

Angin Wayang

A Biography Of a Master Puppeteer

Ghulam-Sarwar Yousaf



Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism MALAYSIA



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*To Hamzah Awang
Amat and all the members
of Seri Setia*

Foreword

Hamzah Awang Amat is a precious artist. He is the sole inheritor of the classical repertoire of Wayang Kulit Kelantan and he performs his role in an outstanding fashion. When the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism Malaysia introduced the Anugerah Seni Negara - the highest award for an artist - in 1993, Hamzah Awang Amat was unanimously selected as its first recipient. But behind his success lie other events that are noteworthy. Hence, the need to narrate the milestone in Hamzah's life in the form of a biography.

The biography is intended to be published in two versions. *Angin Wayang: A Biography of a Master Puppeteer* is the English language version of the biography. The Bahasa Malaysia version is scheduled to



be released by mid-1997. This biography is a literal documentation of his dreams and struggle as a puppeteer. The book also gives a better understanding of the traditional art of the Wayang Kulit Kelantan itself. It is hoped that the readers will be inspired by this book as well as find it a major source of information.

To conclude, I would like to thank Dr. Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof for his excellent work and to the Culture Division of the Ministry which is responsible for this publication.

DATUK ISMAIL ADAM
Secretary-General
 Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism
 Malaysia

November 1996


Publisher's Note

An important project began to take its shape in mid-1996 when two drafts (Bahasa Malaysia and English language versions) were submitted by Dr. Ghulam-Sarwar Yusuf who was appointed by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism Malaysia to research the life of the Anugerah Seni laurette Hamzah Awang Amat and to write a biography of that leading master of Malay shadow play. The Preservation Branch of the Culture Division (a branch responsible for the Division's preservation, research and publishing activities) was selected to serve as the secretariat for the project and to study the drafts. The secretariat was headed by Zaini Nyakman, the branch Principle Assistant Secretary and Alexander Anak Wong, Assistant Secretary of the same branch, was



appointed as its editor. The drafts were accepted by the secretariat and it was decided that the English language version be published by the early 1997 while the Bahasa Malaysia version should be ready by mid-1997.

The work demanded a great deal of effort in view of the limited time available for editing and printing. The first printing draft was ready in November and the final draft was available for printing by the end of the same month with the expectation that the biography will be released to the public by 1997. The publisher is convinced that this publication is a thorough documentation of a true living legend.



HAJI MOHD. ARIFF BIN YUSOF
Under-Secretary
Culture Division
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Malaysia

November 1996

Preface

The idea for this biography of Malaysia's leading puppeteer (*dalang*) in the *wayang kulit Kelantan* (which is also known as *wayang kulit Siam*) shadow play tradition, Hamzah bin Awang Amat, came about following his receiving of the first Anugerah Seni Negara (National Arts Award) in November 1993.

A decision was made by the Malaysian cabinet in 1993, following proposals made by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism Malaysia that a cultural award, known as Anugerah Seni Negara, be awarded biannually. The actual announcement of the award came in May that year, and following the receipt of nominations from cultural organisations as well as interested individuals Hamzah was selected as the first recipient in November 1993. The Anugerah Seni Negara holder receives a cash award of RM 30,000.00 as well as other benefits. On his part the recipient has the task of promoting his particular style art form, be it the shadow play, painting, theatre, music, dance or woodcarving, just to mention a few examples. To this end, the recipient of the award is invited by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism to spend a year in Kuala Lumpur as Artist in Residence, serving as a resource person.

This role Hamzah has played admirably well. He has assisted in research and documentation of *wayang kulit Kelantan*, assisted in the editing of the text of the *Ramayana* story as used in that style of *wayang kulit*, and performed it in an extended version for recording by the Ministry. In addition, under the auspices of the Ministry, he has been actively involved in *wayang kulit Kelantan* performances, demonstrations and workshops in Kuala Lumpur as well as in several of the Malaysian States.

During his term as Anugerah Seni Negara holder Hamzah was appointed as part-time lecturer in the National Academy of Arts (Akademi Seni Negara), which opened its doors to its first batch of students in July 1994. Hamzah's expertise was channelled into a course in *wayang kulit Kelantan* offered to first year students, by the theatre department of that institution. Students of the academy, now entering into its third year, have shown considerable enthusiasm in the course.

The Anugerah Seni Negara Panel had made it known that a recipient of the highly prestigious award should, among other activities, write an autobiography. Consequently, such a work was expected of Hamzah bin Awang Amat. Given the fact, however, that Hamzah was unable to execute such a task, the next best step was to enlist someone else familiar enough with Hamzah's work for the project. Thus the honour as well as the task of writing this official biography of Pak Hamzah fell upon me.

By the time, in early 1995, when I was unofficially approached to write this work, Hamzah had already completed more than a year of his two-year term as Anugerah Seni Negara holder. The work thus became immediately urgent. A formal proposal including a budget was presented and confirmation of the budgetary allocation for the project came in September 1995. The biography will be in two versions—Bahasa Malaysia and English. Initially, the biography had to be ready by December 1995 but my immediate reaction was to inform the Ministry that the biography could not be completed in a very short period of time.

Upon further reflection, however, I agreed to attempt the heroic task of library and field research, interviews, and writing all in three months. I really had no choice in the matter, considering that the subject of the study was to be Pak Hamzah, someone whom I had worked with year after year since 1977 when, upon my invitation, he entered the portals of Universiti Sains Malaysia to teach *wayang kulit Kelantan* on a part-time basis; someone with whom, over the years, I had developed a unique sort of relationship. As far as the shadow play, and in particular *wayang kulit Kelantan* is concerned, the twenty-year relationship between Hamzah Awang Amat and me has been a truly significant one, in terms both of teaching and research. The model perfected for the teaching of the *wayang kulit Kelantan* courses at Universiti Sains Malaysia is now in use at the National Academy of Arts where Pak Hamzah and I have been to teaching *wayang kulit Kelantan* since July 1994.

From July 1996, the *wayang kulit* course will serve as a model for a course in *mak yong* at the same institution. This time I will be involved

with Khatijah Awang, friend and artist with whom I first became acquainted in 1971 when I was instrumental in bringing her newly established Ieri Temenggong troupe to Penang for the first time, and with whom I have had the honour of working during my fieldwork for my Ph.D. dissertation on *mak yong*.

Potentially the biography would be a worthy document of the life and career of Malaysia's leading master puppeteer, and someone who is, by far, the best known of all practitioners of Malay traditional performing arts. I was certain that in many ways it would be a unique biography, given Hamzah's unusual, perhaps even unorthodox lifestyle and career.

The fact that I have worked closely with Pak Hamzah for so long in the teaching and promotion of *wayang kulit Kelantan* made the task somewhat less daunting. Much material could be derived from memory, as well as from official correspondence and notes at Universiti Sains Malaysia. For additional research, I had to depend considerably upon interviews conducted in Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur and Penang interviews with members of Pak Hamzah's family, with his fellow puppeteers as well as members of his troupe in Kelantan; and with a number of Pak Hamzah's countless former students. Several visits were made to Kelantan to interview persons closely associated with Hamzah—the two surviving wives of the famous and venerable Pak Awang Lah, Hamzah's *wayang kulit Kelantan* teacher; his two *main puteri* teachers; members of his family, especially his wife Esah, as well as his friends; members of the Seri Setia *wayang kulit* troupe of which Pak Hamzah is the leader; Yusof Hassan, a well-known *dalang* in his own right as well as a close associate of Hamzah and someone whom he often assists in ritual performances; officials at the Kelantan office of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism and the Tourist Information Centre in Kota Bharu; officials at the Kelantan State Museum and members of the State Culture Council.

I have depended considerably, particularly for information regarding Pak Hamzah's overseas visits and performances upon archival records kept at the Library of the Straits Times Press (M) Ltd., and I was fortunate to get some additional information from Star Publications Sdn Bhd, in Kuala Lumpur. Doctoral dissertations written on *wayang kulit Kelantan* by

three American scholars who spent time in Kelantan studying with Pak Hamzah—Patricia Matusky, Barbara Wright and Beth Osnes—proved useful in understanding *wayang kulit Kelantan* in its performance context.

In Penang, I had the good fortune to discuss details regarding Hamzah and his family as well as his situation in the mid-seventies with Patricia Matusky, Hamzah's most illustrious pupil, who currently teaches at Universiti Sains Malaysia, and who, having lived in Malaysia and Singapore almost continually since 1975 has proved an invaluable source of information. She was able to enlighten me upon the conditions both of living and studying in Kelantan in the mid-seventies, as well as to relate her own experiences as a foreigner in the land of the *wayang*. Interesting insights on Hamzah as a person as well as a teacher of the shadow play emerged from a number of former *wayang kulit* students who have taken courses with Hamzah at Universiti Sains Malaysia or at Akademi Seni Kebangsaan.

With the passage of days and weeks an increasingly interesting portrait of Hamzah emerged. Although I have known Hamzah since 1975 and have worked with him without a break since 1977, there were surprises even for me. Layer upon layer his personality began to unfold. Above and beyond information regarding Hamzah himself, I gathered much insight into *bomoh* techniques as well as *main puteri*, Malaysia's most complex form of shamanism. Hamzah has become, over the past five years or so, an accomplished *main puteri* practitioner, an aspect of his career which has been almost totally overshadowed by his fame as a puppeteer. In many ways, his *main puteri* is every bit as important as his *wayang*. The belief systems that underlie traditional healing techniques and facets of the Malay mind manifested in that genre have only recently begun to be adequately explored. Both Hamzah and his teachers were generous with their time and with the information they volunteered, as were all other informants mentioned in this Preface. To each and every one of them I owe a debt of gratitude.

Written sources, providing even the basic information on Hamzah's life and career are extremely limited. Where such documents as existed in Hamzah's own collection were not destroyed by natural disasters such as floods,

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Pak Hamzah himself has unwittingly been responsible for their destruction. These documents included official souvenir programmes, publicity materials, as well as press reports related to his performances, particularly those done overseas. Their destruction came about obviously as a consequence of a different sense of their worth as well as an altogether different perception of time. Naively as well as perhaps nonchalantly, Hamzah confesses that he did not see their true value at that time. "Who was to know that I was going to become famous?" he asks.

The frustrations generated as a result of efforts to obtain precise information regarding the many overseas visits and the performances brought about an awareness in Hamzah of their importance as research materials. But it was too late for floods and insects had already claimed them years and years ago. There were no copies anywhere in the country.

Indeed, although Pak Hamzah has been working hard a whole lifetime at the art and craft of *wayang* and in a quiet sort of way he had already carved himself a niche as an internationally recognised master of the *wayang*, the Anugerah Seni Negara brought about a new sense of history, as well as a new sense of pride and dignity. Now, with official recognition, there is more systematic documentation of his activities, though still not by Hamzah himself. He is too busy enjoying his fame and status.

In the writing of the present work, there have been two problematic chapters, the first, dealing with his early life and marriages, and the third, touching on his overseas visits. Dates, events and even names often got jumbled as they issued from Hamzah's memory. During revisions to the original draft numerous discussions with him, his family and members of his troupe, some improvements came about. What appears in these pages is, thus, in all likelihood, very close to the truth.

As in the case of his personal life, Pak Hamzah's memories of his overseas trips have often proved wanting in precise details. Names of persons involved in his overseas programmes, as well as details regarding locales of performances have become blurred. With certain exceptions the names of towns and cities where performances took place were often unrecoverable, as were those of the festivals in which his troupe participated. Equally vague

were the identities of institutions or officials involved. They were always some "Mat Sallehs", as far as Hamzah was concerned, nameless and faceless. At the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, the records for this early phase of his career when he travelled extensively in Europe, Russia and the United States were destroyed in a fire. Individuals who went along with Hamzah on some of these trips were able to provide some, imprecise details. For this chapter, therefore, I had to depend almost entirely upon information culled from the *New Straits Times* and the *New Sunday Times*. The Utih column in the *New Sunday Times* was particularly helpful. For reports on more recent events, including performances by Hamzah following the Anugerah Seni Negara, the *Star* and especially its Sunday edition proved invaluable. For these from the country's leading English language newspapers I am extremely thankful to Helen Ang of the *New Straits Times* and to Eddin Khoo of the *Star*. Both of them have in recent years become ardent admirers of the traditional performing arts; both of them have often trudged along with me in Kelantanese or Trengganu mud in pursuit of *mak yong*, *main puteri*, *menora* or *wayang kulit*, and both of them have through their writings in their respective columns brought about a greater awareness amongst their readers of the significance of the traditional Malay performing arts forms and their current plight.

Special thanks are due Pak Hamzah himself for his invaluable assistance in the preparation of this biography, to Raihan binti Sulaiman for the heroic assistance given in the preparation of the Bahasa Malaysia version of this biography, to Dato' Tengku Alaudin bin Tengku Abdul Majid, Datuk Ismail, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism Malaysia and his deputy for their unbounded interest and enthusiasm in this project, and to the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism as a whole, firstly for the excellent idea of wanting to record memoirs of all winners of Anugerah Seni Negara, and secondly for providing the necessary funds both for the research and writing as well as for the publication of this work, the first in what is likely to become a prestigious series on Anugerah Seni Negara recipients.

GHULAM-SARWAR YOUSOF

Penang

November 1996

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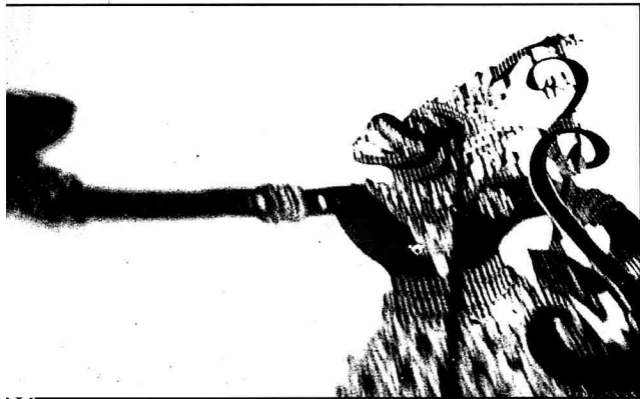
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Early Life and Family

KAMPUNG BUNUT Sarang Burung, also known as Kampung Kebakat, is a sleepy cluster of huts that lying on vast plains close to Chabang Empat in the Tumpat District of Kelantan, some twenty kilometres from the vibrant metropolis of Kota Bharu, the capital of the Malaysian state of Kelantan. In every direction among the flatlands one sees greenery, mostly paddy; only here and there an occasional tree, dead or alive, audaciously interrupts the skyline. Kampung Bunut Sarang Burung would hardly be a place worthy of mention in any history or biography, had it not been the birth place of Hamzah bin Awang Amat, Malaysia's most famous master of the shadow play (*wayang kulit*), and perhaps, as far as the traditional Malay theatre genres are concerned, the "man of the century".

Hamzah was born in that hamlet on a forgotten date in the year 1940 to Awang Amat bin Ismail, the eldest of two siblings of the first wife of Ismail—Awang Amat himself and a sister named Sa'adiyah. From his second wife, Hamzah's grandfather had two daughters, Munah and Zainab. Ismail, Hamzah's paternal grandfather, was established at Kampung Kebakat, where he worked in the construction of wooden houses. Additionally, he also performed *main puteri*, but in an earlier simpler form—not in the current highly elaborate style in which Hamzah himself as well as other bomoh *puteri* perform it.

On his mother's side, Hamzah came from the family of Samad, his mother, Mek, being the eldest of five children; of these Hamzah's youngest maternal aunt is the only one still alive. The family of Hamzah's maternal grandfather had some past links with Thailand, but Samad himself lived in Kampung Ibu, also known as Kampung Genting, in the Tumpat District of Kelantan. The two families were inter-related, so that Hamzah's parents—Awang Amat and Mek binti Samad—were in fact cousins. Following their marriage they lived in Kampung Kebakat where Awang Amat worked principally as a carpenter. Additionally, on and off, for short durations he also performed as a *wayang kulit Kelantan* puppeteer (*dalang*). Hamzah's mother worked as a midwife (*bidan*) before her marriage and even for some time following the marriage. Hamzah's father, however, did not wish her to practice that particular art and even gave her the

ultimatum of choosing between midwifery and himself; thus she abandoned the art of the *bidan*. Instead, Mek binti Samad devoted her apparently considerable skills to traditional massage, taking care especially of women following childbirth. Interestingly, one of Hamzah's maternal uncles, Sulaiman bin Samad, had also been drawn towards midwifery, and even practised it. He was, besides this, also a successful *main puteri* practitioner. It is possible to see, then, on both sides of Hamzah's family the connections, if only tenuous at times, with various indigenous arts forms and healing techniques which were to become part of Hamzah's own vastly rich inheritance, attaining full flowering in him.

Besides Hamzah, who was the youngest, his parents had two daughters and a son—Maryam binti Awang Amat, Munah binti Awang Amat and Abdullah bin Awang Amat. Abdullah had died before Hamzah's own birth. Having lost that child, Mek binti Samad ardently wished for another son. According to stories narrated by his mother, just prior to Hamzah's birth she had made a vow that should she get her much desired son, she would give him the name Hamzah. The reasons for her preference for this name have remained unknown even to Hamzah himself. Later, following his birth, she made an equally inexplicable vow that, when the time came for Hamzah's circumcision, she would cook spinach for him as well as for the *tok mudin* appointed to circumcise him. Like her first vow, this too she fulfilled; and once again her reasons for the choice of that particular vegetable remain a mystery to Hamzah. Hamzah's circumcision, which took place in Kampung Pulau Kerbau, also known as Kampung Dalam Pandang, to which place his parents had by that time shifted from Kampung Bunut Sarang Burung, coincided with the circumcisions of three other friends, Abdullah bin Saman, Awang bin Salleh and Harun bin Usman. These friends of Hamzah's early years were to play important roles, in some way or other, in Hamzah's later life. Like him too, they were involved in the traditional performing arts. Awang bin Salleh, in particular, has constantly remained close to Hamzah since those early years. Distinguishing himself in recent decades as the country's greatest player of the double reed oboe (*serunai*), Awang continues to play *wayang kulit* as a member of Hamzah's Seri Setia Troupe. Of Hamzah's



PHOTO OF HAMZAH
AND SITI ESAH
TAKEN SHORTLY
AFTER THEIR
WEDDING (1967)

mediate family only Maryam, now widowed, is still alive. She performed the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca recently.

Hamzah's recollections of his earliest years are extremely faint. The family moved to Kampung Pulau Kerbau during the Japanese occupation when he was perhaps less than a year old. It was the time of the 1941 Japanese landings and invasion. The Kelantanese still recall the events that led, eventually to Japan's occupation of Malaya. Hamzah remembers the earsome sound of the Japanese bombers in the Kelantan skies and the frantic villagers running in all directions, seeking shelter in the neighbouring sago groves.

At this time, Hamzah's father moved away from his village to Kampung Pulau Kerbau, seeking refuge in land belonging to Tengku Besar, a member of the Kelantan royal family. In the past, before his own marriage, Awang Amat had on occasions taken care of the prince's son, Tengku Malik, as well as a niece of the prince, Tengku Maryam. Tengku Besar, who came to the rear of Awang Amat's arrival at Pulau Kerbau, invited Hamzah's father to his house. He was granted permission to stay on the land, and to cultivate it in exchange for the management of the prince's coconut trees. Although not particularly close, in terms of direct family relationships to the then ruler of Kelantan, Tengku Besar nevertheless was a member of the State's royal family and thus quite well off. He and his family lived in a house that stood where today the Customs Department is located in Kota Bharu on the way to Kubang Pasu.

Thus Hamzah's parents moved to Kampung Pulau Kerbau. The land assigned to them was still jungle. Near the banks of the Kelantan River Awang bin Amat cleared a plot for his house. Hamzah's earliest memories of his life date from the time when he lived in that Kampung Pulau Kerbau house. He recalls running about naked in the grounds of his parents' house on the fringes of the forest, without friends, passing his time shooting birds with a crude catapult. His fascination with birds, already evident at that early age, was to develop into a passion in later years. The rearing and breeding of birds for competition purposes as well as for business is a major activity in Kelantan, and so Hamzah's interest in birds is, in a sense, not exceptional. To this day he is an enthusiastic bird collector. Hamzah boasts of the many *merbok*-singing competitions he has

participated in. The trophies in his collection speak eloquently of his victories. Hamzah believes that this particular passion is likely to remain with him for all his remaining years.

When he was about eight years of age, Hamzah regularly went to the Kelantan river about five kilometres from his father's house where Kampung Kedai Buluh now stands, there to await the arrival of fishing boats. He would assist the fishermen in raising their draw nets from the muddy waters, receiving as a reward fifty or more fish. These he would sell on his way home for a few cents or, if he was particularly fortunate on certain days, even for the considerable sum of a ringgit or more, to kampung housewives. With the money thus earned he would indulge in smoking. He recalls distinctly the brands of cigarettes he smoked and the colourful packets in which they came: Dragon, Signal, and later on Cat brand, Players, Sailing Boat and Lamp brand.

His father worked on the land, helping in the preparation of paddy fields in the vicinity of Palekbang as well as planting vegetables in a small patch at home, while his mother prepared tapioca drink (*tapai*) as well as planted lemon trees. Hamzah acquired the habit of drinking *tapai* all day long. He recalls that one day he drank so much that he fell into a stupor, losing consciousness for a whole day and a whole night. Family members and neighbours believed he was dead. His mother, however, patiently slipped coconut water into his mouth drop by drop; she washed his face with the same liquid and thus managed to restore consciousness to him. Although frightening in itself, the experience did not immediately stem his habit of indulging in *tapai*.

Hamzah's formal education began in 1949 when his mother sent him to the nearby Sekolah Sungai Pinang, then a mere wood and thatched structure raised on stilts, to be admitted into Standard I. He remembers his headmaster, one Cikgu Zakariah, as well as some of his earliest teachers—Cikgu Mat of Kampung Banggol Kota Bharu, Cikgu Ibrahim from Kampung Kijang, Cikgu Sa'id from the village of Sungai Pinang—most of them now dead and gone. During break-time the pupils would be given fresh cow's milk to drink. The wealthier children would mix brown sugar in the milk, whereas Hamzah, who could not afford such a luxury, would take along to school with him coconut palm sugar.

Hamzah's achievements in education were not particularly remarkable. In 1950 he was promoted to Standard II, in which grade he recalls learning how to write in both Jawi and Rumi, as well as studying a range of other subjects including simple arithmetic. He spent two years in Standard II (1950 and 1951) and again two years (1952 and 1953) in Standard III, reaching Standard IV the following year (1954). Not being able to achieve satisfactory grades at that level in Sekolah Sungei Pinang, he transferred over to the nearby Sekolah Kampung Laut where he repeated his Standard IV before being promoted to the grade V.

On Wednesdays, following the completion of formal classes at noon, classes in handicrafts were held in the open. These allowed the young pupils to show their skills at making objects out of wood, weaving mats and so on. Whatever the pupils made they were allowed to take home with them. Hamzah particularly enjoyed these classes; he recalls making spoons with coconut shells as well as weaving *mengkuang* food covers.

Hamzah, now in his seventeenth year, soon began to get bored with formal education, and had no real desire to continue with his studies. With his mother's consent he dropped out of school. A few months later he made another attempt at continuing his studies, obtaining admission into Standard V in the Kampung Laut Primary School. This time he stayed a mere six months. Thus, at the age of eighteen, his formal education came to an end. But as far as the arts and especially the *wayang kulit* is concerned Hamzah was to prove an outstanding student and eventually become the most outstanding practitioner. His talent for the shadow play, already evident as an early age, began to flower immediately he left school.

Hamzah's interest in *wayang kulit* was first kindled at about the age of twelve or thirteen when he was in Standard III. Those days *wayang kulit Kelantan* used to be performed commercially. A *dalang* would build a *panggung* or, alternatively, make use of an existing one. Enclosing the area around with cloth, discarded cement bags or coconut leaves, he would charge a nominal admission fee. In some instances simple tickets were issued, but the general practice was simply to collect the money at the gate. This arrangement of doing "commercial" performances has possibly existed for a long time and even these days it is not uncommon to

see someone like the popular *dalang*, Dollah Baju Merah, perform in this manner. Dollah, who performs a modernised variety of *wayang kulit* using wholly invented stories instead of episodes from the Indian epic, *Ramayana*, which generally serves as source material for the Kelantanese *wayang kulit*. Popular tunes from a variety of sources accompany the action. Dollah Baju Merah, like Hamzah has a considerable following. The two puppeteers, then, Hamzah and Dollah, represent the two poles, stylistically, of *wayang kulit Kelantan*—the classical and the popular, the traditional and the innovative. To purists Dollah's *wayang* symbolises a corruption of its form and style, resulting in a preference for Hamzah with his fierce adherence to tradition.

Hamzah, then, began to watch performances regularly, each time buying a ticket for five sen or, where this was possible, as at open fairs, seeing it for free. Typically, tickets for adults were sold for ten sen each. The greatest puppeteers of the time were Umar bin Yunus, and Pak Awang Lah bin Pandak. Umar bin Yunus had been one of the most outstanding pupils of Pak Awang Lah, his second, following Che Mat Timun. Umar bin Yunus, in whose troupe Hamzah was to perform at a later date in his life as a young *dalang*, became his unofficial teacher, while Pak Awang Lah Hamzah was to eventually accept formally as his guru.

In school Hamzah's beginning fascination with *wayang kulit* manifested itself in the form of the numerous drawings and sketches that he did of the *wayang* characters, using regular ink which came in four basic colours—black, green, blue and red. For these efforts, to which he devoted time rightfully due to more serious lessons he used to get thrashed by his teachers with blackboard rulers. Nevertheless, Hamzah's enthusiasm for the *wayang* continued unabated, and indeed, with even progressively greater zeal. He truly had what can be called *angin wayang*, an obsession with that art form which was to penetrate into the inner core of his being, and to overwhelm him. Hamzah believes that it was his fascination with the wayang kulit that in fact made him take the decision to altogether give up his studies. Having left school, then, he could devote his complete attention to wayang kulit. Using discarded pieces of cardboard, he cut out some crude puppets, shaped after the characters he had seen on the screen. These he painted with ink as he had done in the case of his early sketches. Having made a sufficient number of

these cardboard figures, the resourceful Hamzah decided it was time to set up his own troupe or *wangung*. For that purpose he gathered a group of his young friends. Awang bin Salleh, made an improvised oboe (*serunai*) out of a paddy stalk. The other young "musicians" of this fledgling troupe gathered enough empty cans to generate a suitable "music". The earliest Hamzah orchestra then consisted of the paddy stalk and discarded cans, by no means anything like an authentic orchestra but sufficient to provide the kind of elementary accompaniment his equally elementary *wayang* needed. An old and faded ear-white *batik sarung* belonging to his mother served as a screen. To complete the paraphernalia, a kerosene oil lamp was found. Hamzah was now ready to launch his company, which in later days, more adequately equipped, and performing genuine *wayang kulit Kelantan*, was to enter Malaysian theatre history as the children's shadow play troupe, "*wayang budak*".

The first performances of the cardboard *wayang* took place on the landing of Awang Amat's house. Not surprisingly, Hamzah was able to draw small but enthusiastic audiences, including relatives of the children who used to come to Awang Amat for lessons in the hilly Juran. These, then, were the humble beginnings of *wayang budak*. Awang Amat, fired by his son's enthusiasm for the shadow play, now began to look for whatever remained of his own abandoned *wayang kulit* equipment. For this he had to revisit Kampung Bunut Sarang Burung. It was there that he himself had started playing *wayang kulit* before the Japanese occupation, having learnt the art briefly from Tok Ya'akob. Together with a few friends he had managed to organise a loose company of players, sharing the cost of the puppets and instruments needed. These items had been distributed among the members of the company when, with Awang Amat's move to Kampung Pulau Kerbau during the Japanese occupation, the group had to be disbanded. To the members of his former troupe Awang Amat now returned with a mission to collect for his son the puppets and instruments still available. Hamzah is unable to say whether the instruments he managed to obtain were in fact the original ones, and even if Awang Amat had to pay any money to acquire them, but he did manage to put together a rudimentary orchestra for Hamzah's use. The gongs (*tetawak*) made from tin drums, he obtained from one Tok Sulaiman, a *main puteri* performer, the hourglass shaped drums (*gedumbak*) from Ek Har, a *menora* performer, and a *serunai* was

given to him by someone named Ismail. Awang Amat made some of the other instruments himself. In similar fashion, a partial set of about twenty-five to thirty pre-war puppets, some of them damaged, was also initially collected. To these Awang Amat added a number of new puppets which in the following months he himself fashioned. Hamzah, even at that youthful age, was convinced that his father's puppets were not really up to the mark; however, at that point he could not be too choosy either. Hamzah would himself occasionally assist his father in fashioning those figures out of cow skin. He confesses making a mess of some of the figures while trying to punch designs into them; these had to be thrown away.

Awang Amat's enthusiasm for *wayang kulit* at that point was such that he even decided it was time for Hamzah to learn the art of the *dalang*. This task of teaching his son Awang Amat took upon himself. Someone named Tom Adam from Kampung Dalam Pandang, who also became enthusiastic about the whole project, assisted Awang Amat by teaching Hamzah and the other youngsters how to handle the musical instruments. When it was felt that Hamzah and his company of young musicians could face an audience, plans were made to perform on a real *panggung*, and a structure was put up for that purpose. Hamzah's father did the theatre consecration (*buka panggung*) rituals and also became the principal puppeteer during these performances; Hamzah was his assistant puppeteer (*dalang muda*). The small number of stories that Awang Amat used at this time came from his own collection. This "repertoire" was later expanded by Hamzah who collected stories mainly from performances done by Umar bin Yunus. It became Hamzah's habit to write down brief synopses of these stories as he watched Umar perform, and then to share them with his father.

Inevitably, while watching Umar bin Yunus perform, Hamzah developed a tendency to compare that *dalang's* performance techniques with those of his own father. He decided that Awang Amat was not a particularly good puppeteer. Neither was Hamzah satisfied with the manner in which Tok Adam taught him and his friends the music of the *wayang*. One year had passed since his first lessons in *wayang kulit* with his father, but more and more, with each passing day, Hamzah began to feel dissatisfaction with the situation. He felt it was time to do something so that his own interest in



wayang kulit Kelantan would not just die out. Hamzah then took the momentous step of asking his father to let him join Umar's troupe.

