

# Southeast Asian Shadow Puppets in the British Museum: From Collecting Histories to Iconography

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The British Museum holds more than 700 shadow puppets from Southeast Asia in its collection. Half come from Java, collected by Sir Stamford Raffles during his tenure as Lieutenant-Governor of the island between 1811 and 1816. In contrast, the shadow puppets from Bali, Malaysia, and Thailand were deliberately purchased by museum curators in the mid-20th century to augment the museum's Southeast Asian theatrical holdings. While the Raffles material is well known, the other shadow puppets remain relatively obscure.

In the field of Southeast Asian shadow theatre, the performance and social side of the topic has been addressed, but there have been relatively few publications that examine puppet iconography.<sup>1</sup> The trend has been for studies of the social contexts, political associations, performance traditions, and so forth, which are all essential for comprehending iconography, yet which have left a lacuna in shadow theatre studies.<sup>2</sup> Here, I propose to initiate an exploration into shadow puppet imagery to begin to address this issue within the frame of collecting history. I explore the British Museum's shadow puppets in comparison with other collections of similar material in order to expand the historic picture of puppet development. The focus in this paper is upon the Thai and Malay shadow puppets, because of their iconographic similarities that date to at least the 19th century and the fact that they have been less well studied than Javanese and Balinese examples.

In contrast to the Raffles material, the Balinese, Thai and Malay puppets at the British Museum were collected opportunistically, rather than systematically, relying

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<sup>1</sup> See Paritta Chalermpong, *A Popular Drama in its Social Context: nang talung Shadow Puppet Theatre of South Thailand* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1981), 179-86. See also Amin Sweeney, *Malay Shadow Puppets* (London: British Museum Press, 1972), 25-41, and Angela Hobart, *Dancing Shadows of Bali: Theatre and Myth* (London: KPI, 1987), 67-124. While these scholars are the main ones to have assessed iconography, there are a number of scholars who have studied the varying contexts of shadow theatre, including Paul Dowsey-Magog, *Khao yam – a Southern Rice Salad, Heteroglossia and Carnival in nang talung: the Shadow Theatre of Southern Thailand*, PhD dissertation, University of Sydney, 1996; Christine Hemmet, *Nang Talung: the Shadow Theatre of South Thailand* (Amsterdam: KIT Press, 1996); and Michael Smithies and Euayporn Kerdchouay, "Nang Talung: the Shadow Theatre of Southern Thailand," *Journal of the Siam Society* 60, 1 (1972): 379-390.

<sup>2</sup> See Paritta Chalermpong Koanantakool, "Relevance of the Textual and Contextual Analyses in Understanding Folk Performance in Modern Society: A Case of Southern Thai Shadow Puppet Theatre," *Asian Folklore Studies* 47, 2 (1988): 31-57.

primarily upon the purchase of a main set to provide completeness. Haphazard approaches to collecting have historically been found in many museums, and the impossibility of bringing comprehensiveness to collections was realised even in the 19th century as space to house and display collections became difficult to obtain physically and financially.<sup>3</sup> Similarities in approach to collecting can be seen in museums across Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries, and the British Museum actively shared in them, buying, exchanging and receiving objects from other institutions, such as the Ethnographic Museum in Leiden, the India Museum in London, the Wellcome Trust, and so forth. However, although it has acquired substantive ethnographic materials, the British Museum's relationship to those objects has always been ambivalent: from the reluctant acceptance of such gifts in the 19th century to the dissolution of the Museum of Mankind in 1997.<sup>4</sup> The sudden burst of Southeast Asian shadow puppet collecting in the 1960s and 1970s occurred fortuitously and in windows of opportunity when there were curators of such material at the museum and when there was space to do so. There is currently no space to add substantive numbers of puppets to the collection, and for the present, the shadow puppets will remain snapshots of specific times, requiring a cross-collection approach to iconographic studies.

### The British Museum's collection of Southeast Asian shadow puppets

Shadow puppets first arrived in the British Museum in 1859. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles had collected at least 365 examples during his time in Java. These were retained by his wife, Sophia Raffles, upon his death in 1826, and the executor of her estate, Reverend William Raffles Flint, offered them for purchase to the British Museum in early 1859. This was refused, but the objects were accepted by the museum when offered as a donation later the same year.<sup>5</sup> A second body of material, including shadow puppets, entered the museum in 1939 upon the death of Raffles' great-grandniece, Mrs. J.H. Drake. Only two further Javanese shadow puppets have been added to the collection since then.<sup>6</sup>

Most of these puppets are from the *wayang purwa* tradition, in which the Mahabharata and Ramayana epic narratives are performed. About ninety are characters from the Panji story cycle, the *wayang gedog* tradition. Neither the *wayang purwa* nor the *wayang gedog* puppets forms a complete set, and some common items, such as the clowns who accompany the clown Semar, are absent. Were they not available from Raffles' sources, or was he not interested? It is impossible to say. The puppets appear

<sup>3</sup> See David M. Wilson, *The British Museum: A History* (London: The British Museum Press, 2002), 93-139. He discusses the repeated requests by the institution for necessary additional space in the early to mid-19th century.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-61. See also, John Mack, "Antiquities and the Public: the Expanding Museum, 1851-96," in Marjorie Caygill and John Cherry, eds., *A.W. Franks: Nineteenth-Century Collecting and the British Museum* (London: The British Museum Press, 1997), 34-50.

<sup>5</sup> Trustee Minutes, 12 Nov. 1859, p. 674.

<sup>6</sup> These arrived in 1974. Five *wayang hip hop* puppets were purchased in 2016, but these are not meant to be used to create shadows, although they are in the same format as shadow puppets.

to come from both the central and north coast traditions, and the high quality of the carving and painting and the use of gold leaf suggests court origins. However, in his volume, *The History of Java*, Raffles only discusses shadow theatre generally, and, in his papers in the British Library, there is no mention of sources for the puppets, and unfortunately, there is little further information about how and where Raffles collected the Javanese shadow puppets. The collecting history of these objects thus remains obscure.

The British Museum's interest in Southeast Asian shadow theatre traditions was not particularly strong, and except for the Raffles material and the purchase of a single Thai *nang yai* puppet from Sir Sydney Burney, President of the British Antique Dealers Association, in 1929, nothing was added to the puppet collections until the mid-20th century. The Thai *nang yai* puppet is imposing at more than 177 cm high. It is dark brown with limited pigmentation, which, in comparison with the old collection at Wat Khanon in Ratchaburi, Thailand, appears to be standard for early puppets of this type. At the time of acquisition, it was tentatively identified as Virun Chumbung by Mr. C. Piansukprasirt, but it might also be Virun Yamuk,<sup>7</sup> a son of a nephew of Ravana, the demon king, or a representation of Indrajit, Ravana's son.<sup>8</sup> However, no further acquisitions relating to this court-based shadow puppet tradition were made, nor were any puppets from the related Cambodian shadow theatre, *nang sbek*, added to the collection. The *nang yai* puppet remains the sole example of this central, mainland type in the British Museum's collection, unlike the bodies of such material found at other European and American museums.

At the British Museum, interest in shadow theatre emerged in the mid-20th century when curators in the Ethnography Department made a concerted effort to display and expand the puppet collections with examples from other areas in Southeast Asia beyond Java. In 1969, a group of seventy-eight Balinese shadow puppets were purchased from M.L.J. Lemaire, a dealer in Amsterdam, who had acquired them from an old Dutch colonial family that had been based in Bali and returned to the Netherlands with the puppets at the end of the First World War.

The Balinese collection, which like the Raffles material is not a complete set, comprises specific characters, demons and ogres, deities, villagers, women, animals, clowns, and props. More than thirty of the puppets represent Pandava and Korava characters from the Mahabharata, but Korava personages are not significantly in the minority, as is standard for Balinese collections.<sup>9</sup> There are also puppets identified as Ravana, the demon king, Wibisana, a brother of Ravana, Anila the monkey, and a tentatively identified Prince Rama. These are unusual as they are characters from the

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<sup>7</sup> These are the names as given in the British Museum's register. Today, following standardised Thai romanisation, the spellings would be Wirunchambang and Wirunyamuk. I will use characters' names as usually spelled in English, rather than the local nomenclature, for easy recognition throughout the paper.

