

# NAVIGATING THE STORM: A STUDY OF IMPACTS COVID-19 ON WAYANG KULIT KELANTAN

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## Abstract

*The Covid-19 pandemic hit the entire world at the onset of 2020, paralysing all community activities. The local government has restricted all social activities, including public gatherings, which has indirectly impacted local wayang kulit practitioners. This study examined the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on practitioners of wayang kulit in Kelantan and how they reacted and responded during the Covid-19. This study employs a qualitative approach with a focus on a case study. Ten respondents were interviewed, and non-participant observation was used to obtain data. All data were analysed thematically and triangulated with previous studies. Hence this study found two significant impacts of Covid-19 towards Wayang Kulit Kelantan, including local practitioners who are forced to postpone and cancel artistic activities and a lack of income generation among the practitioners. However, Wayang Kulit Kelantan survived by adapting online version of wayang kulit performances and the need to comply with government SOPs. In conclusion, this study is essential for Wayang Kulit practitioners and stakeholders in sustaining Wayang Kulit during the pandemic and in the future.*

*Keywords: Covid-19, Stakeholders, Wayang Kulit Kelantan*

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# MENGEMUDI BADAI: KAJIAN MENGENAI IMPAK COVID-19 TERHADAP WAYANG KULIT KELANTAN

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## Abstrak

Pandemik Covid-19 telah melanda seluruh dunia pada permulaan tahun 2020 dan melumpuhkan semua aktiviti masyarakat. Kerajaan tempatan telah menyekat semua aktiviti sosial termasuk perhimpunan awam yang memberi kesan kepada pengamal wayang kulit tempatan secara tidak langsung. Kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengkaji kesan wabak Covid-19 terhadap pengamal wayang kulit di Kelantan. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang berfokuskan kepada kajian kes. Sepuluh orang responden telah ditemu bual, dan pemerhatian bukan ikut serta digunakan untuk mendapatkan data. Semua data dianalisis secara tematik dan ditriangulasi dengan kajian terdahulu. Justeru itu, kajian ini mendapati terdapat dua impak utama wabak Covid-19 terhadap Wayang Kulit Kelantan termasuklah pengamal tempatan terpaksa menanggunghkan dan membatalkan aktiviti kesenian serta kekurangan penjana pendapatan dalam kalangan pengamal. Namun, Wayang Kulit Kelantan berjaya bertahan dengan mengadaptasi persembahan wayang kulit secara dalam talian, dan pematuhan SOP kerajaan. Kesimpulannya, kajian ini penting untuk pengamal dan pihak berkepentingan wayang kulit dalam mengekalkan wayang kulit semasa pandemik dan pada masa hadapan.

**Kata kunci:** Covid-19, Pihak Berkepentingan, Wayang Kulit Kelantan

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## 1.0 Introduction

Wayang kulit is one of the performing arts and part of the intangible cultural heritage. The performing arts have been categorised as one of the five domains outlined by the Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage organised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (hereafter UNESCO) in 2003, along with oral traditions and expressions, language which is a vehicle of intangible heritage, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship. According to UNESCO (2003, Article 2), intangible cultural heritage refers to,

... the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage....

Wayang kulit performances combine the skills and creativity of the community in entertainment. According to Kuroda (2020), wayang kulit falls under drama art which combines acting, dance and vocal art in the performance. Wayang kulit performances are still actively performed in the state of Kelantan and southern Thailand. However, at the beginning of 2020, the world was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused all social, economic, cultural, and daily activities to halt. The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted wayang kulit performances because wayang kulit cannot be performed as usual. One of the main challenges has been the need for physical distancing to prevent the spread of the virus. It is due to the traditional wayang kulit performances are typically held in small, crowded spaces, making social distance challenging to maintain. As a result, the number of wayang kulit performances has decreased, as many people are hesitant to attend crowded events during the pandemic.

In addition, the economic impact of the pandemic has also affected the wayang kulit industry. Many wayang kulit performers and artisans have lost their income due to decreased performances and the closure of traditional markets. Supply chain disruptions and other factors have also hampered the production of wayang kulit and other equipment (Zin & Abdullah, 2021). Despite these obstacles, some wayang kulit performers and organisations have responded to the pandemic by moving their performances online or finding other ways to reach audiences safely. For example, some dalangs (puppeteers) have started streaming wayang kulit performances on social media platforms or creating video recordings that can be viewed at home. Others have discovered ways to live performances for small, physically distant audiences, such as by performing outdoors or in larger, more spacious venues.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the following questions:

- 1) What are the impacts of the pandemic towards Wayang Kulit Kelantan, specifically on its practitioners?
- 2) How these practitioners respond to the pandemic?

