

The Shadow Plays of Kelantan, Malaysia and Daoqing, Huan County of China: A Comparative Study of Artistic Functions

Qiang Zhanquan¹ and Raja Iskandar Raja Halid^{2*}

¹Longdong University, Xifeng District, Qingyang, 745000 Gansu, China

²Department of Heritage, Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, 16300 Bachok, Kelantan

ABSTRACT

Kelantan shadow puppetry represents a quintessential form of Malaysian traditional theatre, while the Daoqing shadow puppetry of Huan County exemplifies China's commitment to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. This study employs an ethnomusicological framework, integrating literature review, case studies, interviews, and participant observation to examine and compare the two traditions in terms of musical structure, puppet design, performance style, narrative content, and accompanying instruments. By exploring their artistic and cultural dimensions, this research highlights both shared features and distinctive characteristics. The findings aim to contribute to global comparative studies of shadow puppetry and foster deeper intercultural dialogue, thereby promoting the preservation and sustainable development of these performing arts.

Keywords: Huan county Daoqing shadow play, musical forms, performance forms, wayang kulit Kelantan

INTRODUCTION

Shadow puppetry is an ancient folk tradition that serves both as artistic expression and cultural archive, enriching the spiritual life of communities while preserving historical memory. Through its evolution across centuries, it reflects the distinctive cultural identity and socio-historical structures of the societies in which it thrives.

Primarily an auditory art, shadow puppetry constructs its unique musical identity through rhythm, melody, and performance conventions. Storytelling in shadow theatre incorporates mythology, folklore, and contemporary narratives, delivered through stylised musical

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E-mail addresses:

qzq02359@sina.cn (Qiang Zhanquan)

rajaiskandar@umk.edu.my (Raja Iskandar Raja Halid)

* Corresponding author

accompaniment to enhance audience engagement. Simultaneously, it is a visual art, with its puppets' design, colour schemes, and gestures contributing to aesthetic and symbolic depth. The interplay of light and shadow, often enhanced by vibrant puppet designs, produces a mysterious and captivating atmosphere that evokes a profound sensory and emotional response.

At a micro level, Kelantan and Huan County shadow puppetry manifest divergent characteristics shaped by their respective histories, belief systems, and socio-cultural contexts. Their musical and theatrical practices reflect both ritualistic and performative functions. At a macro level, both forms are integral expressions of the intangible heritage of their respective communities, symbolising shared values, beliefs, and artistic visions. Despite their geographic and cultural distinctions, they collectively affirm the human capacity for storytelling, artistic innovation, and cultural continuity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach, incorporating literature review, fieldwork, organological analysis, and musicological examination. Ethnographic research was conducted in Kelantan and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, as well as in Gansu Province, China.

In Malaysia, participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their expertise and experience. These included shadow play performers, puppet craftsmen,

educators, and government cultural officers: Tok Dalang Pak Cu (a prominent Malaysian performer of Chinese descent), Tok Dalang Pak Nasir (a renowned *dalang* and educator at ASWARA), Tok Dalang Pak Dain (former Deputy Chief Assistant Director of the Kelantan Education Technology Division), Tok Dalang Che Kal (a leading young *dalang*), Tok Dalang Che Ann (a notable puppet maker), and Dr. Fara (a shadow play scholar from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris).

Chinese respondents included Jing Dengkun (fifth-generation inheritor of the Jing family troupe), Jing Dengqi (a provincial-level inheritor), Wei Zongfu (representing the Wei family troupe), Zhang Zhiwen (a municipal-level inheritor skilled in puppet making), and Xu Mingtang (another municipal-level practitioner of Daoqing shadow puppetry). Fieldwork included participant observation in puppet crafting workshops and local community events. Both primary and secondary data were gathered through interviews, audio and video recordings, photographs, and other observational methods.

Data were analysed inductively using a typological approach. Key themes aligned with the study's objectives—such as musical structure, puppet design, performance form and content, and accompanying instruments—were identified and used to organise the comparative discussion. Each theme was treated as a main heading, with corresponding features of the Kelantan and Daoqing traditions discussed in parallel sub-sections.

RESULTS

The Art of Auditory Perception

Forms of Music

The Music Form of Wayang Kulit Kelantan.