<sup>8</sup> The latter attribution made in comparison with other old puppets in the collection at Wat Khanon in Ratchaburi province.

<sup>9</sup> Angela Hobart, *Dancing Shadows of Bali: Theatre and Myth* (London: KPI, 1987), 116-17.

Ramayana, a narrative not commonly performed in Bali.<sup>10</sup> The fact that there are so few of these compared to those representing the Mahabharata indicates that the set is composite, with the limited number of Ramayana puppets corroborating the story's lesser popularity in the Balinese context. Additionally, it highlights the fact that many, though not all, puppets could be used as multiple characters of equivalent status in various narratives.

The quality of the puppets varies, however. The carving on some is highly detailed, especially on the headdresses, clothing, and hair, and is extensive in the case of high-ranking characters. Painting is less carefully executed, with large areas of a single colour. Some details, such as the hair on ogres' bodies, is painted rather than carved. The pigmentation shows significant wear, especially on the high-quality puppets, suggesting heavy use prior to acquisition by the Dutch family, and pushing the date of production back to the mid to late 19th century. The crude examples, which show some but not substantial signs of wear, probably date to the end of the 19th or early 20th century. Again, as with the Raffles collection, there is no information about how or where the puppets were collected that would provide the early history of these pieces.

The Thai and Malaysian puppets are better documented. The British Museum accessioned 136 puppets from the collection of the famous Malaysian puppeteer, Tok Awang Lah, in 1970. He was based in Kelantan, the north-eastern Malaysian state where shadow theatre was once an important part of ritual and entertainment cycles. Although there have been claims that the puppets were disposed of inappropriately,<sup>11</sup> Shelagh Weir, the curator making the purchase, recorded at the time that Tok Awang Lah performed a ritual to enable the sale of his puppet collection. Most of the museum's Malaysian puppets were made by Tok Awang Lah, and exceptions were documented as such. At the same time, Weir purchased thirty-five southern Thai-style puppets made by Charoen, a Thai puppeteer and puppet maker living in Kelantan, specifically for comparative purposes with the Malay collection.<sup>12</sup> In 1977, a further body of seventy-eight new, southern Thai puppets, *nang talung*, was purchased on behalf of the museum by Paritta Chalermpong, a PhD candidate at Cambridge writing on the subject. She also collected a similar body of material for the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge.<sup>13</sup> The British Museum's collection consists of 249 shadow puppets from central and southern Thailand and north-eastern Malaysia.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>11</sup> Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, *Angin Wayang: A Biography of a Master Puppeteer* (Malaysia: Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, 1997), 25. The statement that the puppets were sold to Mubin Sheppard is also incorrect.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication, Shelagh Weir, April 2016.

<sup>13</sup> While the British Museum's collection of Thai shadow puppets is from the *nang talung* tradition, it must be noted that there are numerous shadow theatre forms in Thailand. Using a generic term like *nang talung* to refer to Thai shadow theatre obscures actual subtleties found in practice. However, a discussion of the varying types is beyond the scope of this paper, and the term *nang talung* is used as a shorthand for the multiple, non-court-based shadow theatre forms.

## Malaysia

Malaysia has at least four different, but related, shadow theatre traditions, the most prevalent being *wayang siam*, now locally called *wayang kelantan*, and it is this type of puppet that the British Museum holds.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned, all the Malay puppets were from Tok Awang Lah's collection, and most were made by him. Almost half are demons or unrefined characters, and the remainder includes commoners, religious or ethnic characters, clowns, women in traditional dress, deities and holy men, animals, scenery and props, and characters from the Ramayana.<sup>15</sup> A few are made of plastic instead of the traditional animal hide, evidence of an experimentation with new materials that primarily occurred in the mid-20th century. Puppets of Ravana in animal form, a popular transformation activity of that character, are absent from Awang Lah's collection, and female puppets are limited in number. The Ramayana epic, including branch and twig story offshoots, was important in Malay shadow puppet theatre, and the collection does include puppets easily identified as Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, Hanuman, and Ravana. Mah Babu Senam, brother of Ravana and advisor to Rama, is represented in a standardised form with large mouth, beard, and turban headdress, as is Mah Babu Kenong, another advisor to Ravana. There are several monkey puppets that could be used to represent different characters, such as Anila, Raja Tilam, Anggada, and so forth.<sup>16</sup> The collection also has characters from related branch stories that are not in the main epic, such as Hanuman's son by a fish princess, Hanuman Ikan, and the two sons of Rama and Sita. The puppets generically called jinn, ogres, or followers of a Ratu, could be used as Ravana's sons or other named demonic characters in the Malay tradition. A preponderance of ogre-like puppets, including the monkeys who are shown with large mouths full of teeth like the demons, is typical of 20th century puppet collections.<sup>17</sup> This reflects the numerous kith and kin of Hanuman and Ravana, in contrast to the smaller family circle of Prince Rama, and emphasises the popularity of the branch and twig stories. Pak Dogol and Wak Long, the main clowns, are also present.

The puppets made by Tok Awang Lah range widely in terms of quality. Some have been carved and painted with great care and attention to detail. Others display few details and are painted with large swathes of a single colour. This dichotomy appears to relate to the nature of the character being represented. Thus, princes and

<sup>14</sup> For further information, see Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, *The Malay Shadow Play: An Introduction* (Penang: The Asian Centre, 1997), 5-11. Most of the scholarship on Malay shadow puppets relates to *wayang siam*, also known as *wayang kelantan*, as that is currently the dominant form.

<sup>15</sup> In the past, the Ramayana epic and its variants have been the most popular source for shadow theatre performances. See Amin Sweeney, "The Rama Repertoire in the Kelantan Shadow Play: A Preliminary Report," in Mohd. Taib Osman, ed., *Traditional Drama and Music of Southeast Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 1974), 5-18; and also Amin Sweeney, *The Ramayana and the Malay Shadow-Play* (Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad Dain bin Othman (Pak Dain), *Wayang Kulit Melayu Tradisional Kelantan* (Malaysia: Mahmanis Enterprise, 2011), 155-60.

<sup>17</sup> This can be seen in the collection at the Kelantan State Museum in Kota Bharu and in puppets belonging to puppeteers Pak Dain and Pak Hamzah (d. 2000).



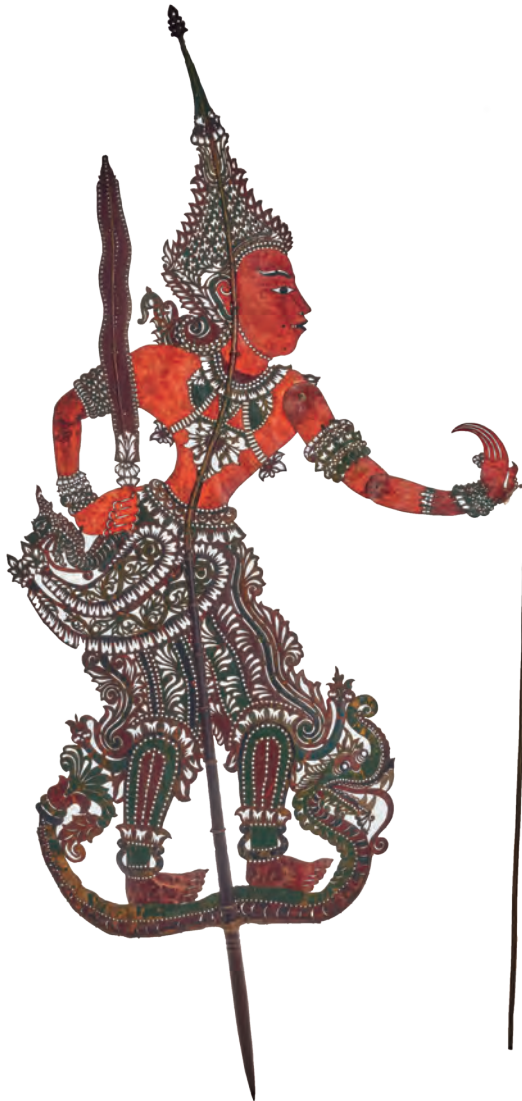


Figure 1. Prince Lakshmana. Hide, wood, pigment, and cotton. Made by Tok Awang Lah. Tumpat, Malaysia. Early to mid-20th century. H 92 cm. As1970,02.105. © Trustees of the British Museum

