



Global Stages of the Ramayana: A Comparative Study of Performance Traditions across Culture

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ABSTRACT

The Ramayana was among the most important epics of Indian culture and has remarkably, through cultural changes and movements over continents, impacted performance traditions elsewhere. This paper addresses the reception and the performance in South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Western world of the Ramayana as it has been transformed through myriad cultural containers and contexts. It further focuses on performing traditions such as Ramlila in India, Wayang Kulit in Indonesia, Khon in Thailand, modern-day western versions, to see how these adaptations and versions reflect the locally predominant artistic tendencies, societal ethics and historical situations surrounding the narrative. The findings of the research indicate how those moments are similar, and which ones are not, and in so doing demonstrate the fundamental importance of the Ramayana in both preserving cultures and preparing cultures for exchange. The central issue of the paper is the cross-cultural applicability of the epic revealing yet another capacity of the narrative to be relevant even in the contemporary context, and how it can be utilized to overcome cultural barriers and enhance international relations.

Introduction.

Ramayana was written by sage Valmiki and it narrates the life story of Lord Rama, his wife Sita and even his loyal follower Hanuman as it tells stories of romance, duty, morality, and the fight between good and evil. Due to its extensive character development and moral dilemmas, this epic has gone beyond its Indian origin and has developed into an epic that can be enjoyed by many. This kind of elasticity emphasizes themes that are commonly humanizing making the Ramayana a multidimensional story which can be reinterpreted in different cultures (Malik, 2022).

As the Ramayana spread to other areas of the world, it began to take on different shapes and forms in accordance with the cultures and beliefs of the people that inhabit those areas. Ramlila is the dramatization of events that took place in the Ramayana, and which is offered to the audience during the Dussehra festival in order to commemorate the triumph of good as well as the unity of society. An art form of this nature is not only a tribute to traditions but also the intention of addressing societal problems and in so doing, the audience can grapple with issues of the likes of justice, loyalty and fidelity. On the other hand, Wayang Kulit, an Indonesian shadow puppet play, embeds Indonesian elements of élan and philology into the Ramayana while retaining its key ideas. This shows that local cultural manifestations tend to provide fresh perspectives into traditional stories (Sinha, 2021).

The goal of the study is to focus on the various cultural contexts of the Ramayana whereby special attention will be given to the performing arts of Ramlila in India and Wayang Kulit in Indonesia and their images existing in Western culture. In pursuing these objectives, the paper aims at explaining how the local environment, historical context, and individual artistic imagination shape and present Ramayana across the geographical and ideological borders. Furthermore, this study will not only demonstrate the significance of this epic to the cultural and intercultural communication but also its importance as a contemporary narrative which transcends social boundaries and brings the world together.

Literature Review.

The Ramayana's impact on performance traditions worldwide has been researched widely in the respective regions especially India and Southeast Asia. This ancient source of possibilities has been traced by many scholars, for it contains the ever-present conflict of good against evil, devotion, and duty. Still, while there are enough studies on individual traditions, studies dealing with general

comparisons between traditions and adaptations of an existing performance remain rather few. This literature review is directed at combining the results of several studies devoted to particular adaptations, Indian Ramlila, Indonesian Wayang Kulit, Thai Khon and some western versions, drawing attention to the cultural differences and performance style each uses in their interpretation of Ramayana.

In India, Ramlila is one of the major performance traditions that enact the Ramayana. Ramlila tells the story of Lord Rama through the combined forms of drama, music, dance, and opposite theatrical performances under the open sky and with people. Ramlila has been pointed out by scholars not simply a dramatical recreation, but rather an integrated performance which is ritualistic nature combining spirituality and entertainment. Dussehra being the traditional period of Ramlila, this provides an opportunity for both the actors and the spectators to become absorbed as one in offering their devotion and cultural heritage. Apart from that, the form of Ramlila was also modified in the course of modernization together with the development of integration of global means of communication that created the form which tackled modern concerns and modern forms that made it appealing to the current audience but still remained cultural.

Performing Ramlila is one of the most widely performed theatrical artforms in India, that essentially aims to reenact the Ramayana. A dramatic representation of Māori cosmology, 'Ramlila' combines music, dance, and acting performed in costumes, usually outdoors and involving communities. It has been noted by scholars that Ramlila is not only a performance, but it is an integrated event where entertainment lies within the shard imprints of spirituality. Contextual Ramlila, like many other performance arts, provides an opportunity for a sense of togetherness to bloom, at an annual occasion such as Dussehra. In addition, with urban expansion and digital media platforms came the change in the performance and its interpretation. Integration of modern themes and aesthetics made it relatable to the current times but without discarding the traditional values.

