

From Ritual to Performance: Tracing the Origins of Puppetry Theatre

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the origin of puppet theatrical performance, tracing its development from early religious rituals to its contemporary form as a performing art. Employing a qualitative research design, the study integrates practice-led and ethnographic approaches to establish a critical understanding of puppetry as both cultural heritage and tourism resource. Data were collected primarily through in-depth interviews with international puppeteers and focused performance groups, supplemented by field observations at major puppetry events, including the Rainforest World Puppet Carnivals held in Kuching, Sarawak. Additional site visits were conducted in Beijing, Guangzhou, Yantai (China), and Yekaterinburg (Russia), enabling access to diverse puppetry traditions and practices. The data were analysed using the qualitative content analysis method, where professional advice and mentoring were leveraged and compiled through personal involvements within the industry at large.

Contribution/Originality: This study repositions puppetry as a cultural continuum from ritual to performance across multiple regions, using practice-led and ethnographic methods. It contributes by addressing Sarawak's absence of indigenous puppetry, proposing a framework to adapt local intangible heritage into a distinct puppetry identity for scholarship, cultural development, and tourism.

1. Introduction

Puppetry is one of the oldest forms of cultural expression, with evidence of its use dating back to ancient civilizations in religious rituals and ceremonial practices. While originally crafted as idols to embody divine or human figures, puppets gradually evolved into performative objects, playing an important role in storytelling, ritual symbolism, and eventually, theatrical entertainment. Scholars such as Banham (1996), and Orr (1974) have traced these changes, noting that puppets were historically embedded in rites and rituals across Asia, Africa, and the Americas before their transformation into theatrical forms. The long process of shifting from sacred objects to performative art highlights the deep interconnections between culture, religion, and creative expression.

Despite puppetry's global significance, Sarawak has no recorded tradition of indigenous puppet theatre. Cultural expressions such as the *Tarian Topeng* (Mask Dance) of the Kenyah tribe, or ritual objects like the *Bilum* of the Melanau, embody symbolic and ceremonial traditions but did not evolve into performance-based puppetry (Yakup et al., 2017). Instead, Sarawak's exposure to puppetry has largely been through imported forms, such as *Wayang Kulit* from Peninsular Malaysia, or popular television programmes like *Sesame Street*. This absence of a home-grown puppetry tradition creates both a gap and an opportunity: (Özder & Söyük, 2019) frame puppetry as a form of intangible cultural heritage that holds symbolic, artistic, and educational value. Because of this heritage status, puppetry can be transformed into a tourism asset. Therefore, the adaptation of Sarawak's rich intangible heritage into a performative medium that can serve as a distinctive cultural product for tourism and education.

The present study investigates the origins and evolution of puppet theatre internationally and explores the potential of adapting puppetry within the Sarawak context. Through combining practice-led research, ethnographic observation, and qualitative interviews with global puppeteers, this study examines how puppetry has historically transformed from ritual to performance and how these insights can inform the creation of a Sarawakian puppetry identity. The study offers two main contributions: first, to contribute to scholarly understanding of puppetry's developmental trajectory; and second, to propose a framework for leveraging Sarawak's arts and heritage through puppetry as a sustainable tourism and cultural development strategy. Therefore, this study not only contributes to global puppetry scholarship but also provides a cultural development strategy for Sarawak, where puppetry has no indigenous roots.

1.1. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. Explore the historical evolution of puppetry from ritualistic practice to theatrical performance;
- ii. Examine the role of puppetry in the diffusion of traditions across Asia and beyond;
- iii. Analyse how cultural exchange, trade, and religious propagation shaped the global development of puppetry; and
- iv. Document contemporary perspectives of puppeteers and festival practitioners to situate puppetry's current significance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. History of Puppetry

The origins of puppetry are widely acknowledged to stretch back over four to five millennia, with archaeological evidence of articulated figurines uncovered in ancient Egyptian tombs, alongside references in Greek literature as early as 422 BCE where both Aristotle and Plato alluded to puppet-like devices (World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts, n.d). These early forms, however, were not theatrical in the modern sense but were closely tied to ritual and religious practices. Scholars like Magnin (1862), Banham (1996), and Orr (1974) generally agree that dolls and figurines initially functioned as ritual objects, crafted to impersonate humans or divine beings in ceremonial contexts, and only later developed into forms of popular entertainment.