other royal characters are highly detailed.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the museum's puppet of Prince Lakshmana is 92 cm from the tip of the crown to the end of the central rod (Figure 1). It has one moveable arm, with the other holding a sword against its hip. Although the head and feet are in profile, the torso is presented frontally. The costuming of the puppet is highly elaborate, from the *naga* form on which the character stands to the bracelets, armlets, anklets, an elaborate breast chain that partially covers the chest, and tall, pointed crown with a tiered effect and flanges, similar to Thai examples. The cloth of the trousers is heavily embellished with floral and geometric forms. These decorations have been picked out in black, yellow, red, green, white, and brown paint, creating a sumptuous puppet.<sup>19</sup> Other characters appear cruder. In Figure 2, the demon is painted with large sections of red, green, and black pigment, with white paint used to highlight some details. As with the puppet of Lakshmana, the features of the puppet are emphasised through the use of separate colours. For instance, the hair tendrils are marked by alternate stripes of black and white, which, in

turn, alternate with the red and green lines of the demon's headdress. Although the large patches of solid colour make the puppet look crude, the features of the face and clothing are clearly differentiated with careful, but simple, carving. However, in looking at the shadows that this puppet casts, it is apparent that the minimal carving was executed with some delicacy, and the clothing, hair, and features are clearly marked and presented. Compared with the good characters, however, demons

<sup>18</sup> Pak Dain, *Wayang Kulit*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. The introduction of translucent, coloured puppets started in the second half of the 20th century, according to Pak Dain, and this is borne out by museum collections.



Figure 2. Demon. Hide, wood, pigment, and cotton. Made by Tok Awang Lah. Tumpat, Malaysia. Early to mid-20th century. H 77 cm. As1970,02.94. © Trustees of the British Museum

have considerably less detail, giving them the requisite rough look. Even Ravana, the demon king, although magnificently arrayed, appears coarse compared with Lakshmana because the carving uses limited numbers of small perforations and no openwork.<sup>20</sup> The result is a heavy appearance compared with the human princes. As is typical of other shadow theatre traditions in Southeast Asia, differing features emphasise the nature of the character being portrayed.

The Malay shadow puppets in the British Museum exemplify the cross-cultural nature of the tradition, as they share iconographic and stylistic features with Thai and Javanese examples, although Malay examples tend to be larger than either of the others. High-status characters in Malay shadow theatre primarily connect with Thai art forms, while the demonic characters and animals display links with Java.<sup>21</sup> For instance, the puppet of Lakshmana

stands upon a *naga* (Figure 1), which can be seen on early southern Thai puppets of royalty and on most *nang talung* puppets of royalty in the central region, and wears a Thai-style, tall, tapering crown. His stance, with one hand holding against his hip an upright, unsheathed sword that parallels his body, is also typical of central Thai representations of protective deities, as is the single moveable arm. However, the

<sup>20</sup> See BM object no. As1970,02.110.

<sup>21</sup> Sweeney, *Malay Shadow Puppets*, 25. Sweeney writes that refined princes, demigods, women, traditional ogres, coarse demigods, apes, sages, and clowns have Thai characteristics, while officers and captains of ogres and coarse princes, and the coarse princes themselves have Javanese characteristics.



Figure 3. Composite animal. Hide, wood, pigment, and cotton. Made by Tok Awang Lah. Tumpat, Malaysia. Early to mid-20th century. H 53 cm x L 61 cm. As1970,02.117. © Trustees of the British Museum

position of the feet, separate and in profile, links with Javanese puppet poses, as in Thai painted representations, feet are usually placed almost side by side or in heel-to-toe arrangements.

Other puppet types represent widespread forms. For example, the composite animal in Figure 3 relates to a larger Asian iconography of similar creatures, such as the Chinese *qilin*, the Burmese *pyinsayupa* (*pancarupa*), and the Indonesian *singharwang* and *paksinagaliman*.<sup>22</sup> This Malaysian example draws on several of these traditions as it is composed of the head of an elephant, the wings and claws of a bird, and the rump and hind legs of a buffalo. In comparison, the Burmese animal has the trunk of an elephant, the face of a lion, the ears and hooves of a horse, the horns of a deer, the body of a fish, and the wings of the mythical Garuda bird, and the Indonesian *singharwang* includes an elephant's head, lion's body, and bird's wings. Although the Malay puppet has the Indonesian combination of elephant and bird characteristics, it does not have a lion's body, and the use of bovine features suggests a link with the

<sup>22</sup> Farouk Yahya, *Magic and Divination in Malay Illustrated Manuscripts* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 188-92.



Burmese and Chinese traditions that do incorporate hooved animals into their composite creatures.

Fearsome beings and monkeys in the Malay collection relate to the Javanese tradition, which may have emerged from the tradition of *wayang jawa*, a Kelantanese courtly art form that used instruments and puppets that related to performances from Java. While *wayang jawa* is now largely extinct, its association with the courts may have assisted with the transfer of imagery from one shadow theatre tradition to another.<sup>23</sup> The Malaysian demonic puppet in Figure 2 is a typical type that resembles Javanese shadow puppets, with hair streaming behind him, a forward-leaning stance, and the greater bulk of clothing against the back leg (called the *bokongan*), providing a strong diagonal pull visually.<sup>24</sup> Javanese facial features, such as the bulbous nose, large round eye, the moustache form defining the mouth, open mouth, and pointed and visible teeth, indicate the character's demonic temperament.

However, not all demons, ogres, and followers of coarse princes incorporate elements of Javanese puppets, and there are a number of Malaysian ogre shadow puppets that emerge from other contexts. One such example, in Figure 4, has an elephant-like snout that resembles that of the *makara* creatures found on Hindu and Buddhist temples during the central and east Javanese periods and the elephant-



Figure 4. Demon. Hide, wood, pigment, and cotton. Made by Tok Awang Lah. Tumpat, Malaysia. Early to mid-20th century. H 89 cm. As1970,02.118. © Trustees of the British Museum

<sup>23</sup> I am indebted to Irving Chan Johnson (personal communication, August 2017) for his suggestions on this topic, particularly the idea that it may have been more *wayang jawa* itself, rather than shadow puppets from Java, that had this iconographical impact.

<sup>24</sup> Javanese examples at the British Museum include: 1) As1859,1228.527, 2) As1859,1228.528, 3) As1859,1228.529, and 4) As1859,1228.530.



