

# TRADITIONAL PUPPETRY, CHANGING TIMES: THE RAMAYANA IN INDONESIAN AND MALAY PUPPETRY

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**ABSTRACT:** The story of Rama has been known on Java and mainland Southeast Asia since before the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The strong divergences in West Java and Malaysian puppet versions from Valmiki show patterns of intensification and localization that make the narrative at home in the region. In the 1960s, the Ramayana was not seen as bearing overt religious or political implications for Muslim performers, and its trans-Southeast Asian popularity boosted its currency. In 1965 the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) held a pan-Southeast Asian Ramayana festival – spurring countries where this epic, preserved in puppetry/mask performance, was only modestly popular (e.g., Indonesia and Philippines) to increase attention to this central narrative for traditional Southeast Asian mainland puppetry. Since the 1990s, however, transnational religio-political forces, including the Hindu revival in India (which sees Rama as proto-ruler of a Hindu realm) and the Islamic revival in the Muslim world (which sees the story as *shirk*, worshipping a god other than Allah), may problematize the narrative in Indonesian and Malaysian puppetry.

**KEY-WORDS:** Ramayana, *wayang golek sunda*, *wayang kelantan*, Indonesian puppetry, Malay puppetry

**RIASSUNTO:** La storia di Rama era nota a Giava e nel Sud-Est asiatico continentale già prima del IX secolo. Le divergenze vigorose tra le versioni fantoccio di Giava Occidentale e quelle malesi di Valmiki mostrano modelli di intensificazione e localizzazione che rendono la narrazione specifica e particolare in ogni regione. Negli anni '60, il Ramayana non era associato a implicazioni religiose o politiche per gli artisti musulmani, e la sua popolarità nel Sud-Est asiatico ne aumentò il valore. Nel 1965 l'Associazione delle Nazioni del Sud-Est Asiatico (ASEAN) tenne un festival Ramayana pan-sudest asiatico, ispirando i paesi in cui questa epopea, preservata attraverso spettacoli di burattini e maschere, era solo modestamente popolare (ad esempio, Indonesia e Filippine) a coltivare l'interesse nella narrativa delle tradizionali marionette del continente sud-est asiatico. A partire da-

gli anni Novanta, tuttavia, le forze politico-religiose transnazionali, compresa la “rinascita” indù in India (che vede Rama come proto-sovrano di un regno indù), e la “rinascita” islamica nel mondo musulmano (che vede la storia come shirk, adorazione di un dio diverso da Allah), hanno imparato a problematizzare la narrativa delle marionette indonesiane e malesi.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Ramayana, *wayang golek sunda*, *wayang kelantan*, burattini indonesiani, burattini malesi

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«Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful»  
Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Simply reporting on *wayang* (Indonesian/Malay puppetry) allows me to be an equal opportunity offender, upsetting both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists. For example, in 1979 I presented at the East-West Center in Hawai'i, noting my Muslim teacher Dalang Ebeng Sunarya found *purwa* (Ramayana and Mahabharata) stories were the «best vehicles to teach Islamic values». An outraged Pakistani Muslim protested that Hindu iconography and heroes should be anathema «to any real Muslim». At a Ramayana conference at Northern Illinois University in 2005, I reported that the monkey general Hanuman, in Southeast Asian puppetry, is a suave lover and father of multiple offspring. A distraught Indian Hinduvtā adherent who recognized only the Valmiki version shouted that «to depict celibate Hanuman making love is blasphemy».

Even in response to my teaching at University of California Santa Cruz, a student from the Indian Student Association protested our 2014 dance drama entitled *The Ramayana, Of Monkeys and Men*. It was carefully advertised as representing Indonesian, Thai, and Malay Ramayana episodes (not Indian) and was created in collaboration with a Hindu-Balinese choreographer (Ida Oka Artha Negara) and a Muslim Sundanese music director (Undang Sumarna) from West Java. A student from the Indian-American student organization attacked the production based on only its title – he found it an insult to call Hanuman a monkey and insisted that only Indians had a right to tell this story. His position did not take into account that for a thousand years the Ramayana has been an

integral part of Southeast Asian culture and that since at least as far back as the colonial era, the tale has been produced in multiple versions world-wide.

My personal confrontations, while modest, reflect Hindu-Muslim tensions over the Ramayana that have exploded in the last decades as the political Hinduism embodied in India's Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party) has grown in India and the diaspora, and, during the same period, the Islamic revival (often espousing Sunni orthodoxy) has strengthened its hold in Muslim majority states. Indian treatment of the Valmiki text qua "Bible" has grown in India, creating strife. At the same time, strict readings of the Koran have grown stronger in Indonesia and Malaysia, where formerly Muslims had followed a moderate form of Islam.

A telling example of this new political climate involves the fate of A.K. Ramanujan's «Three Hundred Ramayanas». This essay used to be an assigned reading for a second-year honors course in the History Department at Delhi University.<sup>1</sup> In 2008, however, activists of the Hindu right's Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Prarishad (ABVP, All India Student Council) protested, claiming that the work insulted religion, since it pointed out the variability in what the group wants to interpret historical fact, Rama's story. Despite a university review committee's vote to keep the assignment, the reading was eliminated. The publisher, Oxford University Press (OUP), castigated for publishing, responded. «We feel concerned to learn that Ramanujan's essay has the potential to hurt Hindu religious sentiments and we thank you for pointing this out» – even as scholars around the world signed petitions supporting Ramanujan's freedom of speech (and the veracity of his assertion of multiple Ramayanas), and so Oxford stopped printing the essay, citing «minimal sales».<sup>2</sup>

Ramanujan's essay states what anyone who sees Southeast Asian puppet versions of the Ramayana knows – these are not Hindu fundamentalists' idea of Valmiki's Ramayana. As Ramanujan explains, «These various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or

<sup>1</sup> RAMAJUAN 1991. See also the article *There are 300 Versions of the Ramayana ABVP*, «The Hindu», 25 Oct. 2011, <thehindu.com/news/national/There-are-300-versions-of-the-Ramayana-ABVP/article13372075.ece>, accessed 30 Oct. 2022.