When he moved over to Umar's troupe he took with him his friends Awang Salleh and Abdullah bin Saman, who now lives in Pahang. Thus ended his brief apprenticeship as a *dalang* with his father, Awang bin Amat, and now began a phase in his career which would take him, as a member of Umar's troupe, to various localities in Kelantan, and to the northern parts of neighbouring Trengganu, in the Besut area. Umar would at times tour for several weeks, taking his whole family with him, and his wife would cook for all members of the company. Hamzah now became Umar's *dalang muda*, while Umar's own son, Hassan, who was to become an active *dalang* in later years, at that time showed no inclination towards learning the techniques of a puppeteer. During the tours, Hamzah, in addition to learning *dalang* techniques, also took the opportunity to learn how to play various musical instruments. Simultaneously, by jotting down Umar's plots, he continued building up his own collection of stories. The were mostly branch (*ranting*) stories, locally invented offshoots of the *Ramayana* created by puppeteers, and

EARLY
PHOTOS OF
SITI ESAH
(EARLY
1960's)



iving inspiration from Javanese or local ories. It was rare, even in those days, for puppeteers to perform the classical Ramayana ory in its full version. Selected episodes were esented but the preference by far was for the anch stories.

After some time, leaving the option to occasionally perform with Umar still open to n, Hamzah, still in his teens, decided to break f from him with the intention of launching his vn *wayang budak* with his friends. Thus he came, for the first time in his life, a proper lang. To his own surprise, he managed to ther reasonable crowds. Several shows by his dging troupe were actually sponsored for rformances at village gatherings. The *wayang idak* had come into being. Awang Amat ecided that it was about time Hamzah's truments were upgraded. Selling his old piece land in Kampung Bunut Sarang Burung he ught a pair of proper bronze gongs for imzah.

It was about this time, when, following his formal tutelage under Umar and the establish-ent of his *wayang budak* when Hamzah, aged out twenty, was building up a name for himself d his young troupe members, that the first of imzah's five marriages took place. According Hamzah's own recollection, there was gularly in his audiences a musician named ail. Occasionally he would be accompanied Hamzah's performances by one of his ughters, named Limah, a divorcee who parently was attracted to Hamzah. Both Ismail d Limah made it a point to attend the wayang henever Hamzah performed. Ismail even uested that Hamzah notify him of any rthcoming performances by visiting him at his use at any time. Hamzah took advantage of ail's open invitation, and soon it clearly wened upon him what Ismail's intentions were.

One day, out of the blue, Hamzah's mother ked him if he had any thoughts about possible arriage. Hamzah firmly expressed the view at he was too young to get married. rthermore, he still needed time to master *ayang kulit*. His visits to Ismail's house ntinued as usual; and Hamzah soon nsented to the marriage proposal. To this day amzah genuinely believes that he had been armed through the food and water offered to m in Ismail's house.

The marriage with Limah binti Ismail was omed from the start. According to Hamzah,

when the effect of the charm used upon him began to diminish, he became conscious of the fact that he did not care for his wife. His feelings towards her, once imprecise, now veered markedly in the direction of hatred; the inevitable divorce soon came about. He had been married to Limah a mere eight months.

A few months later, late in 1960 or early in 1961, Hamzah married his second wife, Minah. With her he had two children. The first child died in infancy while the second, a son named Rahim, now runs a restaurant in Muar. Hamzah found serious problems of adjustment with Minah too; this time the major problem was the fact that Hamzah earned a living as a puppeteer. For some unknown reason, Minah could not tolerate Hamzah's involvement with *wayang kulit*. A separation and a reconciliation took place in fairly quick succession. Eventually Minah gave him an ultimatum: he had to choose between her and his *wayang kulit*. Hamzah decided that he would rather have his *wayang kulit*, and with that his second marriage too ended in divorce some time in the year 1963. Minah kept the children while Hamzah continued to learn *wayang kulit* as well as doing part time work in a variety of jobs.

At Bukit Abal, where Hamzah worked at a construction site with his elder brother-in-law he married a third time, to someone also known as Limah. This marriage too lasted only a few months. Hamzah's mother made arrangements for him to marry a fourth time, to someone named Zaharah who lived in his own village of Pulau Kerbau. This marriage, which took place in 1964 resulted in the birth of one child, but like the others it too was short-lived. The divorce came in 1966.

It was about the time Hamzah married Zaharah that he performed his *sembah guru* or *pelimau* ceremony with Pak Awang Lah bin Pandak, his last *wayang kulit* teacher with whom he had worked for over two years. Such a ceremony involves the transfer of learning from teacher to student. Hamzah recalls that he brought Zaharah home following the marriage in time for the third and final night's activities of the *sembah guru* performance. The elaborate ritual *wayang kulit* performance on such an occasion involves, apart from a normal shadow play, the paying of respects to the teacher (*sembah guru*) as well as additional activities connected with healing or wind adjustment (*semah angin*). The whole performance is an extremely elaborate affair lasting three nights, and ending on the fourth morning.

Siti Esah, known to relatives and friends as Esah, Hamzah's fifth and current wife hails from Kampung Tasik China, Rantau Panjang. The daughter of a village farmer named Isa bin Daud and his wife, Che Mah Binti Hussain, Esah was one of their five children. In addition to her, there were two brothers, Mohamed bin Isa, and Ibrahim bin Isa, as well as two sisters, Mariam Binti Isa and Jenab binti Isa. Esah, born on the 25th of May 1940, was previously twice married, and naturally, twice divorced. Her first marriage took place when she was fifteen years of age; it lasted a mere six months. At the age of seventeen, she married a police driver, and this second marriage of hers lasted six years. In November 1967, at the age of twenty-seven, she married Hamzah. This third marriage brought her considerable happiness, as it undoubtedly did for Hamzah too, for Hamzah seems at last to have found a suitable match, a sympathetic soul, in Siti Esah.

Esah describes her meeting with Hamzah, which took place some two months after his divorce from his fourth wife, in these words: "I met Hamzah for the first time in a coffee shop in Pasir Pekan near the *pangung* where a performance of his *wayang kulit* was to take place. I was in fact waiting to watch the *wayang kulit*. Hamzah extended me an invitation to the performance, saying that I need not buy a ticket."

Hamzah's reasons for marrying Esah, according to his own confession, were entirely selfish. Given his poor financial situation at that time, Hamzah believed that by marrying her he could improve his own lot. Esah, it appeared to him from all the jewellery she wore, was obviously well off, financially, while he himself had no means at all. His expectation was that this marriage too, like his previous ones, would not last very long. But the relationship thus initiated as a casual encounter at a *wayang kulit* theatre has endured; not only endured but, despite the fact that they do not have any children of their own, it has proved productive in more ways than Hamzah or Esah could have realised.

At the time of her marriage to Hamzah, Esah worked as a construction worker, earning approximately \$ 3.00 per day. For additional income, on and off, she carried out, on an ad hoc basis, a series of diverse activities: planting or selling vegetables, contracting to harvest padi at the rate of \$ 1.50 per day, taking care of cows.

Following their marriage Hamzah and Esah lived with his parents at Sungei Pinang; three months later they moved into their own nearby. Considering that at that time Hamzah was not at all financially well off, Esah sold off some of her jewellery to buy the lumber to build their own house. Not being in a position to hire workers, she and Hamzah built it literally with their own hands.

Having sold off all her jewellery, Esah had to work even harder than him so that she could assist Hamzah provide for the household. She bought him a motor cycle, thus enabling him to travel more easily to and from work. Esah describes the first three years of her marriage as difficult times, so difficult, in fact, that she could not even afford a change of clothes.

Both Hamzah and Esah firmly believe that their marriage was in some ways a major turning point in their lives. Fame came to Hamzah when, in fact, he parted from Esah for the first time to perform in Kuala Lumpur during the 1969 *Conference on the Drama and Music of Southeast Asia* held at Universiti Malaya, a land-



GROUP PHOTO OF HAMZAH AND HIS TROUPE DURING THEIR HISTORICAL PERFORMANCE IN KUALA LUMPUR (1969)

mark visit that not only marked the beginning of Hamzah's reputation as a *dalang* but also opened up for him the path to eventual international exposure.

Over the years Esah took a prominent role in Hamzah's life not only as a wife but also as assistant to him in his *wayang kulit* related activities and even as a partial bread winner for the household. As far as the *wayang kulit* is concerned, she devotes her skills to helping Hamzah make the elegant cow skin figures which have found a place in many a museum and private collection the world over. Essentially, her task is to paint the figures carved

ut by Hamzah or one of his part-time assistants i Kampung Gerong. In addition, to this day Esah orks as a *bidan* and *bomoh*, preparing her own pecial herbal concoctions, especially for regnant women as well as for those who have ist had their babies. Her skill as a traditional masseuse have spread her fame and she is in uch demand, cycling from place to place to take house calls, or attending to visiting atients in her own home. During an average eek she sees perhaps a dozen or more patients, ome of them on a regular basis. As far as the *ayang* is concerned, Esah regularly assists amzah, not only during performances when the arious items for the kenduri need to be epared for the ritual opening of the theatre eremony (*buka panggung*) as well as for the laborate *berjamu* performances, but also in the aking of *wayang kulit* figures. He special skill es in the area of painting the figures once they ave been designed and cut. The marriage is a ue partnership in so many ways, and a rather re one at that, although she does not share his nthusiasm for birds. Yet despite a clearly tablished rapport and, speaking in Kelantan rms, a relatively long lasting relationship, owever, has been less than perfect from one oint of view: the fact that she and Hamzah have e been able to have children. Esah helped to ring up Rahim, Hamzah's son from his failed arriage to his second wife, Minah, as her own, nd she speaks fondly of him. Today Rahim is imself married.

In 1973 Hamzah and Esah adopted a daughter, he Rubiah binti Che amzah, when she was bout a week old. A econd daughter, ortfaezah binti Che amzah, was adopted in 1986. But the absence of hildren of their own did ot become a threat to the elationship itself. Both Rubiah and Nortfaezah are exceedingly fond of amzah and Esah. amzah did not remarry. According to Esah: "Even hough we did not have any children of our own, amzah and I continued to e together, maintaining this relation-

ship; there was no separation. This was possible mainly because of the difficult times that we had been through together. Hamzah feels an obligation to me for the sacrifices I have had to make over the years. He feels that every one of his successes and achievements has been the result of my support and encouragement, my patience."

In 1972 Hamzah, through the efforts of Amin Sweeney, was given a teaching assignment at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. This assignment, although brief, and in the long term not as significant as the later connection Hamzah developed with Universiti Sains Malaysia, was important, coming as it did at that particular point of time in his life and career. It gave Hamzah the opportunity to earn some additional income. With the savings therefrom he purchased a piece of land in Kampung Gerong, close to Kampung Laut. Esah and Hamzah dismantled their old house in Sungai Pinang and rebuilt it at Kampung Gerung. This house, where they continue to live up to the present, was somewhat larger than their Sungai Pinang house to start with. However, over the years it has been further extended to make it comfortable both for Hamzah's family as well as for the many guests who regularly visit him. Among his closest friends the house has been named "Istana Kampung Laut."

THE CONSTRUCTION
OF "ISTANA
KAMPUNG LAUT"
IN PROGRESS (1976)





HAMZAH'S HOUSE

Pak Awang Lah

JURING the time that Hamzah was growing up and making his acquaintance with *wayang kulit* here were several well known puppeteers in Kelantan. None, however had the fame or prestige of Pak Awang Lah bin Pandak of Kampung Masira, Morak, district of Tumpat. Pak Awang Lah came from a legendary line of puppeteers whose beginnings are generally traced to someone named Erik. Erik's dates remain unknown, and of the person himself only his name is known, and even that appears to be truncated. From Erik Pak Awang Lah traced his line down through Erok, Ekong, Eku, Saman and Salleh to himself. Now Hamzah recites this "genealogy" of *wayang kulit Kelantan* puppeteers, proudly placing his own name immediately following that of Pak Awang Lah. The unfortunate thing, of course, is that at that point this particular line of descent is likely to stop. Hamzah has never had a "disciple" of his own, and as things appear no one likely to succeed him and thus carry on the tradition. The situation is equally bad in other branches of this "dalang tree" extending down from Erik. At this point it must be stated that no real history of *wayang kulit Kelantan* has been written nor is one likely to be, considering the total absence of sources. Its precise origins and exact age are unlikely to be established with any degree of accuracy. The genealogy as developed from Erik then, is possibly a mixture of legend and truth, for in all likelihood *wayang kulit Kelantan* is much older than the seven generations that lie between Erik and Hamzah. Pak Awang Lah's father, Pak Pandak, though himself a *dalang* was not in this particular line of descent. Little is about him known beyond the fact that he was a Chinese convert. One day while returning to Kampung Bunut Sarang Burung, Hamzah discovered that Pak Awang Lah would be performing in Kampung Masira that night. He decided that he would not go home. Instead, he went in the direction of the *panggung* with the intention of watching Pak Awang Lah perform. At the *panggung*, Pak Wan, one of the venerable master *dalang*'s musicians, recognised Hamzah. Pak Wan himself had been a member of Umar Yunus' troupe, and it was during the trips with Umar Yunus that he had met Hamzah. At his invitation Hamzah soon climbed into the *panggung* to sit with Pak Wan. In a while, when the musicians began to play the opening (*bertabuh*) and other pieces, Hamzah was invited

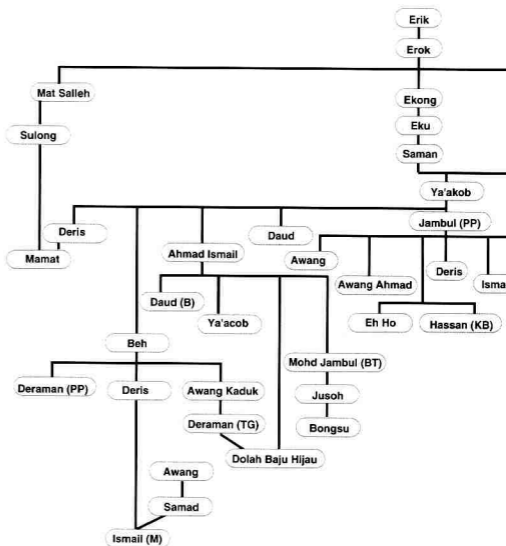
to play the cymbals (*kesi*). With the completion of the opening musical pieces, Pak Wan, who knew that Hamzah could perform the *dalang muda* prologue quite well, suggested that he take the *dalang*'s position on the stage to perform the *dalang muda*. This Hamzah gladly did, and soon the prologue to the evening's story was being performed by him with full enthusiasm. During all this time, Pak Awang Lah was still on the ground in the vicinity of the *panggung*. He watched the *Dalang Muda* performance with an unusually critical eye since there was obviously a talent behind the screen.

The *dalang muda* section, which serves as a sort of prologue to the whole performance, is performed immediately after the placing of the skin puppets in position upon the banana stem (*batang pisang*), the placing of the musical instruments in their designated positions and the theatre consecration (*buka panggung*) rituals. The prologue begins with the removal of the leaf shaped *pohon pering* in figure, the two Dewa Panah characters and the puppet representing the venerable sage, Maharsi, all of which are placed at screen centre. The section, consisting of several smaller divisions, starts off with the appearance of a sage or Maharsi character. Following his appearance the Dewa Panah, two gods with arrow appear and engage in battle. This battle symbolises the conflict between good and evil forces, which is the principal theme of the *wayang kulit* stories. With the exit of the Dewa Panah, Seri Rama and his entourage appear on screen. Seri Rama's warriors and courtiers pay homage to him, and then Seri Rama himself is praised in highly poetic passages. The *dalang muda* section calls for a wide range of abilities on the part of a performer, including the ability to sing and to narrate the story effectively. The section provides good training in the overall techniques of *wayang kulit*, and novice puppeteers thus work on this prologue for a while before proceeding the performance proper. With its completion, the lagu tukar *dalang* signals the change of puppeteers with senior *dalang* (*dalang tua*) taking over for the performance of the selected principal story.

Having watched Hamzah perform to this point, then, Pak Awang Lah climbed into up the *panggung*. Sitting down near Hamzah, he asked

Genealogy of Wayang Kulit

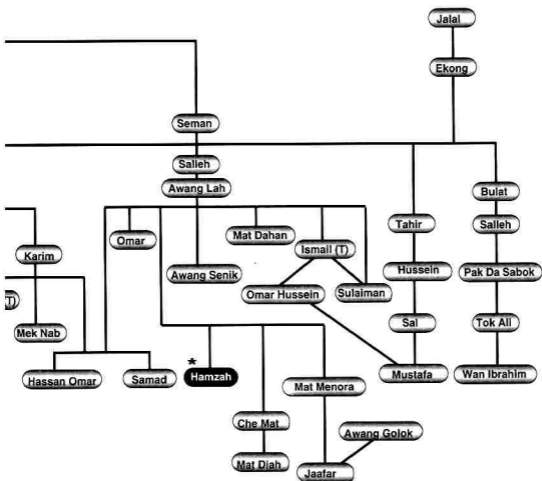
AFTER AMIN SWEENEY, *THE RAMAYANA*



NOTE :	
B	: Bachok
BT	: Besut
KB	: Kota Bahru
M	: Machang
PP	: Pasir Putih
T	: Tumpat
TG	: Tawang

of n Puppeteers

ALAY SHADOW-PLAY (1972)Pg. 61



"Whose son are you?" Hamzah replied that he was the son of Awang Amat.

"Which Awang Amat?" enquired Pak Awang Lah.

Hamzah further clarified that his father, Awang Amat, was the *tok dalang* in Kampung Bunut Sarang Burung.

"Ah ... so you are the son of Awang Amat of Kampung Kebakat! You have the talent to play *wayang kulit*, you have the voice too. Your performance is a little stilted, though. Learn the art of the *wayang* properly."

Pak Wan told Pak Awang Lah that Hamzah in fact was following Umar Yunus. At that point Hamzah, calling Pak Awang Lah "Pak Su", which means uncle, something which he henceforth was to do habitually, indicated that it was his desire to learn the art of *wayang kulit* from him.

Pak Awang Lah responded positively. "Yes, it is possible. But get your father's permission. Ask him to come along and hand you over to me."

Hamzah's father was delighted at the prospect of Hamzah learning *wayang kulit* at the hands of Pak Awang Lah. There was no better qualified person in the whole of Kelantan. The following day Awang Amat went along and in the appropriate manner "handed Hamzah over" to

Pak Awang Lah. This was the beginning of a highly significant and productive relationship between Hamzah and Pak Awang Lah, a relationship that must be unique in more ways than one in the annals of the shadow play.

Hamzah had often watched Awang Lah perform and was highly impressed with his style. Following his apprenticeship with Umar Yunus, and the establishment, under the guidance of his father of his own wayang budak, Hamzah was once again invited by Umar to join him as a musician, and Umar was at that time short of musicians. Umar was at that time planning to go back to Besut for a month long programme of performances. Hamzah took a break for his own troupe to follow Umar. This was in the period following his divorce from his first wife.

On the first occasion when Hamzah went over to Pak Awang Lah's place to begin lessons, Pak Awang Lah required that Hamzah solve a problem before being formally accepted as a student. "Now there are the following persons: your father, your mother, your teacher (*tok guru*), and yourself, the student (*anak murid*). All of you go into a sailing boat and the boat begins to sink. If you could save only one of them, which of the persons on the boat would you rescue?" That was how Pak Awang Lah phrased the riddle or problem.

Without hesitation Hamzah replied that he would rescue his teacher.

"That answer did not satisfy Pak Awang Lah" says Hamzah. The teacher asked him "What about your mother, who brought you into this world? What about your father?"

Hamzah says that he was silenced. He had no answer to the riddle. Pak Awang Lah asked Hamzah to go home and think about the problem, and to see him again only

EARLY PERFORMANCE OF HAMZAH'S WAYANG KULIT KELANTAN. HERE, HAMZAH ADMINISTERED THE CHARACTER OF WAK LONG AND PAK DOGOL TALKING TO SERI RAMA. (1970's)





when he had a suitable answer. Only then would he be accepted as a student. Testing the problem with many persons, Hamzah obtained a range of possible answers, none of which seemed to be right. Eventually, he went back to his teacher after having given the problem as much thought as he possibly could. It seems that the answer came even to him as a surprise.

"I will save every person on the boat or sink to death with all of them. If my parents die and my *tok guru* dies, I will die with them. After all my father is my father, my mother gave birth to me and my *tok guru* is my *tok guru*. They are all equally important to me."

Pak Awang Lah was pleased with the answer and with that Hamzah formally became his student. The episode of the riddle and the acceptance by Pak Awang Lah are moments that Hamzah treasures. Their full import, of course, was to come to him only years later, for the more he studied with Pak Awang Lah the more he realised that his teacher was a highly unusual person. Much of Pak Awang Lah's fame rested upon his inner or mystical learning (*ilmu dalam*). Unfortunately, though Hamzah felt the presence of his considerable wisdom, he did not at that point in his life see much need to acquire even a minuscule portion of it from Pak Awang Lah. It is

very likely too that the few years that Hamzah studied with his venerable teacher were too brief a time for all that knowledge to be transferred from teacher to pupil. Is it possible too, that Pak Awang Lah did not really want to surrender all that he knew to Hamzah? Hamzah really has no answer to this final question. The ceremonies required for the establishment of a formal relationship between Hamzah and Pak Awang Lah did not take place immediately, however, but at a later date when Hamzah had built a *panggung* in the grounds of his own home.

Once Hamzah was accepted as a student of Pak Awang Lah, Pak Awang Lah asked Hamzah to accompany him during performances and to observe his performance techniques. Thus Hamzah became an unofficial member of Pak Awang Lah's troupe. At that time Pak Awang Lah also had another student, Mat Ali bin Osman from Kampung Mesira, Morak. During performances Hamzah was to play the *geduk* and *gendang* while Mat Ali played the *kesi*. Both of these students of Pak Awang Lah sat close to front of the *panggung* near the puppeteer's position. Hamzah was placed by Pak Awang Lah on his right, on the side where the figures of Seri Rama and his companions, characters of the right", stood on the banana stem. Mat Ali sat on the left the other side where the figures of

ANOTHER ONE OF HIS EARLY PERFORMANCE. NOTE THE TYPE OF LAMP BEING USED AS THE PROJECTOR. (1970's)

intended for his new apprentices to be able to identify the figures in the *wayang kulit* set.



AWANG MAT ALI,
PLAYED THE GEDUK.
(1970 s)

Maharaja Wana and his companions or "figures of the left" were placed. This was to enable his assistants to hand him the puppets he would require from time to time at appropriate moments during the performance. Simultaneously such an arrangement was also

After some time, Hamzah discussed with his teacher the possibility of building his own panggung to continue learning the wayang in his own home. Mat Ali coming to know of Hamzah's intention, suggested that Hamzah consider build a panggung in Kampung Mesira in front of the one belonging to Pak Awang Lah. The location would be more suitable as Hamzah and Mat Ali could both use it, taking turns to play on alternative nights. Pak Awang Lah was not in favour of such an idea. Convinced that Hamzah was a better performer than Mat Ali, Pak Awang Lah knew that he would be able to draw better crowds than his fellow student dalang. He feared that this would lead to misunderstandings and quarrels between his two pupils. His suggestion was that they should build separate panggung, Hamzah at Kampung Pulau Kerbau, and Mat Ali at Kampung Mesira. Hamzah immediately started work and the panggung in Kampung Pulau Kerbau soon stood ready for use. Hamzah went to his teacher's place to invite Pak Awang Lah to perform the appropriate ceremonies for the its



ISMAIL SAMAD
PLAYED THE
GENDANG (1970 s)

opening. His teacher then informed him of the paraphernalia, *alat-alat kenduri*, required. Most of these items were the same as for a normal buka *panggung* ritual. Additionally, for the handing down (*peturun*) ceremony the following items were specified: a *pulut semangat*, seven pieces of *kain batik panjang*, a *gantang* of rice, money (\$ 2.15) and the various lengths of cloth to be suspended below the *panggung* roof (*langit-langit*) were needed. In the *langit-langit* there should be flowers. For Hamzah himself were required a piece of yellow cloth to be used as a shawl, and raw cotton thread (*benang mentah*) to be wrapped around his head. Several days later the *peturun* took place. Hamzah sat on seven piece of folded cloth at the *dalang*'s position facing the lamp. In his hand he held the *pokok peringin*, Maharisi and dewa Panah figures. Over these Pak Awang Lah read some incantations (*mantra* or *jampi*), upon the completion of which the orchestra played Lagu Guru. Then, following several seconds of further *jampi*, Hamzah began to go into trance until he was in a state of semi-consciousness. He moved the *pohon peringin*, Maharisi and Dewa Panah. Hamzah says that he was conscious of what was happening, and the trace was thus only partial. At the same time he felt a great deal of happiness, while also feeling a surge of energy (*semangat*). The nature of the trance state in ritual *wayang kulit Kelantan*, and more particularly in *main puteri* performances, will come up for more detailed discussion in a following chapter. When Hamzah had played for a while, Pak Awang Lah prepared a quid of betel leaves, which he gave to Hamzah to chew. Hamzah was then asked to continue playing. This time Pak Awang Lah held Hamzah's hand and taught him the manner of moving the *wayang kulit* figures, and also the dialogue for the characters in the *wayang*. With that the new relationship between Pak Awang Lah and Hamzah was confirmed. Pak Awang Lah was now the official teacher of the young apprentice. Hamzah had not formally accepted Umar as his *wayang kulit* teacher even though he did perform in Umar's troupe. Thus Hamzah considers Pak Awang Lah as his only *wayang kulit guru*.

Following the brief performance that night, Pak Awang Lah expressed his conviction that Hamzah would be his worthy successor. He warned Hamzah not to be disloyal to his teacher. For a person who is disloyal in any manner to his teacher cannot ever expect to become established as a reputable and respected performer.

"Furthermore," continued Pak Awang Lah " whoever learns *wayang kulit* from me is forbidden to copy the designs of my puppets. You, Hamzah have to use your own intelligence to design your puppets. There will, of course, be no harm in your getting ideas from my figures."

He wished to know if these conditions were acceptable to Hamzah. Hamzah replied in the affirmative. Pak Awang Lah went on to indicate that there was yet another condition. When a person is an apprentice *dalang*, and following that when he is a qualified puppeteer too, he has to observe a certain number of taboos connected with the puppets and instruments. He should not cross over the musical instruments or the puppets at any location whatsoever, whether or not the figures are on a *panggung*. The puppets should be treated with respect to the extent that even if there are no mats or cloth for the performers to sit on a *panggung* floor, the figures must not be placed on the bare floor. They should rest on a clean mat or a length of cloth, no matter how simple. Hamzah indicated to Pak Awang Lah that he clearly understood the taboos connected with the *wayang* and that he would at all times be guided by his teacher's instruction.

Following Hamzah's initiation Pak Awang Lah visited Kampung Pulau Melaka twice a week to give Hamzah his lessons.

Mat Ali, who was learning *wayang kulit* at Kampong Morak, was also given the same conditions, but, according to Hamzah, his fellow student did not follow these restrictions exactly. As a result Pak Awang Lah stopped going to teach him. Finally Mat Ali gave up *wayang kulit* altogether; selling off his instruments and puppets, and went to look for another job. He is now in Negeri Sembilan, working for Keretapi Tanah Melayu.

Pak Awang Lah would visit Hamzah to teach him *wayang kulit* on a regular basis. However, when Pak Awang Lah had performances in other villages, Hamzah joined him, usually playing the role of *dalang muda*. In this manner, through observation and imitation of the teacher as well as through specific forms of guidance received from Pak Awang Lah over a period of approximately five years Hamzah mastered the *wayang kulit*. During the first three years the focus was upon aspects of *pedalangan*. This included the technique of opening the *panggung*, drawing an audience and retaining it

throughout the duration of a performance, and reading of the invocations when "opening" the musical instruments. This involves addressing specific *mantra* to the semangat or spirit of the various instruments so that they sound good. The *dalang* or *bomoh* conducting theatre opening rituals, often tells each of his instruments to produce a sound matching the apparently irresistible voice of the Prophet David (Nabi Daud) so that those listening to the music will be totally enchanted by it.

Hamzah spent those years mastering the art of the *wayang* in its different aspects, and managed to master some of the basic rituals. Even though Pak Awang Lah's last and best student or "disciple" who was so obviously loved by the teacher, Hamzah did not manage to obtain secret knowledge (*ilmu batin*) from Pak Awang Lah. The greater portion of the mystical learning, much of it not directly related to the shadow play, Hamzah was to acquire in the later years, from a variety of sources.

In the years before Hamzah joined Pak Awang Lah, the guru had a number of other students, apart from Mat Ali, to whom reference has already been made. According to Hamzah's information, the first was Che Mat Timun of Kampung Kebakat; then there was Umar bin Yunus, who lived in Kampung Sedar, Tumpat before moving to Kedai Buluh, which was his

wife's kampung; Che Daud of Rantau Panjang; and Ismail of Kampung Kubang Batang, Tumpat. Among Pak Awang Lah's other students, whom Hamzah does not remember by name, there were some who lived in Thailand—Mat Menara from Narathiwat, Awang Golok from Sungei Golok and yet others from as far away as Pattani. Most of these students of Pak Awang Lah, however, did not reach the fame and stature first of Umar bin Yunus, and following Umar of Hamzah himself. In Pak Awang Lah's assessment of his students the last was in fact the first. He never tired of pointing this out.

At one point, during the training period, Pak Awang Lah gave Hamzah a talisman to be worn by him. According to his teacher the talisman would ensure that Hamzah excelled in *wayang kulit*; it had been bequeathed to Pak Awang Lah by his own father, Pak Pandak.

"Take this and wear it," Pak Awang Lah said, according to Hamzah. "Anything else, other *ilmu* I cannot give you as yet."