Figure 5. The demon-king Ravana. Hide, wood, pigment, and cotton. Made by Pak Dain. Tumpat, Malaysia. Late 20th century. © Alexandra Green

used in the production of Malay puppets during the mid-20th century. Tok Awang Lah has also been a significant influence on puppet production in the second half of the 20th and the early 21st centuries. Quite a few puppeteers, such as Pak Hamzah bin Awang Amat, Pak Muhammed Dain bin Othman, among others, have continued to utilise Tok Awang Lah's designs. Pak Dain has praised the Rama puppets created by Tok Awang Lah as displaying superlative craftsmanship and drawing skills and has produced very similar puppets himself.<sup>1</sup> The two main types of demon discussed above continue to be produced, as do puppets that look like the museum's puppet of Ravana, the demon king. For example, Pak Dain's puppet of Ravana displays the same high headdress complete with miniature heads, the claws, striped trousers, neck yoke with diagonal flanges over the chest, the club decorated with a two-toned, spiral

snouted *nagas* that flank entrances to many Thai Buddhist temples. The puppet's face is decorated with colourful arched shapes, and it has an open mouth, showing extensive white teeth and a long, red tongue. It also has horns and a flowing, tail-like embellishment that falls diagonally from the neck to the hip and then curves up the back like a monkey tail. The character holds a knife above its head in an aggressive posture typical of these particular puppets, which may relate to central Thai representations of battle scenes where combatants hold weapons behind and above their heads. However, some features, such as the round eyes and bulky body, still relate to the Javanese tradition for representing coarse characters. This generic demon puppet, made by Tok Awang Lah, has been copied by later puppet makers, and in the collection of puppeteer Pak Dain, it is a named character.

The analysis of shadow puppets from the collection of Tok Awang Lah now in the British Museum demonstrates the variety of ideas

<sup>1</sup> Pak Dain, *Wayang Kulit*, 21. He writes that Awang Lah had unsurpassed Rama puppets that were examples of fine craftsmanship and drawing.

design, round eyes, and the bulbous nose seen on Awang Lah's version, although the latter shows more determination of character and less anxiety than Pak Dain's cute figure (Figure 5).

In current production, earlier influences remain, and the puppets have become highly standardised in the forms discussed above. Of course, the Malay shadow puppet tradition has not been static. One innovation has been the development of translucent hide puppets that allow the colours to show through the screen, transforming the performance from a black and white one into a multicoloured spectacle. Translucency has become a standardised feature, but it has not reduced the amount of carved detail, suggesting that colouration is an additional decorative feature, rather than a replacement for carving. Plastic puppets were another innovation. Although primarily formed of opaque hide puppets, Tok Awang Lah's collection also includes a few of these made by other producers. Such puppets are small, with details produced by colouration, since carving is not possible in the thin plastic and would create little effect upon the screen. This plastic puppet of a woman sports contemporary dress, a standard feature of common characters (Figure 6). While translucent puppets are now common, due to the use of commercially prepared hide, the plastic experiment was less successful with comparably few such puppets in use.

While Tok Awang Lah's prominence has dominated Malay shadow theatre collections since the mid-20th century, he was not generally as innovative as might be assumed. In looking at 19th and early 20th century collections, such as those at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) in Cambridge, it becomes apparent that he drew heavily upon earlier puppet forms.



Figure 6. Female character. Plastic, pigment, bamboo, and cotton. Malaysia. Mid-20th century. H 43.2 cm. As1970,02.43. © Trustees of the British Museum



The puppets at the MAA in Cambridge push the links between Thai and Malay shadow theatre back into the 19th century.<sup>2</sup> The Skeat collection of nearly 150 shadow puppets, acquired from a Kelantanese puppeteer, Che Abas or Enche Abas, performing in the state of Selangor in the 1880s and 1890s, was given to the museum in the late 1890s.<sup>3</sup> William Skeat was a colonial official primarily interested in the aboriginal peoples of peninsular Malaysia, but who also collected Malaysian material culture more generally. The puppets that he gathered are made of hide much thicker than that used in the 20th century, rendering them completely opaque, and they often still have animal hair on them. Many are uncoloured, while others have been decorated with red, white, black, and blue-green pigments. The puppets are smaller than those belonging to Awang Lah, averaging between 40 and 60 cm high, and in this way resemble early southern Thai puppets.

Stylistically, the Skeat puppets are distinct in many ways. There are very few monstrous types, indicating that the 20th century preponderance is a relatively recent phenomenon. The demonic figures do not resemble any of those remaining in later collections. For instance, one *hantu* has a rounded black body, two legs with ill-defined feet that curve up towards the body, one fixed arm that holds what might be a club, a wide-open, ferocious snout with five long and pointed teeth, a thin protruding tongue that curls up towards the nose, a bewhiskered and pointed nose with perforations, round eyes, horns, and a solid-black, conical headdress or hair bundle. Other than the head, the hide is not perforated, so the shadow would just be an outline, and the puppet itself is painted in solid swathes of red, black, and white pigment or left plain. The snout and tongue are repeated on other puppets. A popular variation to this is a raptor-like snout-beak with the pointed ends curving in to enclose the open mouth filled with sharp teeth and a thin tongue that extends for the length of the interior space and sometimes beyond (Figure 7). While the protruding tongue and snout could be a precursor for the demon type seen in Figure 4, and the round eye connects with Javanese puppets, the remaining features are not common in currently extant collections.<sup>4</sup> Some of these monstrous features can also be seen in the Skeat monkey puppets, but unlike on Thai and Javanese examples, the tails are short and do not snake up the back.

Human figures in the Skeat collection are likewise different (Figure 8). Royal human characters are shaped in an hourglass form with wide shoulders, a narrow waist, and bell-shaped skirt or trouser-like lower garments. Faces are barely defined with tiny eyes and mouths, and heads are often small in comparison with the bodies.

<sup>2</sup> Two puppets from a Pattani Malay troupe performing in the state of Perak, acquired by the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1912, are very similar to Thai puppets from the late 19th and 20th centuries. Pitt Rivers object numbers 1912.27.1 and 1912.27.2. See their online database, [http://databases.prm.ox.ac.uk/fmi/webd#objects\\_online](http://databases.prm.ox.ac.uk/fmi/webd#objects_online).

<sup>3</sup> For further information about William Skeat, see J.M. Gullick, "W.W. Skeat and Malayan Ethnography: An Appreciation," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 61, 1 (1988), 117-52.

<sup>4</sup> These forms can be seen in Malay divination manuscripts, however. See Yahya, Figure 47, for instance.





Figure 7. The ferocious-looking puppet of Awang Pelehan Gada. Hide, bamboo, fibre, and pigment. Malaysia. Mid to late 19th century. H 40.7 cm. Skeat collection Z33593. © Courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge



Figure 8. A high-status character. Hide, bamboo, fibre, and pigment. Malaysia. Mid to late 19th century. H 45.5 cm. Skeat collection Z33774. © Courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge

Stances usually see the feet apart and in profile. Bodies are frontal with the chest thrust forward, the back arched, and the head thrown back, creating a pronounced curving line. Most of these puppets are characterised by little detail and simple decorative carving, so that in performance the shadows would be solid in parts and would display repetitive, simple perforations elsewhere. Undetailed openwork can only be seen on a few prop puppets, such as leaves.

Despite these variations in puppet style and iconography, several features are part of the standardised repertoire seen in the 20th century. As mentioned, the long, protruding tongue seen on the Skeat puppets gets repeated on the non-Javanese style, demonic-looking characters in the 20th century (see Figure 4). The bell-like trousers and skirts can be seen in generic, high-status characters dressed in traditional Malay style (Figures 9 and 10). Princely figures can preserve a semblance of the curved standing posture, which is also seen on early Thai puppets. Several other retained aspects also relate strongly to Thai shadow puppets. For example, many of the figures hold an unsheathed sword or club parallel to their backs with the hand on the hip. The use of the Thai-style crown with a central finial is also typical of the Skeat puppets, as are the *naga* ground on which many puppets stand, the decorative yoke around the neck, and the single moveable arm. Many of these features relate to the Manora (Thai: Nuura) performance tradition, particularly the crown and the chest pieces.<sup>5</sup>

A small group of Malay shadow puppets from Kelantan, which were made for Ivor Evans of Clare College, arrived in the MAA in 1927 and reveal some stylistic evolution. These puppets are larger, with thinner hide, and in the case of the MAA examples, are more heavily painted than the Skeat ones. They are still crudely produced, but now appear to be early models of Thai shadow puppets, following them more closely in proportion and stance, and displaying many of the standardised features associated with the later high-status characters mentioned above. Clearly, Thai forms were significant in Malaysia during the late 19th and the early 20th century, and Thai-style shadow puppets were in circulation in Malaysia from an early date, a result of the extensive regional interactions along the peninsula.<sup>6</sup>

The Javanese characteristics found on many mid to late 20th century demon puppets were not absorbed into the Malay tradition until a later date, even though Javanese-style puppets were present in Malaysia by the late 19th century, as exemplified by the three in the Skeat collection, which include the clown Semar, a demon, and a Panji-style figure with a rounded hairstyle. Despite their presence, they seem not to have had a visual impact on the Malaysian puppets, and indeed, Amin Sweeney noted

<sup>5</sup> Manora/Nuura was performed by Thai Buddhist actors, though was popular in Malaysia and was sponsored by the sultans of Kelantan. The courtly association may have promoted the reuse of Manora/Nuura imagery in shadow theatre. See Irving Chan Johnson, "Seductive Mediators: the Nuura Performer's Ritual Persona as a Love Magician in Kelantanese Thai Society," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 30, 2 (1999): 286-309.

