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Report: Indonesian Ramayana Festival at Prambanan (2012)

I Nyoman Sedana and Kathy Foley

In Indonesia, the Ramayana is performed in multiple theatre genres spanning puppetry, and masked and unmasked dance drama. Still performed throughout much of Indonesia, these forms function as both ritual and secular entertainments, ones distinguished by characteristically Indonesian elements of song, gamelan music, dramatic narration, costuming (including masks and headdresses), and stylized dance and movement. Historically, the Indonesian theatre genre known as wayang wong (dance drama) in particular may have links to the traditional style of Ramlila performed in India. Even today wayang wong has ritual functions in Hindu Bali, and in Muslim Java, where it was once integral to court rituals. However, Indonesian theatre genres are quite distant from Indian ones like Ramlila, and thoroughly reflect Indonesian arts and sociocultural concerns. After a historic pan-Southeast Asian Ramayana festival in Yogyakarta in 1961, Ramayana-themed sendratari (dance drama) became more popular in Indonesia, a predominantly Muslim country with a fondness for the Mahabharata. One performance at the 1961 festival had such an impact, it has continued to be staged at the ninth-century Prambanan temple complex in Central Java up to the present. This report discusses the 2012 National Ramayana Festival held at Prambanan to commemorate half a century of Ramayana performances there. It is intended to give insight into the history of shared ideas and aesthetics in Ramayana-themed performance in Indonesia and India, as well as some of the obvious differences between them.

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In this report, we detail the content and significance of the Festival Ramayana Nusantara (National Ramayana Festival), which took place on 12–15 October 2012, at the historic ninth-century Prambanan temple complex, a UNESCO World-Heritage site near Yogyakarta in Central Java. Although the Mahabharata is generally more popular than the Ramayana in Indonesia, many Ramayana-themed performances and festivals spanning dance, theatre, music, ritual, and puppetry, still transpire on a regular basis all across the country. We chose to highlight this festival because it clearly demonstrated the range of *sendratari* (dance drama) that is used to tell the story of the Indonesian Ramayana, while showcasing the skills and creativity of the artists working in this form, all across Indonesia. The occasion for the festival was the fiftieth anniversary of the *Sendratari Ramayana*, a Ramayana ballet or dance drama staged in the Central Javanese style at the Prambanan temple complex. This particular production has had great cultural and economic significance in Indonesia, and this has further prompted us to write this report. It is one of the most widely seen and most lucrative of all of Indonesia's regular performance events, one seen by tens of thousands of tourists every year.¹ For this reason, it has had an outsize impact on performing arts in Indonesia. We begin with some historical background to the festival and the production itself.

Historic Migration of the Ramayana

Diachronic study suggests that by the first century CE, Buddhist and Hindu literature and ideas had spread to Indonesia. By the fourth century CE, we know that Hindu kingdoms existed in Kutai, East Kalimantan, and Tarumanegara, West Java. The Cholas (r. circa 300 BCE–1300 CE) and other South Indian dynasties had contact with Southeast Asia from an early period; naturally, the Indian epics and Hindu philosophy traveled with them and impacted Java, Bali, and other parts of Indonesia (Upadhyaya 1990: 5). Early evidence of possible epic-themed performance includes the Balitung inscription (907 CE) of the Mataram kingdom (r. 750–1000 CE) in Java, which mentions ritual puppet shows. About a century later, *Kakawin Wirataparwa*, an early eleventh-century poem on a Mahabharata theme written in Kawi (Old Javanese), mentions a king of the East Javanese Kediri kingdom, King Sri Dharmawangsa Teguh Anantawikrama Tunggaladewa (r. 990–1016). This king had ties to the kingdom of Kalinga in eastern India and sponsored the composition of the *Ramayana Uttarakanda*, telling of the later years of Rama [Ram],² again in Old Javanese. Also composed around that era was the extant *Kakawin Ramayana* by Yogiswara. It was finished between 14 October and 12 November 996 CE (Agastia 1994: 26).

