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REIMAGINING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: A SEMIOTIC READING OF *BATIK GIRL* AND *THE DALANG'S TALE*

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Abstract

This article examines how Malaysian animated shorts mobilise semiotic strategies to reimagine intangible cultural heritage (ICH), focusing on *Batik Girl* (2018) and *The Dalang's Tale* (2021). While earlier scholarship has catalogued cultural motifs in Malaysian animation, less attention has been paid to how these motifs function symbolically and narratively. Drawing on Roland Barthes' framework of denotation, connotation, and myth, complemented by Clifford Geertz's notion of thick description, this study analyses selected keyframes from both films to trace how cultural signs operate within cinematic storytelling. In *Batik Girl*, motifs, textures, and tools from the *batik lukis* tradition are transformed from aesthetic details into symbolic landscapes that externalise grief, resilience, and healing. By contrast, *The Dalang's Tale* engages more deeply with the performative grammar of *wayang kulit Kelantan* (WKK), where shadows, light, and puppet aesthetics articulate secrecy, trauma, and reconciliation. At the mythic level, WKK emerges as a cultural allegory of cyclical conflict and renewal. The comparative analysis demonstrates a progression from surface symbolism to embedded performative allegory, reflecting both the creative development of the filmmaker and a broader shift in Malaysian animated shorts from folktale adaptations toward cultural marker films. These findings underscore the value of semiotic analysis for revealing the symbolic depth of ICH in animation, showing how short films function as cultural laboratories that preserve continuity, enable innovation, and resonate with both local and global audiences.

Keywords
Semiotics, Cinematic storytelling, Intangible cultural heritage, Malaysian animation, Animated short films

1. Introduction

For centuries, storytelling has been one of humanity's most enduring cultural practices, enabling communities to preserve values, transmit beliefs, and record collective memory. Myths, folktales, and rituals function not only as entertainment but also as symbolic repositories of identity and history. As Zabel (1991) suggests, stories function as cultural records, documenting events, celebrating heroic figures, capturing the spirit of an era, and revealing recurring patterns of behaviour and cultural change. Semiotics, the study of signs and meaning-making, provides a framework to decode these symbolic systems and to understand how meaning is created, communicated, and reinterpreted. In film and animation, semiotics reveals how images, motifs, and narrative structures operate simultaneously at literal and symbolic levels, reflecting and reshaping cultural realities. Animation is particularly suited to this task. Unlike live-action cinema, which records reality, animation constructs its own worlds from the ground up. This capacity for stylisation and abstraction makes it especially effective for encoding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) into cinematic storytelling. Wells (1998) argues that animation possesses its own narrative vocabulary, one in which design, movement, and spatial composition serve as meaningful expressive elements. Similarly, Bendazzi (2016) illustrates how animation history involves both the adaptation of inherited styles and the innovation of new aesthetic and narrative techniques. Recent global works such as *Bao* (2018), and *Hair Love* (2019) demonstrate how animation, and particularly the short form, can mobilise cultural practices, rituals, and artefacts as narrative engines with both local resonance and international appeal.