<sup>6</sup> Murals in the Thai Wat Machimaram in Tumpat, Kelantan illustrate figures that display an aesthetic similar to that of Kelantanese *wayang siam* and Thai *nang talung*, indicating the importance of shadow theatre in the region and testifying to the sharing of concepts across media (Irving Chan Johnson, personal communication, August 2017).



Figure 9. Female character. Hide, wood, pigment, and cotton. Made by Tok Awang Lah. Tumpat, Malaysia. Early to mid-20th century. H 62.7 cm. As1970,02.106. © Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 10. Male character. Hide, wood, pigment, and cotton. Made by Tok Awang Lah. Tumpat, Malaysia. Early to mid-20th century. H 63.7 cm. As1970,02.90. © Trustees of the British Museum

that Javanese ideas only started being seen in Malay shadow puppets from the 1920s.<sup>7</sup>

In comparing Tok Awang Lah's shadow puppets in the British Museum with other collections, changes and continuities between the late 19th and the mid-20th century become clear, and codification of puppet forms is also visible. Clearly, the Malay tradition relates strongly to the Thai one, with a stylistic connection to Java only emerging in the 20th century.

## Thailand

The British Museum's southern Thai shadow puppets tell a different story.<sup>8</sup> There are two main shadow puppet traditions in Thailand: *nang yai* from the central region and *nang talung*, which originated in the south. As mentioned, there is only one *nang yai* puppet in the collection. The British Museum's *nang talung* collection contains a group purchased in 1970 from the Thai puppeteer, Charoen, living in Kelantan, Malaysia, the purpose of which was to provide comparanda for the Malaysian shadow puppets. The remainder of the British Museum's Thai holdings, like the MAA's entire *nang talung* collection, was purchased new for the museum by Paritta Chalernpow in the late 1970s. These latter examples are highly similar in composition, quality of production, and appearance, and they provide a large body of material to compare with earlier examples, enabling a better understanding of iconographical and stylistic developments.

The MAA collection has a preponderance of royal figures (14) and clowns (23), followed by high-status or fashionable male and female characters (11). There are also eight villagers, six animals, five ritual figures, five ogres, three military figures and bandits, one nun, and one deity. Thai shadow puppets in the British Museum are similarly grouped with fourteen royals, thirty-six clowns, fourteen high-status and fashionable generic characters, eight villagers, thirteen animals, eight ritual figures, eleven ogres and ghosts, five military/bandit characters, three monks and nuns, and one deity. This numeric comparison demonstrates that both collections are representative of the main

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<sup>7</sup> Sweeney, *Malay Shadow Puppets*, 25. Javanese ideas arrived late in Malaysia or were adopted into shadow puppet design late, as such puppets are highly unusual in collections prior to the 1930s. While the Skeat collection has three Javanese-style puppets, they are originals or replicas, rather than Malay puppets incorporating Javanese imagery. On the performance side, Amin Sweeney notes the presence of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Panji stories in Malay shadow theatre, and the presence of the latter indicates connections with Indonesia (Sweeney, "The Rama Repertoire in the Kelantan Shadow Play," 13-14). Pak Dain (*Wayang Kulit*, 68) lists stories besides the Ramayana that are performed, including the Pendawa Lima (the five Pandava brothers); probably a result of connections with Indonesia, the Mahabharata has been performed in Malaysia. Pak Dain also comments that female costumes in Malay shadow theatre relate to Malay and Thai designs, and show little Javanese influence (6-8).

<sup>8</sup> Detailed information about the shadow theatre traditions can be found in Chalernpow's dissertation, cited above, and in Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool, "Traditional and Modern Styles in Southern Thai Shadow Puppet Theatre," in Ernest E. Boesch, ed., *Thai Culture: Report on the Second Thai-European Research Seminar 1982* (Saarbruecken: University of the Saar, 1983), 569-620.





Figure 11. Figure of a king. Hide, bamboo, pigment, and cotton. Southern Thailand. 1970s. H 66.7 cm. As1970,02.159. © Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 12. Bandit character. Hide, bamboo, pigment, and cotton. Southern Thailand. 1970s. H 56 cm. As1977,19.27. © Trustees of the British Museum

character groupings found in *nang talung*, and that each constitutes a full complement of puppets.<sup>9</sup> The shape of these collections also reveals the importance of clowns and royal characters in southern Thai shadow theatre, with the latter enabling the main narrative thread and the former commenting on it, advising the heroes, interpreting the story for the audience, pointing out social and political issues, showing ambivalence to the dominant culture, emphasising local southern Thai identity, and bringing humour to the show.<sup>10</sup>

The puppets collected by Chalernpow present a standardised view of Thai shadow theatre in the 1960s and 1970s and, unsurprisingly, look like the puppet types described in her PhD thesis. Most puppets have a general identity and can be typecast. Thus, princes and heroes wear elaborate and traditional-style embroidered clothes, which sometimes mimic *lakhon* or *likay* theatrical costumes, carry a sword held parallel to the back, and tie their hair in a topknot. Kings and queens wear tall crowns and traditionally stand upon *nagas*, although not in this example (Figure 11). Heroines usually have big curve lines, a fancy coiffure, and modest clothing that draws on traditional forms, while lower-status women can dress in a more modern and sexy manner. Males are generally portrayed in profile, while females' faces are presented frontally, often in a cut-out manner. Trendy looking characters sporting sunglasses and contemporary fashionable clothing sometimes perform as a prince or hero, but more often they are bandits (Figure 12).<sup>11</sup> Characters representing the military, police, or bureaucrats are dressed in clothes that



Figure 13. Military general. Hide, bamboo, pigment, and cotton. Southern Thailand. 1970s. H 69 cm. As1977,19.32. © Trustees of the British Museum

are dressed in clothes that

<sup>9</sup> Chalernpow, *A Popular Drama in its Social Context*, 179. Chalernpow writes that a complete set includes seven main character types: heroes, heroines, kings, queens, ogres, clowns, and supporting characters.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 285-97.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 180. There is ambivalence over whether this type of puppet can be the main hero of the story.

clearly mark their roles in a stereotyped manner (Figure 13). Ghosts are frequently shown as skeletons, and ogres dress traditionally and carry a club upright against their backs while standing on one leg. Female ogresses follow the appearance of male ones, but often lack the club (Figure 14).<sup>12</sup> Generally, body proportions are natural, with features indicating the moral status of the character. Ogres, for example, have thick eyebrows, coarse faces, and large teeth, while royals have slim, elegant appearances with almond-shaped eyes, small mouths, and elegantly dressed hair. Holy men wear an ascetic's hat, have beards, and carry a staff and fan, and the clowns, who are an important part of Southeast Asian shadow



Figure 14. Ogress. Hide, bamboo, pigment, and cotton. Southern Thailand. 1970s. H 65.8 cm. As1977,19.35. © Trustees of the British Museum

theatre generally, are almost entirely black with distorted forms that have animal and sexual connotations (Figures 15 and 16).<sup>13</sup> Unlike the others, they represent specific characters and personalities and are not interchangeable. The fact that the clowns are named and important individuals indicates their major role in characterising shadow theatre as a cultural form that contributes to local identity.<sup>14</sup> However, their appearances tie closely with other clown representations in Southeast Asia, particularly their black colouration and distorted physiques, features also seen on Pak Dogol and Wak Long in Malaysia and Semar and his sons in Java.<sup>15</sup> In all three countries, the clowns

<sup>12</sup> Chalermpong notes that there are two types of female ogre, the city one and the forest one, which do not look similar. The city type resembles male ogres (personal communication, Paritta Chalermpong Koanantakool, February 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Chalermpong, *A Popular Drama in its Social Context*, 295.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Vanderveest and Paritta Chalermpong-Koanantakool, "The Southern Thai Shadowplay Tradition in Historical Context," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 24, 2 (1993), 307-29. Paul Dowsey-Magog, "Popular Culture and Traditional Performance: Conflicts and Challenges in Contemporary *Nang Talung*," in Wattana Sugunnasil, ed., *Dynamic Diversity in Southern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), 142-143.

