

**LOCALISATION OF THE RAMAYANA EPIC IN
MALAYSIAN VISUAL ARTS**

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**LOCALISATION OF THE RAMAYANA EPIC IN
MALAYSIAN VISUAL ARTS**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AD	Anno Domini
BCE	Before the Common Era
CE	Common Era
NCC	National Culture Congress
NCP	National Culture Policy
HSR	<i>Hikayat Seri Rama</i>
WKMK	<i>Wayang Kulit Melayu Kelantan</i>
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia
DVD	Digital Versatile Disc

LOKALISASI EPIK RAMAYANA KE DALAM SENI VISUAL MALAYSIA

ABSTRAK

Epik Ramayana dan wayang kulit sememangnya saling berhubung kait dan telah menjadi tradisi warisan sejak turun temurun khususnya di Thailand, Kemboja, Malaysia dan Indonesia yang masing-masing telah mewarisi wayang kulit dalam versi tersendiri. Hakikatnya, Ramayana yang berakar umbi secara mendalam dalam tradisi wayang kulit, ternyata telah mempengaruhi amalan sosio-budaya dan spiritual masyarakat di Asia Tenggara, dan Malaysia juga tidak terkecuali daripadanya. Selepas rusuhan kaum pada Mei 1969, Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (DKK) telah diperkenalkan pada tahun 1971 sebagai rangka kerja ke arah pembinaan negara dan pembentukan identiti kebangsaan yang menekankan budaya Melayu dan ajaran Islam di dalam rangka kerjanya. Meskipun dengan pengenalan DKK, elemen dan pengaruh dari Ramayana seperti watak-watak penting, plot dan naratif yang digunapakai dah diaplikasi oleh penggiat seni tempatan masih lagi menjurus ke arah asal usulnya dari India. Penyelidikan ini mengkaji kesinambungan kewujudan elemen dan pengaruh dari epik Ramayana yang masih terdapat pada seni visual Malaysia walaupun DKK telah diperkenalkan. Dengan menggunakan Sejarah Seni Baharu sebagai konsep rangka kerja, penyelidikan ini mengkaji dan menganalisa karya seni tempatan terpilih yang telah dihasilkan sejak kemerdekaan (1957) sehingga ke hari ini menerusi pelbagai medium dari lensa wayang kulit. Menerusi analisis dan penemuan daripada penyelidikan ini menunjukkan bahawa paparan visual wayang kulit telah kekal sebagai paten yang jelas dalam kebanyakan karya di mana ianya wujud secara dominan pada karya awal dan semakin pudar dan lenyap dengan elemen identiti

lokal diguna pakai pada karya kini dan terbaru. Walaupun DKK tidak pernah diimplimentasi dalam sistem perundangan di Malaysia dan keberkesanannya masih lagi dipertikai, namun begitu, tesis ini menghujahkan bahawa impak DKK dalam merubah dan mempengaruhi gambaran tentang epik Ramayana dan juga visualisasi wayang kulit di Malaysia masih relevan.

LOCALISATION OF THE RAMAYANA EPIC IN MALAYSIAN VISUAL ARTS

ABSTRACT

Ramayana and the *wayang kulit* in particular are so deeply intertwined in Southeast Asia that they have become one of its most distinctive traditions—especially in Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia for centuries, with each of these countries having their own distinguished versions. As a consequence of the deeply rooted tradition, the Ramayana epic extends itself beyond the *wayang kulit* and into the socio-cultural practices and spiritual-religious beliefs of the people in its respective nation, and Malaysia is no exception to this. After the May 1969 racial riots, the National Culture Policy (NCP) was introduced in 1971 as a framework towards nation-building and forming a national identity that emphasises Malay culture and Islamic teachings. Despite the introduction of the NCP, elements and derivatives from the Ramayana epic—vital characters, plots and narratives that are continuously used and applied by local visual artists—still lead toward their Indian origin. This research examines the continued presence of elements and derivatives from the Ramayana epic that are still prevalent in Malaysian visual arts despite the introduction of the NCP. Using New Art History as a conceptual framework, this research examines and analyses selected local artworks that have been produced by artists since independence (1957) to this day across various mediums through the lens of *wayang kulit*. Through the analysis and findings of this research, the stylisation of the *wayang kulit*, this research argues, maintains a distinct pattern in most of the works that were examined where it is strongly and distinctively present in the earlier works but wanes as it is further imbibed with elements of local identity in later works. As the NCP was never

implemented as a legislative law in Malaysia and its 'success' remains arguable, nevertheless, the impact that the NCP had in transforming and influencing the portrayal of the Ramayana epic as well as the visualisation of the *wayang kulit* in Malaysia, as this thesis will argue, is visible.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Ramayana, one of the greatest Indian epics, is dispersed in a multitude of forms throughout South Asia and Southeast Asia. Similar to other epics and legends, Ramayana is anchored upon the victory of good over evil after a long period of struggles, losses and challenges of a banished prince, his wife, his brother and a loyal servant. Although the Valmikian Ramayana is well-established in the discourse of Ramayana, other tellings and variations of the Ramayana with their own differences and contradictions have also come to the fore in India as well as Southeast Asia. Ramanujan elaborates on the richness and diversity of this epic as:

Sanskrit alone contains some twenty-five or more tellings belonging to various narrative genres (epics, kavyas or ornate poetic compositions, puranas or old mythological stories and so forth). If we add plays, dance dramas, and other performances, in both the classical and folk traditions, the number of *Ramayanas* grows even larger. To these must be added sculpture and bas-reliefs, mask plays, puppet plays, in all the many South and Southeast Asian cultures.¹

From its initial form in oral literature, the Ramayana epic transcended into the form of poems, inscriptions, leather puppet shadow plays (*wayang kulit*), sculptures and bas-reliefs, stage performances, literature; and further into more modernised forms such as paintings, movies and even more commercialised varieties. The enticing appeal of the Ramayana epic is undoubted, as it has travelled across the world in different forms, capturing younger and older generations alike. In the Southeast Asian region, this epic,