## 2.0 Literature Review

Wayang Kulit Kelantan is also known as Wayang Kulit Siam in the southern Thailand. According to Abdullah (2017), the term 'wayang kulit' refers to the material used for the leather puppet. The shadow puppet figures are formed based on a side view and are made of cow or buffalo leather (Currell, 2015)

The oldest form of wayang kulit originated in Java before the spread of Hindu influence (Rentse, 1936). However, there are several other views on the origin of wayang kulit; where Brandon (1979) states that wayang kulit originated from India and spread throughout Southeast Asia with Hindu influence in Malaya. This can be seen through the performance and storytelling style of Wayang Kulit Kelantan, which is greatly influenced by Indian culture, especially in terms of the Ramayana and Mahabharata stories (Osnes, 2010). The stories of Ramayana and

Mahabharata also influenced visual arts, performances, literature, and religion in wayang kulit (Ghani, 2011). Furthermore, Yousof and Khor (2017) also argue that the form and initiation of shadow puppetry were influenced by ancestral beliefs in the past, as well as cultural elements from India, southern Thailand, and Java that can be seen today in the form of puppet designs, dramatic repertoire, rituals, and overall performance.

However, the performance of Wayang Kulit Kelantan was temporarily halted due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to control the spread of Covid-19 among the local community, the Malaysian government issued the Movement Control Order (MCO), which was enforced throughout the country. During the MCO, the public was advised to stay at home and to comply with the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) that the Malaysian government set for carrying out daily activities. The public was also advised to follow the new norms, which include avoiding crowded places, confined spaces, close conversations, and practising the 3Ws (wash, wear, and warn) (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2020)

The pandemic has significantly impacted society, particularly in the economy, social and health. One of the country's economic sources has been generated by heritage tourism. Cultural heritage tourism generates substantial economic benefits, including employment, income, and foreign exchange earnings. Cultural heritage can contribute to economic development by attracting tourists, promoting local businesses, and creating employment opportunities. Cultural heritage tourism has the potential to stimulate economic growth in Malaysia, particularly in rural areas. However, there has been a decline in the promotion of arts and cultural events due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Various types of crowd activities have been cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Magi et al. (2020), as the Covid-19 pandemic spreads more widely, production organisations and associations in the media, arts and entertainment sectors have cancelled, postponed or ceased all activities involving the general public. People reportedly lose their jobs because of the refineries' inability to operate. No live performances are carried out for cultural and artistic activities, causing performers to be unable to continue performing. As a result, they began looking for new solutions, such as using media and technology to connect with the outside world and fans of performing arts in particular. To control the spread of Covid-19 cases, the community has also changed their work, social and educational activities to digital platforms following the government orders such as 'stay at home' and 'observe your social distance' to control the transmission of Covid-19 cases (Samaroudi et al., 2020).

Several organisations and associations are taking steps to collect information and resources to help professional artists affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, Performing Arts Hub Norway has created a Facebook group to connect artists with companies so that they can exchange information with each other. Performing Arts Hub Norway, or the Norwegian Performing Arts Association, was founded to support independent performing arts companies outside of theatre institutions (Performing Arts Hub Norway, 2020). In addition, most art courses and workshops are offered for free online throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative approach by conducting interviews and observations with ten respondents. A purposive sampling technique was used to obtain research respondents from wayang kulit practitioners, scholars, museum staff, local communities and relevant stakeholders. All respondents in this study are individuals who have knowledge about wayang kulit, have played wayang kulit and the parties involved in promoting wayang kulit at the state level of Kelantan. Interviews with respondents are semi-structured, and observations are conducted to observe respondents' activities during data collection. All the data obtained from the field study were then analysed using thematic analysis, which involves the process of extracting codes and forming research themes.

## 4.0 Findings and Discussions

As discussed in the early stage of this paper, this study has two research questions, namely:

- 1) What are the impacts of the pandemic towards Wayang Kulit Kelantan?
- 2) How these practitioners respond to the pandemic?

To answer these two questions, this section discusses the impact of the pandemic on Wayang Kulit Kelantan and the efforts made by practitioners in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic period.

### 4.1. Impacts of the pandemic towards Wayang Kulit Kelantan

The results of the study found two impacts of the pandemic on Wayang Kulit Kelantan: lack of income generation among the practitioners and postponement and cancellation of wayang kulit performance.

#### 4.1.1 Lack of Income Generation Among The Practitioners

The pandemic has caused the country's economy and society to be affected. This is because the community lost their jobs and thus, their means of subsistence. All performance and arts activities had to be cancelled during the pandemic, and people were encouraged to work from home. Furthermore, public gatherings involving the general public are prohibited to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Several art and entertainment productions have been cancelled and rescheduled. Artists are also unable to perform, which results in a loss of income.

Most wayang kulit practitioners have no side jobs and rely solely on wayang kulit performances to make a living. Therefore, they are extremely stressed by their daily lives, which are exacerbated by the pandemic and restrict their participation in activities. Respondent 5 (Interview, 16 October 2021) stated that wayang kulit practitioners who rely solely on wayang kulit performances would be impacted more than practitioners with primary jobs. This situation demonstrates that, rather than relying solely on performance, they at least have another source of income to continue living.