The music of Wayang Kulit Kelantan is rooted in the folk traditions of northern Peninsular Malaysia. Although it has incorporated diverse cultural influences over time, it has developed a distinct musical identity. According to Yousof (1998), its musical tradition has evolved into a unique form despite assimilating elements from various cultures. Nasuruddin (1992) notes that it employs pentatonic, hexatonic, heptatonic, and nonatonic scales. Its melodic contours—featuring semitones and microtones—resemble those of Persian-Arabic music, yet it retains a singular Malaysian character.

The musical structure centres around the musical form created by the *tetawak* (gong), which is expanded or halved in binary fashion and repeated in cycles, forming a structure known as *gongan* (Matusky, 1997). The *serunai* (a quadruple reed aerophone) plays melodies that are narrow in range and often repetitive. Music plays a vital role in defining performance structure, cueing puppet movements, delineating characters, and signaling transitions and emotional shifts. For instance, the tune *Hulubalang* accompanies scenes of warriors marching; *Perang* is used for the graceful movement of noble characters, while *Berjalanis* used for the graceful movement of noble characters.

Dalang Pak Dain attributes the formalisation of rhythm and tempo to Tok Dalang Saman and Tok Dalang Yaakub, who composed 30 foundational pieces for

Wayang Kulit Kelantan. These pieces are thematically linked to narrative episodes and remain in use today.

The Music Form of Huan County Daoqing Shadow Play.

The musical system of Huan County Daoqing shadow puppetry employs traditional Chinese modal frameworks, primarily categorised into two tonal systems: *Huayin* and *Shangyin*. *Huayin* is associated with joyful and lively moods, while *Shangyin* conveys sadness and solemnity. The musical rhythm is organised into *banshi* (metres), including *Huayin adagio*, *Shangyin adagio*, *Huayin allegro*, and *Shangyin allegro* (The Editorial Committee, 2006). During performances, the music shifts fluidly among *banshi* types, depending on character roles and plot developments.

The musical texture includes three components: vocal style, instrumental accompaniment, and *Mahuang* (a call-and-response style derived from traditional labour chants and unique to northern Chinese folk opera traditions) (Zhao, 1997). The vocal style is non-metric and monophonic, characterised by irregular tempo and unmeasured phrasing (Qiang & Zhang, 2019). In contrast, the instrumental accompaniment follows Western-style conventions of pitch, duration, and rhythm and is typically played during preludes, transitions, interludes, and finales. *Mahuang* is the most distinctive element, known for its lyrical melodies, wide intervallic leaps, and standardised rhythmic patterns. It is the only segment where vocals and orchestra are performed simultaneously.

Accompaniment Instruments

Wayang Kulit Kelantan

The musical ensemble is a fundamental element of Wayang Kulit Kelantan performances. Following the Hornbostel-Sachs classification system, the full ensemble includes:

- Aerophones: *Serunai*
- Membranophones: *Gedumbak*, *Geduk*, *Gendang*
- Idiophones: *Tetawak*, *Canang*, *Kesi*

Serunai

The *serunai* (Figure. 1) is a quadruple-reed aerophone available in two sizes—48 cm and 35 cm in length. It has a loud, bright, slightly husky tone and is made from conical wooden tubing with reeds fashioned from the *lontar* tree. Its eight finger holes (seven front, one rear) allow pitch modulation. Key performance techniques include circular breathing, vibrato, and glissando.



Figure 1. Serunai

Gedumbak

This hourglass-shaped single-headed drum (Figure. 2) comes in two sizes: *ibu* (mother) and *anak* (child), with the former being about 45 cm in length. Played horizontally on the lap, it produces various tones depending on whether the open end is covered by the player's palm.



Figure 2. Gedumbak

Geduk

A barrel-shaped, double-headed drum, the *geduk* (Figure. 3) consists of *ibu* and *anak* drums. Covered with cowhide, it is played vertically using sticks, producing sound through membrane vibration.