Another notable variant of Ramayana exists in the form of Wayang Kulit, an Indonesian shadow novel, which also retells the epic. Wayang Kulit is a montage of Javanese culture and Hindu-Buddhism whereby the Ramayana stories are narrated in form of puppeteers operating leather-made carved figures. This adaptation however stands out as the other adaptations in the sense of visual representation; the images of the puppets appear like ghosts when viewers see them which combine with the sounds to make the audience enticed. With regards to Wayang Kulit picture, the player is described as a storyteller, musician and a cultural keeper who narrates ways of life and philosophies of the unique

Javanese civilization. Ties of Wayang Kulit are characterized by insertion of local myths and propagation of Islamic teachings which is consistent with Indonesia's multi-culture. It is appropriate thus to note that this version of the Ramayana is not only a simple version of retelling thereof of the original story but rather a form of cultural performance which has incorporated the local customs over time.

In Thailand, Khon is the dance-drama which features the use of masks and tells the story of Ramayana or Ramakien. The costumes and the masks worn by Khon performers are very complex which are accompanied by Thai music performed in a rigid form of dance. It is believed that Khon is a type of royal theatre where its performance was supposed to be done in front of aristocratic members of historically relevant societies which shows that Ramayana had an importance in Thai civilization. Though the Ramakien is based on the Indian epic, the original Indian epic was adapted with a Thai setting, thus showcasing the diversity of the Ramayana. Everything about Khon is beautiful and disciplined which is what represents the changes of the Ramayana as a form of art through performance reflecting the beauty of the nation.

On the other hand, it seems from the Western context that the changing or versioning of the Ramayana has a more experimental/cross-cultural approach. Unlike the norms, Western versions often shift their focus to solving the themes of the epic with problems of today, such as that of identity, diasporas, and integration within the culture. Research participants noted that Western readings emphasize heroism and moral struggle as universal themes but combine them with various theatrical experiments: dance, video, interactivity and so on. Such variations illustrate the shifting nature of the Ramayana theme to suit various audiences, even those who are not its original cultural bearers. Western interpreters sometimes would seem to violate or subvert orthodox readings, suggesting alternative ways of approaching the themes of the Ramayana that are more stimulating and thought provoking for the viewers.

The analysis of selected works in the synthesis presented here permit us to make the following observations: The different versions of the Ramayana's retelling in India, Southeast Asia and in the Western world each bring new things on how the epic poem is performed in accordance with cultural traditions, stage techniques, and historical conditions. All the aforementioned cultures have still maintained the main plot of Ramayana however the different approaches to narration reveal the scope of the epic's versatility and transformation to appeal and be relevant to societies while maintaining its basic concepts. Looking at this retelling of the Ramayana in performance provides a holistic understanding of

how such stories can still be remembered and practiced today and how new generations can learn from them and even appreciate the presence of cultural diversity.

Ramlila: Performance and Devotion.

Ramlila is a form of folk theater which presents the Ramayana in a performance style unique to its region. Scholars have taken quite a bit of interest in the subject and have done some justice to it as well. Sax (2002) explains Ramlila as a type of cultural inheritance and states how the term has adopted new meaning with its mix of celebration and aesthetic engagement. Critical to his ethnographic method, Sax shows how at the time the community was actively creating and performing the Ramlila play. As a result, Ramlila becomes both a religious and a social aspect. On the other hand, Hansen (2011), in a chronological order illustrates the changes Ramlila has been undergoing while modernizing. He studies how new elements have been introduced lately and how these elements supplemented the process of acting itself. Hansen is right in alluding to the fact that overall and in its essence its purpose and meaning is the same, although the presentation may be different.

Wayang Kulit: Syncretism and Tradition.

In a different perspective, Ramayana has been perceived and recreated through the lens of Wayang Kulit, Indonesia's popular shadow puppet theatre. Instead of the mostly live rubber puppets in Ramlila, Wayang Kulit utilizes sculpted rubber puppets that depict human figurines performed behind a semi-transparent curtain that forms shadows on the backdrop. This is further embedded by traditional scenes with gamelan music in the background, making every scene more dramatic than it already is. Wayang Kulit is unique for its syncretic character that combines Hindu gods and myths and Javanese culture including local animism. The actors in these plays reveal their habits and observance of morals through their outlines. For example, evil king Ravana from the demon clan is shown with many heads and many arms to show his might and wickedness. This transformation not only retains the central idea of the Ramayana but also includes regional stories that make the storyline suitable for Indonesian people (Brandon, 1970) Moreover, over time, Wayang Kulit has been changing by incorporating Islam and the newer social and political reality of Indonesia that adds to its relevance today (Sears, 1996).