<sup>2</sup> RITO 2011.

common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context». <sup>3</sup> What is more, a written text of the Ramayana, be it Valmiki (7<sup>th</sup> C BCE-4<sup>th</sup> CE), Kamban (12<sup>th</sup> CE), or any number of other versions, is comparatively stable, but in puppet theater, the dialogue and narration are regularly improvised, allowing the performer to more easily retrofit plot points and characterizations to current understandings and issues. Oral composition using formulaic patterning in Indonesian/Malay puppetry means that the presentations morph in ways similar to those that Alfred Lord found with sung epics of eastern Europe. <sup>4</sup> The spine of the story is maintained; patterned speech, formulaic phrases and scenes, repeat; but the characterizations, details, interpretive features, and comic elements are ever malleable. Additionally, new episodes, in so far as they do not violate the core plot points, are easily interpolated. The major plot (usually called *pokok* [tree trunk]) is what we think of as “history.” These are points of the story not to be changed, accepted by all puppeteers, regardless of socio-religious background, for example, the spouse, children, and mode of death of a hero or antagonist [Figure 1].

Thus, Rama is always a handsome prince and incarnation of Wisnu (India, Vishnu) who wanders in the wilderness with his brother Laksmana and his wife Sita. <sup>5</sup> Sita is kidnapped by the



Fig. 1. *Wayang golek sunda* figures (l. to r.) of Rama, Sita, Laksmana. Photo: Kathy Foley.

<sup>3</sup> RAMANUJAN 1991: 46.

<sup>4</sup> LORD 1960.

<sup>5</sup> Here I use Indonesian and later Malaysian versions of character’s names. In each county names can also have variant spellings.

demon Rawana, prompting Rama to gather an army of monkeys led by Hanuman to win her back. When Sita is later cast out due to lingering suspicion about her virtue, she lives with her two sons in a forest hermitage until the arrival of Rama, who cannot defeat these youths and thereby realizes they are his sons. Other stories interpolated into the larger narrative are called *ranting* (branch) stories that grow from the trunk story but are newer inventions that still hone to the major plot points.

This paper will share brief insights into Indonesian and Malay Ramayana performances arguing that while the major incidents that puppeteers memorize correspond relatively closely to patterns found in Indian prototypes, Southeast Asian puppet masters have remolded the tale in the image and likeness of local culture. In particular, I will share selected examples of Indonesian and Malay stories (*lakon*), showing intensifying elements and localized understandings as puppeteers (*dalang*) have interpolated outside material to develop new episodes. The selected examples come from West Java's rod puppetry (*wayang golek*) and Malaysia's *wayang kelantan* shadow puppetry. Though these are only two genres out of a much larger array of Indo-Malay puppet forms with Ramayana repertoire, they give some sense of some local peculiarities.

## 1. INDONESIA: *WAYANG GOLEK*

My Indonesian example, Sundanese *wayang golek* rod puppetry, is a genre popular for the last two hundred years in the highlands of West Java. The form was created by puppeteers from the *pasisir* (literally 'shore' and referring to the North Coast of Java), who were trained in both *wayang kulit purwa* (leather shadow puppetry telling Ramayana and Mahabharata stories) and *wayang cepak* (rod puppetry telling a different repertoire). Most Sundanese puppeteers' ancestors migrated in the 19th century into the mountainous highlands of Sunda where Sundanese language and culture prevailed. Three-dimensional wooden doll figures from 20 to 90 cm. tall are played by a solo *dalang* (puppet master) accompanied by a gamelan orchestra and female singer on a banana log stage set on a raised outdoor platform for performances that last from about 9 pm to 3:30 am. A play is usually presented in conjunction with a circumcision, wedding, or other ceremonial event.

Popular performers can attract 500-3000 viewers who watch for free while the event is hosted by the sponsor holding the ceremony.<sup>6</sup>

On Java, the Ramayana was historically significant – consider the 8<sup>th</sup> century Ramayana depictions in Prambanan Temple reliefs, the 9<sup>th</sup> century *Ramayana Kakawin* (a court poem in Kawi [Old Javanese] verse),<sup>7</sup> and even the naming of the royal city of Yogyakarta, in Central Java, after Rama’s realm, Ayodya. The aura of divine kingship was a feature all Southeast Asian Hindu-Buddhist realms utilized as royal propaganda, and Rama as seventh avatar of the preserver god Wisnu was routinely appropriated by local leaders, since he endowed the head of state with a sense of sacred Wisnu power. The concept of religiously tied kingship endured with Islamization. The major Javanese monarchs, the Sultan of Yogyakarta or the Susuhunan of Surakarta, were thereafter seen not as a reincarnation of a Hindu deity, but as the shadow of Allah on earth. In Southeast Asia, Rama’s story was useful for leaders advertising regal potency: the tale was promoted alike by Balinese Hindus; by Thai, Khmer, Lao, and Burmese Buddhists (who see in Rama a *jataka*, previous life of the Buddha); and by Indonesian and Malay Muslims.

