

The RULE of RAMA from the Bay of Bengal to the Pacific Ocean

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For the last 2,000 years or more, the **Ramayana**, which first sprang to life in India, has been transplanted to the countries of South, East, and Southeast Asia. The epic was assimilated and transformed by the host countries according to local history, geography and way of life. Accepted in all levels of society, it was then interpreted by local artists in oral and written literature, in music, dance and theatre, and in architecture, painting, sculpture and crafts. Today, the **Ramayana** continues to permeate these regions so deeply that it cannot be extracted from them without destroying the basic fabric of their cultures.

India

The story of Rama, first written down sometime between 400 B.C. and 200 A.D., is regarded in India as the "first poem" and its creator, the "first poet." Valmiki's **Ramayana** is told in six sections (*kanda*), in prose that is encrusted with metaphors and gilded with meditative passages. The first section narrates Rama's birth and childhood, the bow contest and the hero's marriage to Sita. The second tells of Dasaratha's

including Ravana's sister Surpanaka and brother Khara, Ravana's abduction of Sita with the aid of the hermit Marica, Jetayu's failed attempt to rescue Sita, and Sita's imprisonment in Ravana's palace in Lanka. The fourth gives an account of the alliance between Rama and the monkey king Sugriwa, the battle with and defeat of Sugriwa's enemy Valin, the offer of help from Hanumat, son of the wind-god, and the conscription of the monkey army of Rama. The fifth narrates Hanumat's jump to

Ravana to return Sita and his alliance with Rama, the building of the bridge to Lanka with the help of the ocean God, the encounter with Ravana's son Indrajit, the fight between Rama and Ravana, the defeat of Ravana, Rama's rejection of the "defiled" Sita, the trial by fire which proves Sita's chastity, the return to Ayodhya, and the coronation of Rama.

After its creation, Valmiki's classic became the fountainhead for the innumerable versions of the Rama story in the subcontinent. Of all the poetic rescensions, the most renowned are: the **Raghuvamsa** by Kalidasa which is one of the sources of the Tamil **Ramayanam**; the **Ravanavadha** of Bhatti, which was translated into Javanese and later called the **Ramayana Kakawin**; and **Ramacaritamanasa** of Tulasi-dasa, composed around 1574 A.D. in Avadhi Hindi. To popularize the epic, it was sung in public for the last 500 years from Assam to lower Bengal.

Unlike the poems, the plays on Rama were created by the playwright's imagination. Since the 5th century, the story has been enacted with shadow puppets or simple glove puppets. Around the 16th century, other dramatic forms interpreted the epic in different languages, among them, the *ankia nat* of Assam, the highly stylised *kathakali* of Kerala, the *yakshagana* of Mysore, and the *dasha-vatar* of Maharashtra.



The Kathakali Troupe from Kerala Kalanandalam, India

attempt to transfer his crown to Rama, the objection of Kaikeyi who wants his own son crowned, and the departure of Rama for his 14-year exile, accompanied by Sita and Lakshmana. The third describes Rama's battles in the forest with the Raksasas,

the kingdom of Lanka, his search for Sita, the latter's lamentation, and Hanumat's reassurance that Rama is coming to rescue her. The last dramatizes the preparation of the monkey army, Vibhisana's fruitless attempt to persuade his brother

In India, the **Ramayana** is not only a colorful saga but also a book of *dharma* (duty). It prescribes the rules of proper behavior, such as the leader's commitment to truth and service above duplicity and personal convenience, the wife's fidelity to her husband, fraternal loyalty and affection, the young person's devotion to elders and the servants' obedience to their masters. In this perspective, the conflict between Rama and Ravana is allegorized as the clash between *dharma* and *adharma*. In this battle, Rama emerges as the lord who rides the chariot of righteousness, whose wheels are heroism and courage, whose flags are truth and virtue, whose horses are strength, discretion, self-control and unselfish action, and whose charioteer is the worship of God (Bulcke 1989: 61, 75; Buck 1989: 41, 52, 54).

Understandably, this hero soon metamorphosed into a divinity. In **Adyatha-Ramayana**, Rama is pictured as the incarnation of the Brahma himself. His story, now sacralized, teaches that doing good to others is essential and turning one's back to the world characterizes one searching for God. It is in this context that the kingdom established by Rama—the *dharma-rajya* or reign of righteousness—should be understood. To realize this kingdom, one must emulate Rama and meditate on his name. This was the

perfect order Gandhiji was thinking of when he died with the name of Rama on his lips (Buck 1989: 47).

With the rise of Buddhism, the *jatakas* began to use the story for their own purposes. Thus, the character of the buddha was patterned after Rama or Krishna. In time, Rama himself was eventually reinterpreted as a *bodhisattva*.

Reverence for Rama as ideal man or god, however, has not spared the epic from criticism. Some contemporary writers, for example, have attacked Tulasidasa for "his defense of monarchy and the caste system, his glorification of the Brahmins, his low esteem of women" (Bulcke 1989: 73), a

fact which only proves that, mystified as it has been, the epic was but a product of its own society, and therefore, mirrors the structures and values of that society. Criticisms notwithstanding, the story continues to be enthroned in the hearts of the Indian people, the way the images of Rama and Sita were seen enthroned when Hanuman's heart was opened.

From India, the **Ramayana** eventually spread eastward to China, Japan, and South-east Asia. To the last, the saga was brought by Brahmin and Ksatriya adventurers and traders, who went to Subarnabhumi and even "to Canton, across the Malay peninsula, by foot or by sailing through what later came to be Strait of Malacca" (Sarkar 1994: 207-208). These travelers must have crossed the transpeninsular route from Takua-pa, southern Thailand to Kedah to ride ships from ports in the east coast of Malaya. There they waited for the proper monsoon, enjoying Indian music and dance, which were also appreciated by the native royal courts, like those of Malaya. Through these waiting stations, where many Brahmins eventually settled, and through the Indianized local courts, the Rama story entered and spread through Southeast Asia.

Indonesia

From India, the **Ramayana** was brought, together with



the Hindu religion and culture, to East and Central Java from where it spread to Bali. Earliest evidence of the epic, found in Central Java, dates from the 8th century. Although Hinduism has continued to influence Bali to the present, it was replaced by Islam in Java by the 14th century. In time, the Javanese Ramayana became more and more secularized, while the Balinese continued to be performed within a religious context (Santoso 1989: 327).

In Indonesia, the Rama story has been expressed in paintings, such as the folk canvasses still being produced in Bali, and in sculpture, which may be free-standing statues of wood or stone, as in Bali and Java, or high and low reliefs, such as those decorating the walls of Prambanan Siva temple, the Panataran Temple in East Java and the series of temples dotting the villages of Bali.

The oldest and longest poem in Javanese literature is the **Ramayana Kakawin** (RK), created in the early 10th century A.D. It was mainly derived from the Indian **Ravanavadha**. In the 19th century, the Javanese poet Yasadipura I created a new and shorter version of the RK entitled the **Serat Rama**, which has since been used as the text for both the Javanese *wayang kulit* and *wayang wong*. The **Serat Rama** in turn has two versions—the **Serat Kanda** and the **Rama Keling**. In Bali, the RK is read in public recitals

during religious ceremonies, such as those held for the tooth-filing or the wedding ceremony (Sarkar 1989: 214).