¹ A. K Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," in *Many Ramanayanas - The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 24.

along with Mahabharata, is prevalent in the traditional practice of leather puppet shadow plays (*wayang kulit*), localised literatures, and oral traditions. More importantly, scenes from this epic are captured on famous temple walls such as in Prambanan and Panataran, Banteay Srei in Cambodia, Tra-Kieu in Vietnam and Luang Prabang in Laos among others. Besides these traditional art forms; great music, dances, theatre and puppetries have been developed to express this epic which narrates a beautiful story of human courage, integrity, faith and loyalty as well as pride and other human frailties. With the passing of time, it is interesting to note that the storyline and iconography of this epic have been somewhat customised through localisations and adaptations in various regions. This is only natural, as the artisans and bards of each, with time, add their own interpretations according to their cultural beliefs and individual creativity.²

The influence of the Ramayana epic in Malaysia can still be found in various contexts and content; from the tradition of *wayang kulit*³ and other theatrical performances such as *Mak Yong*, to the ceremonial events of the royalties, Malay weddings and literature text of *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Rama Saga). In these adaptations, the Ramayana epic has been translated and localised to suit the needs of the Malay cultural context as well as religious matrix of Islam, daily cultural practices and social beliefs. *Hikayat Seri Rama* and the *wayang kulit* are respectively distinguished literary texts and one of the vital cultural art forms that have been repeatedly and timelessly

² James Khoo, "Foreword," in *Ramayana - A Living Tradition*, ed. Gauri Parimoo Krishnan (Singapore: Asian Civilisation Museum, 1997).

³ I am using term *wayang kulit* as a general reference to the tradition of leather puppet shadow play in the writing of this research as in earlier times there were four distinguished genres of wayang kulit in Malaysia. As of current times, only *Wayang Kulit Melayu Kelantan* is still being practiced/performed. Hence the term *Wayang Kulit Melayu Kelantan* will be used specifically to replace the term Wayang Kulit Siam.

linked to the Ramayana epic in the Malaysian context. Along with that, other art forms and artistic expressions such as paintings, visual designs, sculptures and digital arts that consist of element(s)/attribute(s) of the Ramayana epic have continued to enrich and develop the Malaysian visual arts landscape since the 1960s up to this very day. Despite the continued presence of the Ramayana epic in the local visual arts, there is a lack of in-depth discussion and analysis of these works. In some of these writings, although references are made to the *wayang kulit* tradition, the source of origin of such tradition or the shared belonging of it within this region is rarely mentioned.

1.2 Problem Statement

The National Culture Congress (NCC) that was held in 1971 was to seek for a solution as well as to “address the need for a unifying culture”⁴, resulting from the racial tension and disharmony of May 1969. The turmoil of the racial riots that escalated to the incident on 13 May 1969 must not be understood merely as social dissatisfaction among the different races post-independence in 1957. Cheah notes:

It was not until after Malaya’s independence in 1957 that minorities were entitled to claim some of the same citizenship rights as Malaysians and other indigenous races. During this period, however, the Malays felt that they had lagged behind the non-Malays who fared better economically and were reported to have acquired a disproportionately large amount of the country’s wealth.⁵

Even prior to the NCC, Rowland pointed out Krishen Jit’s observation that the impact of the 1969 racial riots was profound on society and culture.⁶ The involvement of

⁴ Valerie Kathy Rowland, “The Politics of Drama: Post-1969 State Policies and Their Impact on Theatre in English in Malaysia from 1970 to 1999” (University Malaya, 2005), 46.

⁵ Boon Kheng Cheah, “Malaysian Political Development from Colonial Rule to Mahathir,” in *The Shaping of Malaysia*, ed. Amarjit Kaur and Ian Metcalfe (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999), 99–118, 99.

⁶ Rowland, “The Politics of Drama: Post-1969 State Policies and Their Impact on Theatre in English in Malaysia from 1970 to 1999,” 44.

the state in the arts and cultural landscape became prominent after the 1969 racial riots. Prior to 1969, it was only artists and literary groups who were interested in formulating a policy in relation to the national culture.⁷ Although the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports was established in 1964, activities were limited to cultural dances that highlighted various ethnic dances that were performed during official/government occasions and for visiting dignitaries.⁸ However, after 1969, the state became more involved in events pertaining to arts and culture.

Albeit the fact the NCP remains a blueprint that was never implemented⁹ through laws or legislations, various contentions and propositions revolving this particular policy continues to this very day. The NCP, which was formulated as the outcome of the NCC, which was held at Universiti Malaya¹⁰, suggested a manifesto guided by three principles¹¹: (1) the national culture would be based on the culture that is indigenous and native to this region; (2) other cultures that are deemed suitable and reasonable will be absorbed into the national culture; and (3) Islam is to be a vital component in the formation of the national culture. Taking a closer look at the outlines of the NCP, they may be considered problematic in the lenses of regionality or even multi-culturalism. Ishak further highlights that the formulation of the NCP was recognised by the non-Malays as an obvious sign of Malay cultural¹² domination. Mandal further explains:

⁷ Ibid, 44.

⁸ Ibid, 44.

⁹ Mohamed Mustafa Ishak, "From State Building to Nation Building," in *The Politics of Bangsa Malaysia - Nation Building in a Multiethnic Society* (Shah Alam: Universiti Utara Malaysia, 2014), 89–142, 126.

¹⁰ Rowland, "The Politics of Drama: Post-1969 State Policies and Their Impact on Theatre in English in Malaysia from 1970 to 1999," 46.

¹¹ Ishak, "From State Building to Nation Building," 127.

¹² Ibid, 126.