<sup>15</sup> Their role in Thai shadow theatre is also highly similar to the role of clowns in other Southeast Asian shadow puppet traditions.

are treated as divine or semi-divine, and the clown puppets are reverently cared for and honoured. Given the interconnections between the Southeast Asian shadow theatre traditions, this is unsurprising,<sup>16</sup> and yet, it does more than emphasise how puppet forms and iconographies and methods of performance are related by also demonstrating that the fundamental spiritual purpose of shadow theatre is shared across the region.

Other media have also had an impact on shadow puppet forms. Although *nang talung* is considered a southern Thai tradition, many of the puppet features discussed here connect with central Thai iconographic traditions,<sup>17</sup> including the raised foot seen on ogres, the flying position of and the halos around deities, the dress and appearance of princes with their hand holding a sword against the back hip, ascetic headdresses, and so forth. Central Thai design elements, such as the *kanok* flame motif, are also prevalent.<sup>18</sup> Many of these forms can be seen in Thai



Figure 15. Holy man (*rishi*). Hide, bamboo, pigment, and cotton. Southern Thailand. 1970s. H 58 cm. As1970,02.162. © Trustees of the British Museum

<sup>16</sup> Fan Pen Chen, "Shadow theatres of the world," *Asian Folklore Studies* 62 (2003), 35-37.

<sup>17</sup> There has also been some discussion of the relationship between shadow theatre and other performance traditions. See, for example, Prince Dhani Nivat, "The shadow-play as a possible origin of the masked-play," in Prince Dhani Nivat, *Collected Articles* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1969). Politically, the relationships between the southern and the central regions have been difficult, with the south strongly dominated by the central Thai polity since the late 18th century. While the first records of *nang talung* only appear in the mid-19th century, this may merely reflect the lack of interest in the art form by the central elite (Vandergeest and Koanantakul, 314). Today, southern shadow theatre is a strong identity marker. See Irving Johnson, "Little Bear Sells CDs and Ai Theng Drinks Coke: Sacred Clowning and the Politics of Regionalism in South Thailand," *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 21, 2 (2006): 148-77.

<sup>18</sup> Irving Chan Johnson (personal communication, August 2017) pointed out that these trends are part of the centralisation of Thai culture and can be seen in other art forms as well. Some features can be found regionally, such as the ascetic's headdress that is also represented in Burma.





Figure 16. National artist and puppeteer Narong Changpum before a performance with his clowns, Theng and Nu Nuay, who have been honoured with gold leaf and offerings of money. Hide, bamboo, pigment, and cotton. Southern Thailand. 1970s. © Alexandra Green

wall paintings and manuscripts from the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.<sup>19</sup> For instance, the sword held against the back hip is the stance of protective deities painted on the interior windows and doorways of Thai temples, such as the Buddhaisawan Chapel in Bangkok, from at least the late 18th century, and the tall headdresses of ascetics can be seen in an early, smaller form in the Wat Yai Suwannaram wall paintings in Phetchaburi from the 17th or early 18th century and in mid-18th century manuscripts.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the flying position of deities with one leg raised and bent in front of the body and the other raised and bent behind is a typical manner of depicting deities en route to visit the Buddha's hair relics in the Sulamani stupa, to hear Phra Malai preach in Tavatimsa Heaven, or to pay homage to the Buddha in manuscripts and wall paintings.<sup>21</sup> The tall, pointed crown worn by royalty and deities likewise exist in a number of media. These forms have been remarkably long-lived, lasting into the 20th century in manuscripts and wall paintings and presenting a clear view of the extent to which the country was oriented towards central Thai visual norms. Interestingly, a group of puppets at the Deutsches Ledermuseum (German Leather Museum) in Offenbach, that are dated between 1830 and 1850, look as if they have been removed from central Thai wall paintings. The details of the clothing and faces, the gestures, and the colouration all resemble those of wall paintings. The construction of a tableau within a single puppet connects the examples with the central *nang yai* tradition, casting doubt on whether these examples originated in southern Thailand, demonstrating a greater amalgamation of traditions during the early 19th century than is now visible, or indicating that *nang talung* puppets were more varied than now seen in collections in Thailand. It may also be that *nang talung* started as a variant of *nang yai*. The use of some central Thai iconographic forms, even in the Skeat collection of Malaysian puppets that date to the mid to late 19th century, indicates the extent to which central Thai imagery penetrated the shadow theatre world of the peninsula.

Chalermpow noted the stability of puppet representations generally over more than a century, writing that innovation primarily occurred in the details, such as hairstyles and decoration on clothing.<sup>22</sup> Clown puppets made recently look remarkably similar to those of the 1970s, indicating the persistence of the characters over time, and, the red glasses on the British Museum's general (seen in Figure 13) are still a popular feature of many military and bureaucratic characters. The similarities stretch back in time too. Puppets thought to be from the late 18th century in Nakhon Si Thammarat share central Thai features, including crowns, puppet postures, and so forth, with 20th century examples. Additionally, the protruding index finger that is often shaped like a phallus on 20th century clowns, can be seen in a less obtrusive and explicit form on

<sup>19</sup> Yahya also discusses the close relationships between theatrical forms and manuscript painting in Southeast Asia. Drawing on Boisselier, he notes that painting and theatre drew on the same artistic and iconographic conventions. Yahya, 164-75.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Ginsburg, *Thai Manuscript Painting* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989), 52-53, 67.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49. See, for example, Or 14068 at the British Library, which dates to the mid-18th century, and wall paintings, such as those at Wat Ko Kaew Sutharam in Phetchaburi that date to 1734.

<sup>22</sup> Chalermpow, *A Popular Drama in its Social Context*, 198.

early ogres from the *nang talung* shadow puppet museum in Nakhon Si Thammarat.<sup>23</sup> The exaggerated sway of female bodies and dandified male characters emerged in the early to mid-20th century. Before the Second World War, traditional clothing was slightly different, with women's skirts in a bell-shape with upturned hems, as seen on some Malay shadow puppets, suggesting divergent sartorial trends in the 20th century. Puppets from the Second World War era are smaller than most puppets in use today.<sup>24</sup> Unlike today's shadow puppets, the hide on the early ones is opaque, a result of self-production versus the purchase of hide from mechanised, commercial tanneries.<sup>25</sup>

Looking at other 19th century collections, it is possible to corroborate Chalernpow's contention of stability. Many of the characteristics discussed here are also seen on puppets dating to the 19th century in the Berlin Ethnography Museum, including on a royal demon and a prince. There is also a female with a cut-out face in three-quarters view, as well as a typical representation of a holy man complete with staff, ascetic's hat, and beard, although unusually carrying a bag instead of a fan. Further examples comprise a chariot, a group of *nagas*, and a distorted human figure who has a large jaw and nose, rounded eye, and bald head. The carving indicating his clothing is not detailed and consists of large, open segments. A number of puppets are unfinished, lacking rods and pigmentation. Like examples at the Leather Museum, a few puppets are carved as tableaux, suggesting a mix of the southern Thai *nang talung* and central Thai *nang yai* puppet formats. Thai shadow puppets in the Ethnographic Museum in Leiden share even stronger resemblances with later puppets than the Berlin examples (Figure 17). There are holy men wearing an ascetic's hat and carrying a staff and fan. Royals are in the usual pose standing on a *naga* with weapon and hand against the hip, although many are shown mid-stride, a feature that fell out of fashion in the 20th century. Tall, pointed crowns are the norm. Women are shown frontally or in three-quarters position, and breasts are shown uncovered, a feature that changes later. Ogres are not necessarily portrayed with one leg raised, and generally among all the puppets, there is a greater variety of stances than seen in the 20th century.

