SHADOW PUPPETS:
THE NEGOTIATED CULTURE IN MALAYSIA AND INDONESIA

Dewi Hermawati Resminingayu[1)]
[1]Abdurrahman Wahid Center for Peace and Humanities Universitas Indonesia (AWCPH-UI).
dewi.resminingayu@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the cultural dynamics of Malaysia and Indonesia through shadow puppet play. Before the coming of Islam, Srivijaya and Majapahit Kingdoms had ruled most of the current area of Malaysia and Indonesia. These two powerful kingdoms had rooted Indian culture and religion in the region. Thus, it is not surprising that shadow puppets can be found in both countries as the manifestation of Indian culture. Such culture could still exist despite Islam's presence and the establishment of Islamic kingdoms until the colonisation era. However, after Malaysia and Indonesia gained independence, both countries embraced different state ideologies, which affected the existence of shadow puppets. Using the qualitative method, this paper will show how shadow puppet faces political and cultural challenges in both countries. Such challenges lead to changes in shadow puppet play, resulting in the differences in the play in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Keywords: shadow puppet, culture, Malaysia, Indonesia

Abstrak

Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dinamika budaya Malaysia dan Indonesia melalui pertunjukan wayang kulit. Sebelum datangnya Islam, Kerajaan Sriwijaya dan Majapahit telah menguasai sebagian besar wilayah Malaysia dan Indonesia saat ini. Kedua kerajaan kuat ini telah membawa budaya dan agama India di wilayah tersebut. Maka tidak heran jika wayang kulit dapat ditemukan di kedua negara tersebut sebagai perwujudan budaya India. Budaya India tetap bisa ditemukan meskipun Islam hadir seiring dengan berdirinya kerajaan-kerajaan Islam hingga zaman penjajahan. Namun, setelah Malaysia dan Indonesia merdeka, kedua negara menganut ideologi negara yang berbeda yang mempengaruhi keberadaan wayang kulit. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif, tulisan ini akan menunjukkan bagaimana wayang kulit menghadapi tantangan politik dan budaya di kedua negara. Tantangan-tantangan tersebut menyebabkan terjadinya perubahan dalam lakon wayang kulit, sehingga terjadi perbedaan lakon di Malaysia dan Indonesia.

Kata kunci: wayang kulit, budaya, Malaysia, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Since the first century A.D., Islam that initially emerged from Saudi Arabia has rapidly spread and marked its influence worldwide. However, according to Douglass, the influence itself did not spread at a fast pace (2002). It took some period, along with the spread of Muslim traders and their migration. Houben acknowledges that not until the seventh-century Muslim traders finally reached insular Southeast Asia (2003). He further explains that quite a few Muslim traders later settled in Southeast Asia and took their religious experts to preach Islam (2003).

Although Islam is always associated with Saudi Arabia, not all Muslim traders who spread Islam were Arabians. As Islam spread to Central Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans, the Iberian Peninsula of Spain and Portugal, and Portugal, more people of various nationalities converted to Islam (Means, 2009). Thus, Muslim traders that reached Southeast Asia came from India, Persia, and south Arabia (Houben, 2003).

Islam did not greatly impact Southeast Asia up until the sixteenth century (Houben, 2003). It is related that Islam came when Indian influence, specifically Hindu and Buddhist, still played the biggest role for the people in Southeast Asia, especially Malay and Indonesia (Means, 2009). However, Indian influence began to decline six centuries later, and it reached its critical point in the sixteenth century. Van Leur believes that it resulted from "the rise of the Islamic Mogul dynasty in India in 1526, and the fall of the Hindu Vijayanagar kingdom in 1556" (cited in Rani, 2010).

Some scholars mostly agree that the sixteenth century was the landmark of Islamic history in Southeast Asia, for Islamic influence slowly showed a greater impact. It was suggested by the political change in the regions that allowed Islam to gain more power. The most obvious change was that the local rulers devoted themselves to their religions and converted to Islam (Houben, 2003). This marked greater change, for the followers of the rulers also converted to Islam. Besides, the rulers who possessed legitimate power were able to accommodate the coming of Islam in the region.