Despite respect for the story, the Ramayana was less central than the Mahabharata to Java’s puppet repertoire in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century because the reality of Javanese kingdoms made the latter epic a better metaphor of how the world worked. The Mahabharata’s tale of inter-family squabbling, with the five heroic Pandawa brothers opposing their hundred conniving Kurawa cousins, was closer to the inter-family rivalries of the Javanese royal clans in the Dutch colonial era. Accordingly, the Mahabharata dominated the repertoire. However, with the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Ramayana, as the favored repertoire in Mainland Southeast Asia puppetry/dance (especially Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos), gained audience share in Indonesian puppetry and dance drama, as it became a convenient common denominator of pan-Southeast Asian heritage events.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For more on *wayang golek* and performing arts in Sunda (West Java), see ANDRIEU 2014; FOLEY 1979; FOLEY - JIT 1997; NALAN 2014; SOPANDI 1997; and WEINTRAUB 2004.

<sup>7</sup> See ROBSON 2015.

<sup>8</sup> See SEDANA - FOLEY 2020 for more on growth of the Ramayana popularity in Indonesia.

While there are differences among puppeteers' versions, I give as examples two stories from Sundanese *wayang golek* popular in Bandung, West Java, when I studied the art in the 1970s. The first, *Cupu Manik Astagina* ('Eight-sided Diamond Case'), which I learned from Dalang Otong Rasta.<sup>9</sup> This is a *pokok* (trunk or "tree" story) and tells of the birth of Hanuman which is considered a prequel to the Ramayana proper. The tale is usually thought of as part of the *Arjuna Sastra Babu* ('Arjuna of a Thousand Arms') Cycle, also called *Babad Lokapala* ('Chronicle of Lokapala'). It deals with events like the birth of Rawana and the origin of the monkeys. The second tale, *Wahyu Makuta Rama* ('Power of Rama's Crown'), I learned from Dalang Nandang Barmaya. It is based on a *ranting* ('branch') story and was, in turn, borrowed from Javanese *wayang kulit* shadow puppetry.<sup>10</sup> The story shows how Ramayana heroes have been imaginatively reincarnated in the more popular Mahabharata figures and even linked with historical Javanese kings. *Wahyu Makuta Rama* was used as the core training module for would-be puppeteers (*dalang*) at the High School of Performing arts (Sekolah Menengah Karawitan Indonesia) in Bandung in 1978-1979. It was part of a wave of *wahyu* (divine power) stories, especially popular in the post-WWII period, since such tales explore righteous self-rule, something which the young nation was working toward after centuries of colonial subjugation. The power of Rama's crown can be conceived of as a tale of good governance: the just leader is both good in himself but can also – via meditation and right action – tap into sacred justice, represented by Rama as Wisnu, the divine preserver. During my primary research on *wayang golek* in the 1970s, I rarely saw a *pokok* Ramayana presentation, but I often saw such *ranting* stories, where, as in *The Power of Rama's Crown*, the spirit of the demon Rawana might possess an ogre king who was stealing women, or Rama might, as in *Wahyu Makuta Rama*, play a passing role. The bad kings were metaphors of the corruption of the Suharto regime and the power of Rama was a trope of needed reform.

<sup>9</sup> RASTA 1979.

<sup>10</sup> BARMAYA 1978.



1.1. *Trunk Story: “Eight-sided Diamond Case”*

The *Eight-sided Diamond Case* shows Anjani, daughter of the hermit Gautama, conceiving a monkey child via semi-immaculate conception. It also prefigures her two monkey brothers Subali and Sugiwa as figures of adharmademon-allied vs. dharmadharma/Rama-allied, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

Indradi, a heavenly *bidadari* (goddess), loves Surya, the sun God. But she is given as wife to the hermit Resi Gautama by the high god Siwa as a reward for Gautama’s powerful meditation. She has a love token received from Surya (the eponymous Eight-sided Diamond Case). When Indradi gives it to her daughter Anjani as a plaything, this rouses the envy of Anjani’s two brothers (Subali and Sugiwa). Resi Gautama, discovering the source of the case, curses his wife to turn to stone where she will wait on the South Sea shore until her grandson Hanuman will release her as his army heads to Alengka to save Lady Sita.

Gotama then curses his bickering children, wishing that their «outward shape [*lahir*] reflect their inward soul [*batin*]». He flings the case to the Himalaya. The children run after it as it falls and becomes Lake Nirmala where all who enter are transformed so that their outward form reflects their inward soul. Subali and Sugiwa dive in and become simians. Anjani, afraid of water, puts only her hands and face in the lake and is therefore only part monkey [Figure 2].



Fig. 2: *Wayang golek sunda* figures (l. to r.) of Subali and Sugiwa and Anjani transformed into monkeys in *Eight-sided Diamond Case*. Photo: Kathy Foley.

<sup>11</sup> See HERBERT - RAHARDJO 2002 for a more extensive discussion.



To remedy the situation, the remorseful children do a *tapa* ('meditation'). Subali does the meditation of a bat, hanging upside down in a tree all day and hunting for prey only by night. He gains great magical power (which he then unfortunately teaches to the demon king Rawana, making the demon almost invincible). Sugiwa does the meditation of a deer, eating only grass and beginning as a vegetarian the righteous path that will align him with Rama/Wisnu in the war against Rawana. Anjani undertakes the meditation of a frog, crouching nude in water, eating only what floats into her mouth. When the high god Batara Guru (Siwa/Shiva) hears of the beauty of meditating Anjani, he does a fly-by. Aroused by the vision of the maid, Batara Guru ejaculates into the lake. His semen floats into unsuspecting Anjani's mouth, miraculously begetting Hanuman. This clever monkey child immediately on being born demands of his bewildered mother his father's name. Anjani claims no one knows, except perhaps the high god who knows all. Infant Hanuman storms heaven to ask Batara Guru the name of his father, and no force can defeat this monkey boy. So Batara Guru acknowledges Hanuman as his son. Batara Guru performs a purification ceremony (*ruwatan*, literally, 'make safe') for Anjani by enacting a puppet show. As a result of this puppet show within a puppet show, her outward form (*labir*) again changes to reflect the full beauty of her now purified inward soul (*batin*). The other gods produce monkey offspring so that Hanuman has friends with whom to monkey around and later serve Rama.