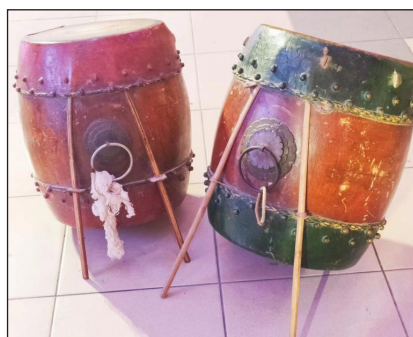


Figure 3. Geduk

Gendang

This long, asymmetrical double-headed drum (Figure. 4) features a golden-ratio waist and is played horizontally across the lap. It has different-sized heads, allowing for adjustable timbre and tonal variation. It, too, comes in *ibu* and *anak* sizes.



Figure 4. Gendang Ibu (left) and Gendang Anak

Tetawak

Also known as a hanging gong, the *tetawak* (Figure. 5) comprises two deep bronze or brass gongs (*ibu* and *anak*), typically 40-60 cm in diameter. Sound is produced by striking the raised central knob (*busut*) with a padded mallet.



Figure 5. Tetawak

Canang

Canang (Figure. 6) refers to a pair of small gongs with diameters between 15 and 20 cm. Suspended in a wooden frame; they are played by striking their central bosses with padded mallets.

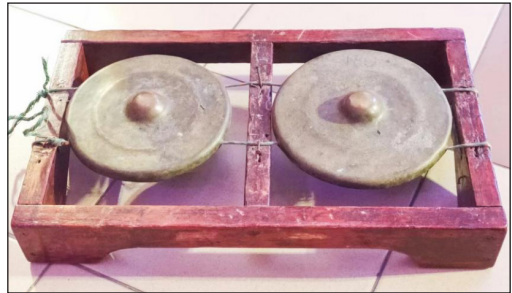


Figure 6. Canang

Kesi

Kesi (Figure. 7) are small cymbals (approx. 10 cm in diameter) arranged in two pairs. One pair is fixed onto a wooden block, and the other is handheld. The performer strikes them together to produce bright, metallic sounds.



Figure 7. Kesi

Huan County Daoqing Shadow Play

The Daoqing orchestra includes a diverse mix of idiophones, aerophones, chordophones, and membranophones. Key instruments unique to this tradition include:

- Aerophones: *Dizi*, *Suona*, *Dina*
- Membranophones: *Yugu*, *Gangu*, *Dagu*
- Chordophones: *Sixian*, *Erhu*
- Idiophones: *Jianban*, *Shuaibang*, *Xiaoluo*, *Naobo*, *Tamtam*

Dizi

The *dizi* (Figure. 8) is a 65 cm bamboo transverse flute crafted by performers themselves. It has six finger holes spaced evenly, but due to its construction, the fourth and seventh scale degrees deviate slightly in pitch. The instrument is tuned to C major and serves as the tonal reference in the ensemble.



Figure 8. Dizi

Sixian

The *sixian* (Figure. 9) is a handmade bowed string instrument. It includes four silk or gut strings and uses horsehair bows manipulated between the fingers using iron rings. The instrument produces a bright and rich timbre, with techniques including vibrato, glissando, and tremolo. It has a playable range from g to a^1 .



Figure 9. Sixian

Yugu

Constructed from bamboo or PVC pipe (in modern versions), the *yugu* (Figure. 10) is a single-headed cylindrical drum covered with goatskin or plastic. Placed on the performer's arm, it is lightly tapped with the fingers to produce indefinite pitches.



Figure 10. Yugu

Jianban

This rhythmic idiophone (Figure. 11) comprises two long bamboo strips (75 cm x 3 cm). Sound is created by pressing and releasing the upper strip against the lower, producing crisp, overtone-free clicks.



Figure 11. Jianban

Shuaibang

A compound instrument made of a rectangular wooden box (*bangzi*) and a pair of small brass bells (*pengling*) (Figure. 12). The box is struck with a stick to produce a resonant sound, while the bells create high-pitched, delicate tones when clashed together.



Figure 12. Shuaibang

The Art of Visual Perception

Types of Puppets

Wayang Kulit Kelantan. Dalang Che Ann has created a complete set of over 100 puppets for Wayang Kulit Kelantan, primarily depicting characters from the *Ramayana*, along with supplementary figures such as monsters, animals, palaces, landscapes, and weaponry. Puppet sizes range from 16 cm to over 60 cm in height and are crafted from treated cowhide or goatskin. Once the leather is cleaned, dried, and shaped, the puppets are drawn, carved, painted, and fitted with bamboo sticks for manipulation.