In the performing arts, the Rama epic has been the principal source of stories for the *wayang kulit purwa* or ancient shadow play with leather puppets. Considered as the oldest form of shadow play in Indonesia, the *wayang kulit* is usually performed on special occasions such as marriage, birth, circumcision, recovery from illness and passing of exams; or on village purification ceremonies before the planting of rice (Yusof 1994: 291-296).

The puppets include kings, princes, princesses and soldiers, gods and giants, counselors and officers, and the clown and servants. Each is distinguished through the details of eyes, lips, necks, shoulders, colours, ornaments and attitudes. Final characterization of the puppets, however, is in the hands of the *dalang* or master puppeteer.

Trained for years, the *dalang* gives “life” to the puppets, or chants both the narration and the dialogue, and guides the singers and the players of the *gamelan*—an ensemble of suspended gongs, bronze and wooden xylophones, and the spiked fiddle—played in the *slendro* mood.

Derived from the *wayang kulit purwa* are the *wayang krucil* and the *wayang golek*. The last two differ from *wayang kulit* only because the *krucil* uses flat

wooden puppets inspired by the colourful leather puppets, while the *golek* uses three-dimensional heads and hands and costumes made of cloth. Because the *golek* uses dolls which are beautiful in themselves, it dispenses with the screen, situating the action of the plays within a large carved wooden frame (Yusof 1994: 279-280).

Inspired by *wayang kulit* as well is the *wayang wong*, the dance drama where actors imitate the movements and stances of puppets and wear costumes and headdresses or masks drawn from puppet designs. Whether in Java or in Bali, *wayang wong* or *wayang orang* (“human shadow”) enacts the story of Rama as the universal and eternal conflict between Good and Evil.

Characters are generally divided into the refined (*halus*) and rough (*kasar*), these two categories being identified through the costumes, head-dresses, and make-up, manner of speech, movement, and masks (for the Balinese version). Groups of characters include: noble male and female characters and ogres, Rama’s attendants, Ravana’s courtiers, good and bad monkeys, birds and other animals (Yusof 1994 : 313).

An older style of *wayang wong* found in Bali is performed during religious festivals, when the natives offer prayers, flowers, food, music, dance and theatre to ancestor spirits and

gods who are believed to descend on temples and house shrines. It may also be performed to consecrate lands and temples and is believed to enhance fertility. In performances, which may last for days, actors emphasize the recitation of passages which give moral instructions. They wear masks (except for noble characters) and traditional character colours (e.g. Hanuman = white, Sugriwa = red). The whole performance is accompanied by the *gender wayang*, made up of four small xylophones, drums, small gongs, flutes and cymbals (Soedarsono 1980: 3-4; Yousof 1994: 312-314).

Sponsored by Muslim potentates, the Javanese *wayang wong* gradually lost all its religious significance and since the last quarter of the 19th century has become a commercial show emphasizing music, dance and costumes. Masks have been set aside in favor of make-up. Today, companies in Surakarta, Semarang and Jakarta perform with traditional full *gamelan* ensemble called *gamelan ageng* but in proscenium-type stages (Soedarsono: 4-5; Yousof 1994: 312-313).

Similar to the *wayang wong* are the *wayang topeng* of Madura which employs masks like those of Bali but has less complicated costumes; the *sendratari* (from *seni*, meaning art, drama, and *tari*, meaning dance), which is exactly like the *wayang wong* except that it has

no dialogue (Yousof 1994: 249-250); and the *langen mandra wanata*, literally, "performing art of many monkeys," a Javanese dance opera created in the second half of the 19th century. In the *langen*, all male dancers deliver the dialogue in *macapat* song and in squatting position (Soedarsono: 6). In Bali, the *kecak*, originally the chorus part of the *sanghyang* trance-dance but created as a separate performance for tourists in 1935, now incorporates episodes from the **Ramayana**. Lighted by a lamp at the centre, the all-male chorus sits on the ground in a circle 5-metre deep, wearing checkered black-and-white *sarung* around the waist. They chant "chak, chak, chak" in polyphonic crescendos and decrescendos, while swaying



Sri Ganesalaya, Institution of Bharatanatyam

back and forth, left to right, clapping to accompany themselves. Towards the second

half of the chanting, characters enter in full *wayang wong* costumes to enact the episodes of the **Ramayana**, with the chorus, still in position, playing supporting roles.

The **Ramayana** is so deeply rooted in Javanese and Balinese cultures that it is impossible to think of these cultures without the epic. Side by side with Islam, it continues to provide the local people with role models for their daily life (e.g. Lakshmana, the loyal brother or Sita, the loving wife). Rama has been emulated through the centuries by the kings of Surakarta and Yogyakarta as well as by contemporary politicians searching for a model of selfless statesmanship. This idolatry of Rama was behind Sultan Hamengku Buwana I's decision to name his kingdom "Ngayogyakarta Hadinin-grat," meaning "Prosperous Ayodhya, the Beauty of the World," which has since been shortened to Yogyakarta.

Malaysia

The Rama story is believed to have been known to the Indian community of some Malay states by the beginning of the 16th century A.D. (Sarkar 1989: 103). However, the popular versions of the epic may have come to the archipelago only between the 13th and the 17th centuries, from western as well as eastern India. Through the

centuries, the **Ramayana** developed in Kedah and Kelantan, and in Malacca—in Northern Malaysia because of the Sis-mere Kings and in Malacca because of the Javanese traders who brought with them, among other things, the techniques of the Malay shadow play.

Hinduism did not spread through Malaysia the way it did in Java and Bali. Just the same, the Rama story survived, even with the spread of Islam after the 14th century. For one, the epic reflected and reaffirmed the “cultural ideals of the ruling elite in traditional Malay society,” including absolute devotion to the family and loyalty to the kings (Singaravelu 1994: 276). Moreover, to accommodate the new religion, the Hindu aspects of the epic were simply removed, replaced, or reinterpreted along Islamic lines. Thus, the story itself is reset at the time of the Prophet Adam, who now figures as the great grandfather of King Dasaratha; and Allah Ta’ala, instead of Lord Brahma, sends down the Prophet Adam to grant Ravana sovereignty over the Jawa Kingdom (Singaravelu 1994: 279-281; Hussein 1989: 146; Sweeney 1989: 123).

In Malaysia, the Rama saga exists in written and oral literature. The **Hikayat Seri Rama** (HSR), literally, the “story of Sri Rama,” with the principal literary version of the story in Malay, was written down in Jawi script between the 13th and 17th

centuries, like the other Javanese rescensions with which it is interrelated. The HSR has survived in different versions, most of which, unlike the Hindu version, begins with an account of Ravana’s history and birth (Singaravelu 1994: 277-279). Aside from the HSR, another major version of the story is the **Hikayat Maharaja Wana** (HMW), which narrates events from the birth to the death of Ravana. To this story is appended the **Cerita Kusi Serawi**, which tells the life of Rama’s sons Kusha and Lawa up to the reconciliation of Rama and Sita (Sweeney 1989: 126; Yousof 1994: 297).