Although initiated by the government as one of the measures to encourage national unity following the racialized political crisis of 1969, the NCP became the source of a great deal of contention. Bodies representing the respective cultural interests of different ethnic groups claimed that the policy equated national culture with Malay culture to the exclusion of others.¹³

Although the NCP was never executed in the form of legislative laws and acts, the impact it had on local art practitioners is hard to dispel. Rowland further explains that the formulation of a policy presumes the authority and enforcements¹⁴ of its agenda as the interpretation and understanding of the particular agenda would be highly influenced by the socio-political context of such a policy—the various reactions from different segments of society. As such, the nature of a policy can be understood to be in a state of flux, instead of being constant; where the policy is constituent to the socio-political environment and exposed to the subjective comprehensions of those who regulate the policy.¹⁵ The relevance of the NCP and its impact can be witnessed by the transformation and changes that took place in the local art and theatre scene. Sabapathy further notes that the 1969 riots, the NCC and other relevant efforts had somewhat shattered local artists and instigated new thinking and practices amongst them.¹⁶

Sabapathy explains:

Throughout the 1970s, artists began the difficult, painful process of rethinking their positions, and recasting their perceptions of culture, language, race, state/nation and identity. For some, the prospects loomed as intolerable and inhospitable and they chose to migrate; some retreated into temporary silence; for everyone else, the stakes were too important and consequential not to be involved.¹⁷

¹³ Sumit K. Mandal, “The National Culture Policy and Contestation over Malaysian Identity,” in *Globalization and National Autonomy*, ed. Joan M Nelson, Jacob Meerman, and Abdul Rahman Embong (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2008), 273–300, 274.

¹⁴ Rowland, “The Politics of Drama: Post-1969 State Policies and Their Impact on Theatre in English in Malaysia from 1970 to 1999,” 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 9.

¹⁶ T.K. Sabapathy, “Merdeka Makes Art or Does It?,” in *Vision and Idea Relooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 49–78, 71.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 71.

This was further clarified by Syed Ahmad Jamal, who noted that local artists were as disturbed and shocked as the rest of the society, and for a period of time, artists had stopped producing.¹⁸ Local artists such as Cheong Laitong was so disgusted by the event that he did not feel like painting, while some artists like Ibrahim Hussein, Redza Piyadasa and Syed Ahmad Jamal had produced works in relation to the racial riots.¹⁹ The on-going questions, negotiations and thoughts among local artists brought forth two significant exhibitions that were radical and somewhat challenged the boundaries of art within the scope of sociology, philosophy and even aesthetics post-NCP.²⁰ These two intriguing exhibitions were *Towards a Mystical Reality* in 1974 and *Rupa and Jiwa (Form and Soul)* in 1979, and it was these exhibitions that brought forth new concepts of thinking²¹ within the Malaysian visual art scene. Mashadi elaborates on the exploration of local artists in the decade of 1970s as:

Their works in the early 1970s investigated the assumptions of nation and community, making direct and oblique references to the events of 1969 and the National Cultural Congress of 1971 that had shaped the cultural debates during the period, placing special emphasis on examining and reflecting tensions and contradictions between individualism and communitarian interests.

...

The economic and social transformations that took place in the 1970s, moreover, necessarily inflected cultural discourse by compelling artists to reflect on a broad spectrum of social conditions.²²

¹⁸ Rowland, "The Politics of Drama: Post-1969 State Policies and Their Impact on Theatre in English in Malaysia from 1970 to 1999," 44.

¹⁹ Sabapathy, "Merdeka Makes Art or Does It?," 69.

²⁰ Siti Nur Balqis Abdul Halim and Sarena Abdullah, "Reaksi Terhadap Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan: Analisis Pameran Seni Towards A Mystical Reality (1974) Dan Rupa Dan Jiwa (1979)," *Melayu: Jurnal Antarabangsa Dunia Melayu* 13, no. 2 (2020): 173–98, 176.

²¹ Ibid, 176.

²² Ahmad Mashadi, "Framing the 1970s," *Third Text* 25, no. 4 (2011): 409–17, 416-17.

The racial riots and the NCC had inevitably jolted and shaken local visual artists to a certain extent. In addition to that, Ungku Aziz had proposed for visual artists to create/produce works that were anchored in social, political and economic realities²³ instead of creating art merely for the purpose of art. At the same time, local artists were also in search for and grappling with representing their own identity as well as expression that could serve as the cultural identity. As a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic entity, one would expect the cultural identity of Malaysia to consist of a variety of elements that encompass this nation state. However, with Islam and the Malay culture²⁴ taking precedence over the national culture, such a proposition was unacceptable to the non-Malays. The importance that was given to Malay culture and Islam was seen as a buttress to the mounting development of Malay nationalism post-1969.²⁵

This comes as a result as the cultural identity of Malaysia has always been debated as to whether it would significantly if not ultimately become the icon of the nation state, thus forming the national identity. The contestations for a national identity as a political tool for the ruling coalition, or as a genuine measure to unite citizens of different races, religions, cultures, ethnicities and cultural elements continue to this very day. The search for a national identity for Malaysia goes on as various parties impose their personal agendas; thus, moving further away from what was proposed at the NCC in August 1971 at Universiti Malaya.

²³ Ibid, 71.

²⁴ Ishak, "From State Building to Nation Building," 126.

²⁵ Ibid, 126.

As a result of the formulation of NCP in 1971²⁶ where the Malay culture was given more importance²⁷ due to the majority population being the Malays and the position of Islam²⁸ as the official religion; there was an urgency especially amongst the Malays to seek their cultural identity and ethnic roots. Piyadasa²⁹ summated that with the formulation of the NCP, Malay intellectuals as well as artists had a strong desire and interest in the search for their historical origin. As a reaction to this, a new and fresh interest emerged amongst artists and intellectuals to further research about the history of the Malays, cultural values, myths, legends, art and literature forms, aesthetical values, and the sensibilities and techniques of art.³⁰ This was further elaborated by Abdul Rahman³¹, according to whom the search for a national identity was further exacerbated when some of the local artists infused literary elements and cultural attributes in their works.