Since then, Islam has become one of the prominent external influences in Southeast Asia. It can be seen from the changes brought by Islam to the state and people in the regions, specifically in Malaysia and Indonesia. These two countries are well-known for their strong Islamic influence up until now. However, history noted that other external influences, namely Indian and Chinese influences, had come before Islam and rooted their culture in the region. Means argues that Indian culture and religion had affected the people deeply and became predominant in the regions (2009).

Moreover, Means states that Southeast Asia received Sunni Islam (one version of Islam) and implemented juridical interpretation based on Shafi'i (2009). He further explains that "this combination enabled Islam to be flexible and adaptable to non-Islamic cultural traditions" (2009). Therefore, Indian culture can still be recognized in these countries, and it somehow mixed with Islamic teaching.

Based on the explanation above, it will be interesting to see how Islam affected the two countries while the Indian civilization was strongly rooted. Therefore, this paper discusses the culture in Malaysia and Indonesia, particularly after the coming of Islam. The topic of this paper is narrowed to 'shadow puppet' as the manifestation of long-established Indian culture, which was later mixed with Islamic teaching. The discussions of Malaysians' and Indonesians' culture are separated to get a vivid description of how shadow puppet in each country undergoes the influence of Islam. At the end of the paper, the change of shadow puppets in Malaysia and Indonesia will be compared to point out the impact of Islam on each country's culture.

METHOD AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper employs a qualitative method, specifically a literature review, to analyse shadow puppets in Malaysia and Indonesia. The literature review is important to show the relevance of this paper to previous studies and to point out the novelty of this paper (Ridwan et al., 2021). The first stage of this qualitative method is to collect the literature related to the shadow puppet in Malaysia and Indonesia. Next, the data is classified, processed, and interpreted to generate some findings (Darmalaksana, 2020). The findings will be analysed to show the cultural dynamics in Malaysia and Indonesia.

FINDINGS

Political Condition
The discussion of the culture cannot be separated from the political condition in the region, for the rulers have control over the laws that regulate almost every aspect of lives, including culture and its performance. Therefore, brief descriptions of political conditions in Malaysia and Indonesia are given to support the discussion. The descriptions include the history of Islamization from the sixteenth century until the contemporary issue of Islam in both countries.

Before the coming of Islam, Srivijaya and Majapahit Kingdoms had ruled the most area of Malaysia and Indonesia nowadays. These two powerful kingdoms had rooted Indian culture and religion in the region. Srivijaya, which lasted from 670 to 1292 A.D., was a particularly Buddhist kingdom (Michael, 1967). Meanwhile, Majapahit was known as the Hindu kingdom, founded later in 1289 A.D. and ended in 1520 A.D. (Michael, 1967).

Toward the end of the Majapahit kingdom, Prameswara, the prince of Majapahit, built a trading port in the Malacca straits between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula (Means, 2009). This trading port supported the huge development of Malacca. Later, Prameswara held an important role in the coming of Islam since he converted to Islam and brought the beginning of the Islamic kingdom (Means, 2009).

Malaysia
When Islam first came to Malaysia, this area was not yet an independent country, and it used to be called Malaya. Prameswara's conversion to Islam surely brought Islamic influence to Malaya. Zain noted that Islam was spread in Malaya by forming *Pondok* as a religious school where the ulama or religious scholars preached Islamic teaching. Despite that, Kim claims that Islamic history before the 20th century is hardly tracked since it is barely found in British colonial records, so it depends on oral records (2001).

In the 19th century, the British began to colonize Malaya, comprising several Malay states. During the colonization, the British government allowed Islam to be the official religion of the Malay states, and it gave authority to the Sultans to preserve Islam and Malay customs (Means, 2009). Although there were fewer big conflicts between Muslim rulers and the British government, the political condition urged the British to monitor militant Islamic movement in the early 19th century (Kim, 2001).