As oral literature, the Rama story has been performed by professional story-tellers called the *penglipun lara*, or more popularly, by the *tok dalang* who manage the *wayang siam*. Found in Kelantan, Trengganu, Pahang, and in Patani, Thailand, the *wayang siam* is the shadow puppet theatre which enacts the “trunk” and “branch” stories of the Ramayana in Kelantanese-Patani dialects. The first, called *cerita-cerita pokok*, uses the story of the HMW (which differs from the HSR because it excludes Rama’s exile and situates the abduction of Sita on the journey home after Rama wins her heart) and the **Cerita Kusi Serawi**. The second, called *cerita-cerita ranting*, are stories of minor adventures of the heroes or minor characters

(e.g. Hanuman, Pak Dogol) and characters not found in the classical version (Hanuman Bongsu, Lak Juna, Rama Ranjung). Complete in themselves and Malayised, these stories begin after the death of Ravana. One *ranting* describes Seri Rama’s adventures involving the love of other women and Sita Dewi’s search for him (she dresses in male clothes and confronts him in the battlefield) and their reconciliation (Yousof in Iyengar 1994: 297, 300; Sweeney 1989: 126, 132).

The leather puppets which are usually painted with enamel, include: heroic and evil figures, who have one articulated arm; and comic figures who have both arms articulated. Noble princely characters have Thai pinnacled crowns, while demigods, sages and captains imitate the Javanese *wayang kulit* figures. Characters are identified as refined or coarse by their size, nose, mouth shapes and sizes, eyes, fingernails and stances. In performance, puppets may talk (their arms move as the *dalang* speaks differently for each character) or they move (walk, fight, fly to the accompaniment of the orchestra and the movements of the *dalang*). (Yousof 1994: 302; Sweeney 1989: 138).

Central to the *wayang siam* is the *tok dalang*, the master puppeteer, who manipulates the puppets in front of a lamp so they cast a shadow before a screen; delivers both narration,

commentary on life and society, and dialogue; and cues and guides the seven-person orchestra of drums, gongs, cymbals and reed aerophones. But the *dalang* is not only an entertainer, he is also a spirit medium. As a spirit medium, he supervises the ritual a) at the opening of the performances, to propitiate the spirits and draw their blessings on the performance and the community, and b) at the closing, to thank the original and mythical teachers of the *wayang*. To become a *dalang*, one must not only be skilled in puppetry but also must have *angin* (wind), the capability "to be moved greatly by the rhythm of the orchestra" and to "identify oneself completely with the characters of the drama, causing one to experience intense emotion" (Sweeney 1989: 141).

Today, the Ramayana is found not only in literature and puppet performances but in dances by groups like the Sri Ganesalaya Institution of Bharatanatyam. In 1980, Hussein observed that "the Ramayana is in fact reviving in Malaysia now, thanks to nationalism and historical pride, and above all due to the search for unifying elements for the New Malaysia." Ironically, as Hussein points out, the **Ramayana** that is being revived is closer in its ethical ideals to the Valmiki **Ramayana** (Hussein 1989: 144).

Philippines

In its colonization of the Philippine archipelago, Spain consciously destroyed or repressed the native traditions and beliefs in order to facilitate the entrance and acceptance of the Christian-European way of life. This strategy succeeded to a large extent among the larger ethnic groups who settled in Spanish pueblos and remained under Spanish rule for 333 years. But among the indigenous communities in the mountains and hinterlands whom the Spanish had not yet reached or had failed to Christianize, the centuries-old customs and traditions related to those found in Indonesia and Malaysia continued to flourish. It was among one of these cultural communities, the Muslim Maranao of Mindanao in Southern Philippines, that the



Radia Mangandiri of Philippines

Philippine version of the Rama story was recorded by a Maranao scholar, Mamitua Saber, in the 1930's.

Composed between the 17th and 19th centuries, the

Maharadia Lawana is to date the oldest version of the Rama epic found in the Philippines. Although similar in structure to the Malay **Hikayat Seri Rama**, **Hikayat Maharadia Rawana** and the folk tale **Sri Rama**, the Maranao prose tale nonetheless contains a wealth of unique details which attest to its having developed among the Maranao for a very long time (Francisco 1969: 10-34).

This version begins with the Sultan of Bandiarmasir driving his son Lawana out of his kingdom because he sets people against each other. Marooned on an island, the eight-headed prince hangs himself, head down, from a tree and over a fire and cries that the world is chained. Diabarail (Angel Gabriel) reports this to Allah, so the latter sends the angel back to tell Lawana that he can only die from a sword sharpened on a whetstone in the palace. Realizing this, the prince returns and is welcomed by his father.

Meanwhile, Radia Mangandiri (Rama) and his brother, Radia Mangawarna (Laksmāna), princes of the Sultanate of Agmaniog (Ayodha), set out to win the hand of the beautiful Tuwan Potre Malaila Tihāia (Sita), daughter of the Sultan of Pulu Nabandai. After 10 years of travel, they reach the island. Mangandiri successfully kicks the *sipa* (rattan ball) into the room of the princess and kills the huge snake on the mountain (the two feats required of the man whom the Princess

would marry), so he is married to Malaila. After some time, Mangandiri decides to travel back to Agmaniog with his wife and brother. While encamped on a field, Malaila sees a golden-horned deer, which Mangandiri and Mangawarna try to catch for her. Left alone, Malaila is abducted by Lawana.

Giving up on the deer, Mangandiri falls asleep and dreams that he is gored by a carabao in a fight and that one of his testicles is thrown eastward. The testicle is actually swallowed by the Queen Potre Langawi who mistakes it for a precious stone. The queen becomes pregnant and gives birth to a monkey, Laksamana (Hanuman). Laksamana then searches for his father and finds him with his uncle under the tree where Mangawarna had seen his brother sleeping. To help her father rescue Malaila, Laksamana assembles an army of carabaos and later, a cohort of crocodiles to accompany them to Lawana's kingdom in Pulu Bandiarmasir. The brothers fight Lawana but succeed in defeating him only after Laksamana sharpens Mangandiri's *kampilan* on a whetstone in the palace. After Lawana's death and two decades of hardships, Mangandiri, his wife, brother and son return to Agmaniog riding on the backs of the crocodiles. In the end, Laksamana is turned into a handsome *datu* (Francisco 1969: 39-61).

In the mid-1970's, the Sining Kambayoka staged, under the direction of Frank Rivera, the **Maharadia Lawana** in Marawi City itself, effectively using the colourful costumes, songs and dances of the Maranao themselves. In 1993, the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA), created its own version of the story, now augmented by other versions gathered from other Maranao informants. The resultant production, entitled **Ang Paglalakbay ni Radia Mangandiri, Isang Pilipinong Ramayana** (The Journey Radia Mangandiri, A Filipino Ramayana) extends the original narrative of the prose tale and shows the deterioration of Agmaniog under Mangandiri, because corrupt advisers have taken the place of his lost *inikaduwa* (twin soul). Potre Malaila is exiled and bears Mangandiri's son, who eventually restores his father's twin soul (integrity as leader). Through imaginative use of ethnic movements and music, PETA's **Mangandiri** succeeded in raising crucial questions about the nature and direction of leadership, seven years after the fall of the Philippine Lawana (the Marcos dictatorship) in 1986.

Another significant revival of the epic was done by the CCP Dance Company in 1980. Based mainly on Valmiki's original, **Rama, Hari** (Rama, King) was a rock opera ballet in two acts.

Bienvenido Lumbera's libretto used classical Tagalog for noble characters and Filipino slang for Surphanaka and Ravana. Similarly, Ryan Cayabyab's music, Alice Reyes' choreography and Salvador Bernal's production design reinterpreted Indian, Filipino and other Asian traditions in a modern stylised idiom that appealed to an audience largely unfamiliar with the epic (Tiongson 1994 V: 168-169).