In addition to that, Piyadasa³² notes that in defining cultural identification, it was important to note the regional history of Southeast Asia that can be traced back to the beginning of the millennia. At this point in time, the Southeast Asian region and the Malay Archipelago was a fluid region³³ with movement of commodities, ideas and its people who were more ‘unrestricted and free’ in comparison to current times. With the

²⁶ “Kata Pengantar,” in *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan* (Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan Malaysia, 1973), vii.

²⁷ Redza Piyadasa, “Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period,” in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Wild Peony, 1993), 169–81, 175.

²⁸ Ishak, “From State Building to Nation Building,” 127.

²⁹ Piyadasa, “Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period,” 175.

³⁰ Redza Piyadasa, “Defining Nationalism,” in *Rupa Malaysia - Travelling Exhibition* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1998), 22–31, 26.

³¹ Muhammad Ali Abdul Rahman, *Pemandangan Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1990).

³² Redza Piyadasa, “Melampaui Sempadan,” in *Rupa Malaysia - Meninjau Seni Lukis Moden* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2000), 54–67, 67.

³³ Farish A Noor, “Historicising ‘Pahang,’” in *From Inderapura to Darul Makmur* (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books Sdn Bhd, 2011), 1–10, 4.

account of Hindu-Buddhist influence in the first millennia, further Islamic waves³⁴ in the 13th–14th century, and lastly Christianity in the 16th century³⁵, the socio-cultural settings and political-religious frameworks were rendered into greater complexity. The process of assimilation, adaptation and syncretisation of indigenous practices and new influences that came along with modernisation and globalisation³⁶ gave birth to a much more complex and multi-faceted region³⁷ that Southeast Asia is today. Acharya further explains the complexity of Southeast Asia’s identity as:

... in the face of the region’s immense diversity and myriad countervailing forces, including the ever-present danger of intraregional conflict and the divisive impact of extraregional actors and events.³⁸

In unprecedented socio-political times, the vision to identify ourselves as individuals as well as a wholesome nation must be widened, while being inclusive of other elements that have formed this very nation today. The pressing need to relook at culture, identity and history is present now more than ever. In relation to the cultural context and history of Malaysia, Piyadasa³⁹ states that there is a need to re-evaluate our cultural heritage in order for us to appreciate and use it as a beneficial factor to us as a nation, and therefore, the need to re-define cultural identity and cultural history. Cultural awareness must be heightened along with cultural confidence in order to protect, appreciate and enrich our understanding. More importantly, Piyadasa highlighted the

³⁴ Ros Mahwati Ahmad Zakaria and Latifah Abdul Latif, “Introduction,” in *Malay Manuscripts: An Introduction*, ed. Lucien de Guise (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, 2008), 7–20, 12.

³⁵ “Christian Art” (Singapore: Asian Civilisation Museum, 2018).

³⁶ Amitav Acharya, “Globalization and the Crisis of Regional Identity,” in *The Making of Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012), 240–88, 240.

³⁷ Amitav Acharya, “Introduction: Region, Regionalism and Regional Identity in the Making of Southeast Asia,” in *The Making of Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2012), 1–20, 1.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 1.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 64.

need to relook and re-evaluate policies that divide and segregate the society further, and for a new cultural identification which is more inclusive and signifies a diverse and complex society is needed to gear towards developing the nation.⁴⁰

Among the elements or factors to be considered in a particular cultural identification are environmental sensibility, climate, society, semiotics, philosophy, spiritual understanding, and cultural complexity.⁴¹ This was due to the reason that cultural signs are not deemed to be static and frozen in a particular period. Instead, these signs must be read with fluidity and flexibility in a different time frame or context.⁴² A similar context must be used in analysing the presence of any elements or attributes from the Ramayana epic in the visual arts as part of the cultural identification in relation to the period it was conceived.

This raises the question, despite the arrival of Islam at the Malay Archipelago between the 13th and 14th century, and further with the formulation of the NCP in 1971, how and why does the Ramayana epic continue its presence in the cultural traditions and artistic endeavours in Malaysia? In a Malay Muslim majority nation like Malaysia, cultural elements and spiritual beliefs from the Hindu-Buddhist past have been eliminated in order to preserve and protect the Malay Muslim culture. The height of such an elimination can be seen through the implementation of a sanction⁴³ on the *wayang kulit* practice in Malaysia. The notion that folkloric Hindu elements as well as animistic

⁴⁰ Ibid, 59.

⁴¹ Piyadasa, "Melampau Sempadan," 67.

⁴² Ibid, 59.

⁴³ Dahlan Abdul Ghani, "The Study of Semiotics Wayang Kulit Theatre in Malay Culture Society," *Estudios Sobre El Mensaje Periodistico* 18, no. 1 (2012): 321–35, 323.

beliefs⁴⁴ that are well-rooted in indigenous Southeast Asia are interlaced in *wayang kulit* practices is seen as a threat that goes against the Islamic framework and religious matrix. These elements are seen to tarnish and slant the teachings of Islam and its beliefs, thereby misleading the Muslims from its true meaning. At the same time, lack of understanding and consciousness regarding the cultural practices as well as spiritual beliefs over centuries which have shaped the country's traditions, heritage and culture is seen as a threat towards building the national identity.

