

Background on *Wayang Jawa/Wayang Kulit Melayu* by Dr. Patricia Matusky

This commentary is based on studies in 1977 with the *Wayang Jawa Dalang* and *Bomoh diraja* (the official *Wayang Jawa* puppeteer and traditional medicine man of the Kelantan royal household) Nik Abdul Rahman bin Haji Nik Din (better known as Pak Nik Man, Photo 1).



Photo 1. Pak Nik Man performing the *Buka Panggung* (opening of the stage for the *Wayang Jawa/Melayu*). (source: P. Matusky, 1977)

The type of shadow puppet theater called *Wayang Jawa* (or *Wayang Melayu*) developed and was performed only for aristocrats and for the royal households mainly in the states of Kedah and Kelantan and, in past centuries, possibly in the Malay Sultanate of Pattani in southern Thailand. This form is extinct today, but it contributes to the historical background and tradition of shadow puppet theatre found in Peninsular Malaysia from about the late 18th century and most likely earlier. Its importance, historically, stems from its development, nurturing and performance under the patronage of Malay royalty in Kelantan and Kedah from at least the late 1700s up to the years of World War II when royal patronage ceased.

We read that the Kelantan Sultan Mohamed (1800-1835) was dissatisfied with the village folk wayang kulit at that time and his brother Long Zainal Raja Banggol sent two *dalangs* to study in Java, these were Demukmin and Ibrahim. Demukmin returned home after 7 years to further develop the *wayang Jawa* tradition in Kedah and Kelantan, but only for the royalty (interview, Kelantan Tengku Khalid, 1960s in Sweeney 1972). The puppeteers who were sent to Java returned with story manuscripts in hand as well as knowledge of the theatrical conventions, the design of the puppets, the orchestra, and the music in the Javanese style, that is, the style of the *wayang kulit Purwa* which uses the traditional gamelan.

The stories told in the *Wayang Jawa* are primarily those of the *Panji* cycle and the *Mahabharata* Hindu epic relating the adventures of the *Pandawa* clan. The *Mahabharata* and stories of the *Pandawa* family are also common in the Javanese shadow play, as are the puppets Semar and Turas (the clown-servants to the ruler, Photo 2). Some old Javanese language is used by the Malay puppeteers in the recitation and chanting of certain passages of text in a story, but the predominant language used is the regional dialects of the Malay language in Kelantan and Kedah.



Photo 2. Puppets Semar and a Prince (*Puteri*) character.
(source: P. Matusky, 1977)

As used in the 20th century, the *wayang Jawa* orchestra consisted of 2 large bronze hanging knobbed gongs called *tetawak*, 1 or 2 *mong* pot gongs of medium size set horizontally in a rack (Photo 3), a *Canang* gong-row of 6 gongs in a single row set horizontally in a wooden rack (Photo 4), a pair of hand cymbals called *kesi*, 2 *gendang* drums played by one or two players, and a 2-stringed *rebab* bowed lute (Photo 5). This orchestra, its music and the stories it accompanied were known in Kedah and Kelantan until the mid-to-late 20th century, and by the late 1980s-early 1990s no *dalang* were present and the form became extinct.



Photo 3. *Tetawak*- 2 hanging gongs,
1 *Mong* pot-gong. (source: P. Matusky, 1977)



Photo 4. *Canang* 6-gong row
played by 2 players.
(source: P. Matusky, 1977)



Photo 5. *Rebab* and 2 *Gendang* drums.
(source: P. Matusky)