

# “SILK SHADOWS SPEAK:” PERFORMING THE VOICES OF CHILDREN THROUGH *WAYANG KULIT* AND HERITAGE FOLKTALES

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## ABSTRACT

There is extensive literature on drama and theatre in education regarding the role, value and benefits of performative tools to enhance learning, stimulating creativity and cognitive of children. However, while there is a substantial and well-evidenced body of literature in this area, there are few studies that present the voices of those directly affected by these claims; the children involved as participants in these studies or research projects, especially in Malaysia. This article deals with a fundamental research grant funded by the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia carried out from January 2018 until December 2019. The research project involves six primary schools in the northern states of Malaysia; Penang, Kedah and Perlis. “Silk Shadows Speak” is an action research project that explores *Wayang Kulit* (shadow play) as a performative art in an attempt to portray that it is able to engage children with heritage folktales in critical and creative ways. The importance of folktales as an integral element of a child’s holistic development is an area that has received significant attention within the academic world (Kaveny, 2015; Normaliza, 2014; Nurul Fiza & Nor Azan, 2010; Zipes, 1997). The concern of the project was finding children’s voices; their thoughts and reactions towards heritage folktales in their everyday lives. The research project aimed at children’s participation in appropriating *Wayang Kulit* to make and communicate meaning through storytelling, interpretation and creation of characters, puppetry, sounds, textures and gestures.

**Keywords:** Children’s voices, folktales, *Wayang Kulit*, performing arts, theatre.

## INTRODUCTION

The last 50 years have brought dramatic changes to the lives of children as they confront shifting patterns in Malaysians' lifestyles, leisure time and tastes as well as increasing competition from entertainment and recreation. Intriguingly, children today, are seeking new fixtures that offer new and varied ways to communicate, learn and play where they can emerge as central actors in a shifting landscape that challenges our values and norms surrounding heritage folktales and performative arts. "Silk Shadows Speak" is an action research involving 180 ten-year-old children from six primary schools in the northern states of Penang, Kedah and Perlis. The focus of the research was on children and their voices, their engagement in heritage folktales and how they appropriate performative arts, in this case, *Wayang Kulit* to communicate their understanding of everyday life through their stories, thoughts, reactions and perceptions, hence coining the title; "Silk Shadows Speak".

Children relate to their cultural knowledge and social experiences as a way to understand their surroundings and the on-goings of the world that make sense to them. It is pertinent to include folklore and heritage knowledge as part of the component of Malaysian cultural identity in shaping children's minds in an ever-evolving life setting. As children are exploring the heritage folktales and finding ways to relate and make sense of them, the close engagement of caring and responsible adults is much needed to lend the children a pair of keen listening ears, interested and responsive minds to support them in their journey of exploration on heritage folktales in Malaysian setting. This will enhance respect for Malaysian heritage folktales in productive ways. Arts experiences that recognize children's active role in exploring opportunities are important to construct and elaborate voices on meaningful activities that are relevant to children's daily realities. Departing from existing conventions that situate children as passive participants, there are struggles to bring *Wayang Kulit* to more participatory platforms that respond to the present lifeworld dramatic experiences that engage critical inquiry and creative skills.

This study's aim was to focus on children's interest in heritage folktales in Malaysia and to chart children's knowledge and attitudes towards heritage folktales in the current Malaysian context. The pertinent questions that were raised, "are Malaysian children interested in heritage folktales?". If yes, "what aspects of heritage folktales do they find as most engaging and as most distressing?" and "what are children's thoughts on building connections between heritage folktales and their social realities?". With regards to performative arts

and appropriating the *Wayang Kulit* experience, the study re-visions the *wayang* experience by exploring new forms of participation, storytelling, interpretation and creation of characters, puppetry, sounds, textures and gestures of children voicing the folktales in creative, fun and imaginative ways.