This is evident in a few incidences such as the renaming of the Lebuhraya Mahameru (Mahameru Highway) in Kuala Lumpur to Lebuhraya Sultan Iskandar (Sultan Iskandar Highway).⁴⁵ The word Meru in Mahameru is in reference to the cosmic mountain Meru, and commonly referred to as the mythical mountain⁴⁶ that is the abode of gods and the axis of the universe in Hindu mythology. The philosophy of Mount Meru, which is also known as Mount Sumeru (Pali canon of Hinayana), that revolves around cosmology is rooted in Hinduism, Jainism as well as Buddhism.⁴⁷ As the origin and philosophy of Meru is not anchored in Islam, this created a certain amount of discomfort and negation in a country that had established Islam⁴⁸ as the official religion. In 2013, a *chandi* was destroyed in Lembah Bujang, Kedah due to development that was

⁴⁴ Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, "Ramayana in the Malaysian Wayang Kulit Siam," in *Ramayana in Focus - Visual and Performing Arts of Asia*, ed. Gauri Parimoo Krishnan (Asian Civilisation Museum, 2010), 135–44, 143.

⁴⁵ D Kanyakumari and Shalini Ravindran, "Eight Major Roads in KL to Be Renamed," *The Star Online*, 2014, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2014/11/25/major-roads-in-kl-renamed/>.

⁴⁶ Stefano Vecchia, *The Khmers History and Treasures of An Ancient Civilisation*, ed. Valeria Manfredi De Fabianis, Laura Accomazzo, and Giorgio Ferrero (Italy: White Star, 2007), 91.

⁴⁷ Joseph E. Schwartzberg, "Cosmography in Southeast Asia," in *Cartography in the Traditional East and Southeast Asian Societies*, ed. J. B. Harley and David Woodward, vol. 2 (U.S: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 701–40, 714.

⁴⁸ Ishak, "From State Building to Nation Building," 127.

taking place at one of the most important archaeological sites in Malaysia.⁴⁹ Lembah Bujang in the northwest of the Malay Peninsula was among the leading Hindu-Buddhist centres of maritime Southeast Asia as early as the first century.⁵⁰ The destruction of the *chandi* in Lembah Bujang was paramount as the demolished site was to be listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.⁵¹

The performance of *wayang kulit* was banned in Kelantan by its conservative⁵² Islamist state government PAS⁵³ (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia) as the *wayang kulit* was said to have Hindu mythological elements and animistic beliefs. This was done without consideration being given to the significance of the *wayang kulit* practice towards the cultural practices and identity of the people of Kelantan. In the 1990s, Kelantan which was under the governance of PAS (an Islamic conservative party) went under intense Arabisation; such as changes in dress code that reflected the Arab culture instead of the local Malay traditional wear for the Muslims.⁵⁴ Cultural performances and traditional games that were unsuitable in the Islamic framework were prohibited in the state, and even the farming of tobacco as an economic income was replaced with *kenaf* as tobacco consumption was declared un-Islamic.⁵⁵ Cultural heritages such as *main puteri*, *Mak*

⁴⁹ “Outrage over Bujang Valley Development after Tomb Temple Destroyed,” The Star Online, December 2013, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2013/12/01/bujang-valley-candi-demolished>.

⁵⁰ Ros Mahwati Ahmad Zakaria and Latifah Abdul Latif, “Introduction,” in *Malay Manuscripts: An Introduction*, ed. Lucien de Guise (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, 2008), 7–20, 10.

⁵¹ “Outrage over Bujang Valley Development after Tomb Temple Destroyed.”

⁵² Wan Saiful Wan Jan, “PAS Has Always Been Conservative,” The Star Online, 2017, <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/thinking-liberally/2017/04/25/pas-has-always-been-conservative-looking-back-at-the-partys-history-it-has-not-hesitated-to-remove-a/>.

⁵³ Dahlan Abdul Ghani, “The Study of Semiotics Wayang Kulit Theatre in Malay Culture Society,” *Estudios Sobre El Mensaje Periodístico* 18, no. 1 (2012): 321–35, 323.

⁵⁴ Izzuddin Ramli, “How Different the Kelantan of My Youth Was,” *Penang Monthly* (Penang, October 2019), https://penangmonthly.com/article.aspx?pageid=15812&name=how_different_the_kelantan_of_my_youth_h_was.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Yong, and *dikir barat* that were also ingrained in the daily lives of the villagers were restricted which further drove these cultural performances to border towns resulting from the restriction and new rules by the state government.⁵⁶

The narratives for both *Hikayat Maharaja Wana* (King Wana's Saga) and *Cerita Kusi Serawi* (Story of Kusi Serawi) were derived from the Ramayana epic. Thus, these well-known narratives for the performance of *Wayang Kulit Melayu Kelantan* (Kelantanese Malay Leather Puppet Shadow Play) were perceived as an intimidation in Kelantan which was ruled by an Islamic conservative state government. *Mak yong*, which is a traditional dance that was initially performed for ritualistic purposes, and currently performed as entertainment was awarded with the UNESCO Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005,⁵⁷ is dying out in Malaysia due to lack of recognition and support to continue and preserve this heritage.⁵⁸ These are a few of the exemplary cases where cultural heritage, regional identity and historical roots that bear resemblance to the Hindu-Buddhist past were not given recognition; what more preservation due to the conflict it has with the teachings and tenets of Islam. Any evidence that relates to the Hindu-Buddhist past is seen as a threat to Islam as well as the Malay culture. An example of this was the conscious removal of the prehistoric past and the Hindu-Buddhist elements of the Srivijaya period by Khoo Kay Kim in his proposal for the syllabus for schools and higher education during the NCC.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ "Third Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity," www.unesco.org, 2005, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/proclamation-of-masterpieces-00103>.

⁵⁸ Madiha Ramlan and M.A. Quayum, "Mapping the History of Malaysia Theatre: An Interview with Ghulam Sarwar Yousof," *Asiatic* 4, no. 2 (2010), 161.

⁵⁹ Faisal Tehrani, "Pembobongan 50 Tahun - Di Mana Kita Dan Apa Ertinya Kebudayaan Kebangsaan Sekarang?," *SVARA* (Kuala Lumpur, 2021), 34.