Hamzah immediately began to use the talisman. He noticed that after some time, Pak Awang Lah's *wayang* began to decline and his audiences to diminish, while Hamzah's own performances improved rapidly. With that his fame too grew. As if suddenly, Pak Awang Lah was visibly ageing. After that the *sembah guru* ceremony was held.

THE LATE ARIFFIN
AWANG, THE GONG
PLAYER. (1970's)





In 1968 following a five year training period with Pak Awang Lah, Hamzah's three-day *sembah guru* ceremony, was held. This is a very elaborate ceremony involving three nights of *wayang kulit* performance followed by highly complex rituals in the morning on the fourth day. With the completion of the ritual *wayang kulit*, Hamzah was acknowledged as a fully qualified *dalang*. Now he had the right to establish his own troupe as well as to teach others. Whatever he had learnt from Pak Awang Lah had now been officially and ceremoniously handed over to him to use in whatsoever manner he desired to. Until this point it would have been morally wrong for Hamzah to claim that the knowledge was his for he had "graduated" in the proper sense of the word. Its use by him had to be legitimised. Customarily until the *pelimau* ceremonies are held, a *dalang* is considered an apprentice and cannot therefore teach others to be *dalang* or even perform independently as a puppeteer. It is permitted for him to perform the *dalang muda* section for other puppeteers or play any of the musical instruments. Hamzah had, successfully mastered the art of the shadow play from its greatest living exponent. In time to come he would prove to be Pak Awang Lah's worthy successor.

Immediately upon the completion of the *sembah guru* performance on the fourth morning, Pak Awang Lah was heard making a remark to Hamzah's father that of all his

students, there was none who had as bright a future as did Hamzah. Despite this faith that his teacher had in him, Hamzah at this point had feelings of doubt and uncertainty. Now that he was on his own, his anxiety as to what would happen to him appeared to increase. He feared that as a full-fledged *dalang* he would no longer be playing with Pak Awang Lah. As things turned out this fear was not altogether justified. For as long as Pak Awang Lah continued to perform, Hamzah acted his *dalang muda*. This is quite a normal thing, and according to Hamzah the continuance of such a relationship would show that the student had not lost respect for the teacher. A guru would in fact become upset should a former *dalang muda* not remain in close contact with his teacher following the *pelimau*. Even in the case of other puppeteers, there is always the possibility that one established *dalang* may be invited to serve, when the occasion demands, as another puppeteer's *dalang muda*. Age or seniority matters little in such instances. To this day Hamzah himself assists Yusof Hassan of Kampung Mesira, and, likewise, Yusof oftentimes helps Hamzah out by performing as his *dalang muda*, although Pak Yusof is himself a *dalang* of considerable standing in his own right, and in age somewhat Hamzah's senior. Such a relationship is a sign of mutual respect. Hamzah felt honoured to thus continue performing with Pak Awang Lah, and we shall see, continued to do so almost to the end of Pak Awang Lah's career as a *dalang*.

THE LATE AWANG
AMAT (RIGHT)
PLAYED
THE CANANG.
(1970's)

Perhaps it was fortunate that, at least in the early days following his *berjamu* performance, Hamzah stayed on with Pak Awang Lah. His own performances did not seem to take off. There was no sign at that point of the much dreamed of fame or prosperity. The situation appeared to him to be desperate, and his patience began to wear thin. More than once he seriously considered selling off his small collection of *wayang kulit* instruments and puppets, and looking for a regular job which would bring him a steady income. The spectre of unemployment, as we shall see, was to haunt him every now and then throughout his life until recent times. It was only when he was well past fifty that he would in the true sense of the word receive any regular income. Even in the days when he was learning *wayang kulit* with Pak Awang Lah he did, in fact, occasionally do odd jobs, mostly as a construction assistant, helping to build concrete fences in several Malayan Tobacco Company factories in Kelantan—at Pasir Putih, Bacok, Bukit Yong and elsewhere. He would be paid \$3.75 per day, with the rate for Friday being twice that much. As things go, the practice of doing part time work is a common phenomenon among the members of his troupe, for *wayang kulit* has never been a full-time "occupation" in the true sense of the word. Even today, many of Hamzah's musicians do other jobs for a living. His close friend, Awang Salleh, is perhaps the most consistent, having been a trishaw rider all his working life, despite his almost magical skills with the *serunar*; opportunities to use that skill are rare. Others work in construction or make musical instruments for sale. For most of them *wayang kulit* has always been only a part-time activity. In Hamzah's case things have been slightly better compared to his musicians or to other performers in Kelantan. In addition to performing, he also makes puppets for sale, and does teaching at various institutions as we shall see in subsequent chapters. Thus although not a recipient of a regular monthly salary, Hamzah has done better than almost all others involved in the traditional performing arts.

During the time that Hamzah was learning to play *wayang kulit* with Pak Awang Lah, he also learnt to make the puppets and later the musical instruments. These skills he acquired on his own initiative. Generally this is not an aspect of the *dalang's* training. In the case of Hamzah the desire to learn this craft of puppet-making arose partly out of necessity. Essentially he decided that he could not afford to buy all his equipment

and this gave him the incentive to learn that craft, later attempting his hands, quite successfully, at making instruments as well. The interest in *wayang kulit* design was already there from the early years of his life, and here and where the opportunities did allow him to bring to his craft a certain degree of professionalism. From the point of conception, shape, design as well as execution, at that time the figures of Pak Awang Lah were the most beautiful. They were justly famous. The other outstanding puppet designs were those of Umar Yunus. But Umar himself had based his designs on those of Pak Awang Lah. The original set of puppets belonging to Umar Yunus was, following his retirement as a *dalang* handed down to Hassan Umar, his son. With Hassan having himself given up performing *wayang kulit* recently that particular set of puppets was acquired from him by Hamzah.

Having then decided that it was about time he learnt the art of puppet making in a systematic manner, Hamzah began with drawings of the principal characters of the *Ramayana*—Rama, Siti Dewi, Hanuman and others. Following the instructions of Pak Awang Lah, Hamzah began by tracing the outer shapes of the figures so that the sizes as well as body and limb proportions of the completed puppet would be pleasing. For this reason Pak Awang Lah did not mind Hamzah using his figures as models or even tracing the outlines. As far as the sizes were concerned, Hamzah, of course, had the liberty to create puppets of sizes different from those of Pak Awang Lah's puppets. Even a casual examination of *wayang kulit Kelantan* puppets made by different craftsmen reveal considerable differences in size, shape and details of design. No two Seri Rama figures, for instance, have the same overall appearance unless they come from the same source. Thus one can easily establish the relationships of shape and design say, for instance, in the puppets coming from Pak Awang Lah and Umar Yunus as compared to those deriving from other originators. Although, then Hamzah had the option to create his own designs, he did not use it. He was mesmerised by Pak Awang Lah's figures. All the same, Pak Awang Lah instructions were quite clear. The internal designs—the facial expression, and other details such as those of eyes—had to be Hamzah's own.

As far as the central figure in the whole set, the *pohon peringin* was concerned, Hamzah learnt that then simplest way to ensure that the designs on both halves of the image are exactly

he same is to fold a piece of paper, do the tracing and then to open it up fully. In that manner exact synchronicity can be achieved. All designs of puppets are traditionally thus first drawn onto blank sheets of paper; these are then pasted onto processed and flattened cow skin before being cut. It is essential, according to Hamzah, in the case of figures representing human or divine characters or even ogres that the mouth and eyes be carved first, for it is through these particular details that the character of a figure emerges. If these are wrongly done the whole image appears defective. The drawing completed, the designs are punched using simple tools, and the paper removed, if necessary by soaking and washing it off. The painting of the figures can then begin.

During the time that Hamzah learnt the art from Pak Awang Lah emulsion paint was commonly used, though tradition has it that in the past natural dyes were preferred. Bamboo sticks were finally attached to the completely painted figures to serve as handles as well as to enable the puppeteer to move the limbs. Hamzah still has in his retention, the most attractive of the figures that he carved in the earliest days of his career as a fledgling puppet maker. Those he did not wish to keep he sold off to a dalang named Ismail from Kampong Tempoyak, Pasir Mas. From the earliest times, Hamzah obtained the assistance, where it was forthcoming, from his wives to make these elegant figures. To this day Esah helps him by painting the puppets that he or one of assistants carves out. Hamzah, as far as possible, retains the designs that he originally obtained from Pak Awang Lah in the traditional figures, allowing for some innovation in the case of lesser figures or new ones that he invents. The same extent, however, innovation is inevitable. In the case of Hamzah, a good example is his shift from opaque to translucent figures. This came about at the time that colour television was introduced into Malaysia. The new translucent puppets allowed the colour to be seen through the screen. Their creation involves a different technique of processing skin, a technique which Hamzah learnt from its pioneer, Umar Yunus and later improved upon it. In recent years Hamzah has started using synthetic ink, essentially to obtain the transparency. Again he has speeded up the production of puppets by making multiple tracings of the designs for his figures using carbon paper or even, these days, making photostat copies. Hamzah's puppets, needless to say, are well known; and have drawn collectors from all over the world to his home in



Patricia Mahony

Kampong Gerong. Hamzah also usually carries some extra figures with him which he for sale following performances. Inevitably there are, among his audience members some persons wish to acquire them. Figures made by Hamzah have also found their way into museum collections the world over.

**HAMZAH'S
MOST LOYAL
FRIEND AWANG
SALLEH. HE PLAYED
THE FLUTE OR
SERUNAI.
(1970's)**

Once the art of making puppets was completed, Hamzah turned his attention to the making of musical instruments. This he began in the year 1968, concentrating on instruments such as the various drums and the oboe which come out of wood. The gongs and other metallophones could not at that point in time be made in Kelantan, as the technology no longer existed. Years later, in 1973, Hamzah and his companions were to some extent, through experiment, come up with successful techniques of shaping gongs out of brass. When the news came to him of his possible trip to Europe, he



Patricia Matosky

THE KESI PLAYER
CHE OMAR CHE MAT.
HE LEFT THE GROUP
IN EARLY 1980 s
(1970 s)

made a complete set of the various drums to take along with him for his performances. Today, Hamzah still makes the drums for sale, and to these has been added the occasional pair of gongs, not only purchased from the villages of Kelantan or Thailand, but also manufactured by his musicians. Having acquired all these skills, then, Hamzah was now awaiting an opening to be able to at least earn a decent living through his performance. What happened, in fact, was far beyond all his greatest expectations.

It was the year 1969, and as providence would have it he did not have too long to wait before the breakthrough came. Two highly significant events marked the turning point in Hamzah's career. The first was the decline of Pak Awang Lah's popularity as a puppeteer and the simultaneous waxing of Hamzah's fortunes. The second took the shape of two British visitors, Mubin Sheppard and Amin Sweeney, whose

names have become connected with aspects of Malay culture for some time now.

As already indicated, Hamzah continued to perform with Pak Awang Lah for a short duration following his *pelimau* ceremonies. On one occasion, Pak Awang Lah was performing in a depression known as Lembah Bawah at the head of the bridge at Pasir Pekan just outside Kota Bharu town. Here an enclosed space had been specially marked off as a regular venue for *wayang kulit* performances. Pak Awang Lah had played for a week when he fell ill, and Hamzah now invited to take the place of his teacher. Soon comparisons began to be made between Pak Awang Lah's style and that of Hamzah. It appeared that there was a preference for Hamzah's manner of performing: his performances were more lively, since he cut out much of the details from his story, whereas Pak Awang Lah devoted a considerable degree of attention to details, and thus, in performance, his script tended to be slower. When, after a week's break, Pak Awang Lah returned to his *panggung*, he expressed a desire not to play. Pak Awang Lah asked Hamzah to carry on being the *dalang tua*. Hamzah was touched, but he did not feel that he had the right to usurp his teacher's position. Following some persuasion from him, Pak Awang Lah agreed to perform. Soon, however, there became evident a negative reaction from members of the audience. A number of voices began to be heard, asking Awang Lah to stop performing. "That's enough"; "Let the boy play". Pak Awang Lah turned to look in Hamzah's direction. Hamzah encouraged his teacher to continue playing. Pak Awang Lah did continue, but the voices in front of the *panggung* became increasingly insistent that Pak Awang Lah should hand over to Hamzah. A critical moment had arrived. An overwhelming sense of guilt troubled Hamzah. He took Awang Lah's hands in his own; apologised to his teacher; asked Pak Awang Lah not to be angry with him. He had no intentions of being disloyal to his Pak Guru. "No", said Pak Awang Lah, "There is no anger. It is a good thing that my student is becoming so well known. Good. We can now change places. I will now play with you as my *dalang*."

According to Hamzah from that point on Pak Awang Lah's performances began to decline while his own prospered. Pak Awang Lah was already growing old; he did not have long to live. From that point on Hamzah played with a mixed group of musicians, many of them coming from

Awang Lah's troupe. These included Samad, Mudin, and Tok Wan.

Mubin Sheppard and Amin Sweeney led Kelantan in 1969 in search of a *wayang* troupe that could participate in an ongoing international conference on Southeast Asian theatre and dance to be held at the University of Malaya campus in Pantai Valley, Kuala Lumpur in August 1969.

They visited Karim Parido, a fairly well-known *dalang* who performed regularly in a popular entertainment park in Wakaf Siku, where other forms of entertainment including *joget* were also regularly featured. Their intention of convincing him to perform in Kuala Lumpur never did materialise.

Sheppard and Sweeney next went to Pak Awang Lah's house to invite Pak Awang Lah to perform at the Kuala Lumpur festival. Pak Awang Lah declined; he said he was getting old. Sheppard asked Awang Lah if there was any reliable pupil of his who could be invited. Awang Lah immediately recommended Hamzah as a good choice. He was, in fact, according to Awang Lah, the best he had ever taught. Sheppard and Sweeney followed up with Kampung Pulau Kerbau and extended the invitation to perform in Kuala Lumpur to Hamzah. Hamzah had in fact already met Amin Sweeney in 1967 when Amin Sweeney was visiting Pak Awang Lah in connection with his research into the *Ramayana*. Amin Sweeney, according to Hamzah was no stranger to Kelantan, as he had been teaching at Sekolah Al-Islah in Kota Bharu. He later married a Kelantanese, named Zainab, and eventually joined Universiti Kebangsaan in Kuala Lumpur as a lecturer. The material collected by Sweeney was later on written in the form of a dissertation presented at the University of London. This dissertation, with revisions, was published by Universiti Kebangsaan Press in 1972 under the title *The Ramayana and the way Shadow Play*. It remains a highly important work on the *Ramayana* story as used in Kelantan *wayang kulit Kelantan*.

Hamzah's first trip ever to Kuala Lumpur materialised at the age of about twenty nine in arrangements were made for him to play at the International Festival of Southeast Asian Theatre and Dance. Hamzah took along with him Kuala Lumpur several veteran performers in Awang Lah's troupe. These included Midin,

Sulaiman, and Hussain. In addition there was Awang bin Salleh, his good friend, now a regular *serunai* player with Hamzah and three other younger musicians. Hamzah honoured both his father, Awang Amat, and his teacher, Pak Awang Lah, by asking them to accompany the troupe; they did not actually perform. Travelling by train to Kuala Lumpur, the troupe travelled to Kuala Lumpur by train and stayed at Jalan Universiti, the place where later on, the temporary campus of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia was to be based. A large audience made up of local people as foreigners witnessed Hamzah's first all-important maiden performance outside his native Kelantan. In some ways it turned out, historically, to be the most important of the countless performances with which Hamzah was to thrill his audiences all over the world. It marked the turning point. Hamzah confesses to this day, his considerable nervousness due to the presence amongst his audience members of so many internationally reputed theatre experts. But Hamzah was already beginning to master the skill that were to shape him, increasingly as time passed into the consummate *dalang* that he has become. His performance was highly successful. Going up to the *panggung* Sheppard embraced him, and introduced him to his distinguished audience. Hamzah, of course, did not understand a word of what was going on as the whole thing was done in English, a language with which, increasingly over the following years he was to become better acquainted and more confident, though by no means conversant as he would have liked to be. Today he does understand basic English and in his performances, to amuse audiences, he does use phrases in English, or for that matter in many other languages depending upon the composition of the audience, usually through the mouths of his pair of immensely popular clowns, Dogol and Wak Long. Hamzah relates that many from among the members of his audience at his all-important inaugural performance including many highly regarded Western scholars of Asian performing arts, such as William P. Malm and Jacques Brunet, who attended the international seminar, came to meet him. He was an overnight hero, being photographed as never before in his life.

Later, Sheppard, interpreting a French visitor, (possibly Jacques Brunet) asked Hamzah if he would be prepared to take his troupe to Europe. Hamzah, who at that point had not the slightest idea of the whereabouts of Europe nevertheless indicated that he would certainly be



HAMZAH AND SITI
ESAH TOGETHER
WITH THEIR
DAUGHTER, CHE
RUBIAH, SAT AT THE
PANGGUNG WAYANG
KULIT WHICH HE
BUILT JUST
INFRONT OF HIS
HOUSE IN KAMPONG
GERONG. (1970's)

willing to travel. In his naiveté, however he somehow believed that he would have to bear his own expenses. When he expressed this fear to Sheppard, indicating that he had no money for such expenses, Sheppard was amused. He naturally assured the young puppeteer that should a trip to Europe materialise, all expenses

would be borne not by Hamzah but by sponsors. Naturally Hamzah, fresh from the warmth and exuberance of his successful first major performance, was both interested and excited at the prospect of performing overseas, although he did not at that time, have the vaguest notion of what all this would entail. The spirit of the adventurer within him had begun to be stirred. He did not at that point realise how far and wide he would travel, taking his wayang to lands of whose very existence he did not at that point know.

Sheppard suggested that on his return to Kelantan, Hamzah should begin to gather enough young musicians to make up a troupe consisting of players of about his age. This he enthusiastically did, facing, in the process, no real problems. There were at that time many active performers in quite a few groups in the State; Hamzah, who himself performed in various localities, and watched every



A RECENT PHOTOGRAPH OF THE PANGGUNG WAYANG KULIT WITH ITS FULL SCREEN.

formance he could catch had met many of them personally and had little difficulty in convincing some of them to join him. In less than a year the group was fairly well established, and when Sheppard paid a visit to Kampong Lau Kerbau in 1970 Hamzah and his new puppeteers played for him. Sheppard expressed his satisfaction. It was at this point that a name was decided upon for his troupe. Out of the various suggestions made, "Kumpulan Seri Setia" was selected. A name was perhaps necessary to some extent, but few know the group by that name even in Malaysia. Everywhere and to most people it is "Wayang Kulit Hamzah."

In Kuala Lumpur, preparations for Hamzah's first trip to Europe began to materialise. With the support of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, under the banner of UNESCO, Hamzah and his troupe would in the following year make an unprecedented tour of five European countries. He was to visit Iran, Russia and Rumania in 1973, and the United States of America, Holland and Britain in 1974. Earlier, following a gap of almost two decades, he had visited Hong Kong, Pakistan and Singapore.

Pak Awang Lah passed away in the year 1973, some time after Hamzah's return from a tour to Russia. While playing *wayang kulit* in Kampung Kebakak, he became ill. Hamzah says it was this happened because he sold his *wayang kulit* figures to Mubin Sheppard without doing a proper release (*pelepas*) ceremony. When Pak Awang Lah realised that he would no longer be performing he told Hamzah that he wished to sell his *wayang kulit* figures. To Hamzah's query, Pak Awang Lah said that the whole set including instruments would be sold for 500.00. Hamzah himself wished he could have bought the whole set, but he did not have any money at that time. He was to regret this many years in the years to come. Requesting Pak Awang Lah to give him some time so that he could get in touch with Mubin Sheppard, Hamzah immediately left for Kuala Lumpur, informed by him that Pak Awang Lah now wished to retire and hence to sell off his whole set of *wayang kulit* paraphernalia. Sheppard agreed to buy the set. Hamzah quoted a price of 1000.00. Back in Kelantan, Hamzah informed Pak Awang Lah that Sheppard would be visiting him in the next few days to see the figures as well as to determine when he could take them from Pak Awang Lah. Awang Lah still needed the uses as he was scheduled to play at the request of a Chinese sponsor for the release of

vows on the fifteenth of the following month. This performance, however, had to be postponed to the following month. When Sheppard came to collect the figures, Awang Lah consulted Hamzah on a possible solution to the problem. Hamzah told Pak Awang Lah that he could hand over the set to Sheppard as there was another set available with him. Thus Sheppard acquired the set from Pak Awang Lah; eventually it found its way to the British Museum where it is still kept.

When the time for the performance arrived, the figures made by Hamzah as well as his instruments were used. According to Hamzah, Pak Awang Lah noticed the similarity between the puppets before him and his own old figures which Sheppard had acquired. But he did not comment; nor did he ask Hamzah any questions. Hamzah says that had his teacher questioned him as to whether he had done tracings of the old figures, something he had specifically forbidden, Hamzah would not have denied that he in fact did. He would have justified his action by explaining that now at least there was another set of puppets, replicas of his own puppets, available for Pak Awang Lah to use. At the Chinese house they played three nights, with a *berjamu* on the final night. Following the *berjamu*, something seems to have happened to Pak Awang Lah — he could not speak. His enforced silence continued during the following days, and on the fifteenth day following the performance he passed away. Not a word had passed his lips in all that time since the *berjamu*. In every other way Pak Awang Lah was normal. Hamzah believes that the loss of voice in his teacher was the result of not having done something called *tolak*, the removal of spirits or spiritual influences in the *wayang kulit* set that he sold. Normally in such a situation, Pak Awang Lah would have had to have a special performance for the purpose of effecting the *tolak* before handing over the puppets to their new owner. Such a procedure was particularly important in the present context as Awang Lah's *wayang kulit* set was considered an heirloom, having come down from Pak Awang Lah's father, Pak Pandak. That was the time when Pak Pandak and Tok Yaakob were the two leading puppeteers in Kampung Morak. Tok Yaakob, the better known of the two, was the teacher of Awang Amat, Hamzah's father. Never the less, Pak Awang Lah was the best *dalang* during his time. As for Seri Setia, the members come and go throughout the decades.

BERITA HARIAN

Rombongan ahli Seni Wayang Kulit berlepas ka-Eropah hari ini...

Oleh A. M. HALMI

22 MAR 1971

KOTA BHARU—Ahad

ROMBONGAN sa ramai 9 orang anggota seni Wayang Kulit Kelantan yang di-judaiakan berlepas ka-San Francisco pada 1 Muzi ini, untuk menyertai pesta kebudayaan 13 buah negara Eropah, di-tunda kepada 22 Muzi ini (esok).

Demikian di-tuturkan oleh Tan Sri Haji Mubin Sheppard ketika di-temui di-Rumah Turpangan Pegawai2 Kanan Kerajaan di-sini baru2 ini. Tan Sri Haji Mubin telah berada di-sini selama dua hari untuk menguruskan masalah perolehan tiket perjalanan wayang kulit oleh kumpulan tersebut sa-behni mereka berlepas yang telah di-sediakan khusus di-rumah ketua dan juga selaku Tok Da-an-nya, Kahe Hamzah bin Awang Hamid, di-Kampong Dalam Pandang, Pelek Bang, Kota Bharu.

Kota Tan Sri Haji Mubin, "Penun-
duan trich itu di-buat setelah pe-
hak yang berkenaan di Eropah mem-
erlukan sebuah rombongan itu untuk
mengadakan pertunjukan sampe
jawab ka-tempat penting lebih lama
lagi dari yang telah di-judaiakan
dahulu-nya.

"Mereka akan berada di-sana sa-
lama tiga bulan sa-tengah."

Mengkat Tan Sri Haji Mubin rom-
bongan seni wayang kulit Kelantan
itu akan berlepas lewat kapal ter-
bang dari Kuala Lumpur pada 22 Muzi
ini dan di-jangka akan sampai ka-
France pada 28 Muzi.

"Mereka akan memulakan pertun-
jukan nya di-sana pada 29th Muzi"
selepas-nya.

Antara tempai2 yang bakal di-
perolehi oleh rombongan itu akan
di-perolehi ke-10 negara sa-
nya, ia-lah England, Italy, Spain,
Portugal, Austria, Belgium dan
Jerman.

Tan Sri Haji Mubin Sheppard juga menberitahu rombongan itu akan di-kepal sendiri oleh Enche Nik Muhamad bin Nik Muzi sa-orang pegawai dari Kementerian Luar Negeri yang sekarang berkhidmat di-Bangkok.

Enche Nik Muhamad, menurut Tan Sri Haji Mubin, ia-lah sa-orang yang memang telah ba-
k, serta mempunyai pe-
kelahiran di-sini.



Enche Nik Muhamad, menurut Tan Sri Haji Mubin, ia-lah sa-orang yang memang telah ba-
k, serta mempunyai pe-
kelahiran di-sini.

Enche Nik Muhamad, menurut Tan Sri Haji Mubin, ia-lah sa-orang yang memang telah ba-
k, serta mempunyai pe-
kelahiran di-sini.



GAMBAR atas ialah Che' Khatijah Awang yang berleluasa sa-bagai Permaisuri kepada Raja Isdara Sakti dalam lakonan "Wayang Kulit" bertajuk "Mandu Dahl" — persembahan "Wayang Kulit" chara baru.



Wayang Kulit "Mandu Dahl" in a new style.

The Trips Overseas

THERE was already initial interest in the latter part 1969 and the following months, after the international festival of music and dance at the University of Malaya, of possibly sending Hamzah and his Seri Setia Wayang Kulit Troupe on a tour of Europe and perhaps the United States. For most of the foreign as well as local observers the festival had provided the first ever opportunity of witnessing a performance of the genre and despite the fact that Hamzah himself could at point was relatively inexperienced as a puppeteer, his spirited performance had made an extremely favourable impression. His performance had, in fact, been unanimously declared as one of the festival's highlights, possibly even its most successful event.

Hamzah himself confesses that he had been nervous. For here was an audience very different, in every sense of the word, from the villagers for whom he had hitherto been performing. The success of his debut was undeniable. How momentous that debut had been was only to become fully apparent years later. His confidence had received a tremendous boost when it became clear that he had not failed Pak Awang Lah, those who gave him the opportunity to make an appearance at the festival as well as his distinguished guests.

When Mubin Sheppard first sounded him out on the possibility of an extended overseas tour of what Hamzah himself knew as a mere rustic kind of theatre style, he had not the vaguest notion of what such an event meant. What would it be like to travel, and travel in lands he had never even heard of? He had never been out of Kelantan before except to Besut; his world revolved around the villages in Tumpat district; Kota Bharu, at that time a middle-sized Malaysian town of perhaps forty or fifty thousand residents, had, for him, been the big metropolis. Even the visit to Kuala Lumpur, apart from the fact that it involved participation in an important festival, was in itself a momentous one for him personally. It had opened up wider vistas for him. And *wayang kulit*? *Wayang kulit* had been nothing more than a mere rural form of entertainment localised to Kelantan. Even most Kelantanese outside the villages did not take it seriously; it was at best a mere curiosity, a frivolity. And outside Kelantan not many were even aware of its existence. With

him, as already seen, it had undoubtedly become a passion. More importantly, it was a means of possibly earning a livelihood. But even that was in doubt as the past two years since his *sembah guru* performance had turned out to be. What the *wayang kulit* was above and beyond that he was totally unaware of. Its full potential was as yet undemonstrated; he had not begun to intellectualise it; all that lay in the future.

Following the August 1969 Kuala Lumpur performance, then, things had been moving fast, things Hamzah himself was not fully aware of. These mostly involved Sheppard, the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, UNESCO and certain foreign agencies through whose efforts the three early and highly important trips overseas were to materialise. He was not given all the details. On his part he had gathered around him his younger set of musicians as suggested by Sheppard and rehearsed them thoroughly, so that they could perform with precision. Precision was in fact, throughout his career as a *dalang*, to be the hallmark of his performances.

By mid-December 1970 Mubin Sheppard had been able to announce at the weekly luncheon meeting of the Petaling Jaya Rotary Club that Hamzah's troupe would visit Europe and the United States the following year. This announcement appeared in the *New Straits Times* on December 16. The tour was being arranged by the International Institute for Comparative Music Studies, a body sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). As it eventually turned out, Hamzah's first overseas trip did not include the United States of America. That country Hamzah would visit at a later date, in 1974, following a 1973 trip which would take him to Iran, Eastern Europe and Russia.

Hamzah's first trip in particular, and the two later ones that were to take him once again to Europe in addition to the United States and Russia, mark the climax of his career as a *dalang*. Although since those early years he has matured considerably as a person and as a performer, the four years 1971-1974 marked the most glorious period in Hamzah's life as an artist. Those years were to see him not only establish his own reputation internationally as a great puppeteer but also to take the humble



THE KUMPULAN SERI SETIA'S MEMBERS WERE BEING MEASURED BY A TAILOR WHO WAS ASSIGNED TO MAKE THE NECESSARY ATTIRE FOR THE EUROPEAN TOUR. (1971)

wayang kulit Kelantan far and wide beyond his wildest dreams. He served, in the process, as Malaysia's cultural ambassador in a manner in which no person has done before or after him. The enthusiasm with which his performances were received in all the lands he touched serves as eloquent testimony to Hamzah's greatness as an artist and his enthusiasm for maintaining not only the classic purity of his art form but also the highest possible standards of performance. These qualities were to remain with him for the rest of his career, coupled with his passionate dedication to his art.

Reflecting upon all this early response to the *wayang* and to later events that were to bring many a casual foreign visitor, and more importantly, foreign academicians and researchers to his door in Kampong Gerong, and realising the seriousness with which these visitors took his art form, he often commented on the depressing lack of interest amongst Malaysians at nearly all levels of society in *wayang kulit* as well as in other arts forms such as *mak yong*. Over the years only a handful have emerged to establish themselves in these areas. He often expressed his view that in future one would have to visit America, in particular, to study Malaysian *wayang kulit*, musing that while the *wayang kulit* would one day decline, and perhaps even disappear in the land of its origin, it would possibly still be active in academic

institutions in the West.

Following intense preliminary preparations principally done under the guidance of Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard, it was possible by the 16th of December 1970 to announce that the Seri Setia troupe would leave for Europe sometime in March 1971, with the likelihood that it would be in that continent for more than three months, returning in July.