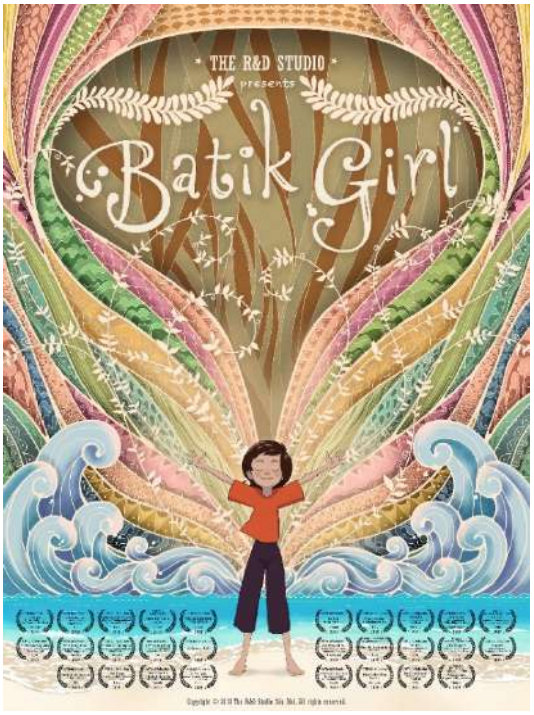
The Malaysian animation industry mirrors these developments. While early works such as *Hikayat Sang Kancil* (1978) adapted folktales for educational and nation-building purposes, more recent short films have emerged as creative laboratories for reimagining ICH. UNESCO defines ICH as the practices, expressions, and knowledge recognised by communities as part of their heritage, including crafts, performance traditions, and rituals. In Malaysia, this encompasses practices such as *batik*, *songket*, *wayang kulit Kelantan* (WKK), *mak yong*, alongside diverse traditions from Chinese, Indian, and indigenous cultures. The integration of such elements into animation provides not only aesthetic richness but also a means of embedding cultural memory into contemporary narratives. Yet much of the existing scholarship on Malaysian animation remains descriptive, cataloguing motifs without fully examining how they function symbolically or narratively. This risks reducing ICH to decorative markers rather than recognising its capacity as a dynamic semiotic system. What is needed is a sustained analysis of how Malaysian animated shorts mobilise ICH as narrative devices that articulate deeper cultural meanings.

This article addresses that gap by examining two landmark Malaysian shorts produced by The R&D Studio: *Batik Girl* (2018) and *The Dalang's Tale* (2021). Both foreground ICH but in different ways. *Batik Girl* reimagines *batik lukis* motifs, tools, and textures as symbolic landscapes that externalise grief and resilience. *The Dalang's Tale*, by contrast, engages the performative grammar of WKK, embedding shadows, light, and puppet aesthetics into an allegory of trauma and reconciliation. Together, the films illustrate an evolution from surface symbolism to embedded cultural allegory, reflecting both the creative development of the filmmaker and the broader trajectory of Malaysian shorts from folktale adaptations toward cultural marker films.The author acknowledges a direct creative role in both films, serving as director of *Batik Girl* and creative producer of *The Dalang's Tale*.

This reflexive position provides insider insights into the creative process, though interpretations are supported by cultural scholarship to ensure balance and mitigate bias.

Figure 1

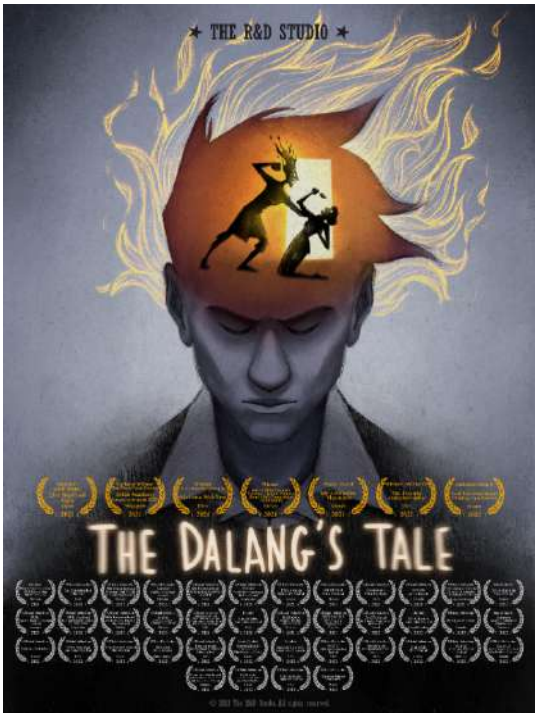
Poster for Batik Girl.



Note. Copyright 2018 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 2

Poster for The Dalang's Tale.