In 1999, the Lumbera-Cayabyab compositions were incorporated into a larger work by librettist Roy Iglesias and composer-arranger Danny Tan, entitled **Rama and Sita**. Directed by Leo Rialp, with costume design by Patis Tesoro and set design by the director, this long-running production depended largely on pop stars, lavish costumes, numerous production numbers, and some rivetting props/effects (a life-like elephant and Indian gods coming down from the ceiling above the audience) to mesmerise its audience.

Thailand

The Thai scholar Phraya Anumanrajthong believes that the Rama story came to Thailand not directly from India but from Indonesia about 900 years ago. It was not until the Ayuthaya period (1409-1767), however, that the story became so revered by the Thais that the

first king of the Chakri dynasty took the official title of Rama I and named the capital of his kingdom after Rama's Ayodhya. As may be expected, Thai royalty adapted the epic to their official religion, Theravada Buddhism, by characterizing Rama as a bodhisatva-king and as the pre-incarnation of Gautama Buddha himself (Thithanan: 174).

Since the 18th century, the Thai Rama saga or **Ramakien** has been portrayed in murals found in the Wat Nang Pya, in Pissulok, northern Thailand and in the cloister walls of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in the Grand Palace in Bangkok, as well as in bas-reliefs of the congregational hall of the Wat Pho. Gigantic statues of demon kings from the Ramayana guard the doorways of Bangkok Temples. Moreover, Ramayana characters and episodes are reproduced on screens, cabinets, chests, boxes, as well as bags, T-shirts, fans and other functional or decorative objects.

As proof of official approval, the different literary versions of the epic have been composed by no less than Thai sovereigns. In 1767, Taksin, king of Dhonburi, composed his version in 2,012 verses and four volumes. In 1785, King Rama I wrote what is now the standard version of the **Ramakien** in 50,286 verses. Later, in 1809, his son Rama II shortened his father's version to 14,310 verses, to make it more suitable

for stage performances. Rama I's version, divided into seven *kandas* or sections, is believed by some to have used not the Indian version but the Javanese **Ramayana Kakawin**, which in turn was derived from the Tamil **Ravanavadha**. As happened in all other countries where the epic took root, the epic was adapted to local customs and traditions, as seen in the Thai-Buddhist ceremony which Rama I included in his narration of the celebration of the birth of Dasaratha's sons (Sarapadnue 1989: s245-247; Yousof 1994: 193).

In the performing arts, the Rama story is found in the *khon*, *lakhon*, *nang* and *hun*. The *khon* is the classical masked play, which represents specific episodes from the Rama II version, in coordination with the chorus and traditional *piphat* ensemble. Male actors play one of the three roles in the *khon*: the human (Rama, Sita, Laksamana), the demoniac (Tosakanth, Indrajit), and the simian (Hanuman, Sugrip, Pali). Each type of role is identified by a strict vocabulary of movements, a specific set of masks (only for demons and monkeys), headdresses and costumes (which display particular colours and shapes). Because

actors cannot speak through their masks, a chorus performs the songs and recites: a) the narrative in *chandra* poetry, some of which date from the days of Ayuthaya; and b) the dialogue which could be in rhythmic prose (Dhaninivat 1989: 5).



Thai Ramakien (Photo by Nipon Sud-Ngam)

The *khon* orchestra used to have only five pieces, with the *ranad* leading and the *sphon* setting the pace of movements. Now bigger *piphat* ensembles play the pieces which are specific to actions of human characters (walking, sitting, standing up), animal figures (running horse, jumping monkey, flying birds), objects on stage (running chariot, capsizing boat, floating bowl) or special events (musical apparitions) (Tramote: 185).

Several types of *khon* may be distinguished. The *khon-klan-plen* is performed in the open-air and showcases big battle scenes and military parades. The *khon-ron-nok* is done on a stage where a pole at

the back serves as seating, flanked by curtains painted by mountains or forest scenes. The *khon-na-co* or mask play is done before a screen of white cloth which also serves as stage background. The *khon-ran-nai* or court mask play emphasizes singing, recitations, and dialogues. The *khon-chak* is the mask play on the modern proscenium stage, as evolved by the Fine Arts Department since 1946. Lastly, the *khon-sod* or live shadow puppets features costumes like those of the *khon* (but with masks worn on the head) and arm and body movements similar to *nangtalung* puppets, as well as *likay* and *lakhon* (Dhaninivat 1989: 21-23; Chakrarot: 4).

The *lakhon* is a dance drama without masks. This may be classical or popular. Of the many *lakhon*

duekdamban. The first is performed mainly by ladies in the inner court of the palace and emphasizes fluid dance movements, sweet music and poetry and opulent costumes. The second is classical dance drama, where actors sing and dance on stage to the accompaniment of seven-tuned gongs against modern sets. Staged with modern techniques, the form was invented by Rama IV's son, who was influenced by western opera (Chakrarot: 4-5).

The *nang* (literally, "skin") is the Thai shadow puppet play enacted behind or in front of a back-lit white screen. Based on the puppets used, the *nang* may be divided into two types: the *nang yai* and the *nang talung*. First mentioned in 1456 in Ayuthaya, the *nang yai* uses large, two-dimensional puppets, about 1-2 metres tall, which may feature single or multiple characters. Carved out of leather, intricately embossed and hand painted, characters may be backgrounded by mansions, forests, mountains or seas. The figures include: single characters praying, walking, flying; or multiple ones fighting, running away or pursuing. Each figure is mounted on two long poles which are held by men who sway, bend or dance, in accordance with the narrative and the music of the *piphat* ensemble.

Like the Javanese *wayang kulit*, the *nang yai* performance opens with a ritual, where

prayers and candles are offered to Vishnu and Shiva, the master of the *nang*, to King Dasaritha and Lord Rama, the Buddha, the genii of forests, streams and mountains, and to the spirit for whose sake the *nang* is being staged (*nang* is often performed at important cremations) (Chakrarot: 5-6; Sarapadnuke 1989: 248-249; Yousof 1994: 186-188).

The *nangtalung* or shadow play with small puppets got its name from Phattalung province, where the form was born during the reign of Rama V, when villagers of Ban Khuan adapted the Javanese *wayang kulit* to Thai conditions. Today, this shadow play is seen mainly in Nakhon Si Thammarat province, in southern Thailand, although it seems to have traveled as well to the neighbouring Malaysian provinces of Kedah and Perlis.

To enact episodes from the **Ramayana**, the *nang talung* uses flat leather figures with only one moveable arm (articulated in the upper arm, lower arm and wrist) and manipulated by a bamboo stick attached to the figure. Comic characters, however, have moveable arms, jaws and genitals. About 40 or 50 puppets are used in a single performance and are stuck on to a banana trunk which serves as the ground for the action of the play.

Principal artist in the *nang talung* is the master puppeteer called *nang*, who manipulates the puppets between the light



nang talung

styles, only two have adapted stories from the **Ramakien**: the *lakhon nai* and the *lakhon*

source and the white screen, provides the songs, dialogues and narration, and cues the orchestra members who play the oboe, twin gongs, twin single-faced drums, one double-faced drum, and sometimes, a modern electric guitar and combination drum set. Performances are held at night from 8 p.m. to midnight, usually in April or July—to celebrate a housewarming, an ordination, a wedding, a funeral, a special public or Temple holiday (Chakrabort: 6; Yousof 1994: 184-186).