### 1.2. Branch Story: "Power of Rama's Crown"

*Wahyu Makuta Rama* has the Mahabharata's divided family of Kurawas and Pandawas competing for the blessing/magical power (*wahyu*) of Rama's Crown, since whoever gains this will rule justly and long. The Kurawa king, Suyudana, sends his supporter Karna, half-sibling of the Pandawa, to win the *wahyu*. At the same time, Arjuna, third brother of the five Pandawa heroes and half-brother of Karna, likewise seeks it. The two parties converge at Hermitage Swelagiri. An old monkey (in reality, Hanuman) protects the hermit Kesaswidi ('Love', in reality Wisnu/Rama/Kresna) against Karna's attack. Kesaswidi then teaches Arjuna the *astabrata* (eight principles of divine kingship) which are the 'Crown'

and promises that Arjuna's grandson Parikesit will carry this power to Java and Rama will incarnate in him and his descendants. Hanuman goes to Kendalisodo (temple site in Java) where he will keep watch over the soul of Rawana under the mountain. Hanuman will only enter heaven at the time of the Jaya Baya (Javanese king of Kediri c. 1135-1159), who is the archetype of Java's just king (*ratu adil*) and said to be both a great-great-grandson of Parikesit and ancestor of the historical Javanese kings.

After other complicated interactions between Kurawa-Pandawa and selected Ramayana figures, the story ends. The spirits of the Ramayana era then incarnate in the Pandawa adherents: Rama enters Kresna (the Pandawa's cousin-advisor); Laksmana (Rama's brother), enters Arjuna; Sita enters Subadra (Arjuna's wife); and Kumbakara (noble giant and brother of Rawana) enters Bima (the large-bodied Pandawa hero and brother of Arjuna). Rama will later fully incarnate in Parikesit and, presumably, all the righteous Javanese rulers in the ages to come. Hanuman remains himself, but as a guardian figure in Java. Rawana (or at least his soul) is both the volcanic earth and the potential political divisiveness of the island. Only good rulers and good guardians can keep Rawana's chaos in check.

### 1.3. *Discussion*

Elements of intensification and localization in the *Eight-sided Diamond Case* story include making Hanuman the secret son of the high god of the universe (Batara Guru/Siwa) and Anjani Siwa's acknowledged wife. Bayu, the wind god, is the father of Hanuman in most Indian versions, but in *wayang golek*'s hierarchy, Bayu is below Siwa, so Hanuman gains status when Bayu merely teaches him fighting skills. Anjani advances from her first appearance as a spoiled brat fighting with siblings over material things (the Eight-sided Diamond Case), to mother of a great hero (Hanuman), then consort of the top god (Batara Guru). She makes this ascent by fully developing her *batin* ('spirit') and embracing her miraculously-born child despite his monkey form – as she says, «A child is

a child, whether he be handsome or plain, man or monkey. Come to my arms my beloved son».<sup>12</sup>

Anjani's siblings' success is more tempered: Sugiwa's deer meditation only makes him eligible for loyal service to Rama. Subali, while powerful in his bat meditation (gaining the *panca sona* that will allow one to rise from the dead if his body touches the earth), turns his power toward injustice providing it to Rawana and giving Rawana the ability to escape death unless he is killed midair. Rama will need to circumvent Rawana's touching the ground in defeating the demon king.

The *ruwatan* of Anjani from monkey to wife of the god is enacted as a play within the play. This is, likewise, a local touch, and here Batara Guru/Siwa himself performs this *wayang* within a *wayang*. The doll puppet of Batara Guru uses the *kayon* (tree of life puppet) to represent a shadow puppet screen. This flat leather figure connotes the cosmos and all its contents which the divine *dalang* (God) animates. The healing power and spiritual authority of the divine that accrue to a puppet master are represented in this scene: *dalang* and Batara Guru/Siwa are, through their ability to manipulate figures and represent truth, powerful. The mantras used in this scene are the same as in an actual *ruwatan* (healing performance done via puppet show, telling a story of Kala, God of Time, another son of Siwa born, similarly to Hanuman, from Batara Guru's premature ejaculation into a watery sea). During performance of the play within the play that Anjani watches, words of the healing formulae for *ruwatan* are chanted while musicians play the sacred tune *kidung*.<sup>13</sup> While in *Eight-sided Diamond Case* the healing is fictive, the narrative highlights the local practice of healing performances by hearing the mantra of a *dalang*'s show. A *ruwatan* is a ceremony that is required for those born in certain circumstances (e.g. an only child or five children of the same sex), who have broken certain tabus (e.g. breaking a grinding stone), or who are starting a new endeavor (e.g. planting land not previously cultivated or opening a new factory). Although the tale of the *Eight-sided Diamond Case* relates to Indian versions of Hanuman's birth, the story is localized by the god cited as parent (Siwa not Bayu), the pattern of powerful son created via divine ejacula-

<sup>12</sup> RASTA 1979.

<sup>13</sup> See SUNARYA - GIRI HARJA - FOLEY 2001 for more on *ruwatan* in West Java.

tion who storm heaven to find his father (Hanuman/Kala), and the idea that Anjani can, through spiritual progress, move from cursed monkey to a home in heaven. Moreover, this tale is linked to the local practice of using puppet shows to “heal” someone who needs purification.