Also mentioned at this point was the possibility that the troupe would make a visit to Tunisia in North Africa in addition to several European countries—France, England, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Yugoslavia, Austria and Belgium.

The troupe was scheduled, among other things to take part in several festivals including the Rennese Festival, the Nantes Festival (both in France), the Verona Festival in Italy and the Hammameh Festival in Tunis. Apart from that, performances would be held in historical sites, and well-known theatres. These included The theatre de L'Hotel de Nille Maison De La Culture in Bourges, France; the Zagreb Museum in Yugoslavia (now Croatia); the Picoto Teatro Milano in Milan and the Museum des zo Jahrhunderts in Vienna.

The group, consisting of Hamzah himself, Wan Midin bin Wan Majid (the gong player), Isa Samad and Sulaiman Che Soh (the *gendang* players), Awang Salleh the *serunai* wizard, Ismail Samad and Hussein Awang Chik (the *gedumbak* players), Dollah Salleh (the *canang* player) and Osman Che Mat who played the *kesi*, finally prepared to leave in the third week of March 1971. They spent several days in Kuala Lumpur to get themselves organised and outfitted in brand new Western suits as well as baju Melayu. Hamzah relates how Tan Sri Nik Ahmad Kamil, then Speaker of the Malaysian Parliament spent

THE GROUP TOGETHER
WITH THE LATE
TAN SRI MUBIN
SHEPPARD
IN KOTA BAHRU
BEFORE THEY
LEFT FOR
KUALA LUMPUR.
(1971)



time with them, teaching them certain basic social practices, including the art of using forks and spoons, that would prove useful for them in Europe. The specially selected leader of the troupe was to be Nik Muhammad bin Nik Man of the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs who at that time was the Information Attaché at the Malaysian Embassy in Bangkok. Nik Muhammed was considered highly suitable to lead the Malaysian contingent due to his previous experience in Europe, having served in the Malaysian Embassy in West Germany.

Following several rehearsals in Kuala Lumpur and other initial preparations, an hour-long preview performance was held by the Seri Setia Wayang Kulit troupe of Kampung Gerong before the Seri Paduka Baginda Yang Di-Pertuan Agong and the Seri Paduka Baginda Raja Permaisuri Agong at the Istana Negara on the March 21 1971. Others present at the preview were Tengku Puan Besar Kursiah, the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, Datok Hamzah bin Datok Abu Samah and his wife Tok Puan Zainon, as well as members of the Diplomatic Corps. The Yang Di-Pertuan Agong and the Raja Permaisuri Agong hosted a dinner in honour of the troupe.

Exact Details regarding this and other trips are not fully available. From reports submitted by the foreign embassies, which included reports in newspapers in their home countries, it appears



ONE OF
THE ATTIRE
MADE FOR
THE GROUP



THIS GROUP PHOTO WAS TAKEN AFTER THEIR PREVIEW PERFORMANCE BEFORE THE SERI PADUKA BAGINDA YANG DI-PUJUAN AGONG AT THE ISTANA NEGARA ON MARCH 21, 1971 BEFORE THEY LEFT FOR EUROPE.

that the tour was highly successful. Hamzah, in particular, the virtuoso artist, seems to have made a tremendous impression upon those his audiences in the performances which began in Nice, France. Later Hamzah's troupe performed in Paris before proceeding to the United Kingdom, Germany, Yugoslavia, Italy, Spain, Austria, Belgium and Tunisia. During the tour Hamzah and his fellow performers were to visit Paris several times; that city served as the troupe's European "base". To Hamzah's satisfaction, and obviously to the satisfaction of the sponsors, performances were enthusiastically received wherever the troupe visited. A Paris newspaper, *Le Monde*, for instance, and a weekly magazine *Paris-Match*, devoted full columns to Hamzah's performances at the eighth Festival of Royan Musical Tower of Bebel. The *Paris-Match* write-up described the whole performance as "fascinating" and Hamzah as an enchanting story teller. *Le Monde's* Theatre critic, Antonin Artaud, wrote: "The music of the *wayang kulit* contains a dramatic power which thoroughly penetrates one's flesh. The vibration of the drums, the irregular rhythms of which incessantly break up the tempo of the gongs, seem to emanate from the earth." He further added that "the sunset is beautiful because of all that disappears with it. The shadow play, whether comic, epic, popular or sacred, has the same beauty. It is stirring for all that it conceals, it is real for all the things which constitute it." After the Royal Festival, Hamzah's troupe performed in the Espace Pierre Cardin, a new theatre designed by the French couturier well

known for his fashions. Later it took part in the programme of the Theatre des Nations.

In West Germany, which the troupe toured in mid-April 1971, about a week following the visit to that nation of the then Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, the response was equally enthusiastic. Performances were held in Berlin, Cologne, Bonn and Baden-Baden. The audiences, made up of senior government official, diplomats and the general public, described the performance as "fascinating" and "astounding". Also present at the Berlin performance was the then Malaysian ambassador to Germany, Tan Sri Philip Kuok. Hamzah's tour presented German audiences with their first ever opportunity to view an example of Malaysian *wayang kulit*, and they were certainly enthralled. Reports in the newspapers described Hamzah's technique as brilliant and refined, while Hamzah himself was described as one of the greatest living interpreters of the shadow play.

Details regarding his performances in the other countries are lacking, apart from the dates. Hamzah's troupe was in France from March 31 to April on May 15, and passed through Paris several times on his way to and from other European countries. He visited Italy, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Switzerland, Yugoslavia as well as Belgium before crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Tunisia, his last stop. In that city he performed at the Festival of Hammett for four days from July before heading for home.

It had been an exciting period of three and a half months, replete with new experiences, some memorable in a serious sort of way, others comic, as the members of the troupe tried in various ways to cope with both the cooler European weather, or with simple details of how to conduct themselves in an altogether unfamiliar environment. It was their first exposure to another culture and environment; many experienced culture shock, and each of those who still survive, for some of the original members of the first European trip have passed away, have to this day their own little stories to tell. Undoubtedly much of the "training" they



HAZAH IS SEEN HUGGING A LITTLE CHILD IN ONE OF HIS TRIPS ABROAD. (1970's)

ed in Kuala Lumpur from Tan Sri Mubin and Tan Sri Nik Ahmad Kamil before departure for Europe proved useful.

The reports upon their return were able, as they undoubtedly had to be, given success of the tour. According to Nik Ahmad bin Nik Man, the *wayang* musicians all houses wherever they went. "People backstage after performances, asking questions, wanted to touch the instruments and go into the night," he told the *New Straits*.

Mubin Sheppard gave his assessment. Group's success was due to its novelty. That was the first time the Malaysian shadow play had performed in the countries Hamzah and his visited. There was excellent publicity, and success of each performance brought more publicity in the form of good write-ups in newspapers and magazines. Both the success of the *wayang kulit Kelantan* and its particularity when masterly performed, to various as well as casual audiences was

now confirmed. And, as was to be expected, once the troupe was back, the question "What next?" inevitably came up. Had the overseas tour been successful for the right reasons? Calls for an evaluation of the shadow play within the context of Malaysian society were raised as were important questions relating to future of the genre itself.

Writing in the *New Straits Times* on August 1 1971 Adibah Amin said: "After enthralled audiences in 31 towns of 10 countries, our *wayang kulit* is quietly fading back into obscurity." The important issue then, as now, was the role of *wayang kulit* in Malaysia itself. As Adibah says "Abroad it certainly helped to put Malaysia on the map". But what shape and what colour of Malaysia was it?" The words such as those used by Artaud and other critics to describe performances and performers alike "demonstrate the Western concept of the Orient as something mystical

and semi-barbaric. . . An affluent, technologically advanced, artistically sophisticated Western society might see in such semi-primitive art the primeval and the mystical."

But in the local context, did the *wayang kulit* need to be in some way changed in keeping with the times, to present complex modern issues? The whole question of the role of the shadow play, and of course other traditional performing arts in the modern Malaysian society, and even in the Islamic environment of this country, have come up time and again, without, as things stand, there being any obvious final answers. Some of these issues will come up for discussion again in a later chapter of the present work where the issue of the ban on traditional performing arts, including *wayang kulit*, in Kelantan state is discussed. As is to be expected, Hamzah, as a spokesman for his generation of artists, has very strong feelings about some of these matters. Adibah expressed a concern which many felt at that time. Her final comment is telling "Now they are happily back in

HAMZAH WAS PRESENTED THE PINGAT PANGKUAN NEGARA IN 1974 BY SERI PADUKA BAGINDA YANG DI-PERTUAN AGONG FOR HIS ROLE IN PROMOTING MALAYSIA AND THE TRADITIONAL GENRE INTERNATIONALLY.



Kelantan, with a Swiss watch each, presents for their families, some money to mend a leaky roof and a bit to save. Until the next festival of traditional art, they will probably stay in their villages, content to give the usual performances to a genuinely appreciative audience after harvest, at weddings and at festivals."

This is exactly what happened to Hamzah's troupe, except that, in their case, it was not just another festival of arts that brought them out of Kelantan; it was another overseas tour, not as extensive as the first, but important nevertheless.

His second overseas tour took Hamzah and his Seri Setia *Wayang Kulit* troupe to Iran, Rumania, Bulgaria and Russia. The troupe was this time led by Abdul Ghaddas bin Mohamed Arif, an officer with the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. In Iran Hamzah and his companions performed at the prestigious Seventh Festival of Arts at Shiraz in September 1973. Utih in his column, *Talking Drama*, in the *New Straits Times* wrote on the 30th of that month: "The audience at the University

Gymnasium Hall consisted primarily of students, festival performers and also delegates of the Third World Theatre Conference held in conjunction with the Festival. A few minutes after the show began, to the annoyance of performers and festival participants alike, some of the students started to leave the auditorium. Apparently they had made it a habit of refusing to abide with boredom. The *wayang kulit* was for them too slow and cumbersome."

A young French director, whose troupe, the Athanour, had also been subjected to a similar humiliation went backstage to sympathise with the Malaysians. Utih goes on to describe how after a few minutes, the members of the audience began to move from their seats until about half were at the back of the screen. Some alternated, watching

Hamzah's performance from both sides of the screen. Suddenly two policemen appeared and began to clear the crowd off the backstage area. They had been notified of the "chaos" in the auditorium.

"But before they could be led off, the Malaysians, to their utter amazement of the concerned undergraduates, called them back. The performers were not at all upset, and if this was the way the audience wished to see the show, they were welcome to it. It was very strange at the end of the performance to hear applause from both sides of the stage. In more ways than one, the Malaysian troupe received a standing ovation."

The situation is not unusual, and even in his village performances in Kelantan, a small section of the audience always make an effort to see the performance from the other side. While in that situation this may not altogether be possible or practicable, where Hamzah performs outside the traditional village context, audiences, such as at Universiti Sains Malaysia and these

ays even at various places in Kuala Lumpur, audience members are in fact encouraged to go behind him to view the performance from the other side. The question as to which is the "right" or "proper" position from which to view a performance of the shadow play in fact has never been answered. The Javanese *wayang kulit purwa* has always provided room on both sides of the screen, originally to separate men and women. Who got the better view or the more "authentic" version is perhaps a matter of taste or opinion. Ideally, of course, to experience the shadow play in its totality, one should have access to both the shadows and the puppets themselves. Only by seeing him in action can one appreciate the puppet master.

As is usual in Hamzah's performances at home and abroad, he was in Iran, and as we have seen earlier from press reports, in Germany, the centre of attention. In the Iranian audience, few could imagine even after they had it explained to them at the beginning of the performance, that the *wayang kulit* puppeteer can do so many things at the same time, manipulating all the figures in use, providing the various voices, directing the musicians, and so on. His technique had to be demonstrated to the Iranian audience, now able to see him better from "backstage," as he tried to convince them of his abilities. At such moments, of course, Hamzah shines; he is in his element. His excellent rapport with persons of all age groups comes to his assistance. Hostility and coolness to his style of theatre, if any, turns immediately into admiration. The colourful puppets, too, create interest wherever they are taken. Inevitably where he performs there are persons wishing to buy them, and Hamzah always carries some extra puppets with him for his very purpose of selling them to interested parties. Shiraz proved no exception. Hamzah usually would not part with his older puppets. At the Conference, the vitality of the Malaysian *rayang kulit Kelantan*, which in fact is in performance much more lively than the more familiar Javanese *wayang kulit purwa*, was the subject of discussion.

Rumania has a strong tradition of puppetry with Bucharest alone having numerous theatres specifically for the performance of the puppet theatre. According to Utih, who accompanied Hamzah and his troupe from Shiraz to Bucharest, "Rumania has become one of the strongest centres of puppet drama in Eastern Europe, rivalling the legendary Obratsov Central Puppet Theatre in Moscow." Hamzah and



**HAMZAH AND MOHAMED
IBRAHIM (WITH GLASSES)
DINED WITH FOREIGN
DELEGATES AT A HOTEL IN
THE USA. (1974)**

his troupe were later to perform at this very theatre in Moscow following their Rumanian visit. The arrival of Hamzah's troupe in Bucharest after the Shiraz Arts Festival was regarded as a major theatrical event. Four shows had been scheduled, including a children's matinee. What impressed Utih was the ability of *wayang kulit Kelantan*, at the hands of Hamzah in particular, to transcend the barrier of language, and the ability of his troupe to communicate through their art. At each of Hamzah's four performances he was the centre of attention, with the backstage scene after each performance becoming almost a mandatory ritual. Hamzah would re-enact certain brief episodes to demonstrate puppet movements. As if to reward Hamzah and his troupe for their contribution in making the Malaysian *wayang kulit* so accessible to Rumanians, the Tandarika Puppet Theatre of Bucharest honoured Hamzah and his musicians with a special show of their kind of theatre and, like his Rumanian audience, Hamzah now had the opportunity to touch the marionette figures of the Tandarika to the amusement of both Malaysians and Rumanians.

For this third major overseas trip, Hamzah visited the United States of America, the American tour being followed by a brief visit to England and Holland. The Seri Setia troupe, consisting of some of its earlier members and some new ones, left Kuala Lumpur on the 25th of September 1974 under the leadership of Mohamed bin Ibrahim, a promotional official with the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The trip would take Hamzah and his troupe for a tour of three weeks in the United States of America, followed by a stay of a week in London



THIS PHOTO IS ALSO TAKEN DURING THEIR TRIP TO NORTH AMERICA. (1974)

and five days in Amsterdam. This time, the tour was organised by Malaysian Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The American visit was sponsored by a private organisation, Kazuo Hillyer International Inc., New York, while the European sector of the tour was under the sponsorship of the Asian Music Circle, London. The troupe returned to Kuala Lumpur on November 12 1974.

The extensive trip to the United States took the Seri Setia wayang kulit troupe to New York, Providence, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Washington DC Tennessee, Michigan, New Mexico and California. Not all details of the performances are available. Mohamed bin Ibrahim is able, however to confirm that Hamzah and his musicians did perform at various educational institutions including Wesley College in Massachusetts, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, the Eastern New Mexico University, the University of California and at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC.

The American performances were attended by audiences highly critical and sensitive to other cultures, especially the Asian. But Hamzah, the master performer was triumphant. According to a statement issued by the United States Information service "wave after wave of applause surged from the audience as it gave the shadow players encore after encore." The troupe's American narrator said that the audience in the University of California, to which the USES report also referred, was "the most expressive and responsive" of any audience in the nine cities in which the troupe had performed. Many of those who attended the performances were in fact people already familiar with the traditional performing arts of Indonesia, especially the *gamelan* and *wayang kulit*. For these genres has been a following since some of the earliest pioneers such as Jane Bell, Mantle Hood, James Brandon, Judith Beaker and others first studied them, and, through the efforts of such researchers and scholars various universities in the United States to this day offer courses in Javanese, music, dance or theatre. But the Malaysian shadow play was something new, and although William P. Mall of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor had documented Kelantanese Malay traditional performing arts, including *wayang kulit Kelantan*, this particular style of theatre had never before been performed in the United States. In fact several years later, one of Mall's and Beaker's students, Patricia Matusky, was first to study *wayang kulit Kelantan* in its home base in Kelantan with no less a teacher than Hamzah himself, and then teach the genre at the University of Michigan. According to Fern Ingress, a specialist in Southeast Asian social

BERITA HARIAN

Wayang Kulit Malaysia dapat sambutan hangat di-benua Eropah

12 Jun 1974

Rekodkan

009 PERILIS SUKARFFA



KUMPULAN SERI SETIA
IN ROME, ITALY. (1990)

and cultural traditions, who saw Hamzah perform, many attended his performances to sample another culture rather than for entertainment. Kazoo Hillyer, head of the firm that organised the United States tour, said that his firm was proud to have been associated with Hamzah and his troupe, particularly given the high quality of their performances. He too believes that familiarity with Southeast Asian traditions certainly helped in bringing about a better and more serious appreciation of the *wayang kulit* Kelantan. Hamzah's reputation too seems to have preceded him. According to an observation of Mohamed Ibrahim, the troupe's leader, Hamzah was already well-known in America at the time that his troupe performed in that country. This, he believes, was the result of reports by previous observers of the shadow play, including Amin Sweeney. It is interesting to note too that members of his audience generally preferred to have direct communication with Hamzah himself rather than have a narrator explain the proceedings. To some extent this was possible due to the fact that enough people could handle basic Bahasa Indonesia, and where this was not the case, apparently Hamzah's little English was sufficient to enable him to establish rapport with his admirers.

A brief deviation took the troupe to Vancouver in Canada, before Hamzah and his musicians visited London and Amsterdam. In Vancouver the group gave a performance at the Simon Fraser University. In London their arrival was marked by a reception hosted by the Malaysian High Commissioner on November 5. As far as *wayang kulit* performances were concerned, they had a four-night season between November 6 and 9 beginning on November 6 to November 9th, with a performance for Malaysian students at Malaysia Hall. This was followed by performances at the Darlington Art Society and the Horniman Museum in Crystal Palace. Their brief British stopover concluded with a final performance at the Commonwealth Institute in Kensington.

During a brief visit to Holland, a performance took place at the Rheicht (something) Museum in Amsterdam. According to Mohamed Ibrahim among the audience members was William P. Malm of the School of Music, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, to whom reference has already been made. Some of Malm's comments following the performance apparently created quite a stir. These had

principally to do with the manner in which he thought the *wayang kulit* should have been presented. It appears that, firstly, he would have liked to have seen performances done outdoors in the traditional intimate manner instead of in air-conditioned auditoria filled with hundreds of people, given that the form itself was one that could be best appreciated in such an intimate situation. Secondly, he voiced a strong preference for full-length performances rather than those which attempt to give merely a sampling of the genre. In his opinion such truncated performances did not seem to give enough respect to the genre itself. Malm's genuine concerns regarding both the authenticity of the traditional performing arts and the fact that they should be presented in a manner as close as possible to the original style and ambience, among others, are, in fact, quite well known to many Malaysians, particularly to those who have been following the progress of the proposed National Theatre since the late

sixties or early seventies. Hamzah himself would probably totally endorse Malm's stand.

Upon return from their third, and yet another highly successful, overseas trip, Hamzah and his troupe were again subject to the same sort of analysis as they faced, in particular, following their extensive 1971 trip to Europe. Questions regarding the wisdom of sending such troupes overseas were raised. The selection of the shadow play itself, in preference to other performing arts, was questioned. In a Press interview on October 12 1974 the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, Rais Yatim, while conceding that other genres of traditional theatre should be considered for similar treatment, maintained that such tours were highly beneficial for they introduced Malaysian culture in other lands. It could not be considered a waste of money. As Malaysia was fast modernising it was important, he stressed, not to neglect the

HAMZAH ON A FERRY WHICH TOOK HIS GROUP TO ELBA ISLAND, ITALY. (1990)





THE GROUP
IN PARIS. (1990)

ditional arts of the country. It was not the fact that Hamzah had visited so many countries that is important, according to Rais Yatim, but the fact that so many serious researchers at various universities had been drawn to the Malaysian shadow play, to the extent of wanting repeat performances. They were attracted to the high artistic qualities in the many-faceted wayang which in itself was aesthetically pleasing.

Similar opinions were also expressed by Ismail Zain, the Director of Culture in the same ministry. The *wayang kulit* performances allowed him an opportunity to expose traditional Malay culture and to demonstrate to the world that these art forms were alive and active in the country. The Americans in particular, he said, were interested in Asian arts, and had shown their appreciation for the Malaysian *wayang kulit*. Ismail Zain indicated that as far as costs were concerned, the Ministry had only to provide the air fares. The rest was taken care of by various foundations and private organisations.

The Ministry officials had of course, also to defend the selection of Hamzah instead of other, more experienced puppeteers. In 1975 and 1977 Hamzah and his group were again selected to represent Malaysia at international festivals in Burma (Myanmar) and Hong Kong respectively.

Hamzah, of course had totally proven himself, for even as *dalang go*, he was a rarity. He had more than vindicated his selection to be Malaysia's ambassador of culture. What was to come beyond the tours was now to become the issue. As it turned out, despite the unprecedented international exposure so early in his career as a puppeteer, Hamzah, although no one, including Hamzah himself, was in a position to know at that point, was to enter a period of near-oblivion. Although he remained consistently active in many a different role, particularly performing and teaching wayang, never again, until 1990 when the ministry invited his group to perform at the Avignon Festival in France and Roma Europa Festival in Italy.



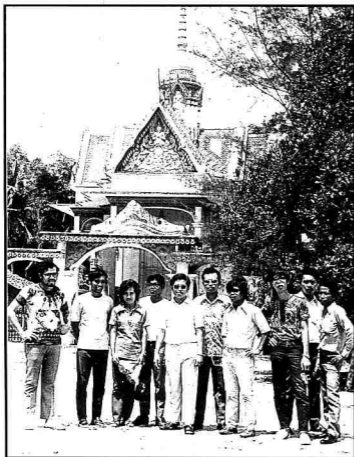
Involvement in the Teaching of Wayang Kulit

PART from his principal role as wayang kulit Kelantan puppeteer Hamzah's achievements include the fact that for well over two decades now he has been able, uninterrupted and with considerable success, to teach the genre with which his name has become almost synonymous. He could not so much as have dreamed, in the early days of his career as *alang*, that his expertise as puppeteer and the as yet untested skills as a teacher of that genre, were to be so fruitfully combined to make wayang kulit Kelantan accessible to perhaps thousands of persons of all ages who would all aim to the honour of being his students. His students have included university undergraduates including a few belonging to his own age group coming in through Universiti Sains Malaysia's off-campus programme as well as such younger pupils fresh out of school. Not all who passed through his hands, however, have achieved anything more than mere exposure to the wayang. That is what they came for and that all that they both needed as well as managed to obtain, not because Hamzah was unwilling to give them more, but because of the constraints that existed. After all short courses in any of the additional art forms can do no more than provide basic exposure. There was an occasion when a teacher who had retired for two years wished to register for the wayang kulit course at Universiti Sains Malaysia. He was told that the course would be physically demanding since it involved playing wayang kulit instruments, that he would have to spend long hours twice every week in evening sessions, and so on. But he insisted on taking the course anyway. His reasons for doing so were simple enough. "I am Malay," he said, "and I have lived in this country all my life. But I do not know anything about Malay culture. That is a shame". His expectations were that the wayang kulit course would open a little window into his own heritage and artistic traditions. There have been many such instances, and Hamzah states that if out of the vast numbers of students who have passed through his hands, a few have benefited from what he has had to offer over the years, even if it is not profound wisdom, he would rest satisfied.

Hamzah thoroughly enjoys his role as a

teacher, and most of his students share his enthusiasm for wayang once they have been exposed to it, even though the vast majority of them have never, in their lives, had an opportunity to view it. Like a group of Lions Club members in Penang to whom I had the occasion to show a selection of puppets during a luncheon meeting many years ago they ask "Are these really made from hide?" And when they go into the intricacies of the origins of the shadow play tradition, the manner of the making of those flimsy figures out of raw cow hide, the music that once heard seems to resound in their ears during sleep, and, most of all, the impossible-seeming techniques of the puppeteer, they are hooked. And so, from far and near, they come to Hamzah. Hamzah fondly looks back at the achievements, at least in class, of some of his past students, and a few names come up again and again in his discussions regarding his now many-faceted teaching career. Most of Hamzah looks back proudly to the achievements of Patricia Matusky, his star student and today, perhaps the world's leading scholar not only of wayang kulit Kelantan music, but also of traditional Malay music in general.

Patricia Matusky arrived in Malaysia in late 1975 armed with a Fulbright-Hays grant with the intention of studying wayang kulit music as well as conducting field work for her doctoral dissertation to be eventually submitted to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Earlier she had completed her Masters degree in music studies at the same university in Michigan. Research for her Masters thesis, also on wayang kulit Kelantan music, was based on the materials on Malaysian traditional performing arts in the vast collection built up by William P. Malm, an internationally-recognised ethno-musicologist, and placed in that university. These materials, in the form of video-tapes, were collected through fieldwork, mostly in Kelantan, that Malm did in the late 1960's following an initial exposure to *mak yong*. Though the bulk of his materials are on *mak yong*, Malm had a selection of videotapes on other genres, including wayang kulit Kelantan. On this material too the present writer spent the greater part of the winter 1974/75 semester beginning the research that



HAMZAH BROUGHT HIS STUDENTS FOR AN EDUCATIONAL TOUR TO KOTA BHARU, KELANTAN DURING HIS TENURE AS THE GUEST LECTURER AT UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA IN 1972.

eventually led to field work in Kelantan, and to a dissertation on *mak yong* dance theatre, the first ever on any area of the Malay performing arts.

It was during the period of field work in Kelantan, lasting approximately a year from February 1975, that the present writer first met Hamzah. It was an encounter and a friendship that has lasted to this day and that has considerably influenced the development of wayang kulit teaching and research in this country.

Following the completion of her official business in Kuala Lumpur, including establishing affiliation with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Patricia Matusky obtained an introduction to Hamzah through Amin Sweeney. It was in fact at Sweeney's suggestion that she made the decision to work with Hamzah. As it happened Hamzah was during that period conducting a *wayang kulit* workshop at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, which at that time occupied a

temporary campus at Jalan Universiti in Pantai Valley close to the campus of the University of Malaya. Matusky had never met Hamzah before. Following Amin Sweeney's briefing to Hamzah, Hamzah agreed to take Matusky as a student. Thus Patricia Matusky became Hamzah's first student ever. She joined him in Kelantan early in 1976.

Patricia Matusky remembers spending a great deal of time on the back of Hamzah's motorcycle taking in the sights of Kota Bharu and the villages of Tumpat district mainly. She met Esah and Hamzah's children, as well as Hamzah's sister, Rosalie, and her family who lived close by along the river's edge. Soon Patricia, having been initiated into *kampung* life by Hamzah's family, got into the rhythm of research, travelling each day to Hamzah's house across the Kelantan river from Kota Bharu to Kampung Laut by boat and then cycling to his place, a pattern of activities that lasted several months. Afternoon music lessons were soon arranged to enable her to learn the drum and gong parts for all of the forty or so pieces in the *wayang kulit Kelantan's* musical repertoire. Apart from Hamzah, her teachers were Mohd Ali, Ismail, and Awang, all of them in her opinion, which has not changed over the years, excellent teachers.

Patricia Matusky also became an unofficial member of Hamzah's troupe and was soon performing one of the gong parts, eventually graduating to a situation where she would play the pair of hanging gongs (*tetawak*) regularly. Each night, following the performances, Hamzah's troupe would return to his house at Kampung Dalam Pandang, and from there Patricia would take her boat ride across the river back to Kota Bharu. At times Hamzah himself would escort her back to town. She recalls that at that time Hamzah played very regularly, at times for several weeks in a row at different villages; in most instances she would go along.

Patricia Matusky's stay with Hamzah and her attachment to the Seri Setia *Wayang Kulit* troupe did have its discomforts and problems, as far as Patricia was concerned. These were related principally to the fact that she was a foreigner, and a white woman at that, living and working in a totally traditional environment unaccustomed to such visitors. It was, in many ways, a unique situation at that time, as far as

Kelantan went. There were few foreign visitors to the state and, compared to now, even Malaysians from other parts of the country had negative feelings about going to Kelantan. It was not only physically remote from the rest of the Malay peninsula, but in addition, it somehow seemed an alien and mysterious land, the land of black magic and the notorious *kapak kecil*. Kelantan was at that time, in the mid-seventies, ruled by the Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PAS) which is now again in power in Kelantan.

Although geographically "remote" from the rest of peninsular Malaysia, and like at present, somewhat "backward" compared to the rest of the mainland, culturally Kelantan was both extremely rich (which it still is, as the cultural heartland of Malaysia) and very active; some might even say too active. For there certainly were "undesirable" elements, including night-clubs in several of the town's hotels, and all manner of activities considered by the present government as sinful or conducive to sin. Today's major hotels had not been built, but their more modest predecessors were lively enough in their own old-fashioned style. Where



Patricia Mihalosky

the Hotel Perdana now stands there was an old, decaying Rest House. Life on the whole was much more easy going; and the town used to burst into a new lease of life after dark.

For researchers in the traditional performing arts Kelantan at that point in time was nothing less than a gold mine, waiting to be fully explored. Traditional performing arts, and *wayang kulit* in particular, were at their peak, though some genres, like *mak yong*, were, even then, already threatened with extinction. Amin Sweeney counted well over a hundred active

HAMZAH ALSO HELD A WORKSHOP FOR THE UNDER-GRADUATES IN KOTA BAHRU. (1977)



dalang in Kelantan while studying the *Ramayana* with Pak Awang Lah. *Mak yong* was less fortunate. In fact in 1969, when the International Seminar on Music and Dance was held in Kuala Lumpur the genre was already threatened and a serious attempt was made to revive it following the seminar. The result was

the Seri Temenggong Troupe, led by Khatijah Awang, the group that has virtually symbolised mak yong for most Malaysians during quarter of a century. Many who remember those days tend to make a comparison with the present term of PAS rule favourably or otherwise, depending upon one's views about the role of Islam in government. During the past two decades, however the state has opened up considerably and today welcomes close to a million foreign and Malaysian visitors annually. Kota Bharu has been transformed from a small east coast town to a bustling municipality. The trappings of modernisation, including MacDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken and half a dozen glossy supermarkets, are all highly visible there. Its a far cry from the mid-seventies when Patricia Matusky reached Kota Bharu for an apprenticeship with Hamzah.