The coming of Japan to colonize Malay states in 1941, followed by the return of British colonization in 1946, shook the political condition in Malaya. Awareness of nationalism showed greater impact in Malay states, for political leaders demanded independence from the British. Finally, in 1957, Malaya gained full independence and, in 1963, became the Federation of Malaysia that covered the Malay Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak, and Singapore (Means, 2009). However, this paper will only focus on Islam in the Malay Peninsula.

After the independence, especially under Mahathir Muhammad's reign, Malaysia became more supportive of Islam. Mutalib claims that "Mahathir Islamised government machinery" as the prime minister issued policies based on Islamic values (1993). He further states that the *Dakwah* movement and the Islamic Party, PAS, bring greater Islamization to the country (1993). It can be seen that Islam held a powerful role in the country.

Indonesia
Like Malaysia, Indonesia was not yet a country when Islam came to the region. The area named Indonesia nowadays previously comprised several Hindu/Buddhist kingdoms. These kingdoms were much affected by the decline of Hindus in India. It became worse as Van Leur states that

Malay-Islamic kingdoms took control of trade in the Malacca straits (cited in Rani, 2010). As the Hindu/Buddhist kingdoms wanted to guarantee their continuation, they formed an affiliation with Malay-Islamic kingdoms, and the rulers eventually converted to Islam. Means adds that Muslim traders were given special treatment in the Melacca strait; thus, local rulers that converted to Islam had the advantage in spice trading (2009).

However, Van Leur argues that although Muslim traders monopolized the trade, it did not have much impact on the cultural development in Indonesia since the region had achieved a "higher civilization" when Hindus still played its role (cited in Rani, 2010). The same idea comes from Houben as he says, "with the exception of a few pockets in Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi, Islam did not construct a civilization but appropriated one" (2003).

After the coming of Muslim traders, spice trading in Indonesia attracted the Dutch. In the seventeenth century, Dutch monopolized trading by founding the Dutch East India Company and began to colonize Indonesia, especially Java (Means, 2009). Moreover, the Dutch also suppressed local Muslim rulers and elites from occupying the region (Houben, 2003). The conflict between Muslims and the Dutch was inevitable. The conflict that led to the fight finally subsided by negotiation in which native Muslim rulers could implement Islamic law and Adat; besides, other rituals related to Hindu, Buddhist, and animism were allowed (Means, 2009).

The Japanese took over the Dutch colonization in the mid of 20th century. The hardship of Japanese colonization triggered people all over Indonesia to unite and struggle to be an independent country. In 1945, Indonesians finally declared their independence.

The first president, Sukarno, was aware that various religions spread all over Indonesia, so he required that Islamic characteristics be excluded from the ideological foundation of the country, namely Pancasila (Means, 2009). However, the next president was a Javanese man who held strong Islam *kejawen* or *abangan*, considered more liberal (Suryadinata, 1995). Koentjaraningrat states that Islam *kejawen* is a syncretic religion that fuses Islamic teaching with pre-Hindu and Hindu characteristics (Murthado, 2002). Islam *kejawen* of the president was allowed and practised by Indonesian society.

Shadow Puppet

Koentjaraningrat believes that defining culture is not an easy task, for most scholars have a wide definition of culture (cited in Sari, 2009). However, he argues that there are seven universal elements of culture: religious system, social organization, knowledge system, language, means of the living system, means of technology and tools, and art (cited in Sari, 2009). Shadow puppets can be included in the category of art. As a form of art, shadow puppets have existed since the Hindu/Buddhist kingdoms, and it was much influenced by Indian culture (Michael, 1967).

Malaysia

Shadow puppet – usually called Wayang– is hardly found in Malaysia, for only some states of Malaysia have their specific shadow play. Kelantan, Kedah, Trengganu, and Perak, for instance, performed Wayang Siam which was different from Wayang Jawa performed in West Johore and Selangor (Sweeney, 1972). In Malaysia, Wayang Siam was more popular than Wayang Jawa.

