

# Realizing RAMA, Realizing ASEAN

Nicanor G. Tiongson



*Performance at Thailand Cultural Centre, 22 March 2000*

*Realizing Rama*, a contemporary dance production of the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, has completed its tour of all member countries, eliciting rave reviews from a wide range of audiences in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Manila, Jakarta, Bandar Seri Begawan, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Vientiane, Yangon, and Phnom Penh.

Known officially as the ASEAN Flagship Voyage, this project was conceived in March 1997 as a high-impact programme that would promote cultural awareness of ASEAN both within and outside the region. Under project director Nestor O. Jardin, it brought together for the first time some of the most accomplished performing artists of ASEAN in a collaborative piece that evokes the region in content and form.



Reinterpreting an epic that has taken root in most of the nations in Southeast Asia, *Realizing Rama* inquires into the theme of selfless leadership, which these countries need to help them combat their most urgent problems, such as graft and corruption, exploitation of labour, women and children, destruction of the environment, drug trafficking and the abject poverty of the masses. The libretto by Nicanor Tiongson propounds the

notion that Rama becomes a true leader of the people only after undergoing the exile of self-purification, where he confronts and conquers the temptations of wealth, lust and power. With Sita (his heart) and Lakshmana (his mind) beside him, he is realized as a leader when he transcends ego and self, thereby achieving wisdom and compassion.

Mejudhon of Thailand created a dance-drama using a process of interaction with the performers from nine ASEAN countries. Chosen for their mastery of their own traditional dances, these dance-artists demonstrated traditional movements and patterns, then, with Reyes, actively reworked and re-interpreted these to create a language of contemporary expression

Bernal's set, which consists of platforms and ramps, is intentionally simple and portable, and is dominated by a stylised lotus that assumes multiple images and functions for every major scene. Lighting design by Virgilio S.J. Catoy supports the narrative, facilitating its flow, providing focus and creating moods.

*Realizing Rama* had its world premier at the Grand Theatre in Hanoi, Vietnam on 16 December 1998, during the Sixth ASEAN Summit Meeting. From September to October 1999, it was performed in the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore and Malaysia. From March to April 2000, it toured Thailand, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Cambodia.

*Realizing Rama* has been lauded for its innovative choreography and for its stunning production values. It has also been hailed as "one intelligent theatrical masterpiece that strikes at the heart of our being Asian". More than this, it has proven beyond doubt that tradition can be successfully transformed at the hands of artists who know and respect it and therefore can build on it to create works that can only be taken on their own aesthetic terms. In this production, it is not only Rama who is realized, but a production style that is uniquely ASEAN.

*All photographs by Nipon Sud-Ngam*



*Denisa G. Reyes, artistic director*



*Nestor O. Jardin, project director*

Seeking to define a Southeast Asian style of music, Indonesian composer Rahayuh Supanggah used traditional instruments from the region as well as a variety of musical idioms he came in contact with in his experience as musician, composer and ethnomusicologist. To this music, artistic director/choreographer Denisa Reyes of the Philippines and co-choreographer Phatravadi

that transcends the traditional.

As the choreography picked movements, attitudes and stances from tradition, so costume designer Salvador Bernal researched the silhouettes, motifs, patterns, colours, textures and accessories of the old Rama dance-dramas from all over Southeast Asia before abstracting these and adapting them to suit the demands and aesthetics of contemporary dance.



## Love Puppets

*A candidate for the greatest love story ever told, the Ramayana is more than a historical romance. According to Garrett Kam's new book, **Ramayana in the Arts of Asia**, the ancient Indian epic reveals much about human psychology and the characters of the different countries to which it is spread. **Phil Cornwel-Smith** speaks with the author.*

Thanks to Garrett Kam's beautiful new tome from Asia Books, *Ramayana in the Arts of Asia*, you can now easily decipher the modern relevance of its symbolism. It is also fun to compare the national traits revealed in variations from India to Iran, Java to Japan, Burma to Bali, Tibet to Thailand.