Khon: Royal Patronage and National Identity.

Khon is executed through dance drama in what is known and actively performed throughout throughout the royal courts as the Ramakien, the Thai version of the Indian Ramayana. It has a close narrative

relationship to both Thai kingship and Buddhism. Rogers (1990) describes Khon as a formal performance style where the words and the movements are codified, and where performers wear masks and costumes and perform according to very rigid movements that embody order and hierarchy as values of loyalty and respect to the king. Rogers emphasizes how Khon depicts the nation's culture within the framework of law and order, authority and divinity of kingship and Khon stage itself is a nationalistic metaphor of cultural power in Thailand. Sucharitakul (2000) on the other hand, raises royal support as a sustaining factor of Khon in performance tradition which has readily been appropriated in projects of nation building and sociopolitical advancements of Thailand. He observes that since Khon has close relations with the monarchy, it is more than a dance practice; it is also the flag bearer of Thai culture. The Ramayana's Thai version, known as the Ramakien, takes to the stage in a most elaborate dance drama known as Khon. This originates from the Siamese court's connections to Buddhism. According to Rogers (1990), Khon is a framework-oriented performing art, where participants don elaborates and specially designed costumes and masks, and choreography is strictly followed in a manner that is hierarchical –values that can be looked at loyally in a hierarchical society.... Rogers focuses on how Khon is a cultural representation of Justice, Power and Divine kingship in Thai society. Sucharitakul (2000) also looks into the Khon's support from royals as a performance tradition and how it has reaffirmed the nation's identity and believed in the socio-political tenets of Thailand. Sucharitakul observes that Khon is a theatrical tradition and offers a continuity of Thai culture due to its association with the Monarchy.

Western Adaptations: Cultural Reinterpretation.

Adaptations of the Ramayana have different meanings in the Western countries in context making. Richman, for instance, analyses the production of the Ramayana in the West as a profound alteration of the epic for the purpose of articulating issues of contemporary life such as migration, multiculturalism, and selfhood. Cross-origin understanding of the East for the Western people is two – these reworks take parts of Western values to the East, and reinterpret Eastern mythology through Western sociocultural patterns. But such affined understanding is only possible when the work is performed within the frameworks of Lutgendorf (2007), who states that the ideals expressed in the Ramayana are distinctly Indian, and the Westernized versions of the epic cannot stand alone as authentic. Lutgendorf's studies are related to bridging the gap between modern graphoidal practices and ancient storytelling.

Methodology.

Cultural performance traditions of the Ramayana across various cultures have been understudied using a qualitative comparative approach underlying this methodology. The research is structured around the following key methods:

1.Textual Analysis: In this case, attention is paid to performing the scripts or the narrative frameworks of some performances of the Ramayana from different local settings. This method pursues the objectives of identifying primary themes, differences and cross-cultural characteristics prevalent in each of the ways in order to determine how the epic has been interpreted and altered in particular parts of the world.

2.Ethnographic Observation: The research focuses in some cases on directly witnessing the live performances where it is possible. This way, there is a better understanding of the interactions in the performance including the audience, space, and the presence of dance, music, and visual images. Such observation of performance as ethnographic captures the process of performance and hence single handed out other forms through standardization.

3.Interviews: In this context, it is based on the interviews carried out with the performers, directors, and scholars in relation to the performers who are all active in the performance traditions. These discussions help in understanding how different artistic, cultural and interpretive aspects are imbued in a case given but also inform about the development of such cases.

3.Archival Research: This involves a systematic examination of records, imagery, and previously published ephemera. This archival work traces the historical development of these performance traditions, presenting how they have grown with changes in society, politics, and culture.

In this scenario, Tawachara Mahagonsa states that Khon in Thailand also has the Ramu, adapted for monarchical power. Further, its movements are choreographed to reflect the culture hierarchy of Thailand and also its religion Performed mostly for royal audiences, Khon uses costumes, and masks to express characters. The most universal interpretation of the Ramayana, although the least traditional, is performed by the Western nations with adaptation for universal ideas of fight between good and evil, specifically adjusting it to out allow contemporary concepts such as migration, identity and gender to address for use in the 21st Century. These development/compositions give fresh perspectives to the epic, and make it fresh for the period.