Furthermore, whether it is due to the formulation of the NCP, or an attempt to bury the historical past, or lack of analysis on the cultural identity ties in the region, or emphasis on Islamic revivalism; historical art writings in Malaysia lack in-depth discussions pertaining to the essentials of *wayang*. Most writings (from catalogues, journals and exhibition books) highlight the reference of *wayang kulit* by acknowledging how the practice of *wayang kulit* had shaped the cultural identity without analysis and discussion of *wayang kulit*'s historiography. In comparison when examining works by Indonesian artists; Fischer⁶⁰, Wright⁶¹ and Holt⁶² provide an in-depth discussion and analysis pertaining to works that have predominantly captured the *wayang* style.

1.3 Research Questions

Nine research questions have been derived for this particular research and are as follows:

What are the similarities of the elements and derivatives of the Ramayana epic in Southeast Asia?

What is the historical belonging of the Ramayana epic and the *wayang kulit* performance or leather puppet shadow play in Southeast Asia?

Why was the Ramayana epic problematic with the introduction of the NCP?

⁶⁰ Joseph Fischer, "The Traditional Sources of Modern Indonesian Art," in *Modern Indonesian Art - Three Generations of Tradition and Change 1945 - 1990*, ed. Joseph Fischer (Singapore: Panitia Pameran KIAS and Festival of Indonesia, 1990, 1990), 14–41, 18-25.

⁶¹ Astri Wright, "Soul, Spirit, and Mountain," in *Soul, Spirit and Mountain: Preoccupation of Contemporary Indonesian Painters* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994), 35–67, 52-55.

⁶² Claire Holt, "The Wayang World," in *Art in Indonesia Continuities and Change* (London: Cornell University, 1967), 123–50.

What is the impact of the National Culture Policy on the Ramayana epic in Malaysia?

What is the Ramayana epic in the Malaysian context?

How has the *wayang* tradition preserved the Ramayana epic in Malaysian visual arts?

What are the elements and derivatives of the Ramayana epic in Malaysian visual arts?

What are the emerging localisation themes of the Ramayana epic in Malaysian visual arts?

How did local artists capture the elasticity and fluidity of the Ramayana epic across different mediums?

1.4 Aim and Objectives of Research

This research aims to identify elements and attributes from the Ramayana epic that have been adapted, localised, and explored in various arrays in the Malaysian visual arts. From a general view, the elements or attributes from the Ramayana epic stem from the *wayang kulit* tradition in relation to its status as a cultural symbol or representation of this tradition in Malaysia as well as in Southeast Asia. The fact that Malaysia is part of a greater and more complex regional entity such as Southeast Asia has made the local arts and cultural context highly complex and dis-integrated. Among the contributing factors are: (1) infused with historical⁶³ and cultural roots that lead back to the Hindu-Buddhist period⁶⁴ in this region; (2) has experienced the insurgence of Islamic fundamentalism that brought a global wave to revive Islamic values; (3) was influenced

⁶³ John N. Miksic and Yiah Goh Geok, "Early Classic 600 to 900 CE," in *Ancient Southeast Asia* (Great Britain: Routledge, 2017), 229–346, 243.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 236.

by artists who were trained abroad⁶⁵ especially in Europe and the United States of America; and (4) the influx of Chinese artists from China in Singapore⁶⁶ who would then contribute towards the development of the local art scene.

Prior to independence, the local art scene consisted of beautiful landscape drawings of Malaya in the 19th century which were produced by colonials residing here.⁶⁷ In the early 20th century, self-taught artists⁶⁸ continued to use the local landscape and its people as the subject of their paintings. It was only in the mid-20th century that the socio-cultural setting and economic growth were slowly beginning to be reflected in the works of local artists. In 1957, Malaysia had gained independence from the British and as a young nation it was grappling to unite its multi-cultural and multi-religious society⁶⁹ that was divided based on socio-economic⁷⁰ stratification. As a result of the growing dissatisfaction and racial tension among its local citizens, this escalated to the May 1969 riot. Thus, the NCC was held in 1971 to propose a trajectory/solution to unite the racially divided Malaysia,⁷¹ and thus, the NCP was formed in 1971 to serve as a

⁶⁵ Piyadasa, "Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period," 172.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 171.

⁶⁷ Refer to appendixes of "Imagining Identities – Narratives in Malaysian Art" on few watercolour renderings of early Malaya by colonials.

⁶⁸ Redza Piyadasa, "The Treatment of the Local Landscape in Modern Malaysian Art, 1930-1981," in *Imagining Identities: Narratives in Malaysian Art*, ed. Nur Hanim Khairuddin and Beverly Yong (Kuala Lumpur: Rogue Art, 2012), 26–58, 26.

⁶⁹ Mohamed Mustafa Ishak, "Managing Ethnicity and Constructing the 'Bangsa Malaysia' (A United Malaysian Nation)*," *Malaysian Management Journal* 6, no. 1&2 (2002): 99–115, 107.

⁷⁰ Piyadasa, "Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period," 175.

⁷¹ Rowland, "The Politics of Drama: Post-1969 State Policies and Their Impact on Theatre in English in Malaysia from 1970 to 1999," 46.

framework towards nation-building, eventually creating a national identity with the Malay culture⁷² as the foundation.

With the formation of the NCP and Malay culture and Islam⁷³ serving as its foundation, over the years Malaysian artists have applied the stylisation as well as subjects of *wayang kulit* puppet figures in their works. This is evident from particular characters and plots from the Ramayana epic, iconographic elements from *wayang kulit* puppets, significant symbols, and even instances of cultural significance that have been brought forth by several artists such as Nik Zainal, Raja Lope Rashydi, Chiang Sao Ling and Norma Abbas, among a few others. As most of the works reflect and/or indicate a reference to the *wayang kulit* tradition, the attributes of *wayang kulit* would be used as a lens in examining, analysing, and discussing the works in this research. Due to the elasticity and adaptability of the Ramayana epic since ancient times, as well as the repertoire of the *wayang kulit* performance, similar adaptability and elasticity are notable within the visual arts in Malaysia.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to examine the persistence of the Ramayana epic in Malaysian visual art by identifying the localisation trends/patterns that have emerged despite the introduction of NCP. As such, the scope of this research would examine artworks that have been produced since independence to present day that consist of any elements or derivatives of the Ramayana epic with regard to the context or content of the artworks. This research will unpack, study, and interpret the various artworks that consist of any derivative or element from the Ramayana epic that have

⁷² T.K. Sabapathy, "On Vision and Idea: Afterthoughts," in *Vision and Idea Relooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 106–18, 107.