Taking a fresh, unstuffy attitude, the Bali-based Hawaiian Chinese is also alert to political correctness. Feminism's big issue with Rama is that he suspects Sita of having Stockholm Syndrome (captives falling for their kidnapers) and being seduced by randy Ravana. Still, Rama's prim sexism does prevent him from getting the girl, says Kam. "Even when Sita has to prove herself despite all the evidence in her favour, in the end she gets back at Rama by disappearing into the earth by her own choice. 'Hey, I've had enough of you'

"Somebody in Singapore did the whole story from Sita's point of view," he adds, pointing out that Southeast Asian versions already make her more assertive. "Lao women are very independent and strong-minded, and the Lao Sita doesn't have to prove anything to Rama. He accepts her back, she doesn't disappear into the

earth; she does have the children, but it's accepted they're Rama's."

"The Thai Sita is also pretty strong and speaks her mind. She really tells Rama off! The Cambodian Sita is the same," he says, contrasting it with neighbouring texts. "If you look at the Malay or Philippine one, the women are pretty passive, but it's a different religion. Because of the Muslim context, the mortals become much more human. The male heroes of Hindu origin become less divine, more susceptible to emotion, and more likely to make mistakes."

That is certainly not the case here. "The Thai Rama essentially cannot make any error," Kam has learned. "No matter how bad he treats Sita or anybody else, he comes up shining in the end with utmost respect."

So do people pick up on the *Ramayana's* relevance to their national psyches? "No, because they don't know other versions," concludes Kam. "If they have something to compare it to, they'd say, 'Oh, this says something about our culture.' But very few studies have dealt with this."

Armed with Kam's juicy plot insights, the casual viewer can more easily enjoy the drama's subtler messages. Historically, these have been

given satirical resonance in commentaries by dalangs (shadow puppet masters) across Southeast Asia, which are particularly topical in Malaysia.

"I found the political situation really does reflect the Malay *Ramayana*—scandals being created and people either having to prove themselves or create evidence," says Kam.

"There are a lot of sub plots. Hanuman and Lakshmana have to prove their loyalty to Rama. It also comes from Malay history, the Hung Tua story, court intrigues, murders, suicides ... all very Shakespearean."

Cambodia's dark past gets equally illuminated. "The fact that the Khmer *Ramayana* emphasises the conflict between Rama and his sons and brothers, I thought, reflected the Killing Fields—family members turning on each other."

Omission can also be revealing. "Conflict over the throne is missing from the Philippine, Lao and Burmese versions," says Kam of Rama's exile on his half-brother's accession. "Now what does that tell you about accession to power?"

Disenfranchisement was likewise the impulse behind a South Indian reversing the entire plot in the 1970s. "There's the feeling that the *Ramayana* represents the invasion of the Aryans from the north, pushing down the darker Dravidians to the south, that all the ogres and demons are identified with Southern Indians, the fairer-skinned, human and divine characters with Aryans," says Kam. "He made Ravana and the ogres the good guys, and Rama and the monkeys bad. His logic is very well defined. It still works."

Value judgements are most contradictory in Hanuman, leader of the monkeys. "In India, he's supposed to be totally celibate but through most of Southeast Asia, he takes on many lovers and fathers many children. When I told Indians they got very offended," says Kam. He himself played Hanuman in 1978 at a dance conference

in Hawaii. "My first encounter with the *Ramayana* was as a dancer in 1977," he says of a previous role as Maricha, the ogre that turns into the golden deer to tempt Sita.

"My teacher in Hawaii told me I can only dance demon or monkey—what role you play is based on physical characteristics. Of course, in 1979 I went to Java and my teachers said, 'No way, you can only dance refined male roles!'"

A Hawaii arts graduate majoring in textiles, Kam became interested in batik, a fabric integral to Indonesian dance. After moving to Java, he became expert in its dance, which he taught at Chulalongkorn University while researching this book. The project was prompted by observing Balinese painting (about which he's also written). "They were used to painting 'tourist episodes' and reproducing them *en masse*. I told them, 'wouldn't this Cambodian episode that's not known in Bali make a wonderful Balinese painting?'"