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The aim of this study is therefore twofold: first, to decode how *Batik Girl* and *The Dalang's Tale* employ semiotics to reimagine ICH in cinematic storytelling; and second, to demonstrate how semiotic analysis reveals the symbolic depth of ICH when transposed into animation. Guided by Barthes' framework of denotation, connotation, and myth, and informed by Geertz's concept of thick description, this article situates visual motifs and performative practices within broader cultural and narrative contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methods

2.1 Semiotics, Thick Description and Film Semiotics

Semiotics provides the core foundation of this study. Saussure conceptualised the sign as the relation between signifier and signified (Key & Noble, 2017), while Peirce (1935) expanded this into a triadic model that emphasises interpretation as a dynamic process. Building on these foundations, Roland Barthes (1983) introduced the layered system of denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign, connotation to its culturally inflected associations, and myth to broader ideological narratives. This tripartite framework is especially suited to film and animation, where visual motifs, colours, and spatial designs can operate simultaneously at literal, symbolic, and cultural levels. To anchor these symbolic readings in context, Clifford Geertz's (2008) notion of "thick description" is also employed. Geertz emphasises that cultural acts must be interpreted within their social and historical environment, rather than in isolation. Applied to animation, this means situating visual and performative motifs not only as stylistic choices but also as carriers of cultural memory and meaning.

Film semiotics (Metz, 2011; Wollen, 2013; Bordwell, 2013) has highlighted the coded nature of cinema, though at times it has been critiqued for overemphasising structure at the expense of narrative and cultural specificity. This study takes a pragmatic approach: semiotics provides the analytic lens, while thick description ensures that cultural interpretation remains grounded in lived heritage.

2.2 Methodological Approach

The study adopts a qualitative, text-focused analysis centred on cinematic storytelling. Representative keyframes were selected from *Batik Girl* and *The Dalang's Tale*. **EIGHT** keyframes were chosen for *Batik Girl* (out of 150 shots across nine scenes), and **SEVEN** for *The Dalang's Tale* (out of 97 shots across six scenes).

Each keyframe was examined through a three-step semiotic process:

1. **Denotative description** – what the image literally shows.
2. **Connotative interpretation** – what cultural or emotional associations it suggests.
3. **Mythic reading** – how these connotations embody larger cultural narratives.

In addition, the analysis draws on van Sijll's (2005) framework of cinematic storytelling, which highlights how composition, colour, lighting, editing, and camera position function as narrative signifiers. This provides a practical lens for identifying how shot-level design choices reinforce the semiotic transformation of ICH into cinematic storytelling.

3. Semiotic Analysis of *Batik Girl*

Batik Girl situates the *batik lukis* traditions of Terengganu at the heart of its cinematic storytelling. Rather than simply using *batik* as ornament, the film transforms motifs, tools, and processes into a symbolic vocabulary through which themes of grief, memory, and healing are explored.

Figure 3

The four main characters in Batik Girl

Mas | Tok Ma | Batik Girl | Shadow

Note. The characters are unnamed in the film due to the non-dialogue nature of the film but were named by the film makers in *Crafting Batik Girl* (Zaidah & Anum Ahmad, 2021). Copyright 2018 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Table 1 summarises eight keyframes taken from *Batik Girl* and illustrates how signs function across denotation, connotation, and myth.

Keyframe (Film Still)	**Real World ICH reference**

Figure 4

Geometric shapes in the background.

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Figure 5

Geometric shapes in batik lukis.

Note. Photo by Utusan/Zulhanifa Sidek.

Denotation (literal)	In the background behind Mas, the *batik* design features repeated geometric motifs, including triangles, diamonds, and symmetrical arrangements.

Connotation (associative)	The bright geometric shapes recall traditional *batik* design, but in the film they expand into an ever-changing kaleidoscope that fills the space behind Mas. This shifting pattern symbolises dynamism and vitality, visually externalising her sense of joy and emotional uplift.
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The geometric motifs embody resilience, suggesting that cultural patterns function not only as aesthetic forms but also as sources of psychological grounding. Their coexistence with floral motifs reflects real-world *batik* traditions, where geometric and organic designs are interwoven, reinforcing both continuity and adaptability across aesthetic and symbolic dimensions.