As far as Patricia was concerned, in all circumstances, Hamzah in particular, Esah and members of Hamzah's troupe came unstintingly to her assistance. The teacher-student relationship gave way into a friendship between Patricia and Hamzah that has, if anything strengthened over the years. The *dalang* and his most important student have worked closely in many different situations over the years teaching of *wayang kulit Kelantan*, particularly at Universiti Sains Malaysia. The partnership started soon after Patricia had completed her field work in Kelantan. She decided to spend some further time in Malaysia doing additional research, and was offered an appointment at

Universiti Sains Malaysia. Later upon the completion of her dissertation at the University of Michigan she was to return to Universiti Sains Malaysia as a visiting Fulbright lecturer for a year, following which she stayed on at the same university on contract before joining University of Malaya, and then returning for a stint in the United States. Following that Patricia found herself working in Singapore, and now, once again, Universiti Sains Malaysia's new music programme has reclaimed her for that institution. During each of her stints in Penang, she worked with the present writer and with Hamzah, and until the music programme was set up, she worked almost exclusively on *wayang kulit Kelantan* music. Through Patricia Matusky Hamzah came into contact with a fairly large group of American Peace Corps people. Hamzah gratefully remembers her initiative, at a difficult time in his life, when work on his present house, then under construction, had to be halted just before Hari Raya Puasa due to lack of money, in encouraging her friends from the east coast to buy shadow play puppets, even uncompleted ones, so that he would have enough money to complete the construction of his house in time for the Hari Raya festivities. In a single day, according to Hamzah he raised over a thousand Malaysian ringgit. Patricia Matusky herself sent back a complete set of *wayang kulit* puppets and instruments, purchased from Hamzah, to the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Perhaps the most important result, apart from Patricia's outstanding dissertation on the music of the shadow play, was the evolution of a system for the notation of *wayang kulit Kelantan* music. This was developed by Patricia and through her, mastered by Hamzah. Thanks both to its relative simplicity and the fact that it is easily teachable, the system is still used in the teaching of *wayang kulit Kelantan* music in the country and even far beyond its borders in places as far apart as Singapore and the United States of America.

Barbara Wright, a researcher from Yale University spent some time with Hamzah as well as other puppeteers

HIS STUDENTS
PRACTICED FOR THE
RECITAL IN KOTA BHARU,
(1977)



Patricia Matusky

performing *wayang kulit Kelantan*. More recently Beth Osnes, another American researcher on a Fulbright-Hays grant, attached herself to Hamzah for a period of six months from June to December 1991. She completed her research for a doctoral degree in theatre studies, submitting her thesis to the Graduate School of the University of Colorado in 1992. Her dissertation surveys the shadow puppet theatre. Thus three major doctoral research projects leading to



Patricia Matusky

substantial dissertations on *wayang kulit Kelantan* all derive ultimately from varying lengths of research and stay with Hamzah. Patricia Matusky's dissertation has now been published by Oxford University Press. Beth Osnes surprised as well as thrilled Kelantanese audiences by performing the *dalang muda* part in performances of Hamzah's troupe at the Cultural Complex (Gelanggang Seni) in Kota Bharu before Hamzah himself took over for the story proper. Hamzah reports that the performance was a sensation. Never before, as far as is known, had a woman performed as a *dalang* in Kelantan. The fact that she was white obviously added tremendously to the appeal. Beth's performance was in the Malay language. Eventually she performed the same episode for her examiners in Colorado.

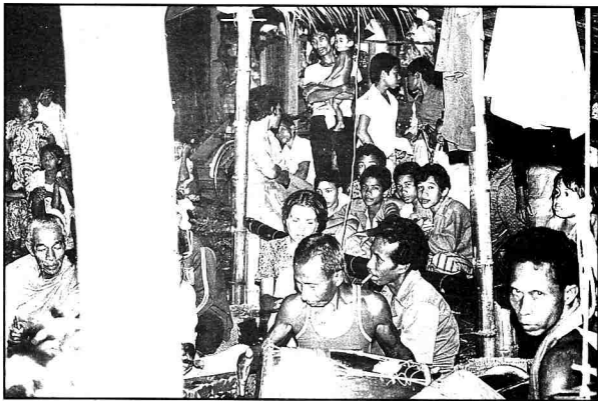
In the years before recognition finally came to him in the form of the National Arts Award (Anugerah Seni Negara), Hamzah often mused on the irony of the situation. Here there had been major researchers—the three above mentioned and the present writer himself—as well as countless other lesser investigators and observers from many a part of the world, some serious, others casual, who had picked his brains. His expertise, knowledge, wisdom and considerable experience had resulted in a vast amount of academic output in diverse forms and varying dimensions of intensity, yet, academically speaking, he himself has no qualifications. On more than one occasion has Hamzah lamented his lack of a proper formal

education, perhaps even a basic degree. He wondered if Universiti Sains Malaysia or any other such institution in the country would take him as a "mature" student, possibly in an off-campus programme, to study *wayang kulit Kelantan*, perhaps under scholars like the present writer, so that his standing in the world of the traditional arts could be "legitimised". Surely if any institution did allow this dream to become a reality that would be an irony upon an irony, for how much more than he already knows can Hamzah study regarding *wayang kulit Kelantan*? And who is there more qualified than the master himself to guide him? Over the years this wish of Hamzah's has become a source of much amusement whenever he is reminded of it.

One another instance when the Malaysian Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports wished to invite Hamzah to Kuala Lumpur for a performance following his two-day teaching stint in Penang, I asked if an air ticket was being provided. They insisted that he travel by train, second class, since he did not have the qualifications to travel by air according to the government salary scales. I told them that in that case he would not be going to Kuala Lumpur. Finally upon appeal to higher authorities within the Ministry an air ticket was obtained for him.

While showing the situation in particular with respect to Hamzah, these instances serve too to demonstrate the situation in which the traditional performing arts as well as the artists involved in such art forms found themselves not

HAMZAH OFTEN HELD DISCUSSIONS WITH HIS STUDENTS TO ENHANCE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ART. (1977)



Patricia Mastusky

PATRICIA MASTUSKY HOLDS A DOCTORATE IN WAYANG KULTI KELANTAN AFTER YEARS STUDYING AND WORKING WITH HAMZAH. SHE BECAME HIS STUDENT IN 1976

too many years ago. Today the situation has changed somewhat for the better, due perhaps to the reorganisation that has now brought the Arts together with Culture and Tourism under a single Ministry. Through government as well as private sponsorships more funds have certainly become available in recent years for the arts in general, and contemporary arts in particular. The traditional arts, however, still have to compete, often on an unfair basis with modern art forms. Nevertheless, Hamzah feels that this situation has served to project the traditional art forms, especially *wayang kulit Kelantan*, into some prominence, and the spillover is certainly being felt by the other forms of traditional theatre. Still, much remains to be done to both preserve these traditions and to expose them in their authenticity. One is reminded of the time when a possibility of doing *wayang kulit* in English for tourists was raised. One is also constantly reminded of all that lies behind the English version of *dikir barat* encountered on the television screen.

More than any other *wayang kulit Kelantan* puppeteer Hamzah has maintained the

traditional, perhaps "classical" style of *wayang kulit* both in performance as well as in the designs of his figures. He is in fact one of the very few *dalang* who have refused to compromise to the pressures of modernisation. And, more importantly, he has managed to retain his audiences.

At a particularly depressive time in his career, when attempts were made to give Hamzah a contract post at Universiti Sains Malaysia, the barriers were raised against him. The then Dean of the School of Humanities maintained the stand that given Hamzah's low academic qualifications, he could not even be considered for a gardener's post at Universiti Sains Malaysia. Eventually, when, after considerable difficulties, an offer was worked out, Hamzah did not accept it; the salary offered would not enable him to live even reasonably comfortably in Penang. He feared too that without him in Kelantan his troupe could die out; after they had gone through thick and thin with him he was not going to abandon them. Hamzah continued as part-time instructor and until March this year flew between Penang and Kota

haru in Kelantan, to conduct practical classes in *wayang kulit Kelantan*. In the long run this proved to be a right decision on the part of Iamzah, for while earning some income from the university he was still able to freely perform when opportunities came his way, travel within Kelantan and to places within the country as well as sell his puppets and musical instruments. All this also gave Hamzah the time to listen to the soothing vocal music provided by his birds in the relatively relaxed and peaceful atmosphere of his home in Kampung Gerong.

Hamzah's first official foray into teaching was in 1972 at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia where he was invited by Amin Sweeney for one academic year. Amin Sweeney himself had previously done research in the *Ramayana* repertoire of the Kelantan shadow play for a doctoral degree in London University. During his field research Sweeney worked principally with Pak Awang Lah.

In 1975 a few months after meeting Hamzah in Kelantan, and when I was completing my research on mak yong, I placed an order for a set of *wayang* puppets from Hassan bin Umar of Kampung Kedai Buluh, a contemporary of Hamzah and one who for a time had also studied

with Pak Awang Lah. The designs of his puppets, like those of Hamzah's figures, were derived from Pak Awang Lah. Hamzah wondered why I had not bought puppets from him instead, since he was a better known *dalang*. I remember telling him, jokingly, that his prices were reputedly higher than those of most other puppet makers, and that as a student on a postgraduate scholarship I could not afford to pay too much. Amused, Hamzah said that prices for these things were not really fixed, and could be adjusted for me. I assured him that I would buy some of his figures too, at some later point. When I visited him in early 1977 to discuss his possible involvement as a part time instructor in the Performing Arts programme at Universiti Sains Malaysia, I purchased from him about a dozen figures representing the principal characters of *Hikayat Maharaja Wana*. Since that time hundreds of puppets, carved and beautifully painted by the deft hands of Hamzah, have passed through my hands into my own collection, into places like Universiti Sains Malaysia (both for its museum and gallery as well as for the performing arts programme) and into the hands of numerous collectors, local and foreign. In addition, of course Hamzah's house has been a popular haunt of puppet seekers as well as those wishing to observe the master of the shadow play in action.

PATRICIA ANN
MASTUSKY

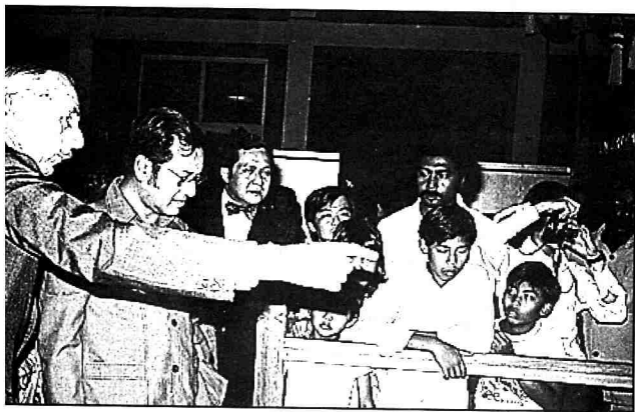


Patricia Mastusky

Satuan Muzium dan Antikwar



HAMZAH DEMONSTRATED HIS SKILL IN PUPPET MAKING AT AN EXHIBITION HELD AT NATIONAL MUSEUM IN 1978. SEEN HERE WERE YB. DATO' MOHAMAD RAHAMAT (LEFT, NOW THE MINISTER OF INFORMATION) AND THE FORMER DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM, DATO' SHAHRUL YUP (BOW-TIED)



AMONG THE GUEST
AT THE EXHIBITION
WAS YAB. DATO'
SERI DR. MAHATHIR
BIN MOHAMAD, THE
PRIME MINISTER OF
MALAYSIA (2nd LEFT,
THEN WAS THE MIN-
ISTER
OF EDUCATION)
ACCOMPANIED BY
THE LATE
TAN SRI MUBIN
SHEPPARD
AND DATO'
SHARRUM YUP.
(1978)



AMONG HAMZAH'S
STUDENTS WERE
THE PUPILS OF
SEKOLAH
KEBANGSAAN
ISMAIL PUTERA,
KOTA BAHRU.
(LATE 1970'S)

The performing arts programme of the School of Humanities was created by the present writer in the 1970/71 session, the university itself having been established in June 1969 with courses only in the Sciences. Initially, apart from basic courses in Western drama and theatre as well as in dance and music, a single course in Southeast Asian theatre was offered. With the arrival on campus of expatriate contract staff the programme was expanded somewhat, though a Malay or Malaysian component was still lacking at that point. It seemed logical, however that since Universiti Sains Malaysia's programme in the performing arts was the only one of its kind in the country as well as in the region, it should provide a greater focus upon the indigenous traditions in the performing arts. This was not possible in the first few years due to lack of expertise in the area although a number of Malaysian academicians had by then joined the staff.

A concrete plan to expose students to the principal forms of Malay traditional theatre

began to take shape in the months soon after my return from Hawaii in December 1976 upon the completion of my Ph.D. My dissertation on *mak yong* was the first ever submitted at any university for a doctorate in traditional Malay theatre. The courses in the practicum in Malay traditional theatre that came into being at that point, were designed to contain lectures on history and theory of the genres, as well as involve students in the actual practice of the selected genres with the direct involvement of practising artists themselves.

For a start *wayang kulit Kelantan* was selected. There were a number of compelling reasons for this choice, part from its intrinsic beauty as an form and its importance in Malay culture as a whole. In terms of practicality, there was the distinct advantage that the various aspects of performance and design, such as music, puppet making, and the art of the *dalang* could be taught by a single person, the puppeteer. For reasons related to origin and content, *wayang kulit Kelantan* received

preference over other styles of the shadow play, such as *wayang kulit gedek*, *wayang kulit melayu* and *wayang kulit purwa* that are also to be found in the Malay peninsula. *Wayang kulit Kelantan* was to be included in a proposed practicum in Malaysian theatre which eventually expanded to cover *bangsawan* as well. Similarly under an attempt to preserve and conserve the traditional theatre a *mak yong* project was initiated under the Student Affairs division of the Universiti Sains Malaysia. Over the years both the *wayang kulit Kelantan* and *bangsawan* projects at the university attained a considerable degree of success as well as fame, while the *mak yong* project was less successful. Eventually both the *mak yong* and *bangsawan* projects at Universiti Sains Malaysia declined and died out, while *wayang kulit Kelantan* with Hamzah in charge continued to draw students until a decision came earlier this year not to re-employ Hamzah. That decision in all probability means that *wayang kulit Kelantan* will never again be featured in that University's curriculum.

When the course started in July 1977, I taught it together with Hamzah, and that arrangement has continued until the present. One year Amin Sweeney, on sabbatical in Malaysia, was also involved, and Patricia Matusky has also been involved in the *wayang kulit* course during her several stints in Penang. Generally, Hamzah handles the practical part of the course, with assistance from Patricia Matusky, while I personally handle the lectures in theatre. During the 1994/95 academic year, with the shift of the *wayang kulit* course to the new music programme in the School of Humanities, the emphasis has shifted somewhat from music away from theatre, but the course structure has changed little in essentials over the years.

The decision to offer *wayang kulit Kelantan* is a regular offering on the curriculum in the Performing Arts programme at Universiti Sains Malaysia in fact turned out to be a momentous event with far reaching implications and effects. The course represented, for this country, a unique experience affecting not only *wayang kulit* but other disciplines in the performing arts as well, for eventually *bangsawan* and to some extent *mak yong* began to receive similar attention in an organised manner. Never at any point in time before had any of the traditional performing arts disciplines been taught in this manner at any Malaysia institution of higher

learning. The benefits of the resultant research and documentation are almost incalculable, as is also the value of Hamzah's output and contribution towards *wayang kulit* related research in particular and research in other areas such as *main puteri* as well.

A format had to be created for Universiti Sains Malaysia's *wayang kulit* course. The structure that eventually came into being gave emphasis to the practical aspects of performance while also requiring students to become familiar with the origins and history of the shadow play as a whole, the repertoire of stories, and the rituals that went into a *wayang kulit Kelantan* performance. This structure for the *wayang kulit Kelantan* courses eventually became a model for other practical courses in traditional theatre not only at Universiti Sains Malaysia, but also in places like the National Academy of Arts (Akademi Seni Kebangsaan) which was set up in 1994. A special course was for a while developed in *dalang* techniques and again another specialised course was designed to teach students the art of making *wayang kulit* puppets. In all aspects traditional techniques inherited by Hamzah in his own training were employed.

As far as other aspects of *wayang kulit* such as the stories, the rituals as well theatrical elements are concerned, the present writer has been the greatest beneficiary of both Hamzah's unbounded wisdom and his unfailing generosity. Through the years since about 1980, perhaps hundreds of hours of actual contact with Hamzah have yielded an immense amount of material has been collected on these aspects of *wayang kulit*, and, more recently, on *main puteri* as well. Some of the material lies in archival collections locally; some is in collections overseas. Some of it has seen publication; much of it remains to be published. Future generations of scholars will undoubtedly owe a debt of gratitude not only to the researchers who have made such material available, but, even more so, to Hamzah and others like him who have been the very source of such materials.



Bomoh and Main Puteri Performer

Hamzah had been involved in some sort of elementary *bomoh* activity from his early days as *wayang kulit Kelantan* puppeteer, principally learning the basic rituals required for purposes of theatre opening and closing first from his father, Awang Amat, and then from Pak Awang Shah.

This much of involvement with the supernatural is in fact a requirement for any well trained *dalang* although some puppeteers, instead of conducting these rituals themselves, obtain the services of qualified *bomoh* just to ensure that no mishap takes place during performances. On the whole the *buka panggung* rituals are far more important and elaborate compared to those for closing a theatre. A number of Islamic verses from the Holy Quran are used before the officiating *dalang* or *bomoh* cites invocations addressed to the Muslim saints and various categories of supernatural beings believed to be present in the environment. Following the invocations, usually addressed to about a dozen different categories of beings, offering are made to the environmental spirits with a view to obtaining their goodwill. Subsequent rituals "open" the musical instruments so that they sound good and are able to retain an audience and finally the theatre itself is ritually opened. The *dalang muda* section is next featured before the senior *dalang* comes over to perform the story selected for the evening.

Upon the completion of a performance similar but simpler *mantera* are recited to express the *dalang's* thanks to the spirits for their co-operation as well as to close the *panggung*. This is done to ensure that none of a negative effect firstly of contact with the supernatural, and secondly with the evil characters of the *Ramayana* story itself affects the performers. It is believed that in the event the rituals are not properly conducted, and a *panggung* closed upon the completion of a season, the spirits may return to attack those involved in the performance as well as audience members or to demand a proper measure of offerings, if these have been insufficient or altogether absent. Should another *panggung* be held for another season of performances, it has to be opened in precisely the same manner. Similar rituals to open and close a theatre are

also used, with slight variations, but with precisely the same functions as those outlined above, in almost all other genres of Malay traditional performing arts.

As a *dalang*, Hamzah had learnt these rituals fairly early. In addition, from a fairly early age he occasionally did elementary sessions of something called *siup* or *siup jembalang*. This involves the reading or recitation of specific invocations, singing or the telling of ancient stories derived from the repertoire of *mak yong*, for instance, to arouse the spirit (*semangat* or *angin*) of a patient or even to drive away negative forces enlodged within a patient. Initially such *siup* may be done for diagnostic purposes and once the malady has been identified the *siup* sessions change their purpose to healing. The *siup* process is a very simple one not involving any musicians. A *bomoh* is thus able to perform such a ritual without any assistant or paraphernalia. In the case of Hamzah there was already a strong foundation of ritual through *wayang kulit* and this he could utilise here. The invocations used in *buka panggung* rituals, can, with appropriate modifications be also used in *siup* and other varieties of healing.

As far as Kelantanese traditional healing methods go, *siup* is perhaps the simplest. More elaborate methods such as *bagih* and *main puteri* come into play where *siup* does not help. *Bagih* is most effective, according to Hamzah, in cases involving black magic or witchcraft. It involves the participation of two performers, a *bomoh*, known as *tok bagih* who goes into trance, and an interrogator, whose function is to question the spirits who possess the body of the *tok bagih*. In *bagih* too, no musical instruments are used and the only notable stage property is a bunch of leaves. There are obvious similar elements between *bagih* and *main puteri*, the most sophisticated and elaborate of all these healing rituals, which Hamzah eventually mastered. Although familiar with the belief system underlying *bagih*, this being in general similar to that behind other traditional Malay healing arts, Hamzah did not learn *bagih* nor has he ever performed it. It is in *main puteri* that he eventually established his reputation as a healer.

Hamzah recalls that from 1971 to about 1984 he was never really healthy. Although the

precise nature of his illness, and even its cause could not be defined or ascertained, its effects were quite severe. Basically the result was an inability to eat or sleep, and a result of the deprivation of both sleep and food, he lost a great deal of weight, becoming thinner each day. Hamzah tried a variety of healing techniques, going from one *bomoh* to another, but with little success. He recalls two specific events that, in his assessment, were significant.

At one stage, desperately looking for a cure, he found a *bomoh* named Ibrahim in Pasir Mas. Ibrahim decided that the illness was quite serious and it had come about as a result of the machinations of one of his previous wives. She had given him something to eat, and this was the beginning of his problems. With the passage of time the problems became more serious, however, as black magic had been used. The *bomoh* believed that something had been planted under Hamzah's house. Sure enough, when Hamzah and the *bomoh* dug under Hamzah's house, they discovered what seemed like chunks of human flesh and oil derived from the dead. With the removal of the offending articles and the necessary counter magic, Hamzah recovered.

About the time when he had to go to Europe in 1971 Hamzah became quite ill. Due to the fact that arrangements for the trip had already progressed considerably, there was no way in which they could be altered. Upon his return from a his European tour, which was in fact quite successful despite his ill health, Hamzah's illness became quite severe. He would suffer not only from physical pain but also from breathing difficulties, particularly during the night. Esah would help him by massaging him or even standing on him, and stamping his body with her feet. But Hamzah had to find a healer, and so once again, there began a round of visits to various specialist *bomoh*. Hamzah says that each time he visited a *bomoh* he would himself try to learn the techniques used. Fortunately for Hamzah most of the *bomoh* were quite willing to at least give him the information he sought regarding the rudiments of their art.

Hearing of a well-known *woman bomoh* in Bachok, whose name has escaped him, Hamzah went to her for consultations. Holding a keris in her hand, she asked him to sit on the floor with legs outstretched. She then started reading various verses from the *Holy Quran* before going into incantations in what appeared

to Hamzah to be the Thai as well as Javanese languages. Following these incantations she went on uttering "I love you, I love you, I love you" in English. Hamzah understood the meaning of this phrase but was left wondering what specific function it had in the healing process, and even, if at all, the *bomoh* was genuinely trying to assess his problem. It was even for him a rather strange situation, to say the least.

Upon enquiry from him, she told Hamzah that a woman was involved. She wanted Hamzah, and had done some mischief. To achieve her objective of getting him, she had used a powerful *bomoh* in Narathiwat, Thailand who had charged his client the tidy sum of \$600.00. The woman *bomoh* was prepared to assist Hamzah by counter magic which would remove the malicious effects of the Thai charm. For her services she demanded \$247.00 and a few cents plus the usual items of offerings (*pengkeras*) prepared for such occasions—tumeric rice, seven pieces of *batik panjang*, *pulut semangat* and so on. Hamzah replied that he would go back home and think about it; he had to raise the money if he wanted the attempted cure by this woman *bomoh* to go on. At home, when reflecting upon his illness, and his meeting with the woman *bomoh*, Hamzah became even more confused. He was not really certain as to the next possible step, although he knew for sure that something had to be done to release him for the illness which had reached a critical point.

A few days later Esah suggested that they go to her cousin's house in Bukit Tuku, near Batu Karang, in the Pasir Mas area to watch *main puteri*. Her cousin, Bidah, was at that time learning this particular style of healing. Up this point, although he was to some extent familiar in very general terms what *main puteri* was and has even seen several performances of the genre, he had not taken it seriously. To him it was just one of the many such art forms that were active in Kelantan, a State which had a reputation for supposedly being the base of much that was considered black magic. Hamzah felt that there would be no harm in his going to Bidah's place to watch *main puteri*.

When Hamzah and Esah arrived in Bidah's house the next evening a troupe of performers was already in action. Some of them immediately recognised Hamzah. An invitation from Bidah for Hamzah to participate in the performance by singing was turned down by



Ghulam-Saniwar Yusuf

HAMZAH
BEGAN TO
PERFORM A
SCENE OF
THE MAIN
PUTERI - A
TRADITIONAL
THERAPY.
(1994)

him. He had never before been really exposed to the genre. His feeling of shyness and the desire not to make a fool of himself prevented him from participating. He preferred to watch. When the activities ceased for the night he had made a decision to return to Bukit Tuku the following evening to watch the continuation of the healing activities.

On the second night too Esah accompanied him to Bukit Tuku. This time too, Bidah's persuasions to get Hamzah involved were unsuccessful. Although the urge was present in him, he could not persuade himself to become involved by singing. On the third night, however, following further persuasion by Bidah and the performers, when the *rebab* player began to play his piece, Hamzah recognised it as *lagu pak yong muda*, a song already familiar to him from *wayang kulit Kelantan* and *mak yong*. This time Hamzah gathered enough courage to participate by singing. Following the practice session, Bidah told Hamzah that, in her opinion, he had the ability to perform *main puteri*, and that he should consider taking it up seriously. To her enquiry as to whether Hamzah he had ever learnt *main puteri* singing from anyone, he responded that it had come naturally. He had made no previous attempt to study this particular technique of healing from anyone, but had come to understand *main puteri* a little through discussions with various *bomoh*. Thus, in a sense, he understood it quite well in theory. He had never had the experience of going into trance. Through this incident, and through further investigations from Hamzah himself,

Bidah was able to assess that Hamzah's illness was due to *angin*, and nothing else. The complex concept of *angin*, in short, implies the presence of one or more repressed desires or obsessions, which, unfulfilled, can become neuroses, with all the negative side effects. This concept will be elaborated upon in greater detail further on in the present chapter together with further details regarding *main puteri*. Bidah picked up a tune, and began to sing, and then striking him gently on his back with her hand, began to cry, her tears and sobbing seemingly becoming unstoppable. This was the effect of *angin*. Bidah then came up with the suggestion that the following night Hamzah should actually perform *main puteri* at her house. Hamzah was quite willing, and with that he took his first step into true shamanism as represented by *main puteri*, the ritual theatre form which was henceforth to become his second major specialisation following the shadow play.

It appears that the circumstances, and in particular his illness, which up to that point had remained inadequately diagnosed, had determined that Hamzah should become a *bomoh*. To ascertain of there was any kind of "election" to the office of *bomoh* I asked Hamzah if through his dreams or through some other processes, he had been chosen by forces beyond his control, as is quite normal in shamanism in many parts of the world. Apparently in Hamzah's case there was no such experience. It was his own illness, if anything, that was the cause of taking his first real step in the direction of becoming a healer. Observers of shamanism point out that such a



HAMZAH ATTENDING
HIS PATIENTS.
(1994)

Ghulam-Salwar Yusuf

crisis is indeed a feature of election into shamanism in many cultures. This is something that Hamzah, naturally, was not aware of.

As it happened, on the third night, in Bidah's place, all basic preparations were made for a proper *main puteri* performance. As is quite common for small scale *main puteri* performances, this particular one did not require the building of a *panggung*. It was held in the same space as the previous night's sessions. The *buka panggung* ceremonies were performed and with the full orchestra in attendance, the vocal and instrumental music was played. Soon, with the characteristic violent shaking of his head Hamzah was getting into the trance state. In popular parlance this is described as a state in which the *Tok puteri* is possessed by invisible forces. Hamzah realised that he was going into an altered state of consciousness. Far from having any reservations or fears, he felt good. He felt he desired that state and even enjoyed it. This state is often described by *main puteri* shamans as one of "lightness" and even of "happiness". Questions began to be asked by the rebab player who generally functions in such sessions as the interrogator (*minduk*), and Hamzah, no longer himself, but a visitant spirit, responded. Several such trances took place before the sessions ended that night, and Hamzah was on his way to becoming a shaman, albeit at this point a novice.

Discussing this perhaps non-spectacular but nevertheless highly important initial entry into the world of the major form of healing that *main puteri* is, Hamzah comments that although it was *main puteri* it was merely elementary. This of course was to be expected, for much of the complexity of *main puteri* Hamzah had to appreciate fully and to master in the years ahead. There were moments when he would hesitate, be uncertain of himself; he needed prodding.

Following the session at Bidah's house where for the first time in his life Hamzah acted as *bomoh puteri* or *tok puteri*, Hamzah was not fully satisfied. He decided that he would now organise a performance in his own home, with the proper paraphernalia required for a *berjamu main puteri* performance, for the release of his own *angin*. His background in the rituals of the *wayang kulit* came in handy. There is, in fact, a considerable degree of overlap between the ritual varieties of performances in the various traditional theatre genres of Kelantan. Through the three-night performance he was able, with the assistance of others, including a friend who acted as the *minduk*, to cleanse himself of his own problems, associated, as has already been indicated, with *angin*.

Soon the word got around that Hamzah was a *tok puteri*, and within a period of two weeks following his own *berjamu* session, he

was invited to serve as *tok puteri* at a nearby kampung (he does not remember the name). His potential patient suffered from depression, something which, in the traditional *main puteri* context, is usually associated with *angin*. A few days later he went to heal a woman who was suffering from uncontrolled bleeding following an abortion. She preferred kampung treatment to visiting a hospital. Hamzah used *siup* technique. She responded, and he then followed up with *main puteri*, in his trance sessions invoking the mythical first midwife. To Hamzah's great satisfaction, his patient was completely cured.