The *hun* theatre or figure puppetry was influenced by the *khon* and *lakhon*, as may be seen in the puppets themselves which are faithful replicas of *khon* dancers up to the last details of their costumes and in the puppet movements which imitate those of court dances. Representing stories of the **Ramakien** are two types of figure puppets: the *hun krabok* and the *hun lakhon lek*. The first are half-figure rod puppets about 50 cm. tall, which were invented during the reign of Rama IV. The puppets have wooden heads, bamboo torsos, and wooden hands attached to the costume, sleeves and rods. The second are full-figure puppets about one metre high, invented in 1901 by Khru Krae Sapvanich, which have flexible joints linked to rods and strings. Called “small classical dancers,” these mari-

onettes require three puppeteers for each male, demon or monkey character, two puppeteers for each female figure and one for the clown which has stiff hands but with a moveable neck and a talking mouth (Chakrabort: 6-7; Yousof 1994: 93).

Given the vitality of most of these art forms and the official and unofficial support given to them, the Rama story will continue to shape the morals and values of Thais in all levels of society, as it has since the 18th century when the kings of the Chakri dynasty aspired to establish a kingdom in the image of Rama’s Ayodhya and named their capital Ayuthaya.

Cambodia

There is evidence that the **Ramayana**, **Mahabharata** and certain **Purana** were recited daily before the god of the

leadership. In the 7th century, the victories of Jayavarman VII against the Chams were depicted on the exterior gallery of the Bayon according to the plot of the Ramayana, alluding to the king as the new Rama (Chandra 1994: 649). In the 11th century, the versified sanskrit texts of ancient Cambodia praised kings who were like the moon and the Brahmanic gods and heroes Arjuna and Rama (Pou 1981: 252). Since then, the epic has been integrated into Khmer life, depicted in temples, enacted in feasts and performed on the stage.

In the visual arts, the Rama story has been carved in bas reliefs found in temples like Banteay Srey or Bapuon. But its most magnificent expression is in Angkor Wat. In this temple built by Saryavarman II (1112-1152 A.D.), the **Ramayana**, the **Mahabharata** and **Purana** reliefs are found in the north-western corner of the complex (Jacob 1986: ix; Sarkar 1994: 210-211).

The earliest version of the story of Rama, called **Reamker** (“Glory of Ram”), appeared sometime in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is not known how many versions there have been of the **Reamker**. One version, based on the manuscript found in the south pagoda of Angkor Wat and made between the 12th to the 18th century, was committed to memory and performed



Reliefs depicting a scene of the Ramayana, Angkor Wat, Cambodia (Photo by Nicolas Urban)

Tribhuvanesvara temple ca. 598 A.D. (Sarkar 1994: 208). In the following centuries, the Rama story spread in popularity and came to be regarded as the expression of the ideals of

orally and with gestures by an ex-monk called Mi Chak. This version exhibits elements and scenes in the other Cambodian versions (Bizot 1994: 263-266). In Cambodia, the "classical" version of the epic is the **Rioen Ramakert** (Reamker) of the Institut Bouddhique of Phnom Penh, which was published in 1937 from two similar manuscripts. These were translated into French twice and into English once.

The literary version of the **Reamker** according to Judith Jacob (1986: ix) is composed of two works in verse, both incomplete. The first, created by several poets, narrates the contest of bow, the exile, the building of the bridge to Lanka, Hanuman's visit to Lanka and the battles ending in the death of Rama's tenth son. The second, created by one poet, tells the story of the drawing of Ravana's picture by Sita, Sita's stay in the forest and the events connected to her son's discovery of Rama, and Sita's refusal to be reconciled with her husband. Because the texts were used in the performance of the *lkhon khol*, it is divided into scenes which differ in verse and mood, and contain directions for music and dance. The text which describes the thoughts of characters and narrates the events is recited by a chorus in performance.

Among the Cambodians, the **Reamker** is not only an entertaining story but also a religious document. In it, as in

other Buddhist countries, Rama has been transformed into Buddha himself. Similarly, the epic has become a religious allegory, with the following equivalences: Ram = conscience; Laks = mental factors; Sita = crystal globe; and Hanuman = the breath. The cycle of **Reamker**, therefore, illustrates the "spiritual quest of the meditation," that is, an initiation into the way that leads to Nibbana (enlightenment). Furthermore, Cambodians speak of a "way of Lanka" which "leads the adept to cross the ocean... to reach a distant island where stands the Meru." This precious island of Lanka is compared to the mother's womb (Bizot 1994: 270-272).

In the performing arts, the Rama episodes are expressed in the *lkhon khol*, the *nang sbek thom*, and the *rapam*. Most important of these is the *lkhon khol*, literally, "theatre of monkeys" or "burlesque theatre." This masked play features a chorus reciting the narration and dialogue, which are visualized through mime, dance and movements of arms, fingers, and eyebrows, among others—all to the accompaniment of the traditional orchestra. As in Thailand, roles are divided into human, demon and monkey, each with corresponding movements, costumes and masks (the last only for demons and monkeys). The actors-dancers are not professional, but are talented male villagers who

rehearse between seasons of farm work. Performances are held during great festivals, such as New Year, anniversaries and funerals of religious or lay personalities. Famous rural troupes are sometimes hired to perform in the capital on special occasions, as happened during the reign of Ang Dung, Norodom, and Sisowath (Pou 1994: 260-261).

The *nang sbek thom* (also *namn spaek* or *namn tham*) is the shadow play which uses two-dimensional leather puppets, carried on sticks by dancers as they enact on stage the story recited by the narrators to the accompaniment of the orchestra. The style of narration and music has led to the observation that the shadow play is a variation of the *lkhon khol*.

The puppets, which are cut out in dramatic poses, are of three sizes. The smallest, depicting clowns, monkeys and rural types, have one moveable arm. The medium-sized figures depict Rama, Sita, Laksmana, Hanuman and the seers. The largest are leather versions of Angkor Wat reliefs showing a scene from the **Reamker** with several characters situated in a palace, forest or battlefield. In sequence, the dancers hold the puppets up as they walk in stylised movements evoking the character of the figure they are holding, first behind the screen and in front of the light and then in front of the screen. Performances of the *nang* begin with

ritual offerings to the gods, in the same way that ritual acts sanctify the making of the puppets and musical instruments (Yusof 1994: 184; Awasthi 1981: 665; Jacob 1986: ix).

The *rapam* is the royal ballet which presents episodes of *Ramkerti* at the Royal Palace. The performance is confined to the abduction of Sita by Rab, the fight between the Demon and Ramaparamasur and the goddess Manimekhala.

Myanmar

The Rama story may have been known to Myanmar by the 11th century during the reign of King Anawratha. Later, King Kyanzittha (1084-1112 A.D.) styled himself as the descendant of Rama. The initial introduction of the story was followed by the influence of other rescensions from India and elsewhere, as the kingdom interacted with Laos, Chiangmai, Ayuthaya and Malaya. By the 17th century, the first known Burmese version was written down. By the next two centuries, the Rama play was already being staged in the royal palace of King Bodawpaya (1782-1819) and King Thibaw (1878-1886). After the annexation of Upper Burma by Britain in 1885, over a hundred Rama play actors left the palace and dispersed, some performing the play before mass audiences, others coming down to Lower Burma where

they formed Rama play clubs or taught younger performers. Of these clubs, one in Yangon and another in the delta region continue to perform the Rama play as a service to the community (Chandra 1989: 651; Han and Zaw 1989: 302, 309-311).