Figure 6

Tok Ma, a batik artist in Terengganu.

Note. Copyright 2018 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 7

Female batik artist at Noor Arfa Craft Complex, Terengganu.

Note. Photo by BERNAMA.

Denotation (literal)	An elderly woman, Tok Ma, is depicted applying wax to stretched fabric using a canting.
Connotation (associative)	The depiction of an elderly woman as the *batik* artisan connotes the gendered dimension of *batik lukis* production in Terengganu, where women are often regarded as the primary practitioners. Their involvement is associated with meticulousness, patience, and creativity, qualities considered essential to sustaining the craft tradition (Yunus, 2012, p. 57).
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	Tok Ma embodies the transmission of heritage, representing not only the continuity of artisanal skill but also the resilience and cultural identity that are passed from one generation to the next. Her role situates *batik* as a living repository of collective memory, linking personal practice to broader cultural survival.

Figure 8

Mas on a swing-set by the beach

Note. Copyright 2018 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 9

Swing-set at a beach in Kuala Terengganu

Note. Photo by Heidi Shamsuddin.

Denotation (literal)	Mas is shown seated on a swing, gazing pensively toward the horizon.
Connotation (associative)	The use of a Dutch angle creates a sense of unease, while Mas's solitary figure on the distant swing accentuates her loneliness as she gazes toward the horizon. The poignancy of the setting is heightened by its connection to a cherished memory of her parents, reinforcing the interplay between absence, memory, and place (Zaidah & Anum Ahmad, 2021, p. 37).
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The swing functions as a symbol of liminality, embodying the threshold between loss and healing. This imagery resonates with Terengganu's coastal setting, a landscape closely tied to the flourishing of *batik* traditions, thereby situating Mas's personal journey within a broader cultural geography of memory and resilience.

Figure 10

Mas touches the stretched batik fabric in the workshop.

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Figure 11

Stretched batik fabric on a frame.

Note. Photo by BERNAMA.

Denotation (literal)	In *batik lukis*, the cloth ranges from 2m to 6m in length is cut and stretched horizontally across a wooden frame at waist height before the artisan begins creating the design (Yunus, 2012, p. 59).
Connotation (associative)	The stretched fabric suggests order, structure, and readiness for transformation. Its horizontal expanse mirrors the "canvas" of life and memory onto which stories are inscribed. Taking inspiration from long horizontal format of *batik lukis*, the *batik* world in the film is designed as one long horizontal landscape.
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The stretched fabric symbolises continuity, representing the cultural framework that sustains and enables new creation. Just as *batik* cloth provides the base upon which designs emerge, tradition provides the foundation upon which new stories are inscribed. By evoking this parallel, the film situates the *batik* world as a metaphor for cultural endurance and renewal, where memory and heritage form the canvas for personal and collective transformation.

Figure 12

Batik Girl's hair spreading the colours

Note. Copyright 2018 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 13

Application of colours with a brush in batik lukis.

Note. Photo by Intan Ruhanida Ramli/ Securities Commission Malaysia.

Denotation (literal)	As Batik Girl moves past the outline of a *cempaka pisang* (magnolia), her flowing hair spreads colour into the flower, which then expands across the *batik* world.
Connotation (associative)	The design of Batik Girl's hair recalls the shape of a brush as it spreads colours in the *batik* world. The *cempaka pisang* (magnolia) flower that symbolises feminity recalling the flower oinned to Tok Ma's head scarf. The flower is a recurring visual motif throughout the film (Zaidah & Anum Ahmad, 2021).
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	Batik Girl character is a cultural embodiment, the idea that the body itself becomes the medium through which heritage

	flows. The act of colouring signifies how personal identity and cultural tradition are inseparable, reinforcing heritage as a living, embodied process.

Figure 14

The batik jungle.

Note. Copyright 2018 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 15

Floral designs in batik lukis.

Note. Photo by BERNAMA.