### *Problem Statement*

Research on the intrinsically linked focus of children, heritage folktales and *Wayang Kulit* performance has not attracted much attention in Malaysia. The richness in our heritage artefacts will vanish before our eyes if we do not engage with children's social realities and re-versioned children-centered capacity in performing arts. Our values and norms in heritage and performative practices are being challenged by a changing landscape of media technologies in which children are central actors. Engaging children with heritage folktales and performance arts is one of the keys to conserving and sustaining any form of knowledge and information on Malaysia's cultural heritage. Children are potential knowledge bearers, and the continuum of these cultures in the future heavily depends on them. It is therefore crucial to hear children's voices on heritage folktales and to unravel their expressions in re-visioning the *Wayang Kulit* experience in the Malaysian context. This is a multidisciplinary project that draws from existing theories on childhood studies, heritage folktales (Chew & Ishak, 2010) and performance studies (Carlson, 2013). The theories from the different areas of study are essential and instructive in shaping the framework of the present project.

In today's world of Facebook, YouTube and Pokemon Go, the important position of folktales in the lives of young children is gradually losing its significance. In view of the rapidly growing technological world and the dying tradition of folktales, numerous studies have been conducted in attempts to reinstate and restore this age-old traditional practice among children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century using technology (Lee, J. H. M., Lee, F. L., & Lau, T. S., 2006; Normaliza, 2014; Nurul Fiza & Nor Azan, 2010). For example, a research conducted by Normaliza (2014) explores the use of technology to encourage the revival of Malay folktales into the social and cultural narratives of children today, while Lee, Lee and Lau (2006) have employed folklore and folktales as the premise for web-based learning activities. While folktales present an important avenue to educate the young about their social and cultural heritage, it is equally pertinent to understand how these tales impact their present social reality. Ideas from Hiiemäe (2004) and Muris and Field (2010) on perceptions and allegories of folktales will be useful in addressing how children of the 21<sup>st</sup>

century perceive and understand the messages imbedded within folktales and how this in turn shapes their understanding about their culture and notions of identity. While these works have dealt extensively on the topic of folklore and folktales, they have not explored the voices of children in the narratives of these folktales. There is a lacuna in the current body of research that draws from the physical and social experiences of a child to understand how stories in folktales of the past can speak to a child's current reality, and how we can in turn adapt their voices and experiences in unveiling new understandings on heritage folktales in their daily lives.

### *Childhood and Heritage Folktales*

The concept of children as active agents is rapidly gaining credence in response to changing perspectives on children's status in society. Such perspectives have shifted in the wake of the UNCRC (1989) towards a recognition of children as social actors in their own right rather than parts of an 'other' such as part of a family or school (Stinson, 2019; O'Connor, 2011). Children began to be seen as 'subjects' or 'participants' rather than 'objects' and research 'with' children became common practice. Children are party to the subculture of childhood which gives them a unique 'insider' perspective that is critical to our understanding of children's worlds. A realisation of children as social actors in their own right, agents in their own worlds will drive the momentum to propel centred agendas in the present study.

The idea of heritage folktales has often been explored within a number of premises that belong to both the material and spiritual spheres. The narratives within folktales include, stories and customs of a given community, fairy tales, historical stories, and even ghost tales (Jenkins, 2002). The most distinctive feature that discerns folktales from other forms of communal narratives is the manner in which folktales are presented within a community. Folktales are essentially the oral history of a community, preserved through social memory and communicated through rote. The stories of a child's parents and grandparents are important elements in folktales as these tales present an important feature in moulding a child's belief system, cultural practice and views on identity within a given community. In his paper on folklore and fairy tales, Piscitelli (2011) examined how the social and cultural narratives of a community play an important role in shaping and influencing a child's perception of his or her reality.

Folktales provide creative and interesting ways for children to make sense of the world around them. Children learn about the conflicts of life and receive important messages that help them make sense of their lives, their relationship with their families and friends, improving their quality of life in a healthy way. This raises an argument, how can these stories/tales/fables which may not even be true, contain imaginary characters (fairy Godmother), performing unrealistic acts (animal talking), magical events, yet having the potentials to make sense to children? This further leads to the understanding and acceptance of the dichotomous situation of “making sense of the unrealistic” as positioned by the folktales and development of children.

Tremblay (2013) emphasises the role of artists/educators in facilitating children to use art to communicate challenges to social inconsistencies in local contexts. As artists/educators, we need to support this process by exploring local folktales and enabling children to contribute to and create art that is socially engaged, and by suggesting directions “to reflect on social realities and the need for a critical and creative society” (Tremblay, 2013). Intent to engage children in meaningful conversations about art works and performances (Piscitelli, 2011) will reveal children’s voices, their observations and reflections upon various forms of art, including their own creative works with regard to Malaysian heritage folktales.