*Wahyu Makuta Rama*, by contrast, gives a sense of the complexity with which Javanese puppeteers have interwoven the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and linked the heroes of both epics to semi-historical Java. This branch story is inset into the “facts” of the trunk story of both the Ramayana and Mahabharata by matching the character types (Kresna is to Rama, as Arjuna is to Lakshmana, as Bhima is to Kumbakarna, as Sumbadra is to Sita). The overlay of one major epic on the next allows for a kind of intensification of the themes. The Pandawa’s kingdom becomes the new Ayodya (Rama’s capital), while the Kurawa’s Astina is paired with Rawana’s Lengka (a demon realm). At the end of the tale, localization sends the descendant of Arjuna, Parikesit, to Java to embody Wisnu power there. At the same time, Hanuman, the hermit-protector, transfers to Java to meditate at a Hindu temple complex on a semi-dormant volcano, capping Rawana’s endless chaotic potential. The power of Rama’s Crown as *wahyu*, the just rule of *astabrata*, is gifted to Java’s historic and future leaders.

I have not discussed many other details which distinguish the West Java version of the Ramayana. For example, intensity is added in that Sita is the daughter of Rawana by his wife Manondari (making his pursuit of Sita incestuous): but he does not realize she is the infant he ordered set upon the waves in a basket when his soothsayer-sibling, Wibiksana, predicted the child would bring him disaster. Nor have I discussed Hanuman as romancer of the daughter of Wibiksana, Trijata, and how she gives birth to Hanuman Trigangga who after the death of Rawana will be part of the leadership of Alengka.<sup>14</sup> Male celibacy has no place in the Javanese cultural paradigm: Hanuman needs wives and offspring to be a true Southeast Asian hero, and so he gets them. Such sons also allows for interesting additional episodes that puppeteers invent. Hanuman can meet Hanuman Trigangga in battle without knowing that the youth is his child and then wonder why this whippersnapper cannot be beat. This pattern – the unknown son who is recognized

<sup>14</sup> Hanuman has another son Purwaganti by the daughter of a sage. Purwaganti primarily appears in Mahabharata tales.

when the father cannot subdue the youth – is, of course, borrowed from Rama’s realization late in the Ramayana trunk story that Kusa and Lawa, who are “equal in power” to Rama are his offspring. Many more examples of changes could be given. However, the two story samples outlined above show how the Indonesian puppet masters have both respected the broad outline of the Ramayana story and yet playfully tweaked the narrative for local consumption.

## 2. MALAYSIA: *WAYANG KELANTAN*

*Wayang kelantan* uses figures made of buffalo hide from 30 to 120 cm. high, carved and incised. They are now often semi-translucent, allowing the color to be seen through the screen. Performers present shows outdoors on a purposely built, enclosed, raised stage (*pangung*) made of wood, bamboo, and thatch. The solo *dalang* is accompanied by a small gong-chime and drum ensemble. Performances are today no longer paid for by a sponsor for a family celebration; rather, tickets are sold for entrance to an enclosed grassy area where viewers lounge as they watch the show [Figure 3].



Fig. 3. *Wayang kelantan* figures r. To l. Sri Laksmana, Hanuman Kera Putih, and Sri Rama, face Lakjuna (son of Rama), Siti Dewi, and Lat Palembang (son of Rama). Photo: Kathy Foley.

The *dalangs* of the Tumpat area, Kelantan, Malaysia who I interviewed in 2014 claimed the real history of *wayang kelantan* had yet to be written, while recognizing that researchers have dealt with the genre's repertoire, music, visual aspects, and ethnological features.<sup>15</sup> My account will be largely based on the interviews I did with the puppeteer Rahim bin Hamzah (son of national artist Dalang Hamzah bin Awang) and the musician/dalang Mat Abang, as well as my own viewing of shows. I have also used story materials from Dain bin Othman (hereafter Pak Daim), who trained in the 1970s and, after retirement from his career in education, has written about what he learned during his *wayang* training. I also took information from Amin Sweeney's 1972 book which includes information from oral interviews with over twenty *dalang* in the late 1960s. These sources have informed my understanding of the trunk (*pokok*) story of the Ramayana which is called *Cherita Maharaja Wana* (The Story of Rawana). The tantric features of the story's antagonist have made Rawana more interesting and important than Rama in the Malay tale and the opening mantra of the Malay puppet play points to its hybrid roots:

With Malay annals, Thai theatre, Javanese stories  
By the original puppeteer, passed  
Within the *dalang* lineage  
Of the first *dalang* Mak Erak<sup>16</sup>

The puppeteers of Tumpat that I interviewed hold that the first *dalang* was a Thai-Chinese woman Mak Erak from Kampung Kebakat who went to Java and studied *wayang*, then brought a puppet chest (*kotak*) back to perform. Enroute to Kelantan the winds rose and the ship floundered, so Mak Erak took out the god-clown puppet (Java's Semar / Kelantan's Pak Dogel). She held up the figure to the wind and it became her sail, bringing her home to the Kota Baru area, where she taught first her husband and later others the art of *wayang kelantan* (also called *wayang siam*). Pak Daim, as the mantra above continues,

<sup>15</sup> For repertoire see and CUISINIER 1957, SWEENEY 1972 and OTHMAN 2011 (Pak Daim); music, MATUSKY 1997; ethnography, WRIGHT 1980; theatre, LIM 2011, OSNES 2010 and YOUSOF 1992, 1997, 2004a and 2004b, YOUSEF - KHOR 2017; politics, CONDEE 2015 and FOLEY 2015; and for manuscript antecedents see SHELLABEAR 1916 and ZIESENIS 1963.

<sup>16</sup> OTHMAN 2011: 17.



then lists twelve generations of puppeteers between Mak Erak and himself. This *sisilab/* teaching line might imply a history of about 200 years.