Now other circumstances, less to do with his personal health and more with the need to earn a livelihood, came about which for the first time, in 1989, made him consider taking up *main puteri* as a profession. In July that year with the commencement of the new semester, the performing arts programme of Universiti Sains Malaysia decided, upon the persuasion of Ayub bin Ismail, the university's Culture Officer, that another *dalang*, instead of Hamzah, should be invited to teach the *wayang kulit* courses. Ayub had indicated several times over the years since he joined the university's Student Affairs Division, that he himself was a qualified *dalang* and could take Hamzah's place. Such suggestions had been rejected. Although there obviously were other untold reasons for the proposal being made in the first place, this time the proposal was strengthened by the information that there was in fact a qualified *dalang* available. This was someone named Teh, from Ayub's own village in Kelantan. Officially, the principal argument advanced in favour of this proposed new arrangement was the possibility of saving some of the money spent on Hamzah's air travel to and from Kota Bharu. Teh was at that time in Penang. Considering that Teh, although unknown as a *dalang* compared to Hamzah, was highly recommended by Ayub, the performing arts programme had little choice but to give him a trial run. As it turned out, the appointment of this new *dalang* as *wayang kulit* instructor turned out to be a serious mistake. There was no real comparison between Teh and Hamzah. The following year Universiti Sains Malaysia promptly reverted to Hamzah.

Hamzah's confidence, however, received a jolt when it struck him there was a very serious likelihood of his annual contract with Universiti Sains Malaysia being jeopardised. Even though his earnings as part-time demonstrator in

Penang were not really substantial, the money did help to supplement income he derived from *wayang kulit* performances and the sale of puppets or instruments. Hamzah now seriously considered the need for a regular source of income, as an alternative to the vagaries of *wayang kulit* performances and the, now, equally precarious part-time income derived from teaching at Universiti Sains Malaysia. This led to his decision to venture into *main puteri* which was in obvious demand in Kelantan.

Main puteri, an ancient form of healing involving trance dancing, sometimes said to derive from the legendary Kelantanese princess, Puteri Sa'adong, is fairly widespread in Kelantan. It continues to be in demand even with modernisation creeping into Kelantanese society, and despite the controversy surrounding many of the traditional performing arts, many of which are considered to be wrong from the Islamic point of view. Other opinions link this style of ritual healing with Hindu or Buddhist Tantric practices which were at one time widespread in region, or with *orang asli* rituals. All in all the origins of this genre are obscure. Without doubt, however, it is the most elaborate, sophisticated and complex form of healing in the Malay peninsula, and a true form of shamanism.

The essential element in *main puteri* is, of course, the trance which is induced in the *bomoh puteri* or *tok puteri*, who may be male or female. The *tok puteri* or shaman performs to the accompaniment of an orchestra consisting of a *rebab*, a pair of hanging gongs (*tetawak*), and a pair of double headed barrel drums (*gendang*). Once the *bomoh* goes into trance, which is achieved through music and dance, it is assumed that a spirit has entered into him. The *tok minduk* or interrogator, who usually operates as the *rebab* player in a performance, questions this new arrival. An elaborate conversation may ensue before the spirit, to the accompaniment of music is sent off, and another takes its place through a following dance, to be similarly questioned. Should it be responsible for the illness in the *bomoh's* patient, it is first persuaded not to harm the patient any more before being driven or coerced away, often with promises of food. A performance may take one or more nights, and more elaborate performances involving paying respects to a *bomoh's* teacher, for instance when a *tok puteri* graduates upon the completion of his training, are known as *berjanu* performances precisely

because offerings are given to spirits. Such performances generally last three nights.

Apart from the performances intended to chase away possessing spirits, *main puteri* is also used when a person suffers from a misadjustment of his *angin*. *Angin* does not in *main puteri*, have its literal meaning, although a *bomoh* will help if his patient suffers from too much wind in the stomach. In simple terms the term *angin* is used to indicate strong urges or desires for something or for some form of activity. Traditionally the *bomoh puteri* talk a range of *angin* with have to do with royalty (*angin raja*, *angin puteri*); those that have to do with various forms of performing arts (*angin mak yong*, *angin joget*, *angin silat* and so on); those that have to do with certain occupations (*angin bidan*, *angin pendekar*, and so on).

Basically if a person has a desire to perform one of these kinds of activities, and for some reason or other is unable to perform it over extended periods of time, the desire is suppressed and eventually turns into a psychosis bringing about in the patient a lack of interest in life, depression, obsession,

obsession or monomania. The patient himself is, oftentimes unaware of the causes of his or her illness. The interesting thing is that *angin* can be inherited. The daughter or granddaughter of a midwife, for instance, who now does not perform midwifery has the desire, albeit unconscious, buried within her. This desire must somehow be given expression. In simple cases, as already mentioned, the mere activity known as *siup* can be used to assist a patient. Where this fails *main puteri* is required. In certain performances the patient has to actually perform *mak yong*, *joget* or some other form of activity, if only tentatively, so that the inner winds are blandished, and the urge is satisfied. Patients who believe they are characters from some mythological tales suffer from complexes. By

allowing them to actually believe that they are those characters, even if only on stage, tensions are released and the patients recover.

Finally, there comes into play the Malay concept of soul or *semangat*. Briefly the traditional belief has it that a human being is the possessor of several different types of souls. The lowest soul or *semangat* may be described as a vital substance that exists in all living creatures as well as in certain non-living objects which, as a result become sacred or otherwise dangerous. Items of royal regalia, *wayang kulit* puppets or certain musical instruments, for instance, are believed to have a considerable level of *semangat*, and hence have to be carefully treated, almost as if they are living entities. As far as man is concerned, his *semangat* or lower soul can be weakened or even stolen. When this



HAMZAH CONSULTING ANOTHER PATIENT. (1994)

happens, sometimes through the use of black magic (*hikmah*) the patient becomes ill, and the only cure is for the *semangat* to be strengthened or restored, as the case may be.

On the whole it is interesting to know that in many cases where modern medicine has not been able to help, some of the traditional techniques such as *siup*, *bagih* and, *main puteri in particular* have been efficacious. In all of these of course, apart from the rituals per se, the mind obviously has an important part to play in the curing process.

When Hamzah made the decision to go seriously into *main puteri*, he went for further training to Che Dollah Puteri in Kampong Morak,

quite a reputable performer of the genre. Hamzah was already previously acquainted with this new teacher of his. Che Dollah had in fact married one of the divorced wives of Pak Awang Lah. Following that Hamzah continued his training with Pak Yusof Tok Dalang (now a haji), a *wayang kulit* puppeteer who had switched over to main puteri. Hamzah's training in *main puteri* came to a culmination when he became a student of Pak Yusof of Tumpat, and it is Pak Yusof that Hamzah acknowledges as his real *main puteri* teacher. It is with him that Hamzah did his *sembah guru* ceremony through a major *berjamu* performance in his house following the award of the Anugerah Seni Negara in 1993.

Additionally, Hamzah also acknowledges her assistance he received, particularly in the area of dance, from another *main puteri* performer, Maimunah (to Hamzah she is Mak Su Munah) now 65, of Kampung Pulau Melaka, with whom Hamzah started working approximately five years ago. Maimunah has been a *bomoh* for a period of approximately twelve years, and has been Hamzah's friend for her past forty-seven. This friendship developed further during the time when Hamzah performed *wayang kulit* in the various districts of Kelantan. Maimunah herself has been actively involved in *main puteri* only for the past seven years although she has always been exposed to the genre and has been indirectly involved in it for more than sixty years. Mak Su Munah too stresses that Hamzah's real *main puteri* teacher is Pak Yusof, and her own part in his training is extremely limited.

"Pak Soh is the one who has taught Hamzah the inner (*batin*) aspects of *main puteri*, from me he has acquired training in the practical aspects. This is because Pak Soh is not able to sing well. Hamzah was initiated by Pak Soh, and eventually he also completed his training with Pak Soh, by performing the *pelimau* ceremony."

Pelimau is a ceremony involving bathing or washing in water in which lime has been placed, and a number of "offerings" prepared. The term *pelimau* is also a shortened name for a series of activities that together constitute what is known as a *berjamu* performance. Such a performance may be done for the purposes of saluting the teachers (*sembah guru*), for wind andishment, for the release from vows, and so on. Hamzah was Mak Su Munah's second *main puteri* "student"; altogether she has had four. He regards him as the most successful of the *ur*, having mastered the techniques she taught him well, and making full use of those

techniques in his own performances.

Mak Su Munah performs *main puteri* on a more or less regular basis with the group of Tok Wan Hassan, although at times she performs independently of this troupe as a freelance artist, according to the invitations she receives. With Hamzah, she operates on a similar basis, without any permanent arrangement. She too was honoured by being invited to Hamzah's *berjamu* performance which was intended to pay homage to Pak Yusof.

Thus Hamzah, introduced to *main puteri* by his own illnesses, and starting off with fairly successful attempts at self-cure, mastered the art of *main puteri* and rose, in a relatively short time, to become one of the leading performers of this genre in Kelantan. Although familiar with a variety of healing techniques, in particular *siup* and *main puteri*, and working with a wide range of patients, Hamzah himself personally specialises in the variety of *main puteri* performances that deal with *sakit angin*. There have been cases for instance where he has been called upon to cure patients suffering from weakness of spirit (*lemah semangat*), and indeed in most *main puteri* performances there is inevitably some element of spirit strengthening or spirit recall involved for the *semangat* weakening is invariably an early stage of most illnesses that *main puteri* can cure. *Semangat* strengthening is also an important feature of the ritual performances of *wayang kulit*. In Kelantan Hamzah now has his own fairly large following for *main puteri* patients too have their own favourite doctors, (in this instance their own favourite *bomoh*) in whom their faith is near total.

From his father too Hamzah had begun to get some insight into the world of Islamic mysticism (*ilmu hakikat* or *tasawuf*). This was another area which in future years he was to explore deeply through contact with others interested in the subject, his teachers and his own reading of texts Hamzah borrowed from them. His training in *tasawuf* continued with Mat Haji Mohamed of Pohon Tanjung, Chabang Empat as well as others, culminating with Pak Su Yusof of Tumpat, his most important *main puteri* teacher. These explorations in the inner dimensions of Islam was to bring about in Hamzah an immensely clearer understanding of *main puteri*, and in particular the symbolism that is found in it. More importantly, it was to resolve for him some of the apparent conflicts that exist between *main puteri* and Islamic beliefs.



Religion And The Shadow Play



THE question whether or not the arts are permitted by Islam has been a subject of much debate and controversy not only in Malaysia but also in certain other Muslims countries. In most places the picture is not altogether clear; individuals are thus able to make their own interpretations, while officialdom is often non-committal or silent. In the absence of a clearly stated policy, then, little is done to prohibit or even to control performances except in cases where such action is warranted by vulgarity, sensitive political content and so on.

Despite the fact that Indonesia is officially a Muslim nation, the authorities there have always taken a liberal stand, even to the extent of interpreting a major Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*, from an Islamic point of view, thereby justifying its use. Islamic philosophical and mystical teachings are believed to be contained in some of the plays derived from this epic, and yet other sources even though they may, in origin, be non-Islamic. Interestingly enough, it was this year declared, following intensive discussions between the Indonesian government, cultural bodies and religious officials that performing arts are not contrary to Islamic teaching and practice. This was a momentous decision with far reaching implications for the arts. As a consequence in 1995 the Istiqlal festival was held on a greater scale than ever before in conjunction with celebrations marking fifty years of Indonesian independence. Islamic art forms including music and dances were highlighted in Jakarta, with performances even taking place on the grounds of the Istiqlal Mosque.

This example of Indonesia is cited to demonstrate the vast difference in attitudes between those of Indonesia and those encountered in Malaysia. As far as Malaysia is concerned, the licensing of performing arts of all kinds—traditional or modern—is done, with the exception of the Federal territories, at State level. As far as can be ascertained, with the single exception of Kelantan, neither in the Federal Territory nor in any of the Malaysian States is there a clearly articulated policy on the question of whether or not traditional art forms are contrary to Islam. This has resulted in much ambiguity and uncertainty. Permits for performances are often issued purely at the

discretion of the officials at the district level. Generally, the principal concern of the Malaysian authorities is to avoid vulgarity, sensationalism, and in particular issues the government considers politically sensitive.

In Kelantan there have, on and off, been statements at various levels either giving the impression that the traditional performing arts would be banned or at least limited on the one hand and statements supporting the arts on the other. Inevitably such statements come at times when officials open demonstrations, exhibitions and so on. On May 12 1971 a statement appeared in the *New Straits Times* quoting the Director General of Information, Ahmad Nordin bin Haji Mohamed Zain, as saying that the government, presumably the Federal government, planned to use the shadow play and *pantun* competitions to explain government policies. This statement appeared after a visit he made to Kelantan and Trengganu. The best *dalang* would be selected for the purpose, according to the statement, and scripts were reported as being prepared. The Secretary General acknowledged that this sort of thing had not been tried before, but he believed it would be effective. Indeed if such use of the shadow play is to be exemplified, there is no better instance of the use of that genre for propaganda purposes than in the State of Kedah, where the popular *dalang* Pah Noh of Kampung Asun has in several elections been used by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the principal party in the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition at the Federal level, during election campaigns. In 1983 a statement came from Kelantan indicating that **wayang kulit** and *dikir barat* would be banned, and there was a chorus of opposition to it. This was reported in the *Berita Harian* on December 27 that year.

The Kelantan State Assembly has a majority of members from the Parti Islam Sa-Malaysia (PAS) and Parti Semangat 46, both breakaway factions of UMNO. In 1991, a statement in the *New Straits Times* headlined "Kelantan may ban wayang kulit" appeared saying that:

"One of the oldest traditional heritage, *wayang kulit* (shadow play) may be banned. The PAS-led State Government believes it involves rituals which are against the teachings of Islam.

Putriani Maringsy



A. THE PERFORMANCE OF BERJAMU. (LATE 1970's)

Although the State Government is yet to decide on the matter, the Kota Bharu Municipal Council (MPKB) has suspended the issue of wayang kulit show permits in the district. According to an MPKB spokesman, the suspension will only be lifted if it was found that wayang kulit did not contradict Islamic principles. He did not say when the suspension came into force but it is learnt that it was enforced earlier this year when the State Government decided to review all cultural performances. The State Government had earlier this year slapped a blanket ban on *mak yong* and *menora* but later backtracked saying that they could be performed to tourists and only in an enclosed area."

Interestingly enough another statement in the same newspaper on September 26, attributed to the State Education and Dakwah Committee Chairman, Haji Yahya Othman, indicated that the State Government had decided against banning wayang kulit as it had plans to use it as a channel to promote Islamic *dakwah* programmes. He clarified that the State

government was only against the rituals performed by the puppeteers before the start of performances. These he said "constitutes a form of worshipping." In the event that the puppeteers gave up these rituals, the shadow play would be freely allowed. The Kelantan State Government, according to this statement, believed in allowing Kelantanese cultural heritage to be nurtured but it was concerned over some un-Islamic aspects of the performances.

In simple terms, whatever art forms were declared forbidden (*haram*) were considered contrary to the teaching and spirit of Islam, and thus no licences would be issued to allow their performances. Later, the prohibition against *menora* was lifted due to the fact that most of the performers are not Muslims. Most *menora*



B. BERJAMU BEING HELD ON A STAGE PERMANENTLY BUILT INFRONT OF HAMZAH'S HOUSE. (1994)

Bahagian Kebudayaan

performances in Kelantan in fact take place in Thai villages and during festivals at Thai Buddhist or Chinese temples. As it happens, of course, Malay musicians and even dancers do, at times, take part in these performances; there is much mobility of persons between the various genres, given the overall shortage of performers in the State.

The situation regarding the shadow play remained unclear, and still does. Certainly, considering the needs of tourism, some provision for the performances of this genre for tourists has been made. Tourist performances are allowed at Gelanggang Seni, the Arts Complex near the Kota Bharu stadium. At this complex, twice a week, in addition to the shadow

play, various styles of music and martial arts (specifically *silat*) as well as top-spinning may be witnessed under controlled circumstances.

At Gelanggang Seni then, the shadow play may be witnessed. Different puppeteers taking turns demonstrating their skills by rotation. Hamzah himself has occasionally performed at that site, though not quite as often as he would have wished to. Technically, hotels and tourist organisations can, of course make similar arrangements for performances at other locations.

What are the principal objections to the traditional arts? In general, according to information received from officials of the State Cultural Council, (Majlis Kebudayaan Negeri Kelantan) there are several major objections to traditional performing arts, and *mak yong* in particular.

Firstly, the fact that men and women appear on stage together, as in *mak yong*, *menora* and in many of the Malay dance styles. This situation promotes licentiousness and is thus contrary to the rules of modesty dictated by Islam. Furthermore, *mak yong* tends to have a degree of vulgarity in it, particularly in the comic sections where some of the acting even becomes physical, with men and women touching each other freely. The fact that women play the principal men's roles is objectionable.

Secondly the stories used in these genres are unsuitable. These stories, many of which are derived from Hindu or Buddhist mythology or from indigenous oral traditions that go back to the period of Malay animism, revolve around characters who are gods and semi-divine heroes. They contain fantastic themes that are illogical. Dead persons, for instance, are brought back to life in some of the plots. The contents of the stories, and their messages have little relevance to today's society.

Finally, many of these genres make use of rituals such as the *buka panggung* and *tutup panggung* ceremonies. These rituals, considered by the performers themselves as vital to the success of their performances, contain elements of belief and practice contrary to Islamic teaching and conduct. These include invocations addressed to Hindu deities as well as to a host of animistic beings from whom assistance is sought. According to Islamic teaching such requests can be considered

equivalent to worship and are thus *syirik*, since they associate other beings with Allah, the one and only God. This is the most serious of all the objections raised against the traditional performing arts.

In the case of *wayang kulit*, the use of puppets, which are images of human beings has also been cited as a possible, but not serious, problem. It is serious to the extent that the images are those of Hindu gods and legendary heroes considered to be of divine origin.

Despite these elements, however, it appears that what was really asked for by the Menteri Besar was merely a review of the shadow play with a view to possibly creating a *wayang kulit* form which would be free from the negative elements mentioned above. Over-zealous officials in Kelantan, in the various District offices, however, have interpreted this as a ban; hence they have stopped issuing licenses to *dalang* wanting to perform shadow play, except when such performances are held for tourists in Gelanggang Seni.

It should be remembered that, overall, the basic intention of these regulations and others like them which are meant to guide Muslims in Kelantan, in almost every aspect of life, is to turn Kelantan, fondly nicknamed Serambi Makkah (the corridor or veranda to Mecca), into a state that is run strictly according to Islamic principles. These principles, are not to be applied only to the performing arts, but where possible, to every aspect of a person's life. Most Muslims, I believe, will not have a problem understanding the State Government's reasons for wanting to ban or restrict the art forms involved. There is, of course, much disagreement between the Kelantan State government and the Federal authorities on these policies, the actual implementation of some of these regulations as well as the manner in which they have been implemented in Kelantan. Two areas have generally been highlighted by the media: the *hudud* laws which the Kelantan government hopes to implement, and the regulations governing the performing arts. Needless to say these issues have been politicised.

As far as the performing arts are concerned, the regulations are ambiguous at times, with consequent attempts to constantly interpret them in different ways. The media has played them up, and even at times ridiculed them. The impression given is that the

Kelantanese authorities are out to prevent people from having fun, destroying the livelihood of performing artists or even destroying tourism in their state. The fact that the Federal territory as well as other States of Malaysia are yet to come up with clear guidelines seems to have been altogether forgotten. Does this mean that the other state governments do not regard the performing arts as *haram*? No one is prepared to commit himself by answering this question. It is an undeniable fact that the traditional performing arts have suffered decline not only in Kelantan but in other States as well, States not ruled by PAS. They have not really received any kind of official support, and even with the creation of the new Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, the situation has not changed drastically. Now and then a particular group receives attention, but a concerted effort to preserve them or even to promote them is lacking.

On the ground therefore a serious situation has developed. A critical examination reveals that many important genres have become extinct: *bangsawan* in Penang, its place of origin; *selampit* in Kedah; *awang batil* in Perlis; *gebiah* in Kelantan; *dabus* in Perak, to mention but a handful. Many reasons may be cited for this state of affairs, apart from religion: competition from modern forms of entertainment, economic considerations, changing tastes of audiences, lack of official support and so on. Various articles, such the one that appeared in the *New Straits Times* on June 14 1984 written by the present author have attempted to highlight the principal reasons for the decline or demise of specific examples of the traditional



b. (1994)

Bahagian Kebudayaan

performing arts in peninsular Malaysia. Though much interest has been generated by the articles very little has been done to find an answer to the problems.

Hamzah, as the doyen of Kelantanese performers, has been involved in the controversy about the banning or control of some of these performing arts. He has seen the impact of some of these regulations on *wayang kulit* in particular, and to a lesser extent on *main puteri*. In both of these activities, as has already been seen in previous chapters, he has been

thoroughly involved for the greater part of his life. As someone with a certain prestige even before the award of the Anugerah Seni Negara to him, and more so following the event, and the consequent rise in stature, he feels an even greater responsibility to comment on these matters. If before the award he was just one of the many puppeteers in Kelantan struggling for survival through their *wayang*, albeit the most outstanding, the award has change his position considerably. He has found new strength, so that he is certainly much more vocal about these problems. His comments, which in the past used to be casual, and perhaps not taken too seriously, have now begun to shape them-

B. (LATE 1970's)



Patricia Maloney

selves into a "philosophy" of sorts regarding the performing arts.

In the obtaining of licenses for performances Hamzah has always had an edge over his fellow Kelantanese performers. This is due to his reputation, and his better rapport with the police, and with officials at the district office which, in Kelantan as elsewhere in the country, is ultimately the authority issuing licenses. According to Hamzah himself there were occasions when all he had to do was to verbally notify the local police station that he was having a performance, and then go ahead, without any harassment from them. During my own research and numerous video-recording sessions, most of which, for reasons of convenience, were held in the grounds of Hamzah's house, similar procedures were observed: essentially those specially commissioned performances were not for the public as such. This however did not prevent large numbers of onlookers to attend, and in the case of *main puteri* recording sessions to actually come in and get their *angin* released.

There have, of course been times when he has had to face difficulties, and even refusals. A particularly serious problem arose several years ago when a senior police officer in Tumpat took it upon himself to consistently refuse permits to Hamzah. He even suggested that Hamzah seek some other "non-*haram*" way of earning a living. This was of course purely a sign of the police officer's personal convictions. The matter had to be brought to the attention of Ismail Zain, the Director of Culture at the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports in Kuala Lumpur. I believe the Ministry's intervention helped. Later when that particular police officer was transferred out of Tumpat district, things became normal again. This, was of course, before the days of the present opposition Government in Kelantan.

The problem, then, is not altogether new. But the levels of tolerance, on the part of individuals in authority or the State Government, have been changing over the years. The attempts to prohibit the arts has become more "official" with the establishment of the present Government. Much of the time, Hamzah has remained defiant, even going to the extent of tempting the authorities by actually performing without a license in the compound of his own house. Thus far he has not been in trouble with the law, and it is very likely that his position and stature as a National Artist has given him a

degree of immunity. The law itself appears to be applied without any stringency. According to the Kelantan Government the law's intention is not to punish but rather to bring about a greater awareness on the part of performers that their activities are not altogether correct according to Islamic principles. With this soft approach, the Government hopes that the objectionable art forms will themselves fade out as performers retire or turn to other occupations, and their audiences are weaned away from them. The State Government's purpose would in this manner have been served. The interesting thing would be to see what happens if there is a change in the party ruling Kelantan. It is very likely that there will be broadly publicised statements of change in policy for political reasons, but little change on the ground for *wayang kulit* has been dying out anyway for decades. As already noted, well over a hundred *wayang kulit* puppeteers were counted by Amin Sweeney during his research on the genre in the early 1970's. Today they number about a dozen, and this figure is unlikely to rise.

Hamzah's views on some of these regulations as well as these art forms vis-a-vis Islam are interesting and have been given some airing in the media. These will be touched upon presently. At this point it may be pertinent to see how *wayang kulit*, in particular, is affected by the restrictions imposed. Main *puteri* has not been banned, nor has there been any statement indicating that it would be.

For a time there was a measure of uncertainty, even confusion, regarding the position of the shadow play vis-a-vis these regulations. Stories carried in the local newspapers gave the impression that *wayang kulit* was also banned alongside *mak yong* and *menora*. Incidentally the ban on *menora* was eventually lifted since most *menora* performers are non-Muslims. Checking from the same sources as above in the State Cultural Council it became clear that no definite order had been given by the Kelantan State government to prohibit *wayang kulit* performances. It appears that at a meeting of government officials and various cultural bodies active in Kelantan, the Menteri Besar suggested that *wayang kulit* be re-examined in the light of some of the blanket objections raised against *mak yong*, and initially, against *menora*.

Essentially the intention was to examine if somehow, *wayang kulit* can still be continued

with appropriate stylistic changes and modifications to performance elements. It was suggested, for instance, that instead of the *Hikayat Maharaja Wana*, which at present is the single source of repertoire for *wayang kulit Kelantan* and which would be objectionable from a religious point of view, others, not necessarily Islamic, could be used, stories which would have greater social relevance to contemporary society. With the change in story, will come about an obvious change in the kind of figures used. From this it appears that the figures did not, as far as the Kelantan authorities are concerned, pose any major problem. It is the characters of gods and demons that lie at the root of this controversy.

The rituals performed in *wayang kulit* and other traditional theatre genres in Kelantan have always been problematic, and at times a source of embarrassment to the performers themselves. The *buka panggung* rituals traditionally open with the *Basmala* (Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim), an certain other phrases derived from Islamic supplications, proceed into invocations which are addressed to various Islamic personalities, including saints, as well as a range of invisible beings, including animistic nature spirits. The invocations essentially serve the purpose of notifying the spirits that a performance is to take place at the locations which, presumably, are under their control and where they abide, and of seeking their co-operation to ensure that no harm comes to performers and audience members alike, and that the performance is attractive to the audience. To ensure that this agreement is upheld by these invisible beings, certain simple offerings are given to them. Finally, upon the completion of performances, the *tutup panggung* ceremony, much simpler in structure than the *buka panggung*, thanks them for their co-operation, and if they are present at performances, sends them off.

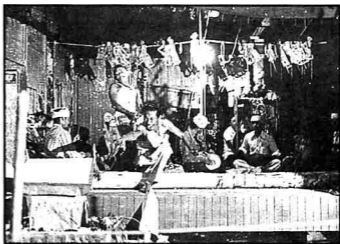
These rituals constitute the major zone of controversy. The Kelantanese authorities would like to see these rituals, or at least the non-Islamic elements within them, abandoned altogether. The recognition of the spirits (sometimes termed *dewa*, meaning gods) constitutes *syirik*, or recognising other gods besides Allah, and in a loose sense of the word "praying" to them. As such this would be a serious deviation from Islamic belief and practice. All favours must be sought from Allah alone. His is the Ultimate Power.

On all these matters, Hamzah, who claims that he is if not an ideal certainly an average Muslim, has very strong views. Some of views were expressed in a recent video documentary on the shadow play prepared for broadcast over Malaysia's third television network (TV3). Firstly, on the question of whether the use of the puppets in *wayang kulit* is objectionable, Hamzah believes that there should really be no objection, for the figures are non-realistic in design; the proportions of the bodies of characters represented by the puppets are, in fact, not in keeping with reality, for who knows what some of these mythical characters look in reality or even if they really exist? The human characters in the *wayang kulit* are also somewhat distorted, and thus non-realistic. All *wayang kulit* figures are two dimensional and thus cannot be construed as iconographic in character. They cannot be named *patung*, as they mistakenly are as this term refers to statues or images for worship. The puppets are not religious objects, even if they represent gods (*dewa*). The term *dewa*, again, is very loosely employed to refer to a whole category of superhuman beings who are not necessary gods. Neither the characters nor the puppets are worshipped. According to Hamzah a more appropriate term for these figures would be *wayang*. The *wayang kulit* figures are also called *wayang* all over Indonesia. Hardly anyone there calls them *patung*.

Hamzah is unaware, of course that during the early period following the introduction of Islam into Java similar objections were raised against the shadow play on that island. Later, with suitable modifications and stylisation in the figures to make them non-realistic the shadow play was not only accepted, but also used by the famous nine saints (*wali songgo*) who introduced Islam into Java as a means of Islamic propagation. To this day *wayang kulit syahadat* and other styles both of *wayang kulit* and *wayang golek* are used for the spread of Islamic stories and teaching. On the whole such a liberal attitude on the part of the Indonesian seems strange and even shocking to Malaysians, especially intellectuals with an Islamic bent. This was voiced, for instance, at a seminar on "Mystical Literature: East and West" held at Universiti Sains Malaysia on July 17 and 18 1993. Particularly noted, with some displeasure, was the tendency of the Javanese in particular to regularly turn to the *wayang* for a multitude of purposes or to use it freely for anything from moral teaching to the enunciation of their national philosophy, *pancasila*.

Again, if human representation is objectionable, says Hamzah, why apply the law only to the shadow play? What about films? Surely the images represented in the films are much closer to reality, considering they move and speak exactly as do the persons those images represent. Such accuracy of representation is not found in any form of *wayang kulit*. And what about the other arts—painting, sculpture, photography and so on—surely these too should be found objectionable. Hamzah is thus unperturbed by these objections. In his view they come about from unfortunately narrow interpretations of Islamic teaching.

As far as the stories of the *wayang kulit* go, until recently Hamzah in particular and others like him were unaware—most are still unaware—that the *Ramayana* comes from India, in the same manner as the Indonesian puppeteers are unaware of the Indian origins of both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The Indonesians have, in fact, gone great distances to try to prove that these epics are not only indigenous in character but represent early phases in Java's own history. The events contained in them took place on Javanese soil, while the noble characters of the *Mahabharata* are considered ancestors of the earliest Javanese kings. Furthermore, to Hamzah and the likes of him, these stories are not seen as "religious" in character. The Hindu character of the epics has in fact mostly been shed during translation and transmission with their arrival in Southeast Asia. To the puppeteers, the *Hikayat Maharaja Wana* is merely an interesting story, with fabulous characters and fantastic events. Even if Sri Rama is considered an incarnation of Vishnu or some other deity, for in the Malay version Vishnu is not mentioned by name, this is not a "religious" event *per se* in Hamzah's mind and the mind of the average Kelantanese puppeteer. Its just an interesting, perhaps original, idea, and such transformations of character and changes of identity appear in all epics, including the Panji romance. In my own discussions with Hamzah on the *Ramayana*, when Hamzah was informed of the religious import of some of these events from the Hindu perspective, the information came as a surprise, as did the information regarding the Indian origins of the *Ramayana*. The *Ramayana*, to him, is merely an interesting romance and adventure story that has been handed down through generations of *dalang*. It is thus part of the Malay literary heritage.