In the old capital of Pagan, the Rama story is encountered in the visual arts, in the Nat-hlaung Kyaung or Vishnu



Myanmar's Yama-pwe

temples where stone figures of Rama and Parasu Rama stand, as well as in Petleik pagoda where the Jataka series was done in terracotta plaques. Both were created in the 11th century. In Pakhan monastery, constructed under the reign of King Mindon (1853-1878), is found a wood carving of episodes of the epic, while at Maha Loka Marazein pagoda in Upper Burma in 1849, the Rama story is told in a series of 347 stone reliefs (Han and Zaw 1989: 301, 308-309).

The oldest manuscript of the literary text of the epic was discovered in 1973 in a Buddhist monastery in the Pagan-

Nyaung-U area and another in Kyaikwaing near Yangon. Written in 80 palmleaf manuscripts, the work, entitled **Rama Vatthu**, is dated to the 17th century. Fifty pages of the manuscript are devoted to the description of the principal characters: of "Rama as an obedient son, a loving brother, a faithful husband, a chivalrous fighter, a righteous prince and a wise leader; of Laksamana as an affectionate and loyal brother; of Sita as a chaste, loving and patient wife; of Hanuman as a loyal and efficient lieutenant; and of Dasagiri [Ravana] as a sinful and an arrogant monarch" (Han and Zaw 1989: 303). Moreover, the **Rama Vatthu** localises the epic, addressing high characters by the Burmese appellation "Maung," omitting episodes like those of Jatayu, Sampati, Garuda, Kabandha and several demon chiefs and fighters, and most of all, by turning Rama into a Boddhisat king and the exemplar of Buddhist holiness. Reminiscent of the account of the birth of Siddharta in the life of Gautama Buddha is the scene where the country begs the Buddhist Deva and others in heaven to incarnate as men in Ayodhya and other gods to come back to life as apes in Kethakinda (Han and Zaw 1989: 303-304).

Aside from the **Rama Vatthu**, there are five other known versions of the Rama story. The **Maha Rama**, composed in the late and early 19th

century, is an expansion of the **Rama Vatthu**. This prose work features four new episodes in the Yuddha Kanda section: Gombadipa carrying Rama to the underworld; Yakkhani transforming himself into the dead body of Sita to deceive Rama; Gamuttara assuming the form of a decaying dog; and the demon Hman-pya burning himself to ashes as Hanuman holds up the mirror to his face. The **Rama Thonmayo** by Saga Htwe, published in 1904, is derived from excerpts from the marionette texts. Famous names are changed in this version and innovations made. For example, Sita is brought back immediately to Rama by Hanuman after the burning of Lanka; the invitation to the bow contest with Sita's portrait is blown by the wind into Dasagiri's hands. The **Rama Thagyin** of U Aung Phyio has almost the same content as the **Rama Vatthu**. This version, which has effective characterization and plot, was sung by U Aung Phyio, a professional balladist in remote villages. The **Rama Yagan** was composed in 1784 by a famous poet U Toe. Using the Siamese versions of the epic which he localised through colloquialisms, U Toe wrote the story not as an epic but as a romance in a lighter style. The **Alaung Rama Thagyin** by Saga Htun uses previous Rama versions and incorporates Arakanese folkways (e.g. Dasagiri buries his spear in the ground

but Rama plucks it out with his toes). A well-known balladist, Saga Htun popularized this version in Arakan and the valley of the Irrawaddy (Han and Zaw 1989: 302-306).

The *yama-pwe* or Rama play was introduced to Burma, apparently through Thailand, after the Burmese conquest of Thailand. At that time, it probably used the text of U Toe. Since then, however, other texts, though incomplete, have been used for the performances. A famous text is **Thiri Rama** by Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Gaung, which is believed to be derived from two Indian versions (in Bengali and Hindi) and written in the late 18th century or early 19th century. In this, some famous details or scenes are omitted, such as the comb of 10 plaintain fruits connected to the birth of the ten-headed Dasa-giri, and the scene where Thugyeik (Sugriwa) witnesses how Lakkhana does not budge in spite of a gadfly biting his back, so as not to awaken his sleeping brother. Another drama text in verse and prose is the **Pontaw Rama**, Part I, by U Ku, which opens with Rama's exile and includes Parasu Rama's offering of his kingdom of San Pathavra to Rama, the death of Dasaratha at Ayodhya, Rama's destruction of the two sons of Gambi, the enchanted deer and abduction of Sita. Yet another Rama play is **Lakkhana**, Part I, by the Maung Gyi, a play in verse and prose which

presents the birth of Sita from the tusk of Dasagiri, who in a previous existence makes love to Sita Candi. Using Indians in Rangoon as oral sources, the drama focuses on Sita's love for Rama. (Han and Zaw 1989: 308-309).

In 1795, Michael Symes was invited to a performance of the *yama-pwe* by the governor of Hanthawaddy. Performed on the ground and in the open-air, the play was lighted by torches and lanterns. Later performances on stage used neither drop-curtains nor sets and only had two door-ways for the exits and entrances of actors. The *yama-pwe* used to be performed for 21 nights in the past (Chandan 1989: 651).

Contemporary performances of the Rama play have not changed much since the 19th century, except that they are much shorter now and sets and props have been added to visualize the setting of scenes (palace interior, landscape, native house). Four aspects may be noted in the presentation of the Rama play: 1) dramatic words and gestures; 2) dramatic words interpreted with songs; 3) dramatic recitation with musical background; and 4) dancing and miming to music specific to the situation (e.g. Hanuman dancing to the music of "stealing" when he arrives in Lanka). To deliver their dialogue and songs, characters with masks simply lift up their masks. Today, the emphasis is

on dance and mime, with narration and dialogue being provided by reciters (Han and Zaw 1989: 310-311).

Instrumental music for the Rama play has been performed by the Myanmar and Yodaya orchestras. The Myanmar orchestra is also known as the *saing* ensemble, which is composed of a circle of drums for the melody; a circle of gongs supporting the melody; woodwinds, including bamboo flute, and big and small oboes; big drums and small cymbals; a drum struck with a stick; six side drums; a tiny cymbal; and bamboo clappers. Vocal music, mostly composed in the 19th century, is associated with certain scenes, such as the luring of Rama with the enchanted deer, the abduction of Sita, Sita's lamentations in Lanka and Rama in the forest, the meeting of Rama with Thugyeik under the byo tree (Han and Zaw 1989: 310-311).

Aside from performances with live actors, the Rama story is also enacted in the *Yokthe-pwe* or marionette theatre which uses dolls with costumes and painted three-dimensional heads. The puppeteer pulls the strings while speaking lines of dialogue and narration.

To this day, the **Ramayana** is still performed within a religious context in some places. In Mandalay and Awarapura, Rama is still worshipped by the descendants of Myanmar Brahmins of Bengali and Manipuri

origin. In October and November, the drama is performed during the Festival of Lights, and offerings of flowers made to Rama, Sita, Lakkhana, Hanuman, and Parasu Rama as gods. These offerings are usually made before the first night of performances in front of the masks used in the plays.