However, rather than a single line of descent/learning, the flow around the gulf of Thailand has always been circular with people, stories, and cultural influences constantly flowing down from what is now southern Thailand, and up from Indonesia (and over as far as Cambodia). As a result, Malaysia's style of figures and stories is an amalgam of Thai, Javanese, and local features. Thai traits are found in figure iconography, for example, the Thai-style *chada* (crown headdress) of noble figures like Rama or Maharaja Wana, a pattern reportedly borrowed from the Thai *nang talung* shadow puppetry in the early 20th century. Stories (for example the episode of the Fish-tailed Princess, Putri Ikan, who is a daughter or granddaughter of Maharaja Wana and with whom Hanuman begets Hanuman Ikan, literally 'Fish-tail Hanuman') again shows Thai impact – this is the popular Thai Sovanna Macha with her son Machanu. The trunk plot in the Malaysian narrative is probably closest to the Thai *Ramakien* (Ramayana), which Thai Buddhists see as a *jataka* (previous life of the Buddha). Rama is an avatar of the Buddha and the *Ramakien* is a tale that Thai monarchs, especially of the Chakri dynasty from the 18th century to the present, have long supported.<sup>17</sup> Major Thai versions of the Ramayana were written by various Thai monarchs, especially Rama I (1726-1809) and Rama II (1766-1824). Kelantan, which shares a border and many cultural features with Thailand, has gotten story material from the Thai. Javanese influences, too, are apparent in a number of characters (for example, Maharaja's Wana son Indrajit, who wears the "shrimp tail" headdress of many Javanese *wayang* figures). Stories related to Java like that of Sita Dewi [Sita, also Siti Dewi], born as the daughter of Maharaja Wana and his wife Mandudaki, abound.<sup>18</sup>

Here I will only give two tales that will be compared with the Sundanese stories discussed earlier. The trunk story is *Birth of Hanuman* (*Hanuman Labir*) in the Malay version. My branch episode is *Rama Distraught* (*Rama Bingung*). The latter shows again

<sup>17</sup> REYNOLDS 1991.

<sup>18</sup> Mandudaki was supposedly created from the sweat of Manondari (stepmother of Rama). Maharaja Wana supposedly attacked Rama's father kingdom and demanded Manondari as wife. Manondari then tricked the Rawana character by making a twin (Mandudaki) from her sweat to give Maharaja Wana as wife. There are even versions where Rama's father, Sultan Sirat Mahraja, goes secretly to Lengka and impregnates Mandudaki, which of course would make Sita a half-sister to Rama!

mixing and matching of one narrative repertoire with another, but here the adaptation is from a non-Indian narrative (the story of Panji, a lover-prince of East Java).

### 2.1. *Trunk Story: "Birth of Hanuman"*

In *Birth of Hanuman*, the misguided ejaculation that births Hanuman is not credited to Siwa (nor Bayu, the wind god), but rather to Rama himself. This Malaysian *pokok* (trunk) version comes from Dain Bin Othman, Pak Daim. After Sri Rama (with the help of Laksmana) wins Sita Dewi's hand by stringing the bow and shooting an arrow through multiple trees at Wat Tujuh Kedi Beremas (Temple of Seven Gold Towers), the couple is heading to Rama's father's (Sultan Sirat Mahraja's) realm, the Kingdom of Java:

Sri Rama drank water cursed by Rawana turning both of them [Sri Rama and Sita/Siti Dewi] into monkeys . . . Sita Dewi became pregnant. In an effort to restore Sri Rama and Sita Dewi to become human again Laksmana's arrow hits a monkey [Sita Dewi] resulting in a miscarriage. The fetus of Sita Dewi is given to Tuan Puteri Maya Angin, the daughter of Maharesi Burung Jerijit.<sup>19</sup>

Hanuman Kera Putih Hulubalang (Hanuman the White Monkey Warrior) trains in mysticism with Dewa Sinar Matahari (God of the Sun), gaining powers and sparkling garb. He asks the name of his father. When the God of the Sun acknowledges his parent is none other than Sri Rama, Hanuman seeks his missing father and finds him in the forest searching for Sita Dewi. Rama tries to avoid acknowledging this embarrassing monkey child, but is convinced by Hanuman's strength that he must be his offspring. Rama finally, recognizes Hanuman as son, eating together off the same banana leaf. Enlisted as Sri Rama's general, Hanuman leaps the ocean to seek his mother, Sita Dewi. As he enters the garden of the Asoka tree, Sita Dewi's breasts drip milk, so she recognizes that this marvel-

<sup>19</sup> OTHMAN 2011: 142. Maya Angin is the equivalent of Anjani and Maharesi Burung Jerijit takes the role of the Resi Gotama character in the Sundanese tale discussed above.

ous monkey is her own lost fetus. Rama's vexed relationship with his son and continual reprimanding of Hanuman, even temporarily banishing him, is often on display.

### 2.2. *Branch Story: "Rama Distraught"*

Next consider this Kelantan *ranting*/branch tale reported by Sweeney. After Sita Dewi is saved from Maharaja Wana, Sri Rama's father will not let her live with Sri Rama, saying they must remarry. Sita Dewi runs away and takes the name of Mek Hutan (Forest Lady) in a hermitage. Rama comes hunting and makes love to Mek Hutan without recognizing that she is Sita Dewi. Rama's stepmother, hearing of this liaison, summons Mek Hutan/Sita Dewi to the palace and has her killed. The body is placed on a raft of flowers and sent down the river. Rama finds the exquisite corpse and tries to kill himself, but then retreats to the hermitage to take up meditation. Hanuman carries the corpse of Sita Dewi to Maha Babu Senam/Wibisana who calls Batara Kala (God of Time, a son of Siwa) from heaven. Kala brings milk from the breast of a virgin nymph to revive Sita Dewi. The episode ends as Rama and Sita Dewi remarry.