His research involved five years of adventures. In Luang Prabang, Lao musicians helped him locate obscure murals; in Burma, he met the country's only female marionettier; and a 1997 International *Ramayana* Festival at Angkor Wat enabled him to see different renditions amid ancient bas reliefs of the story.

That compression of eras raised semi-resolved questions of how the fable developed. "My theory is that during Angkor, it spread into Thailand," says Kam of its Siamese trail, "but after the Thais attacked Cambodia ... the old Khmer version got taken back to Thailand and recomposed much later. That also had to be recomposed after the sack of Ayutthaya, based on other versions." There were further refinements under Kings Chulalongkorn and Vachiravudh, only for the *Ramakien* (Thai version) to suffer 'sound bite' streamlining for tourists and mall-minded Thais.



Sita puppet,  
Wayang Siam  
(Malaysia)





श्रीललाज जी० १६ विद्याकरदेरफजीबतारे कीधकोषिकलाप हाथनभ्यांजासकरे सुरपतिभ्यामभ्याप जी०  
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Illustrated manuscript of Jaina Ramayana

This is a long way from the classic Sanskrit 'Valmiki' version, which "was assembled from a lot of sources—literary, oral and performance—sometime between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC," reports Kam, who toured two dozen locations in India in 1998.

"I timed it to be during the Deshara Festival," he recalls. "For a whole month prior, there were performances in villages, in the fields, in the streets. At the end, they burned enormous effigies of Ravana, Indrajit and Kumbhakarna."

So what's the enduring appeal of the *Ramayana* to literally billions of people? "It's a good story to begin with," says Kam. "There's a lot of adventure, magic, animal, human and divine characters. It's about love, war, everything you can think of ... yet it can be condensed in just a few sentences. You couldn't do that with the *Mahabharata* (a complex Indian epic, adopted by Indonesia). The *Ramayana's* more flexible."

As for its centrality to Thai culture and society, Kam stresses that "it's more than just a story. Vishnu, who incarnates as Rama, later incarnates as Buddha, so there's a lineage.

"It's a whole way of looking at Asia," he concludes. "There are all these cultures, religions and languages - over two dozen are represented

in this book – and the only thing that unites them all is the *Ramayana*. As a weaver, I'm trying to re-weave different traditions back into a complete fabric that includes all the visual and performing arts and folklore. It should be a way to look beyond borders, not to concentrate on differences, but to see there's something everyone shares."

Indeed, we can all identify with the characters since they are also universal archetypes. It is startling to realize that Rama represents our heroism, rectitude and refinement; Ravana our lust, conspiracy and temptations; Sita our femininity, romance and dignity; Hanuman our humour, loyalty and bravery; Lakshmana our intellect and asceticism. Each is an aspect of our personality. Like all great myths, the *Ramayana* is a mirror to understanding ourselves.

Phil Cornwel-Smith interviews Garrett Kam, the author of *Ramayana in the Arts of Asia* in his adopted home, Bali

*Ramayana in the Arts of Asia* (292 pages) by Garrett Kam, is published by Asia Books (662 3912680, 662 7142794)



## Research on Environmental History of Indonesia

The discipline of environmental history seeks a (historical) understanding of the many ways people have understood, changed, and been changed by the environments they inhabit. The discipline itself is not new, neither is the material which has been around for generations, but it is now being re-organised in the light of recent experience on environmental issues. Three broad research areas are distinguished by environmental historians: (1) understanding nature, or the natural environment itself (ecology); (2) the socio-economic realm manifest in human modes of production, different institutions, and decision-making; and (3) the conception of the environment, which includes perceptions, ethics, laws and myth.

In 1993, the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology (KITLV) began a research project on the environmental history of Indonesia. The environmental history of Indonesia is a fairly new specialization and like environmental history in general has been drawing on a number of other disciplines such as anthropology, and their methodologies, a move which is clearly reflected in the multi-disciplinarity of the EDEN project as well.