Kelantanese shadow puppets typically have only one jointed movable arm; the

rest of the body is static. However, comic characters are often equipped with both movable arms and mouths. The designs reflect a blend of Indian, Thai, and Malay aesthetics. Characters such as Seri Rama, Laksamana, and Maharaja exhibit Thai influences in their costumes, headgear, and curved fingernails, while distinctive Malay elements are also evident. This cultural hybridity makes the puppets unique artistic objects (Yousof, 1992). During performances, puppets engage in a range of stylised movements such as walking, flying, and fighting, orchestrated by the *dalang*.

Daoqing Shadow Play. According to puppet-maker Zhang Zhiwen, Huan County Daoqing shadow puppets are divided into three categories: human characters, animals, and scenery (Figure. 13). A unique feature of this tradition is the modular construction of puppets—*toushao* (heads) and *zhuangzhuang* (bodies) are crafted separately. *Toushao* are made based on traditional Chinese opera roles: *sheng* (male), *dan* (female), *jing* (painted face), and *chou* (clown). Variations in age, gender, and personality are reflected in the design. The *zhuangzhuang* are gender-specific and produced in sets with varied colours.

Performers can switch *toushao* to change characters quickly during performances. A typical troupe possesses over 500 *toushao* and 100 *zhuangzhuang* to support diverse roles and stories.

The puppets are made from cowhide, which is soaked, cleaned, and repeatedly dried before carving. Natural pigments derived from plants are used for colouring,



Figure 13. God of Wealth Liuhai (one of the Puppets of the Huan County Daoqing)

mixed with hide glue to improve adhesion. The finished puppets are ironed flat for structural integrity. Each puppet consists of 11 articulated parts, allowing for intricate gestures and lifelike movement.

Manipulation techniques form the artistic core of Daoqing puppetry. Bamboo rods are affixed to the puppet's chest and wrists. The puppeteer employs techniques such as:

- Gripping - firmly holding control rods for strong movements
- Pinching - delicate fingertip manipulation for precise control
- Clamping - using multiple fingers to manage several rods simultaneously
- Lifting - rapid vertical motion to simulate jumping or rising

- Twirling - rotating the rods between fingers to animate trembling or suspense
- Swinging - creating rhythmic side-to-side movements
- Shaking - inducing vibrations to convey emotion or tension

These techniques enable the puppets to walk, sit, kneel, kick, tumble, and perform expressive hand and arm movements.

Light And Shadow Art

The Light and Shadow Effects of Wayang Kulit Kelantan. The art of shadow puppetry is fundamentally grounded in optical principles of projection. In Kelantanese performances, the puppeteer (*dalang*) sits behind a white screen (*kelir*) with a light source—typically a modern electric bulb—placed between them and the screen. Puppets are held between the light and the screen, casting distinct, crisp shadows for the audience on the other side. The white screen maintains the visual integrity of the puppet outlines and colours, ensuring effective image transmission.

The *dalang*'s manipulation of light and motion is central to the aesthetic power of the performance. As the puppets move in synchronisation with musical rhythms, their shadows convey dramatic action, emotional states, and narrative transitions. By adjusting the distance between the puppet and the light source, the *dalang* can alter the scale and intensity of shadows—creating the illusion of depth, motion, or emotional emphasis. For instance, increasing proximity enhances clarity and

enlarges the figure, while distancing creates diffused, softer imagery.

In complex scenes, multiple puppets may be layered to simulate crowds or multi-character interactions. The *dalang* also modulates voice and vocal tone to match each puppet's personality and mood, further enriching the performative dimension.

The Light and Shadow Effects of Huan County Daoqing Shadow Play.

Before the advent of electricity, Daoqing shadow puppet performances in Huan County were illuminated using traditional oil lamps. These were simple bowls filled with vegetable oil and fitted with five cotton wicks. The lamps were suspended between the puppeteer (*qiantai*) and the screen from a horizontal beam (*liangzi*). As the *qiantai* moved and manipulated puppets, airflow caused the flames to flicker, producing dynamic shadows that added a unique vibrancy to the imagery.