### 2.3. *Discussion*

The birth of Hanuman as the child of Sri Rama and Sita Dewi, as in the Indonesian case, elevates the monkey child, but at the same time also humanizes his parents who need Laksmana's help in covering up an embarrassing pregnancy. Laksmana lassos the errant pair (Rama and Sita in their monkey form) to catch them. Then Laksmana extracts the child from Sita Dewi's belly and safeguards him in a surrogate mother (Maya Angin). Coming of age, Hanuman seeks his missing parents as avidly as any modern adopted child using DNA evidence. The choice to make Hanuman the son of Rama is, as in the *wayang golek* version, a promotion that heightens the blood line of this monkey hero. Of course, Rama and Sita, as neglectful caregivers to their monkey son, come off (as does Batara Guru in the *wayang golek* Hanuman birth story) as careless parents.

Behind the branch story of *Rama Distraught*, as Sweeney points out, we find the popular Panji story of the commoner-maid Ken Tambulan/*Anggraeni* loved by Prince Panji. Ramayana characters are matched to Panji figures. Sita Dewi has taken the role of Ken Tambulan, a forest girl who catches the eye of Prince Panji of Kuripan while he is out hunting. In the Panji tale, Ken Tambulan is ordered murdered by the prince's royal parents since the girl is not seen as of sufficient rank for a royal spouse. The Panji role is taken here by Sri Rama. The evil stepmother represented in the Panji tale (the consort Queen of Kuripan) is now Manondari, Rama's stepmother. Other characters, like Hanuman and Maha Babu Senam/Wibiksana, are used as is appropriate to their personality from the Ramayana trunk tale, but, as Sweeney points out, «characters from *Cerita MW* [Story of Maharaja Wana], although not corresponding to any character in the Panji tale, may be introduced into the *ranting* [branch] tale to play parts in keeping with their characters in . . . the *Cherita Maharaja Wana*». <sup>20</sup> Hanuman and Maha Babu Senam create the happy ending for the branch tale by reviving the dead female and showing she is actually Sita Dewi. The floating corpse motif, a sequence where Rama sees what he thinks is dead Sita floating on the water, comes from the Thai tale of Benyaki (*The Floating Princess*) who is in *wayang kelantan* is called Lekasari. <sup>21</sup>

Sweeney suggests that interweaving of different motifs, especially from the Panji story, may have affected the overall interpretation of Rama in Kelantan – he is seen as a profligate lover in Malaysia. Sweeney quotes a noted *dalang* of the last generation, Awang Lah, as saying, «Sri Rama can never resist a woman». <sup>22</sup> Indeed, the Panji story is more a romance than a war epic: young people fall in love, change sex, lose each other temporarily, but usually find their way to a happy ending. The Panji story in Kelantan was the

<sup>20</sup> SWEENEY 1972: 266. Both Maha Babu Senam and Hanuman are “fixers” in the Malay Ramayana and they both serve that function in this Ken Tambulan-Panji adaptation.

<sup>21</sup> The “Floating Princess” episode is shared between Thailand and Malaysia where the Thai Benyaki/Malay Lekasari is the daughter of the Wibiksana character (Thai Pibhek/Malay Maha Babu Senam). This demon daughter is sent by the Rawana character (Thai Totkasan/Malay Maharaja Wana) to Rama's camp to make Rama believe Sita is dead. Seeing the disguised demoness floating on the water, Rama despairs. But Hanuman exposes the ruse and then seduces the girl resulting in a son (Thai Asurapat/Malay Hanuman Bongsu). In the Indonesian version, this demoness daughter of Wibiksana and spouse of Hanoman is called Trijata. In the Malaysian version, however, Trijata is the wife of the Wibiksana character and the mother of Lekasari. I have not encountered the “floating princess” episode in Indonesia.

<sup>22</sup> SWEENEY 1972: 266.

repertoire of palace *dalang* of a form called *wayang melayu* and this tale was probably borrowed from that now defunct repertoire and retrofitted to the Ramayana characters of *wayang kelantan*.

Other differences from India in the Kelantanese episodes abound. Laksmana as a celibate makes no sense in Malay society, so he is seen as a homoerotic ladyboy. Hanuman, to be a muscular Malay hero, must have multiple lady lovers and children and therefore we get Hanuman Ikan (by Puteri Ikan, the mermaid granddaughter of Maharaja Wana) and Hanuman Bongsu (by Maha Babu Senam's daughter Lekasari). Sri Rama, himself, is seldom true to Sita Dewi. When Maharaja Wana's sister, Sammanakha (India's Sarpakanaka), comes seeking Sri Rama as a husband, he pampers the demoness as his second wife, much to Laksmana's and Sita Dewi's consternation. Domestic spats of co-wives are a motif common in Muslim Malay literature and life, and so the alteration makes for appealing local drama. Rama is always loath to recognize Hanuman. In Malaysia, Laksmana, Hanuman, and Maha Babu Senam are the reliable problem solvers, while Sri Rama is often the petulant playboy who must be helped by the three. Sri Rama is far from the kingly ideal of Valmiki.