⁷³ Ishak, "From State Building to Nation Building," 125.

emerged since post-independence. As such, this research intends to study the various elements, symbols, styles, iconographies, and cultural context anchored on *wayang kulit* as the lens in examining, analysing, and discussing the works by local visual artists that directly or indirectly portray the adaptations and localisation of the Ramayana epic.

The racial riots in 1969 that lasted a week was a traumatic experience for the young nation⁷⁴ which had only been independent since 1957. With the introduction of NCP the cultural identity/vision was to be based on “Malay language and Malay cultural values.”⁷⁵ As a result of the formation of the NCP in 1971, which was followed by the revivalism of Islamic values, local artists in the ’70s and ’80s were questioning their roots and identity. Mashadi postulates that as an effect of the racial riots, some artists had declared to create a national identity that was in line with the *Rukun Negara* (National Principals).⁷⁶ At the same time, Sabapathy notes that local artists were re-evaluating their position and trying to understand and relocate their thoughts on race, language, culture, nation/state and identity post-NCC.⁷⁷ With the Islamic resurgence and introduction of Islamisation programme by the Malaysian government, Shariff further explains that some artists would further explore exhibiting Islamic identity through their artworks whereby they “... consciously and seriously attempted to marry Islamic concepts, in whatever guise, with modernist attitudes in art.”⁷⁸ This was further noted by Coombes:

⁷⁴ Ibid, 125.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 125.

⁷⁶ Mashadi, “Framing the 1970s,” 416.

⁷⁷ Sabapathy, “Merdeka Makes Art or Does It?,” 71

⁷⁸ Zainol Shariff, “Towards an Alter-Native Vision” The Idea of Malaysian Art Since 1980,” in *Vision and Idea Relooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur, 1994), National Art Gallery, 80.

The post-Merdeka (independence) period saw the Malay psyche dynamically freed to search for its true identity once again... The Islamic revival and the almost global activity of delving back into the roots of one's own culture to seek a stronger identity, came about in the late 70s and 80s. It proved to be fruitful in restoring the Malay psyche back on a path to relocating its wholeness, first by rediscovering the true cultural elements that constitute Malay culture and second through its reaffirmation of Islamicity at its core.⁷⁹

Despite the arrival of Islam and the formation of the current nation state of Malaysia, elements from the Hindu-Buddhist past are still prevalent in the cultural activities and beliefs of the Malays.⁸⁰ For instance, the elements and derivatives of the Ramayana epic from the Hindu-Buddhist past are still persistent in the cultural practices, artistic heritage and spiritual beliefs amongst the Malays in the form of *wayang kulit*⁸¹ practice, *Mak Yong* performances⁸², among few others. This is inevitable as the Ramayana epic has served as an umbilical cord towards the artistic development and cultural practices of Southeast Asia and its people during the Hindu-Buddhist past.⁸³

In Malaysia, the context of Ramayana (upon localisation and Islamisation) is evident in the main categories such as the *wayang kulit* tradition, oral literature and literary text. Despite the localisation and Islamisation of the Ramayana epic, its resonance with the Valmikian Ramayana is still distinct. Thus, this research intends to examine the localisation of the Ramayana epic in the Malaysian visual arts—from its

⁷⁹ Harun Abdullah Coombes, "The Islamic Spirit – Social Orientations in Contemporary Malaysian Art," in *Art and Spirituality*, ed. Hani Ahmad (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1995), 19-20.

⁸⁰ Abdul Halim and Abdullah, "Reaksi Terhadap Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan: Analisis Pameran Seni Towards A Mystical Reality (1974) Dan Rupa Dan Jiwa (1979)," 194.

⁸¹ Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, "Malaysian Shadow Play Styles," in *The Malay Shadow Play: An Introduction* (Penang: The Asian Centre, 1997), 9-10.

⁸² Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin, "Pas Inflicted Irreparable Damage on Mak Yong," *New Straits Times*, 2019, <https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2019/10/529597/pas-inflicted-irreparable-damage-mak-yong>.

⁸³ Gauri Parimoo Krishnan, "Ramayana a Living Tradition" (Singapore: National Heritage Board, 1997), 9-10.

initial adoption of visual design from the *wayang kulit* puppets, followed by the adaptation of the style of the *wayang kulit* puppets that is further intertwined with the personal artistic style of the artist, and lastly the exploration and experimentation of the distinctive *wayang kulit* puppet style across various media including digital arts. More importantly, this research intends to investigate the effect of NCP's introduction on the localisation of the Ramayana epic in Malaysian visual arts.

The Ramayana epic of Hindu-Indian origin is tightly embedded in the cultural beliefs and practices of Southeast Asian people in general, and Malaysians are no exception to this. Despite the insurgence of Islamic fundamentalism globally or even colonisation by the West, various artistic forms and creative practices that consume certain elements and attributes from the Ramayana epic continue to exist and manifest in various art forms and context to this very day. Coombes notes:

From the complete *adab* (customs) to the artisans and house-builders we see the gradual rejection of pre-Islamic customs and art forms, mostly Hindu, and the result refined and matured up until the encounter with secularism, colonisation and attempted de-Islamisation of the Malay Archipelago. Many artists who chose to rediscover their roots in the Islamicity and Malay culture carried out this process of rejection of un-Islamic elements in the content of their work, although the technique remains mostly western.⁸⁴

On a further note, commenting about the emergence of new and various cultures as a result of globalisation, Ismail Zain (1996) in Piyadasa⁸⁵ commented that the most challenging task was to negotiate an understanding on the 'cultural balance' of what constitutes ours and other external factors. Ismail Zain continued to elaborate that artists and creative intellectuals must occupy this 'autonomous' middle position—neutral

⁸⁴ Ibid, 20.