### *The Wayang Kulit Experience*

Children’s engagement with *Wayang Kulit* and heritage folktales can create spaces to widen opportunities to learn about life matters beyond the constructs of traditional forms of schooling (Piscitelli & Penfold, 2013). In particular, drama or performance can offer voices of children that remain in shadows to express anxieties about their everyday lives and make meaning about real life (Stinson, 2019; O’Connor, 2011). So, what is *Wayang Kulit*? What are children’s experiences and views on *Wayang Kulit*?

*Wayang Kulit* or shadow play/puppet is an ancient form of theatrical performance, employing specially crafted puppets, gamelan musical ensemble, vocals and story-telling techniques by the master puppeteer known as the *Dalang*, a white screen, light and shadow. The highlights of the *Wayang Kulit* is the powerful creation of animated shadows which becomes larger than life projected onto the screen accompanied by the equally enchanting gamelan ensemble and the narration of the *Dalang* which keep the audience spell bound. There is nothing more magical than this entire ancient theatrical performance which is arguably the

biggest and wholesome production of art as the process of its artistic production ranges from drawing, craft, painting, stitching, specific rituals, drama, story-telling, character and characteristics, dance, war, music, narration, lights and on the whole, a live animation of the past.

*As the dalang recites...si si Maharisi....,  
as the lights are projected onto the white screen (kelir),  
as the Gamelan music begins,  
as the Pohon Beringin or Gunungan puppet is placed onto the screen  
as it is then swiped expertly from right to left and vice versa by the dalang  
to indicate the beginning of life, the story and the characters,  
as the puppets emerge as silk shadows  
as silk shadows speak and move,  
as they become alive...  
we are mesmerized by the dancing, emotionally moving and speaking  
shadows...*

Literature on *Wayang Kulit* is rich and many researchers and scholars have studied the *wayang's* contributions from many different perspectives and angles. *Wayang Kulit* has always been a topic of interest among researchers, performance art and film scholars and makers all over the world with focus from ancient times, its evolvement in the past to the contemporary and its continuous survival to the present times through innovation and creativity by the practitioners and keepers of the *wayang*. The *Wayang Kulit* as emphasized by Foley (2010), is a unison of the multi-facets of performance including music, song, visual design, movement, puppets and above all powerful story-telling. Ghulam Sarwar (1977-2001), Tan Sooi Beng (1997) and Matusky (1997) too in their works agree that *Wayang Kulit* goes beyond just an entertainment entity but rather can be seen as a platform to tell stories. Hand crafted leather puppets are used to depict epic stories in a concept of storytelling and shadow play with the accompaniment of the musical gamelan ensemble. As the puppets are moved by the master puppeteer or *Dalang*, behind a white muslin cloth which acts as a screen, the storytelling takes place as each character is brought alive and larger than life by the *Dalang* who is supported by the musical ensemble (Ghulam Sarwar, 1977-2001).

#### *Appropriating Wayang Kulit to the Social Realities of Contemporary Children*

Theatre history has recorded many repertoires of the *Wayang Kulit* around the world from Asia, Asia Minor and even Central Europe consisting of its own traditions, cultural and social settings, stories and performance styles. In Malaysia, the *Wayang Kulit* Kelantan which has its origins from India and

Indonesia is one of the most dominant forms. The *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* derives its stories from the two popular Hindu epics, Ramayana and Mahabharatha. Although these epics posed to be the central themes of the *wayang* in the past, however, they may not hold the same importance with today's children as the social settings, present realities and lifestyles of the children are different from the past.