Cross-cultural evidence supports this religious and ritualistic origin. Anthropological accounts identify ritual dolls among the Maori of New Zealand, Polynesian island societies, and Native American groups, while figurines were integral to Aztec ritual life prior to Spanish conquest ([North American Puppetry, 2001](#)). Similar practices in Africa and Asia illustrate puppetry's deep connection with shamanistic and magical traditions rather than with performance theatre per se ([Banham, 1996](#)). This distinction points to an interesting revelation: the origin of puppets as objects does not equate to the birth of puppet theatre as performance.

2.2. Shadow Puppetry

One of the most significant transitional forms was shadow puppetry, which is documented across China, Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. Scholarly debate persists regarding its earliest emergence. [Ban \(2020\)](#) and [Gao \(1988\)](#) highlighted Chinese sources such as the Book of Han describe rituals where projected images created the illusion of summoning spirits, a practice later interpreted as proto-shadow theatre. [Qi \(2010\)](#) further asserted that shadow puppetry gained theatrical form during the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), when Emperor Xuanzong institutionalised various arts within the imperial court, including puppetry. Tang-era Buddhist influence also proved decisive; monks adapted complex scriptures into accessible dramatic forms, using shadow plays to popularize religious teachings ([Gu, 2000](#)). Also, in her article, [Chen \(2003\)](#) explores how Chinese shadow theater serves well beyond entertainment, she emphasises its strong religious functions (especially during the Qing dynasty) and how it is woven into popular religion and ritual. By this period, shadow puppetry had developed unique and distinct regional styles, particularly in Shaanxi and Xi'an, where performance techniques and craftsmanship were refined.

Indian traditions also claim priority. [Pischel \(1902\)](#) pointed to Sanskrit terminology such as *sutradhara* ("holder of strings") and *sutraprota* ("puppet") as the earliest literary references to puppetry, framing India as a potential origin point. Puppetry in India, however, appears to have developed more slowly compared to China, despite strong cultural and religious exchanges through the Silk Road during the 1st-7th centuries CE according to The Great Tang Dynasty record of the western regions ([Xuanzang, 1996](#)). These transmissions influenced both Chinese Buddhism and performance traditions, complicating questions of singular origin.

Beyond Asia, shadow puppetry spread into the Middle East, likely through Mongol incursions and subsequent Ottoman adaptations. [Banham \(1996\)](#) notes that while indigenous theatrical activity was scarce in the Middle East between the 3rd and 13th centuries, shadow puppetry gained prominence in the Ottoman Empire by the 16th century, often infused with local cultural motifs. The adaptability of shadow puppetry across religious and political contexts highlights its role as both a medium of entertainment and a vehicle for ideological or spiritual messaging.

2.3. Summary

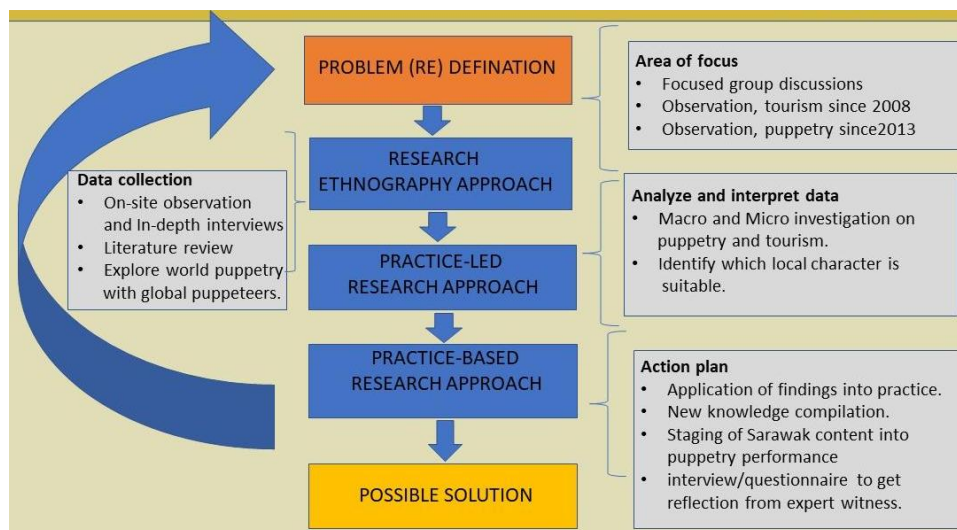
Overall, the highlighted literature points to three main transformations in the emergence of puppetry as theatre: (1) its ritualistic function in ancient and indigenous cultures; (2) its crystallisation into shadow puppetry traditions in China and India, later spreading regionally; and (3) its formalisation within court and religious settings, such as the Tang dynasty's imperial patronage and Buddhist ritual theatre. The exact geographical "origin"

remains contested. While Chinese scholars emphasise the antiquity and variety of their shadow puppetry traditions (Wei, 2007), Indian sources assert linguistic and religious precedence (Pischel, 1902). What is clear, however, is that the transformation from ritual idol to theatrical puppet was a gradual, multi-sited process, shaped by cultural exchange, religion, and shifting notions of spectacle.