Sweeney, one of the writers of Malay shadow play, states that in Kelantan, shadow puppet was traditionally performed during social occasions such as marriage or circumcision to entertain the guests (1972). He argues that shadow puppets could not be associated with cultural nationalism since educated people did not have to favour it; thus, shadow play was barely found in cities (1972). Moreover, the reluctance toward shadow play was affected by Islamic teaching. Shadow play often included mystical elements that did not belong to Islamic teaching.

For instance, shadow play in Kelantan could only be performed from 9 p.m. until midnight (Sweeney, 1972). The same rule of time restriction was applied in Changlun, Kedah. Time restriction prevented more mystical elements that usually appeared after midnight (Osnes, 1992). The basic reason for this restriction was that Islam does not allow mystical performance.

Another Islamic influence in shadow play was shown through the recital of Koranic verses at the beginning of the shadow play (Osnes, 1992). Then the play was performed using the Malay version's plot of the Ramayana story, which originated in India (Sweeney 8). Although most puppeteers were Muslims, the performance of shadow puppets still included magic rituals that did not belong to Islamic teaching (Sweeney, 1972).

Consequently, shadow play was often criticized and rejected by conservative religious elements. Law and government played a major role in the restriction of shadow play. For example, Osnes says that shadow play should have been registered at the local cultural office before it was performed (1992). Another example government ordered puppeteers to convey propaganda about birth control in the story of shadow play (Osnes, 1992).

Despite the restriction made by the government, the Islamic party in Malaysia also made several attempts to ban shadow play, for it was considered not Islamic and immoral (Noor, 2004). The party was against some characteristics of the play, such as the offering, incantation, and spirit possession that violated Islamic teaching (Sweeney, 1972). Thus, shadow puppet was once banned by the government of Malaysia. Although there are recent efforts to revive the play, the ban has detached the people from shadow puppets for years.

Indonesia

As Houben mentioned earlier, the appropriated culture of Indonesia can be found in Java; therefore, only shadow puppet in Java is discussed in this paper. The history of shadow play cannot be separated from nine missionaries called Wali Songo, who were well-known in the Islamic history of Indonesia. They used shadow puppets, a local tradition, to engraft Islamic teaching (Suparjo, 2010). For instance, they adopted the story of Mahabharata and Ramayana and inserted Islamic values into the plot (Suparjo, 2010).

Similar to Malaysia, Van Ness and Prawirohardjo say that shadow play in Java is usually performed on social occasions such as birth, marriage, circumcision, *ruwatan* (exorcism), and *bersih desa* (cleansing of the village) (1980). They further explain that the performance depicts a "mystical function in the Javanese world" (1980). This fact ruins the initial idea of Wali Songo, for the intention of adopting shadow puppets was to introduce Islam rather than to emphasize mystical function.

Unlike in Malaysia, shadow play in Java can be started at 9 p.m. and finished before dawn (Van Ness & Prawirohardjo, 1980). Moreover, shadow puppet is still allowed to be performed nowadays as long as it does not portray a human figure (Van Ness & Prawirohardjo, 1980). Islamic teaching does not allow any performance that resembles a human figure.

Shadow puppet in Java is also well-known for portraying political agenda. During Dutch colonization, it was used to criticize colonialism (Pausacker, 2004). As Indonesia gained its independence, the story of the shadow puppet conveyed Indonesian independence, and later it brought a political campaign of birth control under the Soeharto era (Van Ness & Prawirohardjo, 1980). Moreover, the shadow puppet under the Soeharto era got more privilege, for it represented his cultural background as Javanese. He often held shadow play and commanded the puppeteer to depict him as one puppet named Semar, a charismatic leader in the Pandhawa kingdom (Pausacker, 2004).

After the fall of the Soeharto era, the depiction of the Indonesian president in shadow play is no longer restricted. In his work, Pausacker finds that at the end of Soeharto's reign, the puppeteer depicted Soeharto as Punakawan – the clown in the Pandhawa kingdom. He also

reveals that each national leader has a character in shadow play; for instance, Habibie as Gareng, Gus Dur as Bagong, and Megawati as Srikandi (2004).