Laos

Ratnam (1989: 246) believes that the Rama story came to Laos in different waves from Cambodia, northern Thailand, and upper Burma up to the 13th century and later. By that time, Theravada Buddhism had already entered Laos via Burma and Ceylon. The encounter between the Brahmanic tradition and the Buddhist was not violent. As a matter of fact, the two "existed side by side, after merging one with the other," with Buddhism providing the "moral basis and a practical code for daily life" and the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* becoming "entrenched in the emotional and cultural life of the people" (Ratnam 1989: 261-261).

Episodes of the epic were carved on the pylon of the Vat Mai "New Pagoda" built by King Aniruddha over the Vat si Phrem. Of the same period are

the paintings in the Vat Pe Ke in Luang Prabang which were considered the most complete in Laos. In 1938, Lao artist Thit Panh painted a mural depicting 33 episodes of the epic measuring 20 metres long and 5.30 metres wide on the interior of the Vat Oup MOUNG temple in Vientiane.

The first literary versions of the Rama epic in Laos appeared in the 18th century. Today, there are three important versions of the epic. The **Phra Lak Phra Lam** (Beloved Laksmana, Beloved Rama) is the original rescension of the story composed in the last half of the 19th century by Buddhaghoshacharya. As a court poet of Vientiane, the author portrayed Rama as a powerful king of Vientiane, gaining power over neighbouring areas through marriages. Later, Rama's sons rule over north-



The Folklore Lao PDR National Music and Dance School

eastern Thailand. Ratnam believes that these events actually refer to "post-1731 events when Vientiane had broken away from Luang Prabang" to become a separate kingdom and

had sent expeditions to Ayuthaya and Pinasulok and established marriage alliances with them (Ratnam 1989: 262-263, 257; 1981: 234).

Similarly, the epic was re-interpreted according to local customs, manners, geography, flora and fauna, and more importantly, according to Lao value systems. Thus, the conflict between Rama and Raphanasuan (Ravana) is watered down and characterization subsequently modified. Ram is not given as much importance as Raphanasuan who is portrayed not as a demon but as a "clever and well-read young man of great beauty and charm." Moreover, Rama and Hanuman have children whom they meet by chance. In the end, the defeated Raphanasuan offers Ram a boat to Tranulon, because "in Laotian life, enmity and discord are not permanent" but "chance waves to be submerged eventually in the vast sea of piety and friendship" (Ratnam 1989: 264).

The second literary version in Laos is entitled **Gvay Dvorahbi**, which further adapts the epic to the events in Laos in the 18th century. In the story, three princes rule their territories separately, as happened in Laos between 1711 and 1731. Moreover, the epic is situated on

familiar ground: the first part, in the area between the Angkor Wat and Vientiane; the second, in Lanka, where Rama recovers Sita, and later in Angkor Wat; and, finally, in Vientiane (Ratnam 1989: 235; Sahai 1976; 221).



Wayang-Wong-style Ramayana, Singapore

The third version of the epic is known as the **Phommachak**, an adaptation of the story by Buddhist monks, who interpret it as the previous life of Buddha himself. In this version, Rama is the Buddha himself, Sita is Yasodhara, and Ravana, Devadatta (Ratnam 1989: 248).

The Lao dance-drama, called *khon*, is presented in the royal palace in Luang Prabang and the Matyasak dance school at Vientiane. It includes many dances, one of which is the Ramayana dance, *Pha Lak Pha Lam*. Here, as in the literary pieces, the characters "move and behave exactly like Lao men and women and conform strictly to local customs and traditions" (Ratnam 1989: 263).

Vietnam, Brunei Darussalam and Singapore

There are no more artworks, literary pieces or performances about or related to the **Ramayana** in Vietnam today, but this does not mean that there was none in that country before. As a matter of fact, Filliozat observes that the oldest document concerning Valmiki's version of the epic is a sanskrit inscription found in Vo-can (Vietnam) dating from the third century A.D. Similarly, there are traces of the epic in the Vietnamese names given to Dasaratha and to Ravana (Filliozat 1994: 193-194). Finally, the encounter with the epic is further proved by a stone image of Valmiki and a sanskrit inscription found in a temple in Champa (modern Vietnam) which date from the reign of King Prakashadharma (633-678 A.D.) (Ratnam 1989: 257).

Although the Rama story is known to have flourished in old Malaya, of which Singapore was a part until 1965, there is no evidence that either the literary versions in Malay (the **Hikayat Seri Rama** and the **Hikayat Maharaja Wana** or the puppet theatre wayang siam) took root in Singapore. In fact, the earliest performance of the epic in the island state seems to have been that given by Indonesian dancers who were en route to Europe in the 1930s.

After World War II, local groups in Singapore staged their own interpretations of the epic. Not surprisingly, the organisation that produced the most number of Rama performances was headed by two Singaporeans of Indian descent — K.P. Bhaskar and his wife, Santha Bhaskar. Bhaskar's Academy of Dance, later known as the Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, was mainly responsible for staging the full epic or scenes thereof. In 1952, K.P. Bhaskar danced a solo called **Rama's Valour** and later, choreographed **Kailasodharam** (Rama's Lifting of Mount Kailash) for the Indian Fine Arts Society. In 1954, Mr. Bhaskar performed the **Ramayana** in Ottan Thullal, a traditional song-and-dance style of Kerala.

In 1957, Bhaskar's Academy mounted **Sita Apaharanam** (Abduction of Sita) at the Victoria Theatre. It was also about this time that Nrityalaya performed the complete **Ramayana** at the Victoria Theatre under the auspices of the Tamil Section of the then Radio Singapore. Songs for these shows were from Valmiki's original work and the **Rama Natak** of Arunachala Karirayar. Soon after, the Bhaskars produced for then TV Singapore a seven-episode dance drama of the **Ramayana**, in which 40 dancers and musicians participated, including two famous Chinese dancers Gang Beng Lee and Tan Teck Hui. The

Bhaskars' daughter, Meenakshy, played Sita.

In 1996, Santha Bhaskar choreographed a two-hour dance drama entitled **Sita's Grief** in the contemporary style, with about 20 dancers and 10 musicians. The performance used Simon Tay's poetry as narration to bridge the scenes. For the Angkor Wat International Ramayana Festival of the same year, the Bhaskars headed the Singapore delegation which presented the latter scenes of the epic: the life of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana in the forest, the lure of the Golden Deer, the Abduction of Sita, the Killing of the Jatayu bird, Rama's sorrow, the building of the bridge to Lanka, Sita's rejection of Ravana's lust, the war between Rama and Ravana, Hanuman's visit to Sita, and the accusation of Sita's infidelity towards Rama. At the festival, the Singaporean performance, together with the Indonesian, was singled out as the best show, while Meenakshy was chosen as the best dancer.

Aside from the Bhaskars, the Singapore Kathakali Yongan gave about 16 traditional Kathakali performances in Singapore between 1961 and 1980 at major national day celebrations.

About a decade ago, a production using the epic was mounted by Chua Soo Pong, artistic director of Arts and Acts. For the annual Young People's Theatre Festival in Singapore in 1998, Chua wrote

his **Ramayana** in English, in order to "create an awareness of the richness of Southeast Asian literature and theatre" among the youth of Singapore, who he believed were more familiar with Snow White, Cinderella and Mickey Mouse. Chua's version condenses the long epic into 14 short scenes, which dramatize the basic plot through a narrator and short dialogues of characters. For brevity, this **Ramayana** eliminated a whole range of characters, including Lakshmana, Khara, Surpanaka and Jetayu.