Denotation (literal)	Batik Girl is surrounded by different types of stylised *batik*-styled fauna that expands into a jungle.
Connotation (associative)	This transformation connotes the blurring of motif and environment, where static design elements evolve into a living, immersive space that externalises her emotional state.
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The prominence of foliated patterns in the *batik* jungle reflects a long-standing cultural preference for vegetal motifs over figurative imagery. While this tendency is rooted in aniconic Islamic traditions, it also draws from earlier Hindu and Buddhist influences that shaped the region's visual culture (Arney, 1987, p. 35). By extending these patterns into an immersive jungle, the film situates Batik Girl's emotional landscape within a continuum of spiritual and cultural symbolism, transforming natural motifs into a space of refuge and healing.

Figure 16

Retak textures can be seen on the mountains.

Note. Copyright 2018 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 17

Batik retak texture.

Note. Author's photo.

Denotation (literal)	The textures of the *batik* mountain in the background are inspired by *batik retak* technique.
Connotation (associative)	The effect recalls the *batik retak* or cracked/crackled *batik*, is a technique where, after the wax has dried, the artisan crumples the cloth to create a cracked texture within the waxed areas (Syed Shaharuddin, et al., 2021).
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The crackled textures signify resilience through imperfection, reflecting how trauma and rupture can be absorbed into continuity. In *batik* practice, the cracking pattern is not random but can be deliberately controlled by folding and pleating the cloth in specific directions, symbolising agency and transformation within constraint. By referencing *batik retak* in this way, the film aligns personal scars with cultural practices that turn fracture into beauty, situating healing within the discipline and creativity of tradition.

Figure 18

Tok Ma and Mas embrace each other at the end of the film.

Note. Copyright 2018 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 19

Musim Buah (1968) by Chuah Thean Teng,

Note. Chuah Thean Teng is widely regarded as the father of *batik* art. Collection of Balai Seni Visual Negara, public domain.

Denotation (literal)	The final shot of the film is Mas and Tok Ma embracing as they accept each other into their lives.
Connotation (associative)	The final embrace provides catharsis for Mas, resolving her grief over the loss of her parents after passing through denial, anger, depression, and ultimately acceptance (Zaidah & Anum Ahmad, 2021, p. 41). Symbolically, Tok Ma embodies order and wisdom, represented by the structured lines of *batik*, while Mas reflects youth and emotional volatility, expressed through vibrant colours. Their contrasting qualities mirror the interplay of discipline and spontaneity within *batik* art. Just as lines and colours combine to create a composition of beauty and depth, the union of Tok Ma and Mas signifies how intergenerational bonds transform loss into resilience, offering a vision of a shared life enriched by both heritage and renewal.
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The ending parallels the process of *batik*-making, where structured lines and vivid colours combine to create harmony and beauty. In the same way, the relationship between Tok Ma and Mas affirms that a meaningful life is achieved through the union of heritage and renewal. Their embrace symbolises how intergenerational bonds transform grief into resilience, sustaining cultural identity across time.

Table 1. Semiotic analysis of *Batik Girl* using the Barthesian denotation, connotation and mythic interpretation.

4. Semiotic Analysis of *The Dalang's Tale*

The Dalang's Tale reimagines WKK through a story of trauma, violence, and reconciliation. Unlike *Batik Girl*, which externalises emotion through patterns and landscapes, *The Dalang's Tale* embeds cultural meaning in performance conventions: puppets, shadows, and light.

Figure 20

Identification of characters in The Dalang's Tale analysis.

The Man

The Child

The Dalang

The Father

The Mother

The Son

Note. There are six main characters in *The Dalang's Tale* although they are unnamed in the film due to the non-dialogue nature of the film. For this analysis, the characters are referred to as above. Copyright 2021 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Keyframe (Film Still)	**Real World ICH reference**

Figure 21

Title design for The Dalang's Tale.

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Figure 22

Screenshot of a WKK performance video

Note. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?

v=HRGsXc_p4TA, time stamp 0:03.
Video copyright KiniTV.

