

The 2019 Conference on Asian Linguistic Anthropology

“Revitalization and Representation”

Conference Proceedings Papers

January 23-26, 2019

Royal Angkor Resort
Siem Reap, Cambodia

Hosted by
The Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia

The Conference on
ASIAN LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY
2019
Siem Reap, Cambodia
<https://cala2019.cala.asia>

The CALA 2019 Proceedings Paper 4 - 3

Poetics, Paper 3

**The Malaysian Wayang Kulit, the Malay Language,
and their Anthropological shifts**

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Abstract

This paper seeks to discuss and expose the correlations between a shifting Wayang Kulit puppet performance in Malaysia and the shifting Malay language over the past half century, that is, from the late 1960s until the present time. The Wayang exhibited a patent shift in its poetics, in its use and type of symbolisms, in its social, cultural and spiritual purpose, and in its representation of community. The paper determines ways in which the Malay language experienced change by observing government mandate to 'rehabilitate' the Malay people, and to employ discourses of rehabilitation so to alter the cultural industry in Malaysia, yet to the detriment of language, social cohesion, and cultural performance in Malaysia. For this the data consists of a multi year ethnography of the Wayang both inside and outside of Kuala Lumpur, cases studies of Wayang Kulit dalangs (puppeteers), observing and conducting Wayang Kulit performances, and documenting language diachronic change.

Ultimately, the paper finds that owing to language planning and policy in Malaysia, both cultural performance and language, that is, the written, the standardized, and vernacular have seen significant shift over the past half century, and that these shifts have correlated with altered ideologies in Malaysia that align with intentions to commercialize the country and to increase the mercantile efficiency of the Malay and the Malaysian people.

Keywords: Wayang Kulit, Malaysia, Puppet performance, Symbolism, Ethnography

Introduction

The Wayang Kulit, the Southeast Asian shadow puppet performance play, has been reappropriated in various parts of Southeast Asia, and in other places, such as India, Asia Minor and the Middle East, and in various other localities globally. As such, the intersections of Wayang Kulit performance, with language, spiritually ascetic intentions, symbolism, politics, and various forms of representation, are pervasive. This has become very much the case in Malaysia, where government mandate, intertwined with the Islamization of the country, has significantly influenced changes to Wayang performance and culture, a process which has reflexively influenced change in Malay culture and language.

This paper discusses language and performance shifts common to Wayang Kulit shadow puppetry and society, in Malay communities in Malaysia. In this way, the paper summarizes ways in which sociolinguistic and performative parallels between these two facets of Malaysian society have emerged over the past half century, to significantly alter Malaysian social, cultural, and linguistic landscapes. Adopting an ethnomethodological approach, the study draws from documented narratives and language ideologies of fifty puppeteers whose tenure spanned the

period of a shifting Malaysia over the past half century. Consequently, the abductive methodology (Blaikie 2010) of this research allows for the construction of hypotheses grounded in observation of both Wayang Kulit communities and larger Malay society. To unravel patterns in language and society, within a framework of a poetics (Blaikie 2010), the study notes that poetic exchanges in Wayang Kulit and in larger Malay society become embodied in the constructions of society, as processes ideologically entangled themselves with language (Caton 1987). Strong intersections exist between Wayang Kulit performance and daily vernacular in Malay communities in Malaysia, thus suggesting that the Wayang Kulit does mediate change in Malay language ideologies (Sweeney 1969, 1972, 1994).