However, this method came with limitations. The weak illumination of oil lamps made it difficult to achieve crisp visual outlines unless the puppet was positioned very close to the *liangzi*. Despite this, skilled puppeteers mastered the manipulation of spatial depth to craft a variety of visual effects, including transitions between sharp and blurry forms, and the illusion of movement or transformation.

In recent decades, oil lamps have been replaced by electric bulbs, offering a more stable and intense light source. While this has improved visual clarity and performance consistency, some traditional atmospheric qualities—such as the rhythmic flickering—have been lost.

Performance Form and Content

The Performance Form and Content of Wayang Kulit Kelantan

Tok Dalang Pak Dain, a 72-year-old master puppeteer and certified member of the Kelantan Puppeteers Network, has been formally trained in the traditional performance structure of Wayang Kulit Kelantan. During a visit on August 25, 2023, to the Heritage Archives of Shadow Puppetry, the authors met Pak Dain and Dr. Farrah of UPSI, who provided valuable insights into the performance process.

The performance stage may be permanent or temporarily constructed, with the *kelir* (screen) securely fastened at the centre. Banana stems (or foam blocks) are positioned at the base to hold puppets, and the light source is installed directly behind the screen. The *Pohon Beringin* (Tree of Life) (Figure 14) is placed in the centre, flanked by *Maharisi*, *Dewa Panah Perempuan* (Female Spirit of the Arrow), and *Dewa Panah Laki-laki* (Male Spirit of the Arrow). Puppets on the *dalang*'s right represent righteous characters, while those on the left represent antagonists.

The performance typically follows this sequence:

1. **Opening Ritual:** The *dalang* begins with invocations and prayers to invoke spiritual strength. Rituals are conducted to honour ancestral spirits and cleanse the performance space. Offerings of food are made, and instruments are purified using incense. The segment concludes with the ensemble's performance of *Bertabuh*, a ceremonial musical piece.
2. **Musical Prelude:** The orchestra performs a medley of traditional and popular tunes to attract audiences and create a festive atmosphere.
3. **Prologue (*Dalang Muda*):** Traditionally performed by junior or apprentice *dalangs*, this short introductory act serves as training and entertainment. However, due to the decline in apprenticeships, it is now often omitted.
4. **Main Performance:** The primary narrative unfolds, showcasing the *dalang*'s full range of vocal, musical, and puppeteering skills. The *dalang* is responsible for storytelling, manipulating multiple puppets, voicing characters, and coordinating the musical accompaniment.
5. **Closing Ritual:** The performance ends with a symbolic return to cosmic



Figure 14. Pohon Beringin

balance. The *Pohon Beringin* descends to the centre of the screen, and the *dalang* casts yellow rice—accompanied by a chant—over the stage, instruments, and themselves, signifying spiritual closure (Matusky, 1997).

The Performance Form and Content of Huan county Daoqing Shadow Play

The Jingjia Troupe, established in 1903, exemplifies the familial transmission of Daoqing shadow puppetry. Fifth-generation heir Jing Dengkun, now a lecturer at Longdong University, provided detailed information about traditional performance structures. A typical performance consists of:

- Goucheng (Setup): A temporary stage is assembled, typically indoors. The screen (*liangzi*) is hung on tightened ropes fixed to walls. A wooden table is positioned below to support the stage, and ropes define the performance zone, known as the “city.”
- Shixi (Preparation of Puppets): The puppets required for the show—*toushao* and *zhuangzhuang*—are assembled and arranged. Additional puppet heads are stored in albums for quick character changes.

For ceremonial performances, additional rituals are observed:

- Inviting Deities: A Taoist priest (*yin-yang master*) conducts prayers, accompanied by the burning of paper money and fireworks to sanctify the stage.
- Qingtai (Stage Purification): The *qiantai* walks around the stage

carrying burning spirit money and pours vinegar on a hot stone to create purifying steam, while the orchestra plays full percussion to ward off evil spirits.

- Divine Performances: Opening scenes often involve plays like *Heaven Officer Blessing*, which invoke divine presence and blessings.
- Formal Performance: A full-length story is enacted, typically lasting 3-4 hours, though some episodes may extend longer. Under the *qiantai*'s direction, the sequence includes structured cues for dialogue, singing, instrumental interludes, and transitions.