DISCUSSION:
THE ANALYSIS OF SHADOW PLAY IN MALAYSIA AND INDONESIA

Some interesting findings are derived from the previous literature reviews. First, the explanation above has shown how Indian culture, as the existing culture represented by shadow puppet, changed after the coming of Islam. In Malaysia, the Islamic values in shadow puppets could be seen in Koranic verses recited by the puppeteers. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, Islamic values are inserted in the story's plot, and the standard of puppets should not resemble a human figure.

Second, each country's political situation and rulers have a significant aspect in the interpretation of Islam and the development of shadow puppets. Islam has been proven to have a greater impact on the political situation in Malaysia than in Indonesia. Since the coming of Islam, Islamic kingdoms have emerged in Malaya. It continued when the British came since Islam became the state's official religion, and the Sultans preserved Malay customs. This situation enabled shadow puppet with its Islamic values to existing.

However, as Malaysia gained independence, more educated people and the Islamic party contested the Indian values of shadow puppet. Law and policy had been exercised to restrict the performance of shadow puppets. It demonstrates how the political situation with the Islamic agenda threatened the existence of shadow play. The ban on shadow puppets showed the interference of the Islamic government toward the culture in the country.

This phenomenon can be related to the Malay principle of *Daulat*, which defines the legitimate power of the ruler (Kim, 2001).
This principle is most likely the interpretation of Islamic teaching that the ruler is the "direct descendant of the prophet" (Houben, 2003). Thus, people in Malaysia, especially Muslims, should obey the ruler whom the government represents.

Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the pattern of Islamic influence toward shadow puppets before and during the colonization was much the same as in Malaysia. The difference appeared when Islam was not included in Pancasila as the basic ideology when Indonesia gained independence. Since then, the interference of Islam in the law and policy has been hardly noticed. Thus, shadow play in Indonesia, specifically in Java, is still allowed, although the mystical elements seen as not Islamic might emerge during the performance.

This approval of shadow puppets in Java can be connected to the type of Islam in Indonesia, enabling the acceptance of mystical elements. Islam in Indonesia brought "Sufii'm'sSufii am's mystical bent", which suits most Javanese that strongly believes in mysticism (Van Ness & Prawirohardjo, 1980). It cannot be denied that more orthodox Muslims in Indonesia contest the mystical elements in shadow play. However, the government does not see any need to ban the shadow puppet as long as it follows the Islamic standard determined.

Despite these differences, when shadow play was still allowed in Malaysia, it had similarities to Indonesia's. For instance, shadow plays in both countries start at nine. Both countries also use shadow play to convey political campaigns by the government, such as birth control. Nevertheless, the ban in Malaysia does not enable shadow play to exist. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the use of shadow play as a political campaign is continued by the government and the Indonesians who criticize the government.

The third finding is that culture is so dynamic that external influences may affect the change of the culture. In Malaysia and Indonesia, the external influence, particularly early Islam, did not fully change the existing culture. In Malaysia, the Islamic teaching was negotiated with the existing culture by changing some aspects of shadow play to suit Islamic

teaching. However, the negotiation appears to be failed since the ban on shadow play reflects the domination of Islamic teaching over the existing culture. It results in weakening the existing culture.

In Indonesia, the same negotiation occurs. To fit into the Islamic teaching believed by most Javanese, shadow play has to change while maintaining its Indian culture. Unlike Malaysia, the negotiation in Indonesia preserves the existence of shadow play.

It created new culture by negotiating the existing culture and the external influence. Nowadays, the term 'new culture' is used for shadow play and cannot be categorized as completely Indian culture or Islamic culture. It was mixed of both cultures.

CONCLUSION

This paper's discussion of shadow puppets shows how the same existing culture, namely shadow puppets, undergoes different changes and how the same external influence is perceived differently in two areas. Political conditions and the local rulers hold a significant role in creating such difference, for they have legitimate power over the areas. Moreover, the dynamic characteristic of culture enables such changes to occur. It creates a new culture that adds to the diversity of culture or weakens the existing culture.

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