A Shifting Malaysia

In the 1970s-1990s, adherence to Islam intensified in Malaysia. This process, coupled with neoliberal fears of encroachment, intensified Malay-Islamic nationalism, as new identities emerged, and as the UMNO and PAS government parties created and enforced mandates so as to increasingly intensify Malaysia's position as an Islamic state. These policies materialized as strict dress codes, restricted relations between men and women, and heavily monitored media and restricted performance. These factors all strongly affected Malaysian cultural spaces, not least of which was the Wayang Kulit shadow puppetry performance. The rituals pervasive of the Wayang Kulit were forbidden by these emergent political and religious discourses and mandates in Malaysia. As such, the Malaysian government in the 1970-1990s found the Wayang Kulit as built on non-Islamic precepts and practices, and targeted the Wayang Kulit as a tool with which to locate and attack those communities with weak linkages and affiliation to Islam. The Wayang Kulit became a tool with which to escalate national identity and government agency over society as a whole. To aid this, the Malaysian government attempted to standardize the previously highly localized cultural practice of Wayang Kulit, through government cultural and language policies.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, restricted by government policy, the Wayang Kulit puppet performers, the dalangs, accelerated and truncated previously long performances, to capitalize on the neoliberal requirements of a changing Malaysia, and to which audiences, both local and international, increasingly agreed, as the Wayang Kulit shadow puppet performance emerged as a commodity for the commercialization of localized culture and of Malaysia. These socialization processes shifted during the transition from the old to new Malaysia, as the Malay language saw a significant drop in its poetic structure and in its parallelisms, which aligned with the drop in the poeticity of the Wayang Kulit. At the lexical level, this language change became evident in its descriptive characteristics and in its level of connotation. The highly formulaic and stylized poetic parallelism which prevailed in both old Wayang, that is, Wayang Lama, and in old Malay language, was quickly disappearing, to make room for a new Malay language and a new Wayang performance, that is Wayang Baru. The now pervasive linear styles of discourse in both language and performance excluded satire, sarcasm, lampooning, and political subversion, thus strengthening compliance toward governmentality. Government discourse, then, much of which was oppressive, became largely un-subversible, assigning full agency to the government for implementing policy, at will.

Shifting styles

Socialization processes were dramatically transformed in the transition between traditional and modern Malaysia, and were enforced through religious ‘guidelines’ and government policy. These transformations were evident in the poetic forms of vernacular and Wayang Kulit. Throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, ‘Malay language’ largely disappeared on official levels, but survived, though to a minimal degree, at ground level. New Malay language jettisoned old Malay language, where much language became Arabic, so as to align with the Islamic intentions of the Malay government. In their efforts to accommodate to the changing requirements of audiences, and also with government mandate to impose heavy restrictions on what was now a very new Wayang Kulit 'baru,' the Wayang Kulit dalang puppeteers also accommodated to this language and performance change, fully altering all aspects of their Wayang scripts, props, ideologies, and narrative designs. This change integrated a reversion away from improvisation, a removal of parallelism and poetics, a replacement of references to non Islamic figures with those Islamic, and most significantly, a complete change, if not a removal of Wayang symbolisms and thus its semiotic potentiality. For example, in Wayang Baru comic scenes, rather than finding a multitude of ways to express intention, which would render the speaker clever and subversive, characters employ simple and short blatant remarks. As an example:

Traditional Wayang:	Aahh, tuan hamba duduk la, sebab kami ni nak tidur beradu di atas katil tilam permaidani Aahh, make yourself comfortable, because I am going to sleep on the bed.
Modern Wayang:	Aku nak tidur ni, mu jange caru ko aku. I want to sleep, don't bother about me.
Traditional:	Caaamm ooohhh, batenang kun kun caaamm ooohhh (Extended phrase expressing sorrow)
Modern:	Eeeeeeee eee eee (Crying sound)

Shifts in the Malay pantun, a poetic verse used extensively for a variety of rhetoric purposes throughout Malaysia and Indonesia, including in government speeches, also evidences this change. For example, comparing the A. H. Hill Collection of Malay pantun with pantun recited during current UMNO general assemblies evidences a significant removal of connotation in rhetoric, where the traditional circumlocutory poetics have given way to direct subservience to political apparatuses, displaying a blatant ornamentalism of leadership.

Conclusion

This paper has, in summary, discussed that language, culture and Wayang Kulit performance in Malaysia have traversed collinear pathways, to conform to the political discourse of an increasingly commercialized mercantile Malaysia, and to mediate a renouncement of traditional cultural practices in Malaysia. Malaysian shadow puppet theatre positioned itself well to effect this change, and to become representational of a performance that can mediate such social, cultural, and linguistic change. As such, the Wayang Kulit provides a fruitful ethnographic site with which to observe the struggles of a society emerging from a period of cultural and linguistic

oppression, and hence one moving on to an increasingly subverts political discourse.

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