Since the 1980s, the concomitant growth of the Islamic revival in the Muslim world and India's *Bharatiya Janata Party's* Hindutva-styled politics has helped the Ramayana epic become contested ground even beyond India's borders. Malays and Indonesians have felt the impact of religious conservatism as political Islam has grown in life and politics. In the early 1990s, the Pan Malay Islamic Party (PAS) came to power in Kelantan. Seeing animist elements in the opening of *wayang kelantan* plays, healing uses of *wayang* such as *ruwatan*, Thai *chada* crowns associated with Buddhist kings on Rama, and other such features, PAS banned *wayang kelantan* along with allied arts. The Muslim teacher and important cleric Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, as chief minister, sought to cleanse Kelantanese culture of features he considered "un-Islamic". *Wayang*, therefore, became *haram* ('forbidden'). Whereas Sweeney found there were 300 *dalang* in the 1970s, the practice of *wayang kelantan* is in the hands of a handful of practicing puppeteers today. Dalang Nik Mat Suara Mas (Hashim Ludin, 1952- 2018) was the one most active when I was researching in 2014. He had, like others, largely abandoned the Ramayana repertoire. Trained partially in Southern Thailand, he followed the new model emphasizing come-

dy, music, and new stories rather than Rama tales. Dalang Eyo Hok Seng (1955- ), as a Chinese Buddhist, is free from some of the constraints imposed on Muslim performers, but audiences are still dwindling. The youngest regularly practicing puppeteers are over fifty and full performances are few, though some younger would be *dalang* struggle to preserve the art. The near demise of *wayang kelantan* and other so-called “un-Islamic” arts in Kelantan is an extreme case, but even in Indonesia where very tolerant Islam was the norm in the 1970s, calls for more sharia-compliant Islam impact the arts in general and the Ramayana in particular.

Throughout Southeast Asia, the Ramayana was once seen as a shared narrative among Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists and was adapted according to the preferences of each group. Currently, it probably holds full ground only in Thailand, due to its association with the Chakri lineage in royal supported arts, and in Bali, the one Hindu majority site in Indonesia. But even in Bali, which had long preserved its own strain of Hinduism, one also sees a tendency to turn to India as an authority today, sometimes to the detriment of local traditions, amending the repertoire.

The fight over Babri Masjid, a Mughal era mosque supposedly built on the site where Rama was born, has long existed as a bone of contention between Indian Hindus and Muslim. In 1992, Hindus, egged on by BKJ, tore down the mosque, leading to riots across India where thousands, both Muslim and Hindu, died. The need of the Hindu right for a historical Rama to unite a political voting block remains strong in India and affects the Indian diasporas, both Muslim and Hindu, in making the tale today more sectarian than in eras past. Today, the Ramayana can land the mild-mannered performer of puppet theatre in a nest of hornets since, as Mridula Mukherjee at the Center for Historical Studies at Jawarlal Nehru University notes, «If people believe there is no one original *Ramayan* then how can they say that Ram was a historical figure, born on such and such a date. ...it undermines the Hindutva brigade’s agenda for the last 20 years».<sup>23</sup>

The stories we find in Indonesian and Malaysian Ramayanas, while roughly following the same incidents as Valmiki, have been interpreted quite differently in Southeast Asia. These Southeast Asian traditions, of course, have been affected by the many Indi-

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in RITO 2011.



an variations of the Ramayana of Jains, Tamil Hindus, Thai Buddhists, Muslim syncretists, and others. But now, enmeshed in international politics, Muslim *ulama* (clerics) are prone to see Rama as being worshipped when the tale is told. In the current age as Valmiki is touted by the Hinduvta and Wahabi proscriptions on iconography grow in Southeast Asia, conservative Muslims label the Ramayana tale as *shirk* (worshipping another god than Allah). The Ramayana is, as Ramanujan states, a huge well of narrative that South-east Asians have been dipping into it for their own cultural needs for at least a thousand years, but now politics are limiting who taps this source. In Malaysia, William Condee asks of *wayang kelantan*:

So what is the future...? Will it be dead in five to ten years as many have predicted? My impression is that the wayang of the past, with its rituals, may not survive. But if, along with some dalang, one views wayang more expansively, wayang siam may endure.<sup>24</sup>

Even in Indonesia, where the *wayang* tradition is much stronger, fundamentalist attacks on *wayang* have begun. Statues of the god-clown Semar and other *wayang* characters were burned by Muslim fundamentalists in Purwakarta, West Java, in 2011. There have also been instances of religious vigilantes breaking up *wayang* performance in villages. In a 2022 video, Makassar-born Ustadz Khalid Basalamamah, a popular Islamic teacher, advised a follower to burn their *wayang* figures since puppetry was not compliant with Islam.<sup>25</sup> In response, Dalang Ki Warseno (Hardiodarsono) Slenk staged a performance at a moderate Islamic School (Ora Aji in Yogyakarta) in which a puppet he had built resembling this Islamic teacher Ustadz Khalid was beaten and burnt. Fundamentalists then flooded social media with attacks on the puppet master. *Dalangs* throughout Indonesia then turned to Instagram and YouTube to protect their art.<sup>26</sup> Though the Indonesian case is nowhere near as extreme as that of Malaysia, the impacts and controversies are still real.

<sup>24</sup> CONDEE 2015: 34.

<sup>25</sup> See the article *Banyumas Dalang Will Police Khalid Basalamah About Haram Puppet Lecture*, in «World Today News», <<https://www.world-today-news.com/banyumas-dalang-will-police-khalid-basalamah-about-haram-puppet-lecture/>>, accessed 5 April 2022.

<sup>26</sup> See FOLEY 2019 and FOLEY forthcoming.

In this essay I have noted some of the features of the Ramayana in Indonesian and Malay puppetry versions, showing localizations and the interweaving of outside narrative sources like the Mahabharata or Panji stories with Rama episodes. I have also pointed out that the divisiveness that contemporary religious politics brings is not helping the Ramayana continue as a source story. *Dalangs* seek a renewal of the *wahyu*, that Power of Rama's Crown, to ensure the future of the art. A guardian like Hanuman keeping watch at Kendalisodo is once again needed in a world in which the spirit of Rawana rumbles from under the mountain.

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