Shadow puppet theatres of Southeast Asia

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Southeast Asia has a rich heritage of inter-related shadow puppet theatre forms which dates back at least a millennium. While in some parts of the region, traditions are etiolated and considered endangered, in others they remain relevant or show signs of renewal, including radical reinterpretations. Shadow puppet theatre is finding new audiences through installations, intermedial and intercultural artistic collaborations and online platforms. While in the recent past such innovations took place in isolation, there is increasingly a sense of a shared culture in the region due to the establishment of international puppetry organisations, activities at festivals and by groups, and interaction due to individual travel. This panel proposes to look at the past, present and future of shadow puppet theatres of Southeast Asia. How do the residues of past practices (puppets in museums, manuscripts, temple engravings etc) inform us about how shadow puppetry was performed and conceptualized historically? How are traditional puppets being used in both traditional and non-traditional ways? And how are these past traces being configured today as cultural heritage in dialogue with present-day society? This panel coincides with an exhibition of the shadow puppets of the British Museum curated by the panel organizers, including Javanese puppets of the Raffles collection from circa 1800 (the earliest systematic collection of puppets in the world); puppets from Kelantan, Malaysia made by the innovative puppeteers Hamzah and Awang Lah in the mid-twentieth century; Balinese puppets gifted to Queen Elizabeth II; and modern Thai shadow puppets from the 1960s and 70s that reference contemporaneous fashions, trends and global pop culture.