#### 4.1.2 Postponement and Cancellation of Wayang Kulit Performance

Local wayang kulit practitioners are particularly affected by this situation, as they are unable to be active and perform as usual. Respondents 6 and 7 stated that the pandemic had caused the postponement and cancellation of wayang kulit performance. So, they have no source of income. Respondent 6 also added for example,

*...permintaan untuk [mengadakan] persembahan wayang kulit ada tetapi tertangguh, tidak dapat buat persembahan [kerana pandemik]...* [the demand to perform wayang kulit is still there but, we are unable to perform due to the pandemic] (Interview, 16 November 2021).

During the Movement Control Order (MCO) period, most performance venues were closed. Wayang kulit performers were not permitted to perform in areas designated for wayang kulit performances. Respondent 3 stated that all forms of performing arts were prohibited when the Malaysian government imposed closures and restrictions. Respondent 3 also added, *Setahu saya setakat ni semua bentuk persembahan dihentikan dan disekat, di JKKN saya tak pasti, mungkin ditutup, tapi setahu saya memang masa 'lockdown' memang tak ada la, memang tak boleh 'perform' bukan kata wayang kulit, semua jenis persembahan memang tak ada* [As far as I know, all forms of performance have been stopped and blocked, at JKKN I'm not sure. It may be closed, but as far as I know there is no 'lockdown' period, it is not possible to 'perform', not only the wayang kulit, all kinds of performances also can't be performed] (Interview, 24 Oktober 2021).

## 4.2 Practitioners Respond to The Pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also impacted all forms of artistic and cultural activities. Wayang Kulit Kelantan Group primarily employs a new initiative to ensure the continuity of the wayang kulit performance where the wayang kulit performance has been conducted online. Besides that, during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period, no wayang kulit musicians were involved in online performances (Respondent 6, Interview, 16 November 2021). Respondent 1 (Interview, 17 October 2021) also agreed by stating that the wayang kulit performance during the pandemic did not involve musicians. This is because to the fact that no one is allowed to congregate in order to avoid the infection of Covid-19.

However, this situation changed when the country entered the Recovery Phase when the wayang kulit groups began performing online. For example, in early 2021, the Department of Heritage Studies, Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, in collaboration with the National Heritage Department, organised a webinar entitled 'Survival of the Kelantan Wayang Kulit Performance Art' and invited one of the Wayang Kulit Kelantan groups to perform interlude. The webinar is held online, and listeners can browse social media links while enjoying the wayang kulit performance (Figure 1). As a result, Wayang kulit Kelantan's performance can be continued in a new way by incorporating technology and social media, thereby helping to promote Wayang kulit Kelantan.



**Figure 1:** Wayang Kulit Was Performed Online

Besides that, wayang kulit practitioners also look for other alternatives by doing side jobs such as repairing musical instruments and making shadow puppets. Respondent 4 (Interview, November 3, 2021) stated that during the pandemic, he and his men were hired to make musical instruments such as gedombak and geduk.

To prevent the infection of Covid-19, the government has developed a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to serve as a guide for the general public, and this SOP must be followed. The Malaysian Ministry of Health (KKM) and the National Security Council (MKN) have established Guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures for the creative industry sector, which include all types of events, shows, and live performances with the presence of an audience (KKM, 2021). Among the protocols discussed are the following:

- a. The presence of spectators is limited according to the capacity of the premises and the arrangement of positions based on the physical spacing of individuals of one metre and the arrangement of chairs 1.5 meters apart.
- b. The use of a mask or face shield is mandatory throughout the event.
- c. The use of hand sanitiser is mandatory for artists, crew, employees, service providers and spectators before entering the premises.
- d. Artists, crew, employees, service providers and spectators with body temperatures higher than 37.5° Celsius are not permitted to enter the premises.

For example, Respondent 6 explained that to perform a wayang kulit performance, the members of the wayang kulit group must adhere to the SOP that has been set. The SOPs implemented during wayang kulit shows include wearing face masks, keeping one metre apart and using hand sanitiser. Respondent 6 stated,

'...scan suhu, tanya ada mask tak, tak ada dia bagi mask, pakai mask, duduk atas pentas pun penjarakan, pakai' face shield'...' ['... scan the temperature, ask if there is a mask, he does not give a mask, wear a mask, even sit on stage and put on a 'face shield'...] (Interview, 16 November 2021).

This statement is also supported by Respondent 7, '...kena ikut SOP, pakai mask, jarak dia...' [Everyone has to follow the SOP, wear a mask and keep the distance] (Interview, 26 November 2021).

As Malaysia heads towards the endemic era, there has been a gradual revival of wayang kulit performances, with most performances taking place in physical settings. The reopening of stages has brought relief to Kelantanese wayang kulit practitioners, especially those who depend on wayang kulit performances as their primary occupation. Additionally, the utilization of digital technology in wayang kulit performances serves as a valuable tool for promoting and sustaining the tradition.

## 5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic brought cultural and artistic activities to a halt, but as the country entered the endemic era, these activities gradually resumed. Consequently, wayang kulit performances have proven their ongoing relevance by adapting to modernization and globalization, utilizing technology and social media for delivery. Traditionally requiring physical presence, wayang kulit can now be enjoyed virtually across continents. To maintain relevance in today's world, wayang kulit groups should explore appropriate mediums and embrace new media for their performances.

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