle.</p>

Diagram 2: Maharaja Wana



## Discussion

As a result, the Seri Rama and Maharaja Wana puppets can be analyzed using the *halus-kasar* concept by looking at both internal and external qualities and characteristics: the former refers to its characterization whereas the latter its visual aesthetic. The analyses of these two puppet designs are tabled out and analyzed in the previous section (Tables 1 & 2) leading to interesting findings that show syncretism of cultures on the Seri Rama and Maharaja Wana eclectic puppet designs. Although this is not entirely a new concept, it is, however, the first time for a *halus-kasar* concept to be applied to a visual analysis of the *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* puppets and discussed in detail, in this case, the Seri Rama and Maharaja Wana puppets. This method of visual analysis could lead to more studies on the other puppets representing the interesting characters of *Wayang Kulit Kelantan*, though there may be other more viable methods of visual analysis to examine an art form such as the *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* puppets.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the design of the puppets representing the two most prominent characters in *Wayang Kulit Kelantan*—Seri Rama and Maharaja Wana—are analyzed in this paper based on their characterization in *Hikayat Maharaja Wana* as well as from a visual perspective and the *halus-kasar* concept. Through the results of the visual analysis, each of the puppet are analyzed on the visual aesthetic as well as cultural influences and symbolism that reflect an eclectic mix

of Indian, Thai, Javanese, and local Kelantanese cultural design motifs. These eclectic cultural design motifs and patterns on the Seri Rama and Maharaja Wana puppets reflect a syncretism of cultures on a single surface that makes it a unique art form. Although it is not known if the intricate design motifs and details portrayed on the puppet features and ornamentation could sustain on and maintain its relevance by future puppeteers and puppet-makers in the coming years, due to diminishing interest of the younger generation towards this age-old art form and lack of support by the ministry of culture and tourism. With the recent years newly invented shadow plays like *Star Wars Wayang Kulit* that is gaining popularity, the status of survival for *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* is increasingly harder with time particularly when it is currently one of last two surviving shadow plays in the country. Its traditional art of puppet-making ought to be preserved as a cultural art heritage of Malaysia while it strives to stay relevant in today's rapidly changing modern society.

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