Pertinent questions are raised here through this study. How can *Wayang Kulit* be re-versioned in a way that retains the core elements, and yet be performed in appealing ways that engage children's voices today in fruitful ways? What are the folktales that are seen as relevant and how have they expressed these representations and meanings in their *Wayang Kulit* works? There has been many projects reviving the *wayang* done around the world, in South East Asia and Malaysia. Some of these projects have been done by film makers for advertising agencies, films, animation with graphics through extensive research into the form, puppets, the stories, music and cultural and heritage settings. One of the projects which received attention from local media and the patrons of the arts is "Projek Fusion Wayang Kulit" featuring "Peperangan Bintang (Star Wars)" a fusion project using *Wayang Kulit* as the medium and backed by an innovative multi-media design and technology. The project was performed during "Designer's Weekend at Publika (Kuala Lumpur) in July 2012 and later it was previewed in 2013. The designer, Tintoy Chou worked alongside the infamous *Dalang* Pak Daim Othman to understand the techniques and artistry of the *wayang*. As this fusion project introduced Darth Vader as "Sangkala Vadeh", Luke Skywalker as "Perantau Langit", R2D2 and Princess Leia into *wayang*, similar attempts have been made by *Dalang* Juffery and *Dalang* Che Mat Jusoh by featuring modern characters, story lines to attract the interest and attention of children for the traditional *wayang* (2014-2017). Whilst innovative attempts have been inspired by various *wayang* patrons, on the contrary, this study intended to keep the local cultural essence intact by using heritage folktales to engage children to the experience of *Wayang Kulit* though their participation as musicians, narrators, puppet movers, their interpretation of the stories and their voices.

*"Silk Shadows Speak": Performing Children's Voices*

An action-research methodology (Leavy, 2008; Liamputtong & Rumbold, 2008) was employed which includes the systematic use of artistic process and with an emphasis on experimentation towards creativity and theatre making as a way to understand and examine children's engagement with *Wayang Kulit* and folktales, the cultural heritage experiences in new and valuable ways (Springgay et al.,

2008; Knowles et al., 2008). The study utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methods and data sources, including surveys, observations and group discussions with children as well as hands-on engagement with theatre making processes of the *Wayang Kulit* performance. Questionnaires and focus group discussions were used to examine children's views on heritage folktales and opinions on the practice of *Wayang Kulit*.

As mentioned earlier, the study focused on 180 ten-year olds from six primary schools in three states of the northern region in Malaysia (Penang, Perlis and Kedah). The children comprise of urban and sub-urban schools and were targeted areas within the 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysian plan as growth catalyst cities in order to stimulate national development on the whole. The research took on a creative method involving five key stages: discovery, interpretation, experimentation and evolution whereby each stage went through appropriate sessions with the children.

Fieldworks were carried out respectively by researchers in order to gather data from the children towards the creative processes of discovery, ideation and interpretation of heritage folktales and *Wayang Kulit* theatrical performance. Questionnaires regarding children's knowledge, experience and views of heritage folktales and *Wayang Kulit* were explored and discovered. The relevance of the folktales to their everyday life realities and struggles were examined through their understanding and interpretations of the stories.

Children's interpretations, their understandings and meanings on the folktales and experiences with *Wayang Kulit* tend to be the core of this research. As children are more open to accepting and learning, they observe with different eyes, ask questions and have concerns which are very different from the way adults may or may not even think of understanding. This project takes as one of its starting points, that meanings about children's creative works are visible as representations once they are realised materially. Here, 'materiality' refers to the actual modes and media involved in the representation of meaning. As Jewitt (2003) tells us, modes, such as visual (writing, drawing), oral, kinaesthetic, gestural etc. and media, such as paper, crayons, paintings etc., are culturally available resources that the children engage with, making meanings within the realm of what is understood as literacy. The discussions on folktales through children's interpretations become the source for ideation towards their connectivity with present realities. The stories they interpret will frame the creative works in *Wayang Kulit* and offer valuable insights and original contributions to knowledge. We believe that children's interpretations can pave communicative pathways for imaginative and engaging ideations and discourses in appropriating heritage folktales and *Wayang Kulit*, thus building children's voices as the core of the performance.

As children start to explore and experiment with *Wayang Kulit*, and “their stories” enacted from the heritage folktales, they soon begin to give voice to the characters of the stories, re-design the plot by adding or omitting certain elements/input which makes sense to them, create dialogues and narrate the stories over and over again. Children go through the process of literally re-building the characters, giving colour to the personalities, developing characteristics that deem fit for the characters as per the story and their interpretations. They then act out the characters, say the lines and dialogues that they created, thus becoming a creative construction by the children for the children. Folktales, fairy tales, fables are central to the development of the child and often shaped to test children’s initiative. L.I. El’Koninova (...) states that children should not only read the stories but also act them out in order to experience them and feel or create the “make-believe situation” to develop a child’s consciousness and for his or her moral development.