<sup>23</sup> They are labelled as dating from 1795 in the museum.

<sup>24</sup> There is a belief among some puppeteers of *nang talung* in Phetchaburi province, central Thailand, that southern Thai *nang talung* are smaller than the central Thai *nang talung*, but this is not necessarily the case. There are three main sizes of puppet in the south, and the medium sized one is the main one used in performance today. These generally correspond with the central Thai ones. I should clarify that I am not stating that all puppets are the same size. As Chalernpow notes in her dissertation, sizes vary within the same period and within the same set. There are also differences over time. As mentioned, puppets produced during the Second World War are quite small, and some of the puppets in the British Museum collection, although new, are of similar size. Super-sized examples were made for the Amazing Thailand tourism campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s (personal communication, Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool, February 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Chalernpow Koanantakool notes that the tanneries sliced the hide thinner, which resulted in the translucency. This type of hide became popular because it was cheaper and could be carved more easily than hide that was purchased and treated by the puppeteers themselves (personal communication, Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool, February 2017). Food colouring and marker pens that do not obscure the light shining through the hide are used to colour it.





Figure 17. Prince Rama. Hide, bamboo, and pigment. Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand. 1880-1886. H 76.5 cm. RV 582-116. © Courtesy of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, The Netherlands

Commoners are often shown in detail, but the clowns, although different from the ones in the collections of the British Museum and MAA, are still physically lumpy and lacking detail. They do not sport a phallic finger. Some of the buffalo puppets resemble the Skeat examples, with extended lumpy necks. Regardless of these differences, the puppets' forms remain recognisable in comparison with 20th century examples.<sup>26</sup>

The shift in performance narratives away from the Ramayana in the late 19th or early 20th century in Thailand also had an impact on the appearance of shadow puppets. The new narratives no longer necessarily characterised the dangers of the world as demons, ghosts, and ogres, but presented situations where contemporary experiences, such as drug problems,

bureaucratic difficulties, and corruption, dominate. As a result, contemporary puppet types enabling the presentation of such stories have increased in number.<sup>27</sup> Supernatural

<sup>26</sup> See Paritta Chalermpong Koanantakool, "Old Shadow Play Figures in the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden," *Muang Boran* 19, 1 (1993): 77-87 [in Thai]. Two types of puppet that are represented in the Leiden collection, but not in later sets, are monkeys and elaborately dressed figures with disproportionately small or large heads that appear to be demons given their fierce faces. The disappearance of monkeys from puppet sets may be due to the fact that the Ramayana declined in popularity and also that the scene of the black and the white monkey ceased to be part of opening ritual performances (Chalermpong, *A Popular Drama in its Social Context*, 141-42, 193, 202-5).

<sup>27</sup> Stories continue to be moralistic. Chalermpong, *A Popular Drama in its Social Context*, 208. See also, Paul Dowsey-Magog, "Demons with mobile phones: evolutionary discourse in Thai shadow puppetry," *Australian Drama Studies* 25 (1994), 130-45. Stories relate to local life within the extant governmental and community systems. The government has occasionally used *nang talung* to present new ideas or to try and resolve problems. For instance, the national puppeteer Narong Changpum began his career in *nang talung* after being commissioned to travel around using shadow puppet theatre to explain birth control (personal communication, Puppeteer Narong, February 2016).



features, such as the use of *nagas* as a support for royal and heroic characters, also lessened during the 20th century, and consequently, none of the puppets in either of these collections stands on one.<sup>28</sup>

Further differences between past and present are also observable in the presentation of shadow theatre in the south and the centre of Thailand; in the latter it exists in Phetchaburi, Ratchaburi, and a few other central regions.<sup>29</sup> It is generally accepted that *nang talung* spread north during the mid-19th century in the reigns of King Rama IV and King Rama V respectively, although this has not been thoroughly researched, and it appears that the central Thai *nang talung* traditions maintain some features that are now no longer prevalent in the south. For instance, ritual features that used to be shown at the beginning of a performance, such as the fight between a white and a black monkey, are maintained in central Thailand but have been lost in the south.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, monkey puppets are no longer part of the collections of southern puppeteers. Iconographic remnants can also be seen in central Thai puppets, including the use of royal figures supported by *nagas* and the bell-shape to women's skirts. Like current Malay usage, there are two main clowns, in contrast to the numerous examples of southern Thailand.<sup>31</sup> The Ramayana is still occasionally performed in the central region, but local folk tales are more likely to be the source of narratives. What is thus visible are the multiple arenas for change and continuity that provide information about how shadow theatres developed.

The complexity of the southern Thai and northern Malaysian region, arising from its role in international trade, is known from approximately the 13th century.<sup>32</sup> Current

<sup>28</sup> Chalermpong, *A Popular Drama in its Social Context*, 177-205.

<sup>29</sup> See Nipatporn Pengkaew, "Phetchaburi's Talung-Southern Talung," *Wittayasan* 3 (Feb 1977), 46-47 (in Thai). Shadow theatre also exists in northeast Thailand, where it is called *nang pramo Thai* or *nang baktue*. See Bonnie Brereton, 'Traditional Shadow Theatre of Northeastern Thailand' (Nang Pramo Thai): Hardy Transplant or Endangered Species?' *Aseanie* 19 (2007): 113-142. Also, Suriya Smutkupt, *Isan Shadow Play: Cultural Diffusion and Modification in Rural Villages, Northeast Thailand* (Khon Kaen: Khon Kaen University, 2535 (1992), and Terry E. Miller and Jarernchai Chonpairot, "Shadow Puppet Theatre in Northeast Thailand," *Theatre Journal* 31, 3 (1979): 293-311.

<sup>30</sup> Chalermpong, *A Popular Drama in its Social Context*, 193.

<sup>31</sup> In the past, there were numerous clowns in the Malay tradition, as can be seen in the Skeat collection, but this has been reduced to two (Pak Dogol and Wak Long) in the present. See Mubin Sheppard, "The Comic Characters in the Malay Shadow Play," in Mohd. Taib Osman, ed., *Traditional Drama and Music of Southeast Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 1974), 30-34. Mubin Sheppard, "Pa' Dogol and Wa' Long: The Evolution of the Comedians in the Malay Shadow Play," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38, 1 (1965), 1-5. The Thai clowns also continue to change, although many popular in the 1970s are still common today.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Reid, "Patani as a paradigm of pluralism," in Patrick Jory, ed., *Ghosts of the Past in Southern Thailand* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 3-30. Barbara Andaya discusses the strong significance of place in pre-19th century Pattani. Barbara Watson Andaya, "Gates, Elephants, Cannon, and Drums: Symbols and Sounds in the Creation of a Patani Identity," in Patrick Jory, ed., *Ghosts of the Past in Southern Thailand* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 31-52. Geoff Wade, "The Patani Region in Chinese Texts of the 6th to the 19th Centuries," in Patrick Jory, ed., *Ghosts of the Past in Southern Thailand* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 53-84.