3. Research Methods

As shown in Figure 1, the study adopts a multi-layered qualitative research design combining ethnographic inquiry, practice-led investigation, and practice-based approaches to examine the origins of puppetry theatrical performance and its relevance to Sarawak's cultural landscape. Given the limited documentation of Sarawak's performing arts traditions and the absence of indigenous puppetry practices, the research problem was first scoped and redefined to focus on the relationship between puppetry, ritual origins, and cultural adaptation. Primary data were gathered through on-site observations, in-depth interviews with international puppeteers, and participation in global festivals such as the Rainforest World Puppet Carnival. Secondary data were sourced through literature reviews on the history of puppetry and shadow play to further complement the findings. The detailed description of methodology is as shown below.

Figure 1: Research Methodology Flow



This study involved 35 participants, all of whom were international puppetry practitioners, artisans, and local tourism stakeholders. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where additional interviews were no longer yielding new themes. A purposive sampling approach was adopted, as the study sought seasoned international participants with direct knowledge and experience of puppetry as a cultural practice and its potential link to tourism. This method was chosen to ensure that participants could provide rich and relevant insights into the research questions.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol developed from the study's objectives provided by the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, UNIMAS. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to probe emerging themes while ensuring that all key topics were addressed. Aspects on interviewee's understanding on the history of puppetry, the evolving roles, cultural exchange, and their perspectives on the significance of puppetry in contemporary settings are gauged through

the interview. Interviews were conducted face-to-face during the World Puppet Carnival in Yekaterinburg on 16th August 2018, depending on participant availability and logistical considerations. With participants' consent, all interviews were video-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual details.

Furthermore, through ethnographic inquiry, the study allows an immersive observation and the documentation of lived experiences of puppeteers across different cultural contexts (China, Russia, and Malaysia). This approach enabled both the insights at macro-level (regional historical changes) and micro-level (individual practices and performances). Moreover, the practice-led investigation focused on generating new knowledge through the process of organising and staging puppet performances, while the practice-based approach evaluated the outcomes of these practices as research in their own right. These methods were used to examine how Sarawak's cultural narratives could be integrated into puppetry performance. Collected data were subjected to iterative qualitative content analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and cultural signifiers. Findings were cross-validated by re-examining the data through multiple lenses (ethnography, practice-led, practice-based) until consistent interpretations emerged. Insights were then applied in practice through the design and staging of performances that incorporated Sarawakian cultural motifs. Feedback was obtained via questionnaires and expert interviews to validate the relevance of the outcomes.

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, guided by the established themes in the interview protocol. These themes included the origins of puppetry, role play, cultural transmission, motivations, challenges, and the future outlook of puppetry, all of which were tied to the objectives of this study. Following familiarisation with the interview transcripts, initial codes were generated through both deductive reasoning (based on the pre-identified themes linked to the research objectives) and inductive reasoning (emerging from participants' narratives). The codes were then iteratively reviewed and consolidated into broader categories, such as:

- Origins and Functions (historical role, ritualistic functions, transmission of myths and religion)
- Cultural Transmission and Comparisons (cross-regional similarities, role in heritage preservation, religious propagation)
- Contemporary Challenges (sustainability issues, decision-making processes, survival strategies)
- Future Outlook and Motivation (personal journeys, intergenerational advice, role in intercultural dialogue)

Themes were then refined through constant comparison across cases, ensuring consistency and depth. To enhance trustworthiness, findings were triangulated with field observations at puppetry festivals and corroborated by secondary literature on the history of puppetry. Peer debriefing with academic supervisors was also used to validate the coherence of theme development and to minimise researcher bias.

4. Results

This study draws upon the fieldwork conducted at international puppet festivals and through interviews with puppeteers from diverse cultural contexts. The findings are presented thematically, reflecting the ways in which practitioners conceptualise the origins and functions of puppetry.