The Daoqing repertoire, passed down orally, comprises around 180 scripts categorised into seven genres: deity and ghost tales, historical dramas, anti-corruption and anti-oppression narratives, frontier defence stories, moral and ethical plays, romantic tales, and contemporary themes (Editorial Committee, 2006).

DISCUSSION

Chinese ethnomusicologist Wang Guangqi, in his foundational work *Music of the Oriental Nations* (1958), classified world musical traditions into three overarching systems: the Chinese, Greek, and Persian-Arabic. The Persian-Arabic system extended southeast into India, Myanmar, Siam, and Java. Within this framework, Wayang Kulit Kelantan aligns with the Persian-

Arabic musical lineage, while Huan County Daoqing shadow puppetry is firmly rooted in the Chinese system.

These musical and performative systems are underpinned by broader cultural differences. As Nettle (2005) argues, understanding music within its cultural context is essential: “the relationship between music and other parts of culture is paramount.” Kelantan, one of Malaysia’s oldest cultural regions, forms part of the Malay world, encompassing Indonesia, Malaysia, southern Thailand, the Philippines, and parts of Indochina—a region defined by shared linguistic and cultural heritage (Nasuruddin, 1992).

Historically, Kelantanese culture has been shaped by successive layers of influence: indigenous animistic beliefs, Indian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), Islam, Chinese exchange, and finally, European colonial contact (Raja Iskandar, 2022). The Malays, rather than passively absorbing these traditions, actively synthesised them into a unique cultural identity. This syncretism is manifest in Wayang Kulit Kelantan’s musical scales, melodic structures, instrumentation, and narrative content.

For instance, the *serunai* shares tonal qualities with Persian-Arabic instruments, though adapted to local styles. The *geduk* (referred to locally as the “Chinese drum”) and the *gendang* trace their origins to Chinese and Indian prototypes, respectively (Lou & Zhong, 2002). The puppet figures blend Thai, Indian, and Malay visual motifs. The narratives, while anchored in the *Ramayana*, also incorporate Islamic prayers

and local folklore. This amalgamation produces a distinctly Malay artform that serves as both spiritual ritual and community entertainment.

In contrast, Huan County lies within the Qin-Long cultural zone—an area at the crossroads of agrarian and nomadic civilisations. Historically dominant within China’s multicultural framework, it has significantly shaped the regional identity of north-western China (Ge, 1998). Daoqing shadow puppetry reflects this heritage. It features modal frameworks rooted in Chinese opera, character archetypes such as *sheng*, *dan*, *jing*, and *chou*, and pentatonic melodic structures typical of the Chinese system. Its instruments—*dizi* (membrane flute), *sixian* (silk strings), and *mahuang* (a distinct vocal-instrumental form)—are deeply embedded in local tradition.

Equally significant are the performance conventions: elaborate lighting using oil lamps, sophisticated puppet manipulation techniques (*tiao qian*), and an extensive oral repertoire. The puppeteer, with “one mouth to tell a thousand-year-old story and two hands to command a million troops,” embodies the memory and creativity of generations.

While the two traditions are structurally and stylistically distinct, they share core functions: both serve as carriers of collective memory, operate within ceremonial and entertainment frameworks, and rely on fixed performance patterns rooted in ritual and social function. These shared roles reflect their identity as socially embedded art forms. As Allan (1967) stated, “all people, in no matter what culture, must be able to

place their music firmly in the context of the totality of their beliefs, experiences, and activities.” John (1973) posed the essential question: “Why do humans have a profound need for music?” Because such art forms, including shadow puppetry, fulfil vital societal roles.

In pre-modern societies, ritual—not entertainment—was the primary function of shadow puppetry. Though entertainment has become more dominant today, the ritual aspect remains essential to its cultural survival. As Nettl (2005) observed, “among various commonalities, surely significant among them must be the association of music with the supernatural.” McAllester (1971) echoed this sentiment. Shadow puppetry thus acts as a “living fossil” of human civilisation, embodying the spiritual, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions of human culture.

Despite their cultural differences, both Wayang Kulit Kelantan and Huan County Daoqing shadow puppetry belong to the “complex whole” that Tylor (1871) described as human culture. As long as these forms continue to resonate with their communities—spiritually, socially, and artistically—they will endure as powerful emblems of cultural identity.

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