*Staging “Silk Shadows Speak”: Discovering Children’s Voices*

The staging of the *Wayang Kulit* theatrical performance was carried out in School of The Arts, University Science Malaysia (USM) through a three days workshop. About 60 children from SK Minden Heights (Penang), SK Seri Jerai (Gurun, Kedah) and SK Sungai Petani (Kedah) participated in the workshop and successfully staged a workshop performance. The dates of the workshops were 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2019 at Panggung Pelengkap Cahaya, USM, Penang. The workshop conducted by the researchers explored various skills and performance techniques; acting, narrating/ story- telling, line reading, puppetry techniques, playing the gamelan music, designing and arranging the costumes, sets and props for the scenes. The children selected three folktales that they had read, understood and were keen on exploring the stories with their social realities. The folktales were “Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah” (Shallots and Garlic), “Si Tanggung” and “Hikayat Sang Kancil” (The Adventures of the Mouse deer). This valuable process examined children as creative artists, designers, musicians, puppeteers, actors and storytellers. Whilst children were guided with positive feedback from researchers, they were also trusted with the role of little master directors to interpret and chart the design of their productions. Through this creative process, this study is believed to advance children’s views on Malaysian heritage folktales that presents a renewed meaning to the local narratives and culture of the community.

The research documented three major processes that the 60 children went through in order to chart their knowledge in heritage folktales, appropriating the *Wayang Kulit* experience and staging the performance of *Wayang Kulit* by using heritage folktales through acting, puppetry and playing the gamelan instruments. Charting children's knowledge in heritage folktales:

- children were able to identify at least 3 folktales. Among the folktales were “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih”, “Si Tanggang” and “Hikayat Sang Kancil”.
- they could relate the stories of the past to their present lives by adding their moral and social values to these stories from their perspectives.
- children gave their voices as they narrated the stories, wrote the dialogues, acted and embodied the characters.

Appropriating the *Wayang Kulit* experience:

- children were able to envision, imagine and ideate as how the puppets were to be created, coloured and shaped.
- children were able to learn the puppetry moving techniques.
- children were able to handle and move the puppets well accordingly to the plot and flow of the story, sequence of characters, timing and rhythmically.
- children were able to voice out their perception of moral values to each of the stories.
- children played the gamelan musical instruments accordingly with tempo and timing.

Staging “Silk Shadows Speak”

- children staged “Silk Shadows Speak”, a full length *Wayang Kulit* theatrical production at the end of the workshop.
- children were able to engage with various stakeholders in the arts scene. They were invited to witness the performances and to chart the social futures of children arts, heritage folktales and the *Wayang Kulit* in collaboration with the children who led these performances.
- children's artistic experiences were documented as the evolving children's arts in Malaysia in five artistic spheres:
- i) children as story board designers (script arrangement, dialogues writing, plot)
- ii) children as narrators, storytellers
- iii) children as actors who embodied the characters
- iv) children as master puppeteers (little *Dalangs*)- handled the puppets
- v) children as gamelan musicians-bringing life to the *Wayang Kulit* performance through their music.

## CONCLUSION

Children face complex experiences in approaching and understanding the social, cultural and moral facets of the adult world. It is crucial to hear their voices, expressions and stories on the contexts and consequences of heritage folktales in Malaysia. Sadly, we are less certain as to how and whether these heritage folktales are tied into the realities of the children's everyday lives. There is hardly any empirical information on children's engagement with heritage folktales and clearly it is an uncharted territory for stakeholders and it is difficult to accurately predict what impact this will have on the social futures of children, heritage and performative arts in Malaysia. Policymakers, arts educators and activists, businesses, educators and parents need to understand children's involvement with living experiences to comprehend their attitudes and practices in the contemporary challenging settings. This study agrees with Piscitelli and Penfold (2013) and emphasizes that children's engagement with *Wayang Kulit* and heritage folktales can co-create spaces to widen opportunities to learn about life matters beyond the constructs of traditional forms of schooling. In particular, drama and theatre performance can offer voices of children that remain in shadows to express anxieties about their everyday lives and make meaning about real life. The expressive modes of *Wayang Kulit* can be re-visioned and appropriated to engage children in fun, exciting and imaginative ways.

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