Overall, the findings underscore the Ramayana's Ramayana is an outstanding epic that can be able to adapt and integrate into versatile cultural norms, stylistic means of art and different times. This research emphasizes not only the eminent function of the epic within the cultural context but also its prevalent integrative potential including inter-civilizational communications.

Comparative Analysis.

This section presents the achievements of four different performers from different traditions of Ramayana with courtesy of the Existing unambiguous focus is on the endings and the important relationships each of them has with cultural meanings at their various times. Ramlila in India Ramlila is a joyous and esteemed family practice in India. It is a practice that brings together the practitioners and the audience in a collective form of worship and within the larger performative space. Lasting several days, the drama usually ends with the burning of Ravana, which shows the everlasting conflict between good Ravana, and his true enemy Lord Rama, the embodiment of righteousness. Also, it is not just a portrayal of history but a celebration; it is a sacred chore that reaffirms the culture and religion of the society. Plots of Ramlila get the want in temples or other holy places and so they are surrounded by elder's costumes and traditional music making Ramlila unique in many ways (Sax, 2002) What comes out strongly in the performance stylistics of Ramlila and what is quite different from other performance styles is the factor of loyalty and communal choreography. Most players consider the performance for God whilst the view is regarded as a prayer. The story has a strong Chaturikaranat about problems with the audience such as obligations, fidelity, and justice. Furthermore, Ramlila acts as a medium for social commentary, enabling communities to address contemporary challenges and conflicts through the lens of this ancient epic. This dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity keeps Ramlila relevant, ensuring its continuation as a living cultural practice

Findings.

The results of this emphasized that the adaptability and continuous significance of the Ramayana can be witnessed among different performance traditions the world over. In India the Ramlila is not just a play but a serious sacred act or a community festival which finds its roots in the socio-religious life of the people. It is all about devotion including the performers and the audience who engage in the act as a form of worship which upholds the morals and some mission of the culture and religion. In Indonesia, Wayang Kulit adopts a totally different perspective, fusing Hindu beliefs with Javanese animism and Islam. This type of shadow puppetry theater supported by the sounds of gamelan is arranged around the

use of puppets which aims to deliver social and moral messages while the characters represented are most of the times overdrawn in terms of their portraits resembling their worth. A Performance is a cultural synthesis, whose mythology has been integrated with the local narrative, evolving in accordance with the political and social realities.

Discussion

The comparative inquiry into these performance traditions makes it clear that the basic storyline of Ramayana is more or less similar everywhere, but the way of depicting and performing it changes from culture to culture. In India, Ramlila acts as a festival and is regarded as a sacred cultural contribution to the people. In Indonesia, Wayang Kulit portrays a cultural mixture of Ramayana and Hindu as well as Nusantara cultural elements. In Thailand, Khon portrays the monarchy and the cultural values of the country while in the West, usually, it is used to address issues that are more current than the epic itself. Such differences point out the elasticity of Ramayana with its adaptation to various audiences while retaining the core ethical and philosophical concepts. This work also highlights the importance of these performative activities for the communities, as they help them to relate with their past. Further, the capacity of the Ramayana to cross the cultural space and be reframed in other contexts points to its relevance and its general appeal. The Ramayana with all its unchanging concepts attributes however can be termed flexible enough to be a symbol of cultural strength to tell stories that are common in history irrespective of when and where the events took place.

Conclusion

The Ramayana's path through different peoples and nations testifies to its significance as well as its story's evolution. This performance comparison, which is in the traditions of the East and West, could demonstrate how the epic worked its way into people's consciousness and history, enriching innovation. Repeated viewing of Ramlila's lively reenactments, on the other hand, is an expression of reverence that does not defy the sociocultural order. Wayang Kuli's complex shadow puppetry is a perfect exploration of Indonesia's ancestral tales and demonstrates the heterogeneity of Indonesian culture. The Thai Khon dance drama depicts hierarchal gods and benevolent kings in societal order, whereas Ketupu and the Vhs in western frameworks discuss the issues of gender and cultural identity in more current terms, thereby widening the storylines. The limitations of the focus of this investigation arise out of the techniques employed for analysis, which were four performance types, thus failing to capture the many expressions of the Ramayana in other cultures. The political and socio-economic factors that exist and motivate these

acts were also absent. Future studies might use diverse contextual background materials to project less known variations or distinct regional expressions, and intercultural perspectives could enhance knowledge of the Ramayana's Central Asian roots.

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