Denotation (literal)	In the official poster, the title design presents the words *The* and *Tale* with their outer edges rendered slightly out of focus.
Connotation (associative)	The blurred edges of the title evoke the visual qualities of shadows cast on the screen during WKK performances. This design choice connotes the ephemeral and fluid nature of shadow imagery, which depends on the *dalang's* manipulation of puppets to create expressive effects. Through subtle variations in movement and positioning, the *dalang* conveys character status, emotional states, and narrative tension; the poster design symbolically echoes this interplay between clarity and ambiguity.
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The blurred edges of the title resonate with the cosmological dimensions of WKK, where shadows embody the threshold between the material and spiritual realms. Exaggerated shadows produced when puppets move away from the light source can distort the audience's perception of space and location (Khor, 2014, p. 19). This distortion is not merely visual but symbolic, reminding audiences of the liminal nature of shadow play, a medium that mediates between reality and illusion, presence and absence. By adopting this visual cue, the poster situates the film within a tradition where ambiguity and distortion carry deeper cultural meaning, transforming graphic design into an extension of WKK's ritual and narrative symbolism.

Figure 23

Staging of characters in The Dalang's Tale

Note. Copyright 2021 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 24

Screenshot of a WKK performance video

Note. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRGsXc_p4TA, time stamp 0:24). Video copyright KiniTV.

Denotation (literal)	In the wayang world sequences, the Mother consistently appears on the audience's left while the Father is placed on the audience's right. This spatial orientation is maintained throughout, except in one scene shown from the Child's point of view, where the positions are reversed.
Connotation (associative)	This spatial arrangement encodes symbolic meaning, with the Mother positioned as the abused and the Father as the abuser. The reversal in the Child's perspective signifies his misperception of events, as he interprets his Mother as the aggressor who has harmed his Father. The shift in spatial coding thus externalises the Child's confusion and conflicted loyalties, aligning point of view with psychological distortion.
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	This spatial orientation recalls the conventions of WKK, where positioning serves as a subtle indicator of character allegiances and temperament. Noble or virtuous characters are traditionally introduced from the left, while antagonistic or malevolent figures enter from the right (Osnes, 2010, p. 60).

Figure 25

Holes in the characters symbolises abuse.

Note. Copyright 2021 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 26

Closeup of the Nenek Jin Bera Sakti puppet.

Note. An original puppet of *dalang* Dollah Baju Merah from the collection of the Museum of Asian Art, Universiti Malaya. Reprinted with permission.

Denotation (literal)	The character designs of both the Mother and the Father feature perforated patterns, with holes incorporated into their forms.
Connotation (associative)	The perforations in the character designs are reimagined as abstract manifestations of abuse and its psychological consequences. The Mother's circular holes signify the emotional wounds inflicted upon her through cycles of violence, while the Father's rectangular holes convey a

	sense of inner emptiness and failed attempts to repair or compensate for his deficiencies. These contrasting shapes transform ornamental design into a visual metaphor for trauma, situating personal suffering within the symbolic language of form.
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The punched holes reference the traditional design of WKK puppets, where perforations are carefully crafted to allow light to pass through and create intricate patterns on the screen. These decorative cut-outs are not merely ornamental but function to animate the puppet with vitality, enabling the play of light and shadow that is central to the performance. By reimagining this convention in the character designs of the Mother and Father, the film situates their personal struggles within the cosmological framework of WKK, where illumination transforms material forms into living symbols.

Figure 27

Cucuk sanggul with a pohon beringin design.

Note. Copyright 2021 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 28

Pohon beringin puppet.

Note. An original puppet of *dalang* Dollah Baju Merah from the collection of the Museum of Asian Art, Universiti Malaya. Reprinted with permission.