EDEN is the acronym for Ecology, Demography, and Economy in Nusantara. The first phase of the project (1993-1997), which focused on the period of the earliest European contacts with Indonesia up to the end of the nineteenth century, was characterized by a geographical approach. Covering important themes in environmental history of the islands, the researchers have written on (parts of) Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Sumbawa. The edited volume *Paper landscapes: explorations in the*

*environmental history of Indonesia* is an anthology of topics investigated in that first phase of the project. Most of the researchers' books are in an advanced phase of preparation, or publication.

In June 1999, EDEN entered its second phase: three new researchers were appointed to work together with Peter Boomgaard and David Henley on themes in the environmental history of Indonesia covering the period 1850 to the present. This time the project has opted for a more thematic approach through which certain subjects, previously paid too little or no attention at all, will be investigated, such as malaria, livestock, and fisheries. Since the time frame has shifted to the modern historical period including the present, data collection by fieldwork in Indonesia will form an important part in most of the team members' research.

Peter Boomgaard, historian and the project leader of EDEN, has written a book on tigers and people in the Malay world during the first phase

of the project. In the second phase, he will concentrate on the subject of forest management, reforestation, and nature conservation in Java. His research will have a strong historical focus covering a longer period, namely from 1600 to 1950.

David Henley (social geographer) is adding the final touches on his product of EDEN I, a book on a number of environmental history themes of North Sulawesi, with an emphasis on demography and economy. Within the framework of EDEN II, he will undertake the task of investigating the history and effectiveness of malaria control in the Indonesian Archipelago, which will encompass both descriptive and analytical research. Both traditional and more modern forms of malaria management in the colonial and post-colonial period will be taken into account. In the summer, Henley will conduct an initial survey in two sets of fieldwork locations in North Sulawesi (Minahasa and Bolaang Mongondow) and in Central Sulawesi (Lore and Palu). Beside these locations, attention will be paid to Jakarta, where interviews will be conducted with people involved in malaria control efforts in the metropolitan area in the past, including health service officials.



Martine Barwegen, trained in zootechnology at Wageningen Agricultural University, has previously undertaken research on animal husbandry in Costa Rica and Kenya. Since June 1999,

she has been a PhD student focusing on a study of livestock and land use in Java in the period 1850 to the present. Her main research interest is to investigate the principal factors which have influenced the utilization of livestock in small-holding systems – shedding some light on the mutual influence of livestock and environment.

Next month, Barwegen will start her first six-month fieldwork period in East Java, where she intends to get an impression of the small-holding systems, the different livestock related activities, and the time spent on them (with a focus on women), as well as noting the changes that have taken place since 1950. Archival research in the national archive in The Hague and the National Archive of Indonesia (ANRI) in Jakarta, plus visits to governmental departments and universities in Java form the other part of the research.

Manon Osseweijer joined the EDEN II team in October 1999. She is an anthropologist who has undertaken her PhD research on local fisheries in the Aru Islands, Eastern Indonesia. While finishing her thesis, she has started post-doctoral research under the aegis of EDEN. This covers the long-term trends in Eastern Indonesian fisheries. The fisheries policy of Indonesia places a heavy emphasis on the marine potential of Eastern Indonesia, which is why this region has been chosen for research on fisheries policy and management. In addition, Osseweijer would like to emphasize the way knowledge of fisheries is developed along the different levels of government administration on the one hand, and local and non-local fisheries activities, and the interactions between them on the other hand. Her research covers more recent history by comparing 'historical narratives' concerning regional fisheries and administrative officers during the last 80 years. Fieldwork to support one or two case studies is likely to take place in Maluku and Irian Jaya.

*The EDEN 1 members, besides Peter Boomgaard and David Henley, were Freek Colombijn (Sumatra), Bernice de Jong Boers (Sumbawa), Han Knapen (Southeast Borneo), and Luc Nagtegaal (Java).*

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