To further bring Singapore into the cultural traditions of Southeast Asia, Chua chose to stage his drama in the *wayang wong* style of Surakarta, Java, complete with puppet-like movements, elaborate costumes, fighting sequences and *gamelan* music, through the help of Martinus Miroto and Lin Chun Wai. Premiered at the Botanic Garden, the show was received warmly by both critics and audiences.

Because of its success, the play was invited to perform at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Toyama International Theatre Festival in Japan. In Hong Kong, Chua's student, Lee Yen Hoe directed an abridged version; while in Japan, the version directed by another student, Johnson Choo Yeong Huei, received several awards. In 1990, the Arts and Acts presented yet another version at the International Youth Theatre

Festival in Christchurch, New Zealand—**Ramayana** in Chinese opera style, with choreography by Tan Poh Lee and music by Yang Pei Xion.

Conclusion

A cursory survey of the **Ramayana** and its manifestations illustrates not only how wide its reach but how deep its influence has been between the Bay of Bengal and the Pacific Ocean. Steeped in Rama lore for at least a century, most countries of Southeast Asia have so internalised the epic—from generation to generation, on the conscious and unconscious levels—that it has given the impetus for the creation of some of the most outstanding masterpieces of art in the region. In architecture, it has prompted the erection or inspired the decoration of world heritage temples, such as the Prambanan in Indonesia, the Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the Wat Pho and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok. In the visual arts, it has provided the matter and motive to thousands of paintings, murals, rubbings, sculptures and reliefs that range from pious to pop, from kunst to kitsch. In the performing arts, it has inspired the many rescensions that are now treasured as the ancient literary classics of these countries, such as the Burmese **Rama Vattu**, the Thai **Ramakien**, the Lao-

tian **Phra Lak Phra Lam**, the Malaysian **Hikayat Seri Rama** and the Indonesian **Ramayana Kakawin**. In the performing arts, it has given life and meaning to the major dance dramas, puppet theatres, songs and dances that eventually comprised a large part of the cultural identity of these countries. Water cannot rise higher than its source. Fortunately, the **Ramayana** springs forth from one of the loftiest peaks of human creativity.

As interpretations of the same story, these art forms reveal similar characteristics and tendencies. For one, they have borrowed heavily from each other: with murals visualizing scenes from literature, as in the case of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha and the **Ramakien**; with puppet theatre dramatizing scenes from literature, as in *wayang siam* and the **Hikayat Seri Rama**; and with dance-dramas mimicking puppet theatre, as in *nang* and *wayang kulit purwa*, or vice versa, as in *hun krabok* and *khon/lakhon*. For another, each of these art forms exhibits the same presentational and didactic style. The style is presentational because the art works do not claim to reproduce reality or an illusion of it, as in the style called realism, but merely narrates a story that is primarily fictional (even if rulers have sometimes tried to harness it for their own political, pragmatic needs). In the performing arts, the presen-

tational style is most evident. Here, narration takes precedence over dramatization, songs over dialogue, movement over internalisation. Costumes identify camps and types, even as they mesmerise and delight. Sets and props, if they exist, merely suggest locale, or are purely functional. Music blends all elements into a spectacle of sound, colour and movement that fires the imagination and fills the heart, the better to transmit to its audience the metaphor of life that it embodies. Like most presentational theatre, the performances are didactic, clearly taking the side of Rama in the eternal battle between Good and Evil.

But similarities of style or story should not lead to the impression of uniformity, for the most intriguing and obvious fact about the epic in Southeast Asia is the diversity of interpretations that it has undergone because of the religion, history, and general culture of each country.

In many instances, the story was introduced by Indian traders in halting stations or by rulers in Hindu Kingdoms or Indianized communities. For as long as Hindu influence held sway (as in Bali), Indian culture and religion could spread with ease and speed as they did for many centuries. But with the arrival of other religious systems, the epic had to adapt or be summarily eradicated with everything connected to Hindu religion. And adapt it did—with

no small success. In Islamized Malaysia, the Indianness of the epic was deemphasized through a change of names, and Rama, who was venerated as the reincarnation of Vishnu in Brahmanism, was stripped of his divinity to become a secular, romantic hero. In Buddhist Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, Rama became a Bodhisattva-king and in the case of Myanmar, the preincarnation of the Buddha himself. In the Jain tradition, he became the Salaka-Purusa. And even when other religious leaders displaced Rama as arbiter of morality, he remained the hero in the hearts of the people who had delighted in his saga long before the other religions came into their lives.

Aside from religion, history too remolded the character and meaning of Rama according to its priorities. It has been noted how the kings of Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Yogyakarta associated themselves with Rama, either metaphorically or sanguinely. In Laos, the **Phra Lak Phra Lam** showed Rama and his brother marching through Thai territory on their way back to Vientiane from Lanka, founding the cities of Ayodhya, Pisanulok and Nokhon Savan and gaining political ground there through matrimonial alliances—events which resemble Vientiane's post-1731 history, when military expeditions were sent from Laos against the Thai cities and marriage alliances

made with them. In countries such as Laos, history successfully turned the epic into an ethnoepic and the ethnoepic helped to make history in the hands of political dynasties.

Most of all, the **Ramayana** could not escape assimilation and indigenization in each country. The **Ramakien** introduced Thai-Buddhist rituals for the newly-born babies to the epic. Malaysian native seers and Islamic prophets figure in the **Hikayat Seri Rama**. Lastly, food and dress, behaviour and traditions have made the **Phra Lak, Phra Lam** a "true encyclopedia of life in Laos." More importantly, each country infused its own value system into the story, thereby modifying or transforming the epic's characters and plot. The Burmese version emphasizes fraternal love in the story, as seen in the episodes where Lakkhana would rather suffer the sting of a gadfly on his back, than move and wake Rama sleeping on his lap. On the other hand, the Lao version emphasizes smooth interpersonal relations when it depicts the vanquished Raphanasuan magnanimously offering the victor a boat on which to get away. Depending on a country's value systems and social priorities, Rama may be depicted as a god, a romantic hero, an ideal husband, a womaniser, a temperamental brother; Sita a goddess of love, a faithful wife, a vengeful demigoddess; Hanuman, a chaste

bachelor, a fickle lover, and father to many children; and Ravana as a cruel tyrant, sincere ascetic and gentle young man (Vatsyayan 1981: 699).

If there is anything to be learned from the many transformations of Rama in Southeast Asia, it is that the **Ramayana**, as Buck (1989: 42) observes, is "not a sixth century or third century book" but "a contemporary book, changing its meaning with each succeeding age." And herein lies the secret of the epic's longevity and vitality: *it belongs to everyone and to no one*. As a story long extracted from its mother culture, the epic has accommodated all ways of life, allowing itself to be re-cast in the image of its host culture.

Through all its adaptations, however, the image of Rama has remained positive and continues to be revered as the model of *dharma*, of the man who can sacrifice all except honour, of the leader who can lead his people to the rule of righteousness—because he has love, wisdom, and personal integrity. Then, as now, as in any period of the collective histories of the countries of Southeast Asia, such leaders have always been in constant demand but in rare supply, and remain the perennial goal of our best endeavours.

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