Denotation (literal)	The *pohon beringin* motif is integrated into the design of the Mother's *cucuk sanggul*, serving as her hair ornament.
Connotation (associative)	The incorporation of the pohon beringin motif into the Mother's *cucuk sanggul* acquires symbolic significance during a pivotal scene. When she uses the ornament as a weapon to stab the Father in an abusive episode, the

	hairpiece shifts from an emblem of femininity and adornment to an instrument of resistance and survival. This act marks a decisive turning point in her life, signalling empowerment and the reclaiming of agency against oppression.
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The *pohon beringin* is among the most significant puppets in WKK. Traditionally used to open and close performances, it functions as a liminal device that marks transitions between scenes and mediates between the human and the cosmic (Nasuruddin, 2009). By embedding this motif into the Mother's *cucuk sanggul*, the film contextualises the *pohon beringin* as a symbol of transformation. Its role in the act of resistance against the Father aligns with its cultural function as a transitional emblem, here signifying the passage from subjugation to empowerment and from trauma to healing.

Figure 29

One light source per scene.

Note. Copyright 2021 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 30

Dalang manipulating puppets using one light source behind the screen.

Note. Photo copyright The Star/Chester Chin.

Denotation (literal)	All of the wayang world sequences are lit by a singular source of illumination, typically represented as a window or a door.
Connotation (associative)	The use of a single light source in the wayang world sequences reflects the staging conventions of WKK, where a lamp or bulb is used to cast clear, distinct shadows of the puppets. This cinematic device emphasises the interplay of light and shadow, reinforcing themes of concealment and revelation within the narrative.
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The oil lamp in WKK carries symbolic resonance as a representation of life and energy, functioning as a semiotic analogue of the sun (Abdul Ghani, 2012). By drawing on this cosmological association, the film situates its light source not merely as a technical necessity but as a cultural symbol of vitality

	and illumination, aligning the narrative's movement from secrecy to disclosure with WKK's ritual and cosmological dimensions.

Figure 31

The dalang sheds a tear upon realizing that her son understands her situation.

Note. Copyright 2021 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 32

The buka panggung ritual of WKK.

Note. From the collection of the Museum of Asian Art, Universiti Malaya. Reprinted with permission.

Denotation (literal)	In the final scene, the Man realises that the WKK performance he has just witnessed is, in fact, a retelling of his own life story, and he recognises the Dalang as his estranged mother.
Connotation (associative)	In the film, the *dalang's* WKK performance operates as a symbolic act of catharsis, connoting self-healing through narrative disclosure. By staging her personal history within the conventions of shadow play, the *dalang* reveals her hidden trauma to her estranged son, transforming performance into a medium of reconciliation.
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The performance recalls the ritualistic origins of WKK, where shadow play was historically used in healing rites and traditional performances were often conducted to restore the well-being of individuals who were unwell (Osnes, 2010). In this context, the *dalang's* act of narrating her own story becomes more than personal disclosure: it symbolically aligns with WKK's cultural role as a medium of restoration and reconciliation, extending individual healing into a broader cosmological and communal frame.

Figure 33

Colours in the environment denote the danger the characters are in.

Note. Copyright 2021 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 34

Maharaja Wana puppet.

Note. An original puppet of *dalang* Dollah Baju Merah from the collection of the Museum of Asian Art, Universiti Malaya. Reprinted with permission.

Denotation (literal)	The characters in the shadow world in film are rendered in monochrome and darker tones, while the backgrounds are highlighted with vivid, contrasting colours. It is also noted that WKK shows have colourful puppets that cast coloured shadows, compared to the shadows of *Balinese wayang kulit*.
Connotation (associative)	The vivid background colours function as an expressive device, with shifts in palette reflecting the emotional tenor of each scene. In the shadow world, the changing chromatic environment corresponds to fluctuating levels of threat, with red signifying the highest degree of danger and intensifying the visual externalisation of conflict.
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The use of colour recalls the traditional conventions of WKK, where puppets are painted in vibrant hues to signify distinct traits and emotions (Yousof & Khor, 2017). For example, Hanuman is commonly rendered in red to symbolise aggression, vitality, and ferocity, while noble characters such as Seri Rama are often depicted in gold or green to convey refinement, balance, and virtue. By referencing this symbolic colour system, the film aligns its chromatic shifts with established cultural codes, adapting them into its cinematic language.