views of the region – of a hard-line Islam in Kelantan and southern Thailand, as well as the drive to establish Buddhism as the state religion in Thailand – reflect recent realities and obscure the plurality of the region in religion, economics, and ethnicity that has historically been the norm.<sup>33</sup> The convoluted history of the region, extensive interactions over time, cultural and religious connections, lack of borders, and fluid construction of identities has unsurprisingly led to strong similarities in the shadow theatre traditions of the region. This is particularly exemplified by the puppets in the British Museum collection that were made by a Thai puppeteer living in Kelantan.<sup>34</sup> The British Museum and MAA collections of Thai *nang talung* reflect a moment in the history of shadow theatre. In comparison with earlier collections, they demonstrate the remarkable continuity in certain Thai shadow puppet forms over the past 150 years. In contrast, the Malay puppets show greater changes in the same time period, yet they display a strong connection with the Thai tradition that has persisted through the transformations of the 20th century. Thus, what is visible in the shadow puppet forms are the remarkable networks of interconnecting ideas that fed, and continue to feed, the theatre traditions. These ideas maintain older concepts, absorb new features, and appear to morph narratively, yet remain stable in trying to present and comprehend the surrounding world.<sup>35</sup>

### Southeast Asian shadow puppets in context

The British Museum also holds Turkish, Chinese, Greek, and Indian shadow puppets and associated paraphernalia. The latter two collections comprise less than fifty puppets each, while the Turkish puppets number 398 and the Chinese 577. Most of these shadow puppets were acquired between 1965 and 1980, the same time period during which the Malaysian and Thai puppets arrived, although many of the Chinese puppets were purchased in 2000 by Brian Durrans, the curator for Asia and Europe and Asian Ethnography at the Museum of Mankind. Shelagh Weir, the curator responsible for the acquisition of the Turkish, Greek, Indian, Malaysian, and some of the Thai shadow puppets, stated that such acquisitions were usually opportunistic, rather than the result of strategic collection development.<sup>36</sup> Yet, the fact that so many shadow puppets entered the British Museum in a relatively short period of time indicates a curatorial focus. In the case of the Southeast Asian collections, the fact that objects associated with shadow theatre, such as musical instruments, temporary stages, and

<sup>33</sup> See Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory, eds., “Introduction,” *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on a Plural Peninsula* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 1-24. Anthony Reid, “A Plural Peninsula,” in Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory, eds., *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on a Plural Peninsula* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 27-38.

<sup>34</sup> See Irving Chan Johnson, “Paradise at Your Doorstep: International Border Fluidity and Cultural Construction Amongst Kelantan’s Thai Community,” in Wattan Sugunasil, ed., *Dynamic Diversity in Southern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), 299-330.

<sup>35</sup> This is accurate of shadow theatre globally, as there appear to be many points of intersection between the numerous traditions. See Fan Pen Chen, 47-48.

<sup>36</sup> Personal communication, Shelagh Weir, April 2016.

equipment used during performances, were not usually acquired, created an emphasis on the shadow puppets themselves and emphasised their role as art objects, unlike in the literature, where the focus is on performance. These collections thus function as representations of particular moments in time in the histories of this theatrical form, and their extensiveness makes them good records of stylistic and iconographic forms.

However, the puppets have been little used at the museum, with few exhibitions or little space for them in the permanent galleries. For instance, Javanese and Malaysian shadow puppets were on display in the Museum of Mankind between 1970 and 1973, and a few Javanese puppets were included in the exhibition, *The Golden Sword: Sir Stamford Raffles and the East*, in 1997. Four to five puppets are rotated in the *Treasures from the British Museum* exhibition that is currently on tour. Other than two booklets, one on the Malay puppets by Amin Sweeney and the other on the Javanese examples,<sup>37</sup> there have been no major publications on the subject. There was a small exhibition of some Turkish puppets in 2014, and the Greek, Chinese, and Indian examples have also occasionally been displayed.

Rather than emphasising research or display, what is visible in the British Museum's shadow puppet collections are efforts to acknowledge the existence of shadow theatre across a large portion of the world. It seems clear that such collections were added to make the British Museum's holdings more representative of world cultures and human activity generally. This ties in with the museum's stated goal of being a global institution that contains the civilisations of the world, representing the world to the world.<sup>38</sup> While universal museums have been challenged over the colonial origins of their holdings, the collections have verified claims that culture "...has always been dynamic and hybrid, formed through contact and exchange with diverse peoples."<sup>39</sup> Encyclopaedic museums further enable cross-cultural explorations, as the varying shadow puppet collections at the British Museum demonstrate. However, there are also substantive gaps in the British Museum collections, and the collections do not get used equally. This stems from the 19th century concept of collections as raw data anticipating classification and transformation into knowledge,<sup>40</sup> but the physical limits to gathering and storing universally comprehensive collections, as well as the dearth of curatorial time to investigate them, has made the universal museum in large part a repository of material moments available to researchers.<sup>41</sup> The traditional universal

<sup>37</sup> Jeune Scott-Kemball, *Javanese Shadow Puppets: The Raffles Collection in the British Museum* (London: The British Museum, 1970).

<sup>38</sup> See the website: <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/2015/11/12/the-british-museum-a-museum-for-the-world/>. See also, Sonya Lee, "Introduction: Ideas of Asia in the Museum," *Journal of the History of Collections*, 28, 3 (2016), 359-66.

<sup>39</sup> James Cuno, *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993), 4. In the case of the British Museum, Richards noted that during the colonial period the institution increasingly devoted itself to storage, rather than interpretation (151).

<sup>41</sup> Whether researchers can get access to objects depends on staff time. More collections are becoming available online, although this too depends on institutional culture and objectives, as well as the availability of resources to create a complete online record of collections.

museum and imperial archive focused upon creating a record of a tradition's historical progress, a concept upon which the art historical discipline was initially based, but the emphasis on gathering a body of material together in just a few tranches, rather than regular collection over time, adjusts acquisition to manageable proportions. The result is holdings that provide views of specific instances in traditions, rather than comprehensive, historical surveys,<sup>42</sup> and as such need to be studied comparatively. This is the case with all the British Museum's shadow puppet collections, which appear in displays periodically, but still await in-depth research. In conjunction with other collections of such material, however, they provide another piece in the puzzle of Southeast Asian shadow puppet development.

### *Acknowledgements*

The Museum Research Fund enabled me to travel to Southeast Asia to view performances and examine collections. Jane Portal, the Keeper of the Department of Asia, was very supportive throughout the project and provided me with further travel funding. Shelagh Weir and Nigel Barley both patiently answered my many questions about the collections. Nuchjaree Klongsungsorn, at the Royal Thai Embassy in London, was extremely helpful in providing contacts, including HRH Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn, who, in turn, generously allowed me to visit her collection of *nang talung* puppets in Bangkok. I would also like to thank HRH Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn's staff members, who very hospitably showed me around the collection. Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool graciously provided information, pictures of puppets in European museums that I was unable to access, and contacts, and Nipatporn Pengkaew generously shared her time and knowledge. Constantine Korsovitis gave me considerable assistance, and Paiboon Booranasanti was immensely kind in translating for me and ferrying me around Trang despite being in the middle of moving to another city. I am also indebted to Puppeteer Narong and his daughter Montathip Chanpum for their explanations, help and access to puppets, as well as Puppeteer Chainat Cherd for enabling me to look at his collections and view some performances. Jirawan Sangpetch helpfully drove me around and translated for me. In Malaysia, Mohammed Kamrulbahri bin Hussin and the Sanggar Budaya Geng Wak Long group kindly performed for me and provided information about Malaysian shadow theatre. I was also assisted by Pamela Yamaguchi and Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof at the Universiti Malaya. Thanks are also due to Irving Chan Johnson for his comments and suggestions. Rachel Hand at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge generously spent two days helping me to examine the Skeat collections. Thanks are also due to Paul Bromberg and Chris Baker for their assistance with this paper. All errors are, of course, my own.

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<sup>42</sup> See Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," *Art History* 3, 4 (1980), 448-69.