C. (LATE 1970s)



c. (1994)

Hamzah himself and other *dalang* in Kelantan, during performances give greater emphasis to the branch (*ranting*) stories that they themselves or the predecessor *dalang* have invented using ideas from the Malay versions of the *Ramayana* or from the Panji story as well as other sources. These have nothing of the original "religious" character of the *Ramayana*, and may loosely be considered romances. The puppeteers have come to regard both the *Ramayana pokok* and the *ranting* stories as an integral element in the shadow play, and really seen no reason to abandon the epic and its offshoots.

As to the possibility of introducing of new stories into the *wayang kulit*, Hamzah and his fellow puppeteers generally do not have serious objections, as long as the original *wayang kulit* with its Rama theme is allowed to exist side by side, for the introduction of new stories in effect would result in the creation of new *wayang kulit*

styles, as has happened in Indonesia where well over twenty different styles of *wayang kulit* exist, differing from each other in story content, or manifesting regional variations of the same style. Hamzah was involved with me in an experiment to create new forms of shadow play at Universiti Sains Malaysia. Puppets were designed to perform *Hikayat Raja Muda, Gul Bakawali, the Monkey God* and other stories. Performances that followed, using these puppets, were successful. Due to the fact, however, that the teaching of the shadow play in Universiti situation meant as constant flux of students and the teaching itself was fraught with other problems, including financial constraints, the project did not last long. In theory then, it has already been proven that forms of shadow play alternative to *wayang kulit Kelantan* or other existing varieties such as *wayang kulit gedek, wayang kulit purwa* and *wayang kulit melayu* can succeed if properly managed. Hamzah agrees that perhaps this is a direction in which attempts should be made in the future, if *wayang kulit* itself is to survive. Given the "spirit" in which the Menteri Besar of Kelantan suggested changes, there is also the possibility that his government would not come down as hard upon such forms of shadow play as it did upon *wayang kulit Kelantan*.

As regards the more serious objections against *wayang kulit Kelantan*, the "religious elements" said to be contained in the *buka panggung, tutup panggung* and even more so in the ritual (*berjamu*) varieties of *wayang kulit Kelantan*, Hamzah's stand again is quite clear and consistent. This stand becomes even clearer, as will soon be demonstrated, when it comes to *main puteri*. To simplify his view here it is sufficient to say that firstly, there is

acknowledgement of the existence of supernatural forces. Various terms are used in Bahasa Malaysia for them: *jembalang, hantu, jin*, and so on, derived from a variety of sources. The fact that such forces exist cannot be denied. They are mentioned in *the Holy Quran*, just like the angels (*malaikat*). *The Holy Quran* says that the *jinn*, created from smokeless fire, live in their own world, parallel to our own. Similarly, says Hamzah, other creatures made from different elements, live in their own dimension.

Though seemingly not coming into contact with human beings this is not really the case. A good example is of the appearance before the prophets of the angels, especially Jibrail, or of Satan (Iblis) in various forms. The traditional view in many a society the world over holds that it is possible for these invisible beings to cause diseases. This is also the traditional Malay view. Scholars of Malay culture have often noted that hundreds of named spirits are said to be responsible for specific diseases. Should such an eventually take place, it becomes the task of a *bomoh* to deal with them so as to restore health in his patient. In his role as a *main puteri* performer Hamzah himself becomes the vehicle through whom the spirits descend (*menurun*), as well as an agent for the chasing away of such spirits. But as far as Hamzah is concerned, neither *main puteri* nor the concepts behind it are as simple as that.

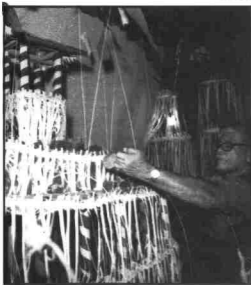
Having acknowledged then, that the invisible forces exist, it is easy enough to accept the fact that they live in different localities based either upon their composition (e.g. whether they water spirits, wood spirits, earth spirits and so on) or for other reasons, such as when they "haunt" a space as resident or guardian spirits (*penunggu* or *penggawa*). They have as much a right to their own territories as do humans. This being the case any disturbance that affects them naturally upsets them, and they are then likely to react negatively, causing harm to those responsible. One way is for them to create what we understand in ourselves as diseases. Although, therefore, in theory human beings are supposed not to come into contact with these beings of other dimensions, sometimes such contact is inevitable, when, for instance a person enters a forest or goes to the sea.

As far as the theatre is concerned, through the *buka panggung* rituals, the performers, having recognised that such beings exist in certain localities which in fact belong to them, need to obtain their permission to use those

Pahang Malaysia



D. (LATE 1970's)



Bahagian Kebudayaan

localities. This is done through their incantations. Again, considering that these beings need to eat to survive, food is offered to them. In effect what they eat is not the food but its essence (*semangat*), since being from a non-physical dimension, they cannot possibly consume physical food. Whatever remains of the food after they have "consumed" it, is, of course, wasted.

Seen in this light then, as far as Hamzah is concerned, *buka panggung* rituals cannot be considered *haram*. No worship of the invisible forces is involved. And in effect no favours are sought from them. An analysis of a typical *mentera* from a *bomoh* used when opening the theatre reveals this situation. As to whether or not these incantations can be abandoned, Hamzah says that the answer is "yes" and "no" at the same time. It is possible, of course to appeal direct to Allah, and to use 100% *doa*, *zikir* or Quranic passages to *buka panggung* as is done in some of the more recently developed art forms, especially those that have an Islamic or rather Middle Eastern base, but then many performers of the traditional genres, including *wayang kulit*, do not have enough confidence to drop the rituals altogether. They fear that neglect in the rituals will lead to problems, for reasons already explained above, particularly since all the material, including stories that go into the performances is ancient. Hamzah acknowledges that some of the material is pre-Islamic, as many aspects of traditional Malay culture are. At the same time, however, he maintains that it does not necessarily come into conflict with Islam. In

this case as well as with the case of other genres, including *mak yong* and *main puteri*, Hamzah feels that a proper dialogue between the Kelantan state authorities, the religious officials, performers and academicians can resolve the apparent conflicts.

Such an attempt both to understand these problems and to discuss them with the authorities concerned was made by extending an invitation to the state authorities to attend a *wayang kulit* seminar called in Camp Kijang just outside Kota Bharu especially for this purpose. While a number of papers were presented by scholars, and the majority of *dalang* in Kelantan were present at the seminar, unfortunately the state was not represented. As a follow-up of that seminar it has been proposed that a small group of persons representing the puppeteers and scholars should be appointed to try and meet the



Bahagian Kebudayaan

Menteri Besar or his representative with a view to finding some common ground, and if possible resolving the impasse. Such a meeting has yet to take place.

Hamzah's attitude towards religion and the performing arts as well as his understanding of religion in the context of those art forms becomes much clearer when his involvement in *main puteri* and his interpretation of the spiritual process that take place in that genre are examined.

As already seen, *main puteri*, the most elaborate form of Malay shamanism, comes into play in spiritual or psychological illness and at times seems to prove efficacious, for reasons not yet fully understood, where modern medicine as well as other traditional healing methods have failed. Although in many ways

A PLAY AS A PART OF THE BERJAMU PERFORMANCE. (1994)



Ghulam-Sarwar Yusuf

related to concepts that underlie other ritualistic theatre genres, particularly *mak yong*, *main puteri* is not officially on the list of items banned in Kelantan. It is very likely that this is the case because of the very strong social need for it, especially in rural areas of that State.

In performance *main puteri* makes use of *buka panggung* and *tutup panggung* rituals very much the same as those used in *mak yong* or *wayang kulit Kelantan*. The objections to these and Hamzah's defence have already been discussed. Beyond these, as far as the theory goes, illness comes *inter ail*, for something called *angin*, a penchant or intense desire, often repressed, which gives rise of various forms of depression or obsessive monomania, with the consequent physical manifestations of these illness.

As already pointed out, one other

cause of disease is possible possession by one or more of a whole hierarchy of spirits. This is where controversy begins to arise, and where Hamzah's interpretations become exciting. While earlier, for the sake of discussing the *buka panggung* rituals, it was stated that invocations are addressed to spirits which actually exist, Hamzah believes that, when it comes to the spirits that play a part in the healing processes an altogether different view has to be taken. The starting point of this analysis, on the part of Hamzah was a question I asked him regarding his state of being or state of mind when he is in trance during *main puteri* sessions. I wondered if he actually was possessed by spirits. And if he did what his feelings were at that time? The question arose out of observation of many performances, not all of them staged by Hamzah, where the entranced *bomoh* is in fact, conscious of his surroundings and even of those who are seated around him in the panggung. During such a healing session, a *bomoh*, Abdullah bin Daud, in fact came close to where I was sitting inside a panggung, and then withdrew with apologies, saying that he had no intention of knocking into me. Presently I began



PHOTOS A. AND B. SHOW HAMZAH FULFILLING HIS DAUGHTER'S WISH TO PLAY THE WAYANG KULTI. (1999)

to ask this question of Abdullah, of other bomoh and finally of Hamzah.

Hamzah's answer was really interesting and revealing. He said there are in fact no separate entities known as spirits. What are called "spirits" are in reality thought forms that have arisen in the collective unconscious of the Malay mind, accumulating and consolidating over the centuries. Since those ancient times the Malay mind has become convinced that they exist and have accepted them. Thus they have acquired, for the rural Malay, some of "real" existence. The impact of this belief upon the "spirit" or soul (*semangat*) of the Malay is what causes disease, as everything is in the mind. In the healing process, the *bomoh* still uses traditional metaphors and they work because he and his patients are in the same frame of belief. When asked for their explanation, most *bomoh* will "confirm" a view or conviction that "spirits" do exist because essentially that is their understanding of this phenomenon which is nothing more than psychological. During healing processes of *main puteri* then, certain traditional metaphors are used. These are understood by the average *bomoh* and most of his patients in a literal sense. For instance when he addresses *megat empat* or *hulubalang empat*, the four warriors, he is not referring to soldiers, real or mythological. *Megat empat* are the arms and legs of his patient. Different parts of the inner landscape are referred to symbolically as rivers, playgrounds, palaces and so on. Characters derived from indigenous Malay mythology which similarly come to "exist" in the Kelantan Malay psyche attain reality for the average Kelantanese *bomoh* whereas for Hamzah they are symbols. The most outstanding of these is the character of the prince Dewa Muda from the most important of all *mak yong* stories of the same name. Dewa Muda the prince, having seen the image of a sky princess on a flower, goes to the heavens in search of her, is killed in the process, brought down to earth, revived by the princess disguised as a shaman, and then, realising that she has been down to see him, goes up once again to the skies to meet her. Dewa Muda is the major spirit or god (*dewa*) haunting Kelantan Malay consciousness, as revealed through *main puteri* and *mak yong*. Hamzah, however, interprets this "character" as symbolising the "perpetual youth" in Everyman, the soul that refuses to grow old and which suffers due to its never ending desires. Hamzah claims that through this kind of analysis, which of course the patient does not understand, nor is he told about it, the spirit or

soul can be directly approached and the illness lodged therein removed. Explained in this manner, then, illnesses can be seen to be mere complexes, and *main puteri* sans its spirits may be more readily acceptable even to the most die-hard of Muslim fanatics. Hamzah believes it certainly deserves to be more widely accepted and practised without the fear of its called "animistic" past. As already pointed out, however, this is Hamzah's interpretation of the whole process of shaman healing.

Music is an integral part of *main puteri* and that too certainly has acknowledged powers to heal, powers that among the Malays have not to this point been neither properly studied nor explained. In his state of altered consciousness Hamzah makes use of visualisation techniques, as well as techniques to arouse the energy centres (*lataif*, equivalent to the Sanskrit *chakras*) located at various points on the etheric body of every individual. The techniques are ancient, and are being rediscovered in all parts of the world. In Hamzah's experience as a *bomoh*, they are also efficacious. His patients seem to recover, whether the illnesses are psychological, emotional or parapsychological.

Hamzah's understanding of much of what goes on in *main puteri* is further coloured by whatever understanding he has of Sufism. Some basic training in Islamic mysticism he obtained from the earliest times through his first teachers. His search has gone on to this day and he continues to expand his horizons in this direction through contact with practising Sufis as well as through his own readings of materials, almost totally in Jawi for he has difficulties reading Rumi, obtained through them. And all his wide and deep learning he brings to his *wayang kulit*, his *main puteri*, and well as to his daily life. Recently when talking of death he commented that anyone who understands the true reality does not have to fear death. That was a telling statement of his perception both of himself and of the greater reality.

When in the year 1993, Hamzah was awarded the Anugerah Seni Negara, the highest arts award ever presented by the Government of Malaysia, the irony of the situation was not altogether lost upon everyone in the country, for while his form of art was threatened in his own home State, it was getting official recognition, at last, at the national level, and to some extent there was to be a revival of interest in it internationally.




(SULTAN AZLAN SHAH)
Yang di-Pertuan Agong

KERAJAAN MALAYSIA
dengan ini mengurniakan


ANUGERAH SENI NEGARA




kepada

HAMZAH AWANG AMAT

kerana sumbangannya
memartabatkan akal budi manusia melalui
karya seni wayang kulit yang unggul,
bermanfaat kepada bangsa dan negara


Dato' Sabbaruddin Chik
Menteri Kebudayaan,
Kesenian dan Pelancongan,
Malaysia.


Dato' Khalid Hj. Ismail
Pengerusi
Panel Anugerah Seni Negara.

26 November 1993

Anugerah Seni Negara 1993



Realising the need for some sort of recognition for persons involved in the arts, whether from the point of view of performance, preservation and conservation, research or the overall enrichment of the arts in keeping with the objectives outlined for Vision 2020 and the National Cultural Policy, the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism made a proposal, which was accepted by the Malaysian Cabinet at a meeting on the 14th of January 1993, that a National Arts Award (Anugerah Seni Negara) be created. This award would be similar in its benefits as well as prestige to the National Literature Award, Anugerah Sastra Negara.

The scheme for the National Arts Award had, as its principal objectives, the raising of the status of the artists and arts activists, the encouragement towards the production of original art works and productions of high quality so as to enrich the national arts heritage, and adequate follow up documentation. It was envisaged that the Award would stimulate involvement in the arts by members of the Malaysian community in general. This in turn would be the first step towards the direction of consolidating the national arts heritage, the bringing about of a greater consciousness of the value of the arts in themselves as well as an appreciation of the contributions made by those directly or indirectly involved in them. The overall effect of all these would be the development of the national arts themselves.

For the award, four principal areas of focus were decided upon—Music, Dance, Theatre and the Fine Arts, with possible awards in the traditional as well as contemporary arts within these four areas.

Nominations for the proposed award could be sent in on prescribed forms by members of the Malaysian public as well as cultural and other organisations, based upon criteria that showed expertise on the part of the nominees, leadership qualities as well as intellectualism; their determination and total commitment towards the art form of their choice or specialisation as well as their willingness to continue contributing towards the development of their selected art forms. In addition, the nominees had to have shown a high level of achievement in their artistic creations.

The award itself would consist of a Document recognising their contribution, a cash

award of RM 30,000.00, a certificate of appreciation, a pair of traditional Baju Melayu made of *sangket* material, and other facilities considered appropriate for such a high award. The already existing Anugerah Sastra Negara award was taken as a model for this new Anugerah Seni Negara.

The Anugerah Seni Negara Selection Panel consisting of ten persons selected from amongst government officials, academicians and experts in the arts was set up on May 1 1993 for a period of three years.

The initial announcement of the scheme for Anugerah Seni Negara was made by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism, Yang Berhormat Dato' Sabbaruddin Chik, at a press conference on May 21, 1993. The major newspapers in all languages as well as the electronic media carried the announcement. Members of the Secretariat held interviews with National Radio and Television Studies (RTM Channel 1), as well as presented slide shows regarding the scheme until the entries were closed on August 28 1993. By that date a total of twenty-two nominations had been received. The breakdown was as follows: eight in theatre, two in music, one in dance, ten in the fine arts and one general nomination not belonging to any of these categories. Among these nominees was Hamzah bin Awang Amat.

The Anugerah Seni Negara Panel held four meetings to evaluate the merits of the twenty-two nominees, the first of these on July 13 1993. Various steps were taken to obtain detailed curriculum vitae of the candidates following the first meeting up to the point at which a final decision on the panel's choice for winner was decided upon. During the second meeting, on September 15 1993 a shortlist of five candidates, including Hamzah bin Awang Amat was arrived at. A special sub-Committee consisting of five persons from the main Committee now continued the evaluation process. This Committee met on September 29. The third meeting of the panel as a whole was held on the October 14 1993. The panel accepted the criteria that had been laid out by the sub-Committee. This meeting, in three rounds of discussions, was able to finally arrive at a consensus. Hamzah was the choice for the first Anugerah Seni Negara Award. The fourth meeting of the Panel, held on October 26 1993, prepared the report



HAMZAH RECEIVING
THE AWARD FROM
SERI PADUKA YANG
DI-PERTUAN AGONG,
SULTAN AZLAN SHAH-
WATIKAH
PENGHORMATAN
NEGARA
(1993)



HAMZAH
RECEIVING
THE TRADITIONAL
BAJU MELAYU,
(1993)

which was later to be submitted to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism.

Apart from the other required qualifications, all of which Hamzah obviously had, the panel acknowledged Hamzah's vital role, and his commitment and determination towards the preservation of *wayang kulit Kelantan*, an art form which could be considered a national treasure, and which was declining and on the point of dying out. With that step, this ancient art form was now at last given appropriate recognition.

More importantly, Hamzah's considerable, indeed almost superhuman, efforts in the direction of preservation as well as performance, at times under trying circumstances, were at last acknowledged by the Malaysian authorities. Hamzah strength lay in the fact that he had been involved in the shadow play, in almost every conceivable way—from the making of the puppets and instruments to performing and teaching—with total determination, and with little assistance from outside. His expertise as a consultant and teacher of *wayang kulit* played an important role in the giving of the award. It was obvious that his involvement in the institutions of higher learning in the country had much to do with his continued involvement in *wayang kulit*. At the same time, the fact that Hamzah had played such a significant role in taking the Malay shadow play beyond Malaysia's shores to an international level through his performances in so many countries on four of the world's five continents was an important contributory factor. All the same, his attempts to introduce and expose the wayang kulit to local audiences did not go altogether unnoticed even if in the past

somehow the importance both of the shadow play and of its leading puppeteer was overlooked or merely taken for granted in a milieu which has treated other traditional art forms in similar fashion. All this indicated that a change was taking place, a change that would benefit initially the shadow play and then, perhaps at some later date, other traditional performing arts as well.

The fourth meeting of the Anugerah Seni Negara panel was held on October 26, 1993 to examine the draft of the report on the selection which was to be presented to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism. With the acceptance of the report, it was decided that the Award would be officially given to Hamzah by the King, Seri Paduka Baginda Yang Di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Azlan Shah on the 26th of November 1993 in the Banquet Hall of Parliament House.

Throughout the process of the selection for Anugerah Seni Negara Hamzah was unaware, first of all, that the new Award had been created, and secondly that he was in fact one of the nominees. When a list of short-listed candidates had been arrived at, the present writer was asked by an official of the Ministry of Culture to prepare a detailed *curriculum vitae* of Hamzah as well as a justification for his case. Hamzah was, of course, on that shortlist. As Hamzah was coming to Penang in a few days for his weekly classes at Universiti Sains Malaysia, the present writer asked him to bring with him any documents he had which would throw some light on his life, his career as a *dalang* and his travels so that such a report could be written and sent off to the Ministry. I was, obviously, not to indicate to him the purpose of such a report. I

could not even mention that the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism was involved. All I could say was that perhaps the government was considering giving him another *pingat*, of which he already had several.

Once the selection had been completed, and the present writer was given notice that he would be called upon to present the citation address at the official ceremony conferring the award on him, again the present writer could not reveal the fact of his selection to him, for he had to be informed officially and in the appropriate manner. The present writer merely asked him what he would do if he suddenly received a substantial amount of money from the government or from some other source. He asked how much he would be receiving, and again that information could not be revealed to him. His answer was that in the event that he received anything like RM 10,000.00 he would organise a ritual (*berjamu*) performance of *wayang kulit Kelantan* in his house, and that all his friends in Universiti Sains Malaysia would be invited to a sumptuous feast (*kenduri*). He confessed to the present writer that from that moment he kept wondering about what possibly could be in store for him.

Approximately a month later there was a call for him at the village coffee stall, the owner rushing to tell him that Dato' Tengku Alauddin Majid from the Ministry of Culture wished to speak to him. Hamzah had never met Dato' Tengku Alauddin before. Dato' Tengku Alauddin congratulated him on having been selected as

the winner of the first Anugerah Seni Negara, also at the same time explaining what the award was all about. Hamzah says that the news came to him as a shock. He sat down for about an hour not knowing how to react to it. Numerous further telephone calls followed, including those from the Press. Hamzah then went to the State Culture Office in Kota Bharu where there were reporters waiting to interview him. It was only there that he knew that he would be receiving, as part of the award, the sum of RM 30,000.00 in cash. His house suddenly became a centre of intense activity. Photography sessions were held following the breaking of the news to him. Ahmad Tarmimi Sarigar, an official of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism arrived with a crew of photographers and video-cameramen to shoot excerpts of *wayang kulit* and *main puteri* performances staged by Hamzah and his troupe. As the climax of all this rush of activity, then Secretary General to the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, Dato' Khalid Ismail personally visited Kampung Gerong to deliver to Hamzah the official letter of appointment. This was on the 4th of November 1993. Supiat Mukri, also of the Ministry came with air tickets to Kuala Lumpur for Hamzah and his family. For Hamzah and Esah there were business class tickets. During of his tenure as Anugerah Seni Negara holder he would have that privilege of travelling first class wherever he went on official business, as a representative of the Ministry. In Kuala Lumpur he was provided with accommodation in a luxury hotel, as well as a chauffeur driven BMW. Officers of the Ministry were appointed to accompany him on a tour of

various cultural sites, including the National Museum. Hamzah recalls that while he felt a sense of pride, there were also contrary feelings which he cannot really describe. He was not a highly educated person, not a senior government official, not someone wealthy, and yet he was treated with so much respect and honour. Hamzah confesses that he was touched; tears came to his eyes.

On the night of the award, November 26 1993, following the

HAMZAH
RECEIVING
THE CHEQUE FOR
A VALUE
WORTHED
RM30,000.00
(1993)



official dinner, the award was given by the King in the presence of a dignified assembly. The ceremony itself was a rather uncomplicated though glittering affair at which Hamzah was once again in action, this time in a rather unconventional way, not as a *dalang* moving puppets but as the presenter of a tableau on the romance between Rama and Sita, linking the events of that familiar tale that he has performed a thousand times or more to his own life's journey. The tableau was presented by dancers from the Pangung Negara. At the invitation of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, the present writer had the honour of introducing Hamzah and presenting the citation address. The award night was a fitting climax to a long and illustrious career for this son of Kampung Benut Sarang Burung. Though physically he had travelled far and wide in many a land, in the true sense of the word it was on that night that he really arrived. Yet in some sense, it was yet another beginning for from that night his life was to take a new course.

Following the award conferring ceremony Hamzah stayed another four days in Kuala Lumpur before returning home to Kelantan. There an impressive welcome awaited him at Pengkalan Chepa airport, organised by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism office. This was a demonstration of the pride that the office felt at the fact that one of the sons of Kelantan had become the first recipient of the Anugerah Seni Negara. A Ministry officer, Alexander Anak



Bahagian Kebudayaan

Wong received him at the tarmac. *Bunga manggar* bearers welcomed him, and in his honour performances of *rebana ubi*, *silat* and *wayang kulit* music were presented the moment he emerged from the aeroplane. An official headgear (*tengkolok*) was presented to Hamzah before he was escorted in a caravan of cars to Gelanggang Seni, the Cultural Complex in the heart of Kota Bharu. In the hall there, a dance-theatre performance of the *Ramayana* was presented in his honour by the Sri Temenggong Group headed by Khatijah binti Awang. At that function representatives of the Kelantan State Government presented Hamzah with a set of

HAMZAH DELIVERING HIS SPEECH - CUM - PERFORMANCE AT THE PRESENTATION CEREMONY. (1993)



Bahagian Kebudayaan

HAMZAH TOGETHER WITH ESAH SHORTLY AFTER THE CEREMONY.

clothes made of *sungkit* material.

Hamzah was surprised that at all these highly significant receptions, none of the other active *dalang* in Kelantan were present, with the exception of Yusof bin Hassan, his close friend and companion. Hamzah does not wish to interpret this absence as a sign of jealousy, but he does indicate that he felt disappointed and

depressed. He also wondered whether or not the award of the Anugerah Seni Negara to him bring was likely to bring about a change of attitude in the Kelantan State Government towards *wayang kulit* and other forms of traditional theatre in Kelantan. Now, several years after the award, little has changed in Kelantan. Ironically, that recognition given to him and to one of the traditional theatre genres active in Kelantan has had little impact in that State. The decline of traditional theatre continues unabated, although Hamzah himself has been much more active recently, compared to the years before the award of the Anugerah Seni Negara to him. Things may have been different, he muses, had there been a more arts-friendly administration in the State.

The decision to give the Anugerah Seni Negara to Hamzah was without controversy. But it



HAMZAH AND HIS FAMILY (1993)

Bahagian Kebudayaan

HAMZAH WAS GREETED AT THE VIP ROOM BY MEMBERS OF THE STATE CULTURAL COUNCIL ON HIS ARRIVAL AT KOTA BAHRU. (1993)



Bahagian Kebudayaan

appears that a small number of persons involved in other disciplines of arts were unhappy at the fact that Hamzah was the recipient of the award. There was of course, nothing personal about this feeling, as discussions with the artists themselves revealed. They had nothing against Hamzah as a person. Many of them had hardly ever met him or knew him personally. The nomination of Hamzah was a total surprise to many of them, mainly because he was, in their minds, the most unlikely of candidates. His triumph therefore came as something of a shock and a disappointment, disappointment at the fact that a virtually illiterate villager working in one of the non-mainstream art forms hither to somehow considered insignificant had been selected over the heads of so many highly educated, professional and well-known national figures in the other art forms, and especially in the fine arts. It was a question of prestige.

Could *wayang kulit* be placed on par with painting, or sculpture, music or modern dance? It might be of interest to them to know that Hamzah himself was equally surprised at being selected to be the recipient of the award. The very fact that throughout his life this humble Kelantanese villager had not been the beneficiary of the kinds of monetary and other benefits received by artists working in other fields was in fact one of his strong points.

As the months and then the years passed, however, more and more of those who initially had reservations about his selection for the first National Arts Award or critical of those who, firstly, had nominated



Ebtisagah Kechudayan

HAMZAH WAS PRESENTED THE MALAY HEADGEAR TENGKOLOK AS HE WALK OUT OF THE ARRIVAL HALL. (1993)

him and secondly of the panellists who had selected him as the winner, began to concede that he altogether deserved it. And Hamzah himself, through numerous projects and performances often involving hundreds of participants or audience members has more than vindicated himself, established his right to the award. He was in fact an overnight hero. Much of Hamzah's success following the award of the Anugerah Seni Negara to him must again be credited to him alone. His achievements since he received the award have been near phenomenal.

As part of the Anugerah Seni Negara, it was decided that the appointee for the award should automatically be required to spend a full year, with the possibility of an extension not exceeding another year as Resident Guest Artist in the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism under a scheme known as *Seniman Tamu* (Guest Artist). The scheme intended to give recognition both to the holder of the Anugerah Seni Negara as well as the art form in which he is involved. The special focus, for the time being, would be in the areas of performing arts and fine arts. The planners of the scheme envisaged that the Anugerah Seni Negara holder would, now physically placed in the Ministry, receive the stimulus to produce fine arts works or performances which would contribute towards the raising of standards in particular in the art form in which an appointee is involved. Indirectly this would contribute directly as well as indirectly towards the development of the national culture. The Secretariat for the Scheme *Seniman*

Tamu is located in Culture Division of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism.

Hamzah took up this appointment on the April 1 1994. The appointment came to an end at the end of March 1995. It was the Ministry's expectation that, among other things, Hamzah would contribute towards activities principally planned by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism. There was a proviso, however, that his involvement with other bodies or agencies such as colleges, schools or other institutions of higher learning would take place only with the consent of the Ministry. Thus Hamzah continued uninterrupted his teaching activities at *Universiti Sains Malaysia* and in addition to doing the occasional *wayang kulit* or *main puteri* performance in Kelantan.

There were, of course, several distinct and substantial benefits for Hamzah through this scheme. The most important of these was the fact that he began, for the first time in his life, to receive a regular monthly remuneration. The amount the Ministry determined was RM 2500.00 per month. In addition he received medical benefits for himself and his family, first class air fare whenever officially representing the Ministry, as well as the honour of representing the country at international festivals or seminars related to the arts.

Hamzah, as part of the contract for the *Seniman Tamu*, was required to write his memoirs or autobiography, giving the general

Esthargiani Kieubayayam



A SPECIAL CEREMONY WAS HELD AT GELANGGANG SENI KOTA BAHRU IN HONOUR OF HAMZAH'S SUCCESS. (1993)

Malaysian public and the rest of the world an opportunity to see his development both as a person and as an artist. In the end it turned out, however, that since Hamzah was unable to do so, the present writer was appointed to write the official biography of Hamzah, the present work.

Similarly, where Hamzah was required to produce other suitable publications related to the shadow play, such collaboration between him and other writers would be established so that the expertise of the performer and the linguistic abilities and academic experience of the writer would come together to produce the best possible work. Several independent works in which Hamzah has been an important resource person, however, have been initiated by the present writer and these will see fruition in the next year or two. One of these is a complete book on *wayang kulit Kelantan* which will discuss the historical and performance aspects of the genre; a second book will present in English, the principal story, *cerita pokok*, of *Hikayat Maharaja Wana*, while also attempting to make comparisons between this version of the epic and other well-known ones in Southeast Asian region.