Figure 35

The dalang wears her hair in a bun.

Note. Copyright 2021 by The R&D Studio. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 36

Siti Dewi puppet.

Note. An original puppet of *dalang* Dollah Baju Merah from the collection of the Museum of Asian Art, Universiti Malaya. Reprinted with permission.

Denotation (literal)	The Dalang and the Mother, who are revealed to be the same person at the end of the film, are depicted with rounded character designs, in contrast to the Father, whose form is angular and sharply defined.
Connotation (associative)	The character designs draw on universal visual cues rather than strictly adhering to the traditional *kasar/halus* aesthetic codes of WKK. Rounded features are employed to signify benevolence, while angular features denote antagonism, a strategy intended to ensure greater accessibility for global audiences. However, certain culturally specific elements were retained, most notably the Mother's and the *dalang's* hairstyle, styled in a bun reminiscent of Siti Dewi, which serves as a subtle reference to the *halus* ideals of femininity within WKK tradition.
Myth/ICH Meaning (cultural narrative)	The design of the main puppets reflects the aesthetic conventions of *kasar* (coarse) and *halus* (refined) in WKK. *Kasar* characters, such as Maharaja Wana, are depicted with bulkier and more rounded forms, connoting power and aggression, while *halus* characters, such as Seri Rama, are rendered as tall and slender, embodying refinement and nobility (Yousof & Khor, 2017). These aesthetic codes map directly onto moral dichotomies, embedding cultural categories into character design. By referencing these traditional categories, *The Dalang's Tale* situates its character design within an established cultural semiotic system, even as it adapts these visual codes for broader accessibility.

Table 2. Semiotic analysis of *The Dalang's Tale* using the Barthesian denotation, connotation and mythic interpretation.

5. Comparative Discussion

The semiotic analyses of *Batik Girl* and *The Dalang's Tale* highlight two distinct but complementary ways of reimagining ICH in animation. *Batik Girl* mobilises surface-level motifs of *batik lukis* such as tools, textures, and floral designs as visual metaphors that externalise grief and resilience. By transforming craft details into symbolic landscapes, the film demonstrates how abstraction and stylisation can embed cultural identity within a personal narrative of loss and healing. In contrast, *The Dalang's Tale* situates meaning within the performative grammar of WKK Shadows signify secrecy and trauma, light suggests revelation and healing, and puppet aesthetics encode moral struggle. Here, ICH operates not as motif but as performance system, where cultural practices themselves structure the story. This deeper engagement with performance reflects a shift toward allegory, aligning individual trauma with cyclical patterns of reconciliation embedded in WKK tradition.

Together, the two films illustrate a progression from surface symbolism to performative allegory. This progression mirrors broader currents in Malaysian animated shorts, which have moved from retelling folktales toward reimagining heritage through original narratives. Positioned within global parallels such as *Bao* (2018) and *Hair Love* (2019), these films show how short-form animation functions as a cultural laboratory: a space where heritage is not only preserved but also adapted into dynamic and globally resonant storytelling.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown how semiotic analysis can reveal the symbolic depth of ICH when integrated into animation. In *Batik Girl*, motifs of *batik lukis* function as emotional landscapes, while in *The Dalang's Tale*, the performative conventions of WKK stage trauma and reconciliation as cultural allegory. These cases affirm the potential of Malaysian animated shorts to serve as cultural laboratories, preserving traditions while enabling creative innovation. By mobilising ICH not as decorative ornament but as narrative engine, such works contribute both to local cultural continuity and to global conversations on identity and storytelling.

Future research may extend this approach to other Malaysian or Southeast Asian shorts, or to audience reception studies that explore how these semiotic strategies resonate across different communities, but already it is clear that Malaysian animated shorts demonstrate how ICH can be reimagined through semiotic storytelling, offering models of cultural continuity and innovation that invite further critical exploration.

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