4.1. Ritual Origins and Evolution into Performance

The study had explored the historical evolution of puppetry from ritualistic practice to theatrical performance. Scholars such as Banham (1996) and Orr (1974) have observed that puppets, since their earliest origins, were deeply embedded in rites and rituals, with even monotheistic religions that opposed “idolatry” preserving or re-engaging with puppet practices inherited from ancient cultures. Ritual figures have been discovered among Native American peoples, while in Asia and Africa puppets appear most abundantly, often serving as sacred objects rich in symbolic meaning. Importantly, these early puppets were primarily created for use as idols in religious, ritualistic, or shamanistic contexts, rather than as instruments of theatrical performance or entertainment. Pandin (2020) further notes that the development of puppets reflected the blending of colours with nature and the progress of surrounding communities. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that while puppetry originated in ritualistic practices, its gradual evolution into theatrical performance was shaped differently across cultures, ethnicities, and community environments. In my view, however, the theoretical origins of puppetry should not be conflated with the birth of puppetry as a distinct form of theatrical performance, which emerged later through cultural adaptation and artistic transformation.

Across interviews, puppeteers consistently described puppetry not merely as entertainment but as a cultural continuum linking ancient ritual, performance, and storytelling traditions. For instance, shadow puppeteers in China emphasises the connection between their practice and ancient ritual performances documented during the Han and Tang dynasties. One of the valuable connections to this was mentioned by Master Mao C.B., one of the interviewees from Beijing.

The story of Emperor Wudi (r. 141-87BCE) of Han Dynasty tells of his fascination with shadow play practices, and I believe this historical incident was the origin of shadow theater. (Puppeteer and owner of the Shadow puppet hotel, Beijing, China. 50s)

Similarly, practitioners in Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe highlighted the enduring religious and communal functions of puppet theatre.

When the Spanish arrived in Mexico, they brought puppets and used theater and puppets to introduce the Catholic religion. One way was through the pastorelas, which were representations of the birth of the baby Jesus and the shepherds who came to worship him while the devil tried to prevent it. Later, glove puppets were used in literacy and health campaigns. (Puppeteer of Titeres Marionetas EL Tenderete, Mexico. Age 70s)

4.2. Diffusion, Functions, and Global Recognition

Findings reveal that puppetry today functions as both an artistic performance and a form of cultural diplomacy as it moves its way across Asia and beyond. Participants observed that puppet theatre has gained international recognition through festivals and television adaptations, allowing traditional forms to evolve while retaining their symbolic roots. Such is the case of Russia, as highlighted by a puppetry researcher in Yakaterinburg, Russia.

Theatrical puppetry in Russia can be traced back to its origins as a form of street art performed in public markets during the fifth or sixth century. I realised that these performances often coincided with local festivals, where villagers gathered for trade and entertainment. (Puppetry researcher based in Yekaterinburg, Russia. Age 40s)

Within this context, puppetry functioned as the “fun element” of communal gatherings, providing both amusement and cultural expression. Elizaveta further emphasised that this early form of street puppetry laid the foundation for the character of Petrushka, who subsequently became a central figure in Russian puppet traditions. By the 1960s, however, the practice transitioned from informal street performances to institutionalised theatrical settings, where modern puppet shows were staged as organised cultural productions

The study witnesses how puppetry evolves through cultural exchange, trade, and religious propagation and takes shape into a theatrical performance in the modern world. Several interviewees noted that global audiences are increasingly receptive to puppetry as both heritage and modern art.

4.3. Cultural Exchange and Practitioner Perspectives

The evaluation of findings followed a participant-oriented model, giving primacy to the perspectives of puppeteers, organisers, and audiences. Puppeteers frequently linked their artistic practices to wider narratives of cultural preservation, while organisers highlighted puppetry’s potential to foster intercultural dialogue. Audience feedback confirmed the perception of puppetry as simultaneously educational and entertaining, reinforcing its relevance in contemporary contexts.

Puppetry continues to hold potential as a powerful cultural form, particularly when framed within a participatory and community-oriented context. As Wanlu, the Philippine Ambassador of Puppetry puts it, if practitioners and puppeteers across different regions prioritize collective artistic development over individual gain, the medium can offer a unique experiential value that exceeds the impact of technologically mediated forms such as artificial intelligence and digital animation, especially in live performance settings. However, contemporary discourse among puppeteers and festival practitioners suggests that achieving such unity remains a critical challenge. These perspectives highlight both the promise and the tensions in situating puppetry’s current significance: while it embodies a participatory ethos that emphasizes direct audience engagement and communal identity, its sustainability depends on overcoming divisions within practitioner communities and cultivating sincere collaboration.