The Ministry decided too, that Hamzah should perform the complete story of *Hikayat Maharaja Wana*, something that had never been done during his lifetime. This time the performance was to be fully recorded on videotape by the Ministry. In preparation for the recording sessions, Hamzah's own copy of the story had been misplaced, and a copy was made from one in the present writer's possession. Hamzah spent a great deal of time mulling over the previously unperformed sections of *Hikayat Maharaja Wana* to familiarise himself thoroughly with the outline of the story as well as the characters involved. Since the events in the plot had to begin well before the familiar material dealing with the wanderings of Rama, the standard material he had so often performed, Hamzah now had to deal with rarely used puppets, to familiarise himself with the both the



THE PAST (1970's)

physical images as well as the personalities of the new characters who were to emerge on the white muslin screen (*kelir*) before him. The performance was done with his own *loya* musicians from the Seri Setia troupe of Kampung Gerong, who were housed in a hotel ir Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman for the duration of the recording. As it turned out, due to budgetary constraints, only approximately half the story of *Hikayat Maharaja Wana* was recorded; and ever this half took eighteen nights to complete. By that time, however, Hamzah, had lost his voice. It is the Ministry's hope that at some point in the future the remaining half will similarly be recorded. It is to be expected that this material will prove an invaluable tool for future researchers in the *wayang kulit Kelantan* and

Pantolon Maturky

more particularly in the *Hikayat Maharaja Wana*. Up to the present, the majority of archival recordings of not only *wayang kulit Kelantan*, but also of other genres of traditional Malay theatre, have been undertaken by the present writer.

During the one year in office at the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, documentation not only of shadow play performances, but also of demonstrations and workshops that were carried out by Hamzah time that he was Resident Artist at the Ministry. His activities included the giving of lectures or facilitating other activities connected with the *wayang*. He was assisted by an officer from the Ministry at the Federal level and another in each of the states where the activities took place. In general, the state activities consisted of three parts. The first consisted of workshops on theme of the history and art of the shadow play, as well as demonstration of performance techniques in which the participants were involved. The second part consisted of two workshops dealing with (a) the essential philosophical concepts in *wayang kulit* stories and (b) the role of the shadow play in contemporary Malaysian society. The third part involved demonstrations on the making and movement of the *wayang* puppets and a demonstration were done in various parts of the country. It also became part of his responsibility, as Resident Artist at the Ministry, to train other suitable persons so that they could



AFTER ANUGERAH SERI NEGARA (1994).

Bahagian Kebudayaan

attain to a satisfactory level of expertise in *wayang kulit* both in terms of puppet designing, as well as in terms of staging performances.

Through the *Seniman Tamu* programme much was achieved during the period of one year. However, there remains a question, if through all this some assurance was obtained regarding the possible continuity of the *wayang kulit* tradition itself. Those who participated in the workshops certainly benefited, became aware, like many of



HAMZAH GIVING LECTURE IN ONE OF THE WORKSHOP UNDER THE PROGRAM BERSAMA SENIMAN NEGARA. ON HIS LEFT IS THE AUTHOR (SHAH ALAM, 1994)

HAMZAH GIVING
LECTURE IN
SEREMBAN
(1994)



Bahaglan Kercudayanan

Hamzah's students, firstly of the *wayang kulit* itself, and then of its importance. It is unlikely, however, that these participants will ever again perform *wayang kulit* or even make a single puppet. There certainly is not the slightest chance that they will in any way assure a continued existence for the shadow play itself. This is something that has to be thought about more seriously at some point in the future. For the participants, their involvement will remain but a memory that with time will become increasingly remote. It is certain, however, that no matter what plans are drawn up, during the next few years, for the shadow play, Hamzah will certainly figure prominently in them.

By shifting, as Anugerah Seni Negara holder, from Kampung Gerong, to the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism's fancy offices on the 34th floor of the Putra World Trade Centre, Hamzah traded the life of an easy going villager person to that of a Kuala Lumpur-ite. Giving up his causal attire, he now dressed in Western formal suits or official blue-grey bush jackets like a civil servant. At the Putra World Trade Centre, sitting in his large air-conditioned office, Hamzah became the point of reference for researchers from far and near who wished to consult him on the shadow play, or sharing bits of information about his life and his past experiences with students, Ministry officials, as well as visitors alike. There were many who came to spend time with him, and although he was not required to keep office hours, Hamzah did in fact spend a considerable amount of time

in his large office. Initially, he found himself a bit of a misfit in the clean glassy environment. He said that he could not even stand the air-conditioning. Then, gradually, he became accustomed to them, and as time passed he seems to have begun to fit in quite comfortably. The question that now arises is, how does he fit into his kampung environment, when he goes back to Kelantan in his blue official bush jacket? When questioned in this manner he laughs. In his laughter one still sense the traditional simplicity and warmth, and in his character and personality there remains still the humility that one has always associated with Hamzah. He has not changed much although inevitably and certainly to a degree, his outlook, as well as his attitude towards things have undergone transformation. This is inevitable.

Suddenly, to a scale never before experienced, interest seemed to have grown in Kuala Lumpur in the erstwhile humble art of the puppeteer. Hamzah himself seems to have made the decision, in the past two years or so, that since, at last, the nation has recognised him, he is prepared to impart all that he knows to whosoever is interested in obtaining it from him. In the past such knowledge, some of which was considered "secret" and not to be divulged at any price to anyone but the best of his own disciples in the manner in which he himself received it from Pak Awang Lah, was given merely to the closest friends and researchers. Even then there was much that remained untold, according to Hamzah. Hamzah often claims that

next to him, as far as the *wayang kulit Kelantan* is concerned, the greatest amount of information is with the present writer. The connections between Hamzah and the present writer go back almost two decades and during all that time there has been constant contact, discussion, as well as research. Much has been collected, some of this has been published. Yet not all will be divulged; that is the traditional way. With his appointment as Resident Artist at the Ministry the way had been opened to anyone willing to step into his office and to talk to him. He was available for interviews almost every day of the week during office hours. According to Hamzah, many came, and some of the many obtained data of varying degrees of importance from him. He certainly has not, as yet, accomplished the task of giving away "everything" he knows. It is doubtful if he ever will.

The original proposal included a plan for Hamzah to train one or more persons from the National Cultural Complex (Kompleks Budaya Negara) or National Theatre (Panggung Negara) to become professional *dalang*. This task remains to be accomplished.

During the appointment as Anugerah Seni Negara holder of course, Hamzah had the opportunity or rather the duty of performing the *wayang kulit* at various locations. This activity

continued during the time that he was Resident Artist at the Ministry. His activities included the giving of lectures or facilitating other activities connected with the *wayang*. He was assisted by an officer from the Ministry at the Federal level and another in each of the states where the activities took place. In general, the state activities consisted of three parts. The first consisted of workshops on the theme of the history and art of the shadow play, as well as demonstration of performance techniques in which the participants were involved. The second part consisted of two workshops dealing with (a) the essential philosophical concepts in *wayang kulit* stories and (b) the role of the shadow play in contemporary Malaysian society. The third part involved demonstrations on the making and movement of the *wayang* puppets and a demonstration on the making of instruments used in the shadow play orchestra. The principal instruments made were the various types of drums, i.e. *gendang*, *gedombak*, and *geduk* as well as the oboe or *serunai*. It was impossible to demonstrate the art of making brass instruments such as gongs, *canang* and *kesi*, as special facilities would be required for such demonstrations, and in fact many of the instruments of this type are no longer manufactured in Malaysia, the majority in existence having been brought in, in all probability, from Java.



PARTICIPANTS AT THE WORKSHOP (SHAH ALAM, 1994)



PARTICIPANTS TRYING TO MAKE PUPPETS AT A WORKSHOP DURING HIS TENURE AS THE RESIDENT ARTIST (1994)

Bahagian Kebudayaan

HAMZAH
INTRODUCED
DATUK ISMAIL
ADAM,
SECRETARY
GENERAL OF THE
MINISTRY OF
CULTURE, ARTS
AND TOURISM
MALAYSIA TO
PARTICIPANTS OF
A WORKSHOP
HELD AT
KOMPLEKS
BUDAYA NEGARA.
(1994)



Bahagian Kebudayaan

To accompany the activities already mentioned, mobile exhibitions of *wayang kulit* were also planned for the various states between the May 15 and 30 November 1994. The intention of the exhibitions was to expose both the *wayang kulit* so as to bring about some sort of a revival in that art form and to honour Hamzah as the recipient of the Anugerah Seni Negara.

Also developed as part of an attempt to honour Hamzah was the *Program Bersama Seniman Negara*. Under this programme Hamzah had to organise or at least participate in seminars, discussions as well as performances, with the participation of other invited experts at various selected locations throughout the country. A budget of RM 80,000.00 was given for the whole project. Following the first such programme, at the Institute Teknologi MARA in Shah Alam, held on April 23 and 24 1994. The present writer was involved as facilitator in two of these projects, the one held in Shah Alam and the one held in Kuala Lumpur, the Federal Territory. Under the *Program Bersama Seniman Negara* scheme, there was a plan to publish one volume of materials on the *wayang kulit*: memoirs of the puppeteer. This final work, as already mentioned was later on shifted to be done by the present writer.

In the various workshops some of the problems faced by *dalang* in the *wayang kulit Kelantan* tradition were highlighted. The most precise statement on these problems was at a 1979 *wayang kulit* seminar at Port Dickson, at which, for perhaps the first time the forms of *wayang kulit* including the experimental work done by Universiti Sains Malaysia were staged. At the seminar a whole paper, by the present writer, was devoted to these problems faced not only by *wayang kulit* but by all traditional theatre genres for many of the problems are identical. This paper was also eventually published under the heading "What Ails Traditional Malay Theatre?" in the New Straits Times on June 4 1984. One of the major problems of the traditional artists, including *dalang*, is the lack of opportunities to perform. This means that they are

unable to survive by means of their art, no matter how excellent their performances. Again, there are certain social problems, including the fact, for instance that in Kelantan, the home of *wayang kulit Kelantan* itself, performances of the genre are now restricted by the state authorities. The reasons for this include the fact that animistic as well as other pre-Islamic elements derived inter alia from Hinduism—all considered contradictory to Islamic teaching and practice—continue to be heavily used in, for instance, the *buka panggung* invocations (*mantera*). Other problems include the lack of opportunities for students to study the traditional theatre genres, such as *wayang kulit* or to even get familiar with them, and the lack of opportunities for *dalang* and other traditional artists to be shown on the television, while more than ample space, in fact too much air time is given to programmes depicting decadent Western cultures. The need for some form of continuous training was often highlighted in these seminars and workshops both by Hamzah as well as by other speakers. The whole question of how to popularise *wayang kulit* and to make it suitable for the contemporary audience received considerable attention.

Hamzah, of course, has been deeply involved in these diverse issues. The problem of the performing arts and their supposed conflict with Islam has been constantly raised by participants and equally constantly rebutted by the speakers as well as by performers, including Hamzah. As seen in Chapter VI of this work, he has very firm ideas about this particular issue; in the articulation of these he has never wavered.

THIS GROUP PHOTO WAS TAKEN AFTER THE CLOSING CEREMONY. SEEN ARE DATUK ISMAIL ADAM (6TH, RIGHT), DATO' TENGKU ALAUDIN ABDUL MAJID (5TH) AND HAJI SUPLAT MUKRI (8TH), DIRECTOR OF PANGGUNG NEGARA, (1994)





Akademi Seni Kebangsaan And Beyond

In the last couple of years, Hamzah was to travel again, though not as extensively as he had done in the early to mid-seventies. The Singapore National Arts Council invited him to participate in a Festival of Traditional Theatre from February 2 to 22. His official performance for the festival was held at the Drama Centre on Fort Canning. Additionally Hamzah performed in the English Department of the National University of Singapore following an introductory lecture the present writer gave. This Singapore connection was, later on, in May 1993, to give rise to a more personally rewarding visit when Hamzah was hosted by TheatreWorks, a professional theatre company. According to Utih, as related to him by Hamzah himself, (*New Sunday Times* July 4 1993) before Hamzah left Kota Bharu, he reported to the State Culture Department: "An officer there chided him for giving out his *wayang kulit* secrets to foreigners. Hamzah's reply was that nobody much needed him in Malaysia, he had no students with whom he could share the innermost secrets of *wayang kulit*. In any case teaching *wayang kulit* to novices for a month would not cause him to betray any deep or important secrets of his art." Theatre Works, a company located at Fort Canning, wanted to use *wayang kulit* to expand the performing vocabulary of its actors. The company was completing a highly acclaimed performance of Kuo Pao Kun's *Lao Tin Tju* that used multiple Chinese puppet traditions, including shadow theatre. Utih describes the production as a major breakthrough in fusing the traditional and modern arts of Singapore. Hamzah worked with three batches of students throughout May, giving music lessons, while at night, apart from other activities related to the production, the members took classes in making of *wayang kulit* puppets. Hamzah was impressed by his students. He felt that the Theatre Works people were among the best he has ever taught. By the end of the highly intensive course they had learnt more than twenty pieces from the *wayang kulit Kelantan's* traditional musical repertoire. At the end of the course they joined Hamzah in staging a performance. Utih describes the situation in which Hamzah taught: "That was a sight to see—mostly Chinese Singaporeans, all modern theatre practitioners, playing *wayang* music. Many of them had never seen an actual *wayang kulit* performance before. So they were all agog at what Pak Hamzah was

doing with his puppets . . . Pak Hamzah was in his element during the whole two-hour performance. . . There was a feeling of triumph at attending such a glorious performance."

Overall, Hamzah created quite a stir in Singapore, something that was to become a norm in future visits to that island republic. Later in October Hamzah, as the holder of the Anugerah Seni Negara, was to visit Pakistan to participate, this time as a handicraftsman rather than a puppeteer in a prestigious Crafts Fair (Lok Virsa) bringing together craftsmen from all over the Muslim world. He emerged as one of the winners of the fair. In addition, he was honoured with an award by the President of that country. But Hamzah's most important work lay ahead, with the National Academy of Arts.

The Malaysian cabinet's approval for the setting up of a National Academy of Arts (Akademi Seni Kebangsaan) was obtained in 1990. The academy itself opened its doors in a temporary campus close to the Experimental Theatre on Jalan Tun Ismail in July 1994 with its first batch of eighty students in four disciplines: theatre, music, dance and creative writing. The academy is placed directly under the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, and is temporarily headed by Dato' Tengku Alauddin Majid of the Ministry.

The Akademi Seni Kebangsaan has been designed to produce arts practitioners who will be experts in the field of their own choice from amongst the four disciplines offered. While specialising in one of these four areas, students do get some exposure to the other areas as well in the form of optional or elective courses. While some provision has been made for the imparting of theoretical knowledge, the emphasis in the courses offered by the academy is upon the development or enhancement of practical skills. The academy anticipates that well-trained performers and creative artists leaving its portals after a stint of four years will be able, through their involvement, to raise the quality of the various arts in the country. By filling suitable positions both in the private and public sectors, they will be the agents of change towards better quality theatre, music or dance productions, as well as original literary works.



A CERTIFICATE AS A
TESTIMONY OF HIS
ACHIEVEMENT AS THE
BEST CRAFTSMAN FOR
LEATHERWORK AT THE
FIRST INTERNATIONAL
ISLAMIC ARTISANS
-AT- WORK FESTIVAL,
ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN
(1994)

With these objectives, the emphasis in the academy, unlike in the universities and other existing institutions of higher learning in the country is upon the practical aspects of the four disciplines. The academy foresees that its graduates will, for instance, work as members of an orchestra, music composers, actors or directors, script writers as well as teachers of the arts. They could possibly find a niche for themselves in the rapidly expanding arts industry in the country, and, some at least of the academy's graduates, it is hoped, will make an impact internationally. Overall it is hoped that the programme designed by the academy will in some small measure be able to contribute towards the development of more rounded and balanced community as Malaysia moves full-swing towards its goal of becoming fully industrialised by the year 2020.

Whether or not these near-idealistic objectives of the Academy, as set out in its Handbook for the academic year 1994/95, can and will be achieved is too early to say, as the first batch of students are at present only in their second year at the institution which is still struggling to get "established" in the proper sense of the word. Proper facilities are still lacking, in every sense of the word, and much time is needed before they can be in place, perhaps at the new buildings that will replace the existing ones in Jalan Tun Ismail. What can be said, of course, is that there is considerable enthusiasm on the part of the academy's administrators, lecturers and students. Expectations are high, and the will to attain them is not altogether lacking. For its teaching staff the academy has, until permanent staff is trained, to depend a great deal, as at present, upon part-time lecturers from other academic institutions in the country, as well as from the private sector. In some ways this has provided a strong base for the programmes in the academy to start from, since many of these lecturers are highly qualified and bring with them a great deal of expertise and considerable experience.

A coincidence of events took place that provided a vital role for Hamzah in this new institution. The academy's doors were opened to its first batch of students in July 1994. At that time, until November 1994, Hamzah was serving his one year residency at the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism in Kuala Lumpur. Almost naturally a niche was created for him in the academy, for among the courses offered in its theatre programme a slot had been provided for traditional Malay theatre forms. In the first

year curriculum this slot is occupied by *wayang kulit*. *Bangsawan*, *mak yong* and *randai* come respectively in the second, third and fourth years. As the most qualified person in the field Hamzah was the obvious and inevitable *dalang* of choice for the academy, and already in the earliest stages of curriculum planning there were plans to invite him as part-time instructor. His presence in Kuala Lumpur, rather than in Kelantan, as well as the fact that his tenure as resident artist at the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism would come to an end in November 1994, meant that in fact his services could be obtained on a more permanent basis and long term basis if he was amenable to staying in Kuala Lumpur. For a start, however, Hamzah, who was appointed part-time lecturer beginning in July 1994, continued to shuttle between his Ministry office on the 34th floor of the Putra World Trade Centre complex and the Akademi Seni Kebangsaan in Jalan Tun Ismail.

The *wayang kulit* course, in which the present writer also participated as lecturer with Hamzah, was intended to be both theoretical and practical. The formula already so well established in Universiti Sains Malaysia and highly successful since Hamzah first started teaching at that university in 1977, was now also used in the academy with only slight modifications. In some ways, with the *wayang kulit* course running over two semesters instead of one, as at Universiti Sains Malaysia, skills can be better imparted and better quality performers produced. The first batch of sixteen students enrolled with enthusiasm into a genre of theatre to which they had never before in their lives been exposed, except perhaps in a casual manner. Hamzah enjoys every moment with them, and despite the fact that some among them consider him a highly strict and demanding teacher, preferring to work with those who progress rapidly rather than with laggards, rapport was quickly established. On whole the much has been achieved, for by the end of their first year, students were able to play *wayang kulit* music well enough to give a public demonstration. This in fact was one of the objectives of the course, and it will be the objective of the other courses in traditional Malay theatre—to reach to a tolerable level of performance. Having completed the first level *wayang kulit* course, students have the option of developing their skills further through voluntary participation in rehearsals or signing up for more specialised work as puppeteers. It is expected that a small number will opt for the second choice.



ACCOMPANYING THE CERTIFICATE WAS A HEADGEAR, THE AWARD WAS PRESENTED BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF PAKISTAN, (1994)



HAMZAH GIVING AN EXPLANATION TO VISITORS OF THE FESTIVAL AT THE MALAYSIAN'S BOOTH IN ISLAMABAD, (1994)

The second batch of students joined Academy Seni Kebangsaan in July 1995. Due to the small number of theatre majors and for other reasons as well, a majority of students in the *wayang kulit* course this time are in fact music majors. They have been able to handle the musical extremely well, and Hamzah is both delighted and impressed. He certainly expects a high quality final performance at the end of the

second semester. Hamzah is already talking in terms of taking the group to Kelantan for a performance on his own *panggung* in Kampong Gerong. Should such an event materialise, it would certainly be a sensation, comparable perhaps to the debut of Beth Osnes as a *dalang muda*, especially since the majority of the performers would be females. A "national" tour for the Akademi Seni Kebangsaan students is also something that Hamzah has in mind for some future date. Such a tour will, in his opinion, allow students at the academy to see performances in the traditional village context while also demonstrating their own skills. The publicity for the academy would be tremendous. For now, of course these are highly inconcrete plans for the future.

And talking of the future, two subjects have constantly come up for discussion in recent months at the academy. First there is the now almost perennial question of the future of *wayang kulit* itself, and secondly Hamzah's own future. Inevitably it comes to mind that in teaching situation in Akademi Seni Kebangsaan, as in Universiti Sains Malaysia since *wayang kulit* courses were started there in 1977, students



HAMZAH AND HIS GROUP TOGETHER WITH DATO' TENGKU ALAUDIN ABDUL MAJID, DEPUTY SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE MINISTRY WHO IS ALSO THE DIRECTOR OF AKADEMI SENI KEBANGSAAN. THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF A

come and go. Following their limited semester or two with this particular genre of traditional theatre, there is very little chance that they will perform *wayang kulit* again. Like the university, the Academy Seni Kebangsaan, in theory at least, is not really responsible to ensure that *wayang kulit* is preserved for future generations. Perhaps, as authorities at Universiti Sains Malaysia once said, this is the function of the Ministry. It appears, then, that the training and exposure given to the students at Akademi Seni Kebangsaan is going to achieve little.

During the present writer's informal discussions with Hamzah and with Norliza Rofli, Registrar of Akademi Seni Kebangsaan, two salient ideas emerged. Firstly the possibility of somehow creating a permanent group consisting of selected former students who graduate from the academy. Such a group would be given support and all facilities, and perhaps some funding by the Ministry, perhaps through the Academy itself, to assure the performance of *wayang kulit* on a regular basis. Sponsorship for performances could be obtained from private institutions such as those involved in the tourism industry. Whether or not this can lead to the preservation of the *wayang kulit* is, of course, uncertain. The idea of creating a group somehow still attached to the academy was well

received by both Hamzah and Norliza. Such support would, in all likelihood, come with even greater enthusiasm in the event that develops an initiative to establish such groups not only *wayang kulit* but also in other genres of traditional theatre. Norliza, however, feels that "we have to be realistic in the sense that we can only hope for *wayang kulit* to stay in its present form. On the other hand it is important that we instil an understanding among students towards the traditional arts forms, and how they translate that understanding is up to them —those in music might use the rhythms of *wayang kulit*, the dance department will possibly use *wayang kulit* movements." She continues that we can be satisfied "as long as the soul of *wayang kulit* continues. We have to be practical about this. We cannot expect *wayang kulit* to be maintained, unless of course a miracle happens, and who knows if a miracle will happen?"

The second possibility that emerged was that of somehow creating extension courses or projects in specialised areas, as for instance, in *wayang kulit* puppetry or in the music of the *rebab*. These projects would bring together performers to give them a better appreciation of their own art as well as to enable them to upgrade their own skills. This appears to be particularly important to Hamzah as well. He



HAMZAH TOGETHER WITH HIS STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA, PENANG. (1992)

Kepada Tot Hamzah.

2/1/92

Kami ingin mengucapkan ribuan terima kasih kepada Tot atas bimbingan Tot dalam mengajar ~~kami~~ ^{kami} bermain alat-alat muzik. Semoga Tot selalu berada dalam keadaan sihat walafiat. Bye!

Saya (Miau Fui) duduk di sebelah kiri Tot.

Pelajar Wayang Kulit
Sesi 1991/1992
Universiti Sains Malaysia

AN APPRECIATION
WRITTEN AT THE
BACK OF THE PHOTO
ABOVE.
(1992)

feels, for instance, that other puppeteers in Kelantan should not feel discouraged or envious of the fact that he has been selected to be the first recipient of the National Arts Award. Instead they should see the sorts of skills and the kind of commitment to their own art forms that is required for them to be recognised beyond the narrow confines of their own kampung. Following the award to Hamzah there were in fact rumblings among the *wayang kulit* puppeteers themselves, and among the performers of other genres as well. The puppeteers felt that with Hamzah now hogging the limelight, they would be altogether forgotten, especially by the Ministry. Whatever little attention they received in the past would somehow be lost. Performers of *mak yong* and other traditional theatre forms too felt that, following



HAMZAH AND
THE MEMBERS
OF SERI SETIA.
(1993)

the award to Hamzah, *wayang kulit* was getting unfair and perhaps undue exposure through him and the Ministry of Culture Arts and Tourism, to the detriment of their own theatre styles. There is certainly some truth in all these statements, and in view of the fact that the other genres of traditional theatre are indeed threatened species, something should be done for them. Norliza says that as far as *wayang kulit* is concerned, "We are just beginning. We have a lot more to cover and a lot more to do. We want *wayang kulit* to be ingrained in Malaysians. Malaysians should not treat it as a foreign art form." And at least in the foreseeable future, if any of this is to be achieved, Hamzah has to be in Kuala Lumpur.

The question of whether or not Hamzah would consider moving away from Kelantan has been raised several times in the past. At one time, following intense negotiations at all levels of administration within and outside Universiti Sains Malaysia, a post was in fact approved for him. This would have allowed him to be on the University's staff full-time on a year-to-year basis. Hamzah had to turn this offer down for a number of reasons. These included his fear that he would not be able to perform often enough in Kelantan and also that his troupe in Kampong Gerong would suffer decline.

Since those days the situation has changed drastically. In Kelantan there are hardly

any performances these days, and the events leading to and following the award of Anugerah Seni has brought about in Hamzah a considerable change of perception as well as attitude. The fact that from a part-time lecturer at Akademi Seni Kebangsaan he is now employed at that institution on a more permanent (though still on a year-to-year contract) basis following the completion of his term as Guest Artist in Residence at the Ministry means too that, for the first time in his life he is getting regular income. In some ways then, Hamzah has gradually and much to his own enjoyment become a Kuala Lumpur-ite. It is not surprising then, that he decided to move permanently to Kuala Lumpur. The major step in this direction was taken when he moved his family to the city at the end of the school season in 1995, having first rented a house in the Sentul area. Faezah, his younger daughter would henceforth go to the Sekolah Menengah Sentul. The move from Kampong Gerong to Kuala Lumpur, not even dreamed of three years ago, was complete. The transition had been phenomenal, but as Hamzah would say, his *rezeki* was in Kuala Lumpur.

His move fits in well with the work he is doing both in the Akademi Seni Kebangsaan and in Kuala Lumpur as such. Norliza Roffil expressed the hope that "Hamzah will be here for a long time" to help the academy to achieve all it has set



HAMZAH RECEIVING
THE AHLI MANGKU
NEGARA IN 1996
FROM HIS MAJESTY
THE KING.

out
t o
achieve.
Hamzah too, now that at last he has received due recognition with the Anugerah Seni Negara, is prepared to give everything he has to students, scholars and researchers alike. He will in all probability find the environment in Kuala Lumpur more suitable for such work. On the question of what will happen to his Seri Setia group and especially to his musicians, Hamzah feels that they will not suffer. The troupe will not be dissolved. Throughout their involvement with Hamzah over the past two decades or so, he has never neglected them. His advancement has also indirectly benefited them financially with the increase in performances,

workshops and other activities. Hamzah says there will be things for them to do in Kuala Lumpur, including workshops and performances, and they will certainly be invited down on such occasions. When performances are to be done elsewhere, including Kelantan, Hamzah of course has the Academy's full permission to travel. The promotion of *wayang kulit* is, after all one of its principal objectives too, as it is Hamzah's.

Saving the *wayang kulit*, if that is at all possible, may become another, is another problem altogether, and for this there may be no solution. The problem is a highly complex one, and needs drastic measures, assuming that is, that there is, in the first place, an "official" will to see the *wayang* preserved. At present such a will is seriously lacking not just for the preservation of *wayang kulit*, but of the traditional performing arts as a whole. Hamzah is justly disappointed that he might after all, as described by the *New Straits Times* on January 6 1992 be "the last of the *wayang kulit* puppeteers." At that time there were around twenty active puppeteers in Kelantan, now the number is certainly less, and no one, with the possible exception of Yusof Hassan of Kampung Morak, performs *wayang kulit* in the traditional manner of Hamzah himself.

Hamzah's achievement have been remarkable by any standard. His has been a full and active life devoted entirely to his art form. For his dedication to his art he has been adequately rewarded with five titles given by the Sultan of Kelantan and the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong. The latest of these, the Ahli Manguku Negara, came this year. He has received international recognition as few in the traditional performing arts anywhere have. From a slow and painful start, this consummate artist with electrifying movements and voices for many has reached out from his tiny village of Kampung Gerong to the world, and the world has responded enthusiastically to him.

menarik minat orang2 Jerman

BES! Wayang Kulit mengalir ke Barat.



Wayang Kulit dapat sambutan di Eropah
 KUALA LUMPUR, 11 Ogos (M)—Wayang kulit, seni pertunjukan tradisional Indonesia, telah mendapat sambutan yang hangat di Eropah. Hal ini terbukti dengan banyaknya rombongan wayang kulit yang datang ke berbagai negara di benua tersebut.

Ditawar
 Wayang kulit telah ditawar kepada masyarakat Eropah melalui berbagai pameran dan pertunjukan. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa seni pertunjukan tradisional Indonesia semakin dikenal dan dihargai oleh masyarakat internasional.



Kasih sayang kepada budaya tradisional



Wayang Kulit menghantar Wayang Kulit
 Hamzah

Wayang Kulit menghantar Wayang Kulit
 Hamzah

mzah melihat inia melalui ayang kulit



New friends in the world of puppetry

New friends in the world of puppetry

Rombongan Seni Wayang Kulit berlepas ka-Eropah hari ini ...



PUPPET THEATRE IN ROMANIA
 With the National Institute for the chest of puppeteers, and numerous theatres scattered around in the provinces, Rumania has become one of the strongest centres of puppetry in Eastern Europe, rivalling the legendary Soviet Central Puppet Theatre in Moscow.

Talking drama - by Utih
 RAMAYANA IN ROMANIA

Kejayaa yang menjad kenang mania

Kejayaa yang menjad kenang mania