⁸⁵ Piyadasa, "Melampau Sempadan", 66.

without any biases, somewhat ‘middle’ (being able to consider various factors instead of blind ignorance), and to be driven by criticality. This is such in creating, analysing, critiquing, reviewing and reflecting; one would need to step out of his/her own position while occupying the other to consider various other elements and influences as a cultural reviewer—as an artist or even as a critic.

The first objective intends to trace the development of the Ramayana epic in visual arts in the Southeast Asian region. This objective will examine the content and context from the Ramayana epic that have been used by Southeast Asian artists in their visual artworks which have been primarily derived from the leather puppets. As such, this objective will further research on the historical belonging of the Ramayana epic in Southeast Asia as well as the *wayang kulit* tradition or leather puppet shadow play performances that have sprung out in this region resulting in variations and diversities.

The second objective is to problematise the continued presence of the Ramayana epic in Malaysian visual arts post-NCP and to identify the different variations of the Ramayana epic in the Malaysian context. This objective will further examine the dissonance of the Ramayana epic with the introduction of the NCP and its effect on the Ramayana epic in Malaysia. Under the scope of this objective, the definition of Ramayana in the Malaysian context will be discussed, followed by the role of the *wayang kulit* tradition in preserving the Ramayana epic in the Malaysian visual arts. This objective will also further identify similar elements and derivatives of the Ramayana epic in Southeast Asian art forms.

The third objective intends to analyse and examine the localisation of the Ramayana epic in Malaysian visual arts. Within the scope of the third objective, this research intends to identify the elements and derivatives of the Ramayana epic in Malaysian visual arts, and further distinguish the localisation themes of the Ramayana epic. This research would also look at the elasticity and fluidity of the Ramayana epic that has enabled local artists to capture it across various mediums.

1.5 Scope and Limitation of Research

The fluidity and flexibility in this particular approach is to ensure that the research is not confined to a particular limitation as in cultural boundaries or even artistic styles, but more so to use these various elements and push the existing boundaries that limit the very interpretation of the ‘localisation’ of the Ramayana epic. This is needed so that the research can relate to its current time frame when the artwork was created and to inspect the socio-cultural as well as political-economic factors, regional history, cultural practices and beliefs, and traditional heritage that constantly shape our understanding. As this research examines the ‘localisation’ of the Ramayana epic in the Malaysian context, inevitably, this research would also highlight some aspects of the localisation of the Ramayana epic that have emerged in the Southeast Asian region from a general view point. This is due to the shared tradition of the Ramayana epic as well as the *wayang kulit* practices in the Southeast Asian region. As some local Malaysian artists refer to Ramayana plots from neighbouring countries, inevitably, while examining and analysing such borrowed references, this research will also highlight several aspects of the localisation of the epic in this region.

As the scope of this research emphasises visual arts, therefore, paintings, graphic arts, digital animations, electronic arts, new media content, sculptures, puppets, graffiti wall art and some of the story telling techniques and mediums will be examined to encompass the totality of the visual culture in Malaysia. It is necessary to highlight here that most of the elements and attributes of the Ramayana epic resemble the *wayang kulit* puppets due to the historical origin of the epic in this region. The *wayang kulit* tradition occupies the position of a lever, where artists, idealists and practitioners derive their inspiration for a multitude of artworks and creative expressions that are multi-faceted. Albeit, these new outcomes may not necessarily reflect or resemble entirely the traditional *wayang kulit* leather puppets that are highly stylised or the reliefs found at the temples in Java and Cambodia, the origin or the source of these emerging new art forms and practices must be acknowledged.



Figure 0.1: Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, “3d Sculpture – Hopeless” 1995
Source: *Gema: Resonance – A Malaysian Exhibition of Contemporary Art*, 1998

Another important point that will be highlighted in this research is the ‘*wayang* style’⁸⁶ that is acknowledged and discussed in depth in the Indonesian art landscape, but on the contrary, a similar ‘*wayang* style’ (influence of *wayang kulit* in terms of characters, plots, symbols or stylisation) lacks recognition and acknowledgement in the Malaysian art scene. In this particular installation by Azizan Paiman⁸⁷, as seen in Figure 1.1, the presence of *wayang* style—the flattened, two-dimensional side-profiled figures in a particular stance—is distinct, despite the infusion of the artist’s particular style by giving it a contemporary look sans the highly elaborate design and finishing of the traditional leather puppets. Giving it an almost minimalist look with abstract patterns and gaudy colours on the disfigured bodies of the ‘characters’, Azizan gives an almost ugly look to his figures. This is an example of the adaptation of the *wayang kulit* puppet style and localisation (the injecting of personal stylistic patterns by a particular artist) that has resulted in a distinct artwork compared to the traditional puppets. Nevertheless, as observed from this installation, the inspiration and influence from the *wayang kulit* tradition and its historical ties and belongings to the Ramayana epic do not go unrefuted. It is the localisation of the Ramayana epic such as seen in Figure 1.1 that this research intends to examine and investigate.

Upon researching and reviewing local artworks where local artists have used the *wayang kulit* tradition as a reference or inspiration for their artworks; supporting texts and writings lack in-depth analysis and examination. The scenario is quite the contrary in Indonesia; whereby in instances where the *wayang* style is found in their artworks,

⁸⁶ Fiona Kerlogue, “Hindu Vision,” in *Arts of Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 93.

⁸⁷ I had attempted to contact the artist and ask about the work, but did not receive any response.