4.4. Significance and Cultural Implications

Through comparative analysis of interviews and observations, the study confirms that the theatrical dimension of puppetry most likely emerged through the transformation of ritual practices into staged performances. This aligns with historical literature but is also enriched by practitioner testimonies. It addresses the contemporary perspectives of puppeteers and festival practitioners in embracing puppetry’s cultural and heritage significance. Importantly, the research demonstrates that puppetry continues to serve as a vehicle for cultural identity and transmission, offering insights into how local traditions can adapt to globalised platforms.

Armando Samaniego a Mexican puppeteer who started at the age of 12, first as a ventriloquist then with thread puppets in the heart of Mexico City, reveals during my interview with him that Puppetry, as an embodied and artisanal form of performance, continues to hold cultural and scholarly significance by foregrounding the handmade and the human in an increasingly digital and technologically mediated world. Its capacity to stimulate imagination, foster creativity, and nurture the human spirit situates puppetry as more than mere entertainment; it is a cultural practice that contributes to human development, empathy, and collective identity. At the same time, the sustainability of puppetry depends on practitioners' ability to continuously innovate and preparing productions that resonate with contemporary audiences through new modes of expression, while safeguarding the traditions, customs, and cultural distinctiveness that define its heritage.

This dual orientation, simultaneously rooted in tradition and open to innovation, highlights puppetry's role as both a distinctive cultural expression and a unifying artistic language. In this sense, puppetry not only contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage but also enriches the broader discourse on how traditional art forms adapt, transform, and generate knowledge in response to global cultural shifts.

5. Discussion

This study reinforces long-standing debates about the origins of puppetry while offering new perspectives through practitioner testimonies. Historical sources variously locate the beginnings of theatrical puppetry in China, India, or the Middle East ([Pischel, 1902](#); [Banham, 1996](#); [Wei, 2007](#)), yet the evidence remains piecemeal. The findings here strongly point to the notion that puppetry first emerged as ritual objects before evolving into performance, but they also highlight that practitioners themselves see puppetry as a continuum rather than a bounded "origin". This suggests that scholarly attempts to fix a single birthplace underestimate the art's fluidity and adaptive capacity.

At the same time, the results support and extend the view that puppetry spread through cultural diffusion along trade, missionary, and migration routes. Historical accounts of Mongol incursions or Buddhist transmission ([Wei, 2007](#)) resonate with contemporary narratives, as noted by Elizaveta's account of Russian street puppetry evolving into institutional theatre, mirroring the earlier processes of adaptation seen in Asia. Today's festivals and collaborations act as modern conduits, echoing historical pathways while adding new dimensions of cultural diplomacy and global recognition.

Practitioner perspectives also complicate Eurocentric and Sinocentric narratives of puppetry's development. While Goethe's support of *ombres chinoises* in Europe exemplifies puppetry's transformation into popular entertainment, interviews show that puppeteers situate their practice not within national traditions but within a shared, transcultural dialogue. Puppetry's resilience, therefore, lies not in fidelity to one origin but in its openness to reinterpretation, whether in ritual settings, colonial encounters, or contemporary festivals.

Finally, the testimonies of practitioners such as Wanlu and Armando Samaniego foreground puppetry's dual orientation: rooted in heritage yet open to innovation. This duality confirms [Magnin's \(1862\)](#) view of adaptability but extends it by showing how today's puppeteers actively negotiate sustainability and relevance in a digital age. For Sarawak, which lacks an indigenous puppetry tradition, these insights point to practical

opportunities: local intangible heritage such as ritual dances or symbolic objects could be re-imagined within a puppetry framework that is both authentic and globally resonant. Theoretically, the study reframes puppetry as a multi-sited evolution shaped by ritual, diffusion, and exchange; practically, it positions puppetry as a strategic medium for cultural innovation, identity formation, and intercultural dialogue.

6. Conclusion

This study traced the transformation of puppetry from ritualistic and religious practices into theatrical performance. While puppet-making traditions existed in many early cultures, their theatrical form appears to have crystallised through shadow puppetry, particularly in China, before spreading to India via Buddhist missionaries during the Han and Tang dynasties. In India, shadow theatre merged with local traditions, producing diverse regional forms that later diffused to the Middle East and Europe through trade, religious missions, and itinerant groups. The findings suggest that puppetry theatrical performance cannot be ascribed to a single point of origin. Rather, it represents a dynamic and adaptive art form shaped by intercultural exchange, religious propagation, and regional innovation. Although historical records remain fragmented, the evidence highlights puppetry's role as a global performance tradition that evolved across borders and continues to reflect both cultural diversity and continuity.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics that have been cleared and approved by the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts (UNIMAS) Postgraduate Research Committee during the Main Author's proposal defense. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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