Although today's drama performances in Indonesia do not generally use these verse texts, they provide evidence that the Indian epics were well-known in Indonesia by 1000 CE and probably from the beginning of the Common Era. Today Ramayana stories are regularly presented in performance all over Java and Bali, mostly in versions that have been localized and passed along in oral form. Stories are typically presented in improvised language in the traditional *wayang* theatres—puppet, human, and masked—of the archipelago. Puppetry in Indonesia remains popular, with top puppeteers commanding thousands of dollars per evening, their fees paid by local patrons hosting ceremonies or sometimes by government or institutions. In Java, puppetry remains the most important art form for indigenous viewers and is generally performed by Muslim performers for Muslim audiences.³ In Bali, *wayang* prevails as well, and is mostly performed for local audiences, often in the context of Hindu and Buddhist temple festivals. Short performances (puppetry and dance) based on the Indian stories are also presented at tourist venues in tourist cities, for consumption by international viewers. But these are generally carried out by less renowned puppeteers.

Elsewhere, author Sedana has already written on the many ways the Ramayana has been adapted in Indonesian literature and performance (Sedana 2015a: 133; 2015b: 653–654), so we will not repeat that material here. However, we shall just note that it is very likely that specific ritual uses of Ramayana material were much more common in Indonesia's past when Hinduism and Buddhism flourished. Moreover, as in other areas of Southeast Asia, performance of the Ramayana here has been used to boost kingship, allowing the ruler to share the aura of the divine king, Rama, an incarnation of the preserver god Wisnu [Vishnu].⁴

The story of the Ramayana exists in a number of puppet and human genres, but historically, Ramayana themes have been most common in *wayang wong*. The technical term “*wayang wong*” encompasses both courtly dance drama based on the Ramayana and Mahabharata in Java, and masked dance drama based on the Ramayana in Bali. Significantly, both of these forms are associated with, and grew out of palace culture. Although women have always danced publicly in Indonesia, formerly, courtly troupes were often gender-specific (all female [but often with male clowns] or all male).⁵ By the time of Indonesia's independence in 1949, however, all the courtly performance arts, including dance dramas depicting Ramayana-themed episodes, had been transformed such that mixed-gender casts became the norm. In *wayang wong* today, women often dance both refined male hero roles like Rama and Laksmana [Lakshman] in the *sendratari* genre discussed here, as well as female roles.

The present affords both ritual and non-ritual uses of the Ramayana in Indonesia. Ritual use here includes reading/singing of the *Kakawin Ramayana* mentioned above in Balinese ceremonies, and in a Balinese-Hindu ritual called *pesantian* (*santi* or peace), performed for spiritual purification. In *pesantian* rituals, practitioners make offerings and burn incense while the *Kakawin Ramayana* or other works are recited, so that “*Sang Yogiswara sista; sang sujana sudha manahira wus maca sira*” (The poet-reciter attains peace; the learner is purified by the sung reading). In parts of Bali—in Tejakula regency to the north and Gianyar regency to the south—*wayang wong* based on the Ramayana is still performed in temple-based religious ceremonies. These take place in the towns of Telepud, Tangkup, and Mas, during Galungan and Kuningan holy days that occur every 210 days.

Even in Hindu-Buddhist Bali, dance dramas based on the Ramayana are usually not closely linked to a particular season or holiday like India’s Dussehra festival in late September or October, depending on the Hindu lunar calendar; rather, Ramayana-themed performances may be done any time of the year. Plus, dance dramas are staged in more varied venues than Ramlila (*Rāmīlā*) is in India—in village halls, temples, schools, public squares, court pavilions, private compounds, or schoolyards. This is in *addition* to the tourist performances that are frequently done in upscale restaurants and hotels. In contrast to tourist performances, cultural events like the 2012 National Ramayana Festival at Prambanan are primarily expressions of regional cultural pride and heritage geared to national audiences, not tourists, though of course tourists often attend such events.

Contemporary performance forms based on the Ramayana frequently show creative exploration and experimentation. (See Figs. 1 and 2.) For example, the famous *Sendratari Ramayana*, first staged in 1961, which we discuss below, had little ideological or aesthetic connections to earlier palace or temple ritual forms. Instead, this modern presentation of the Ramayana story was invented, via *kawi dalang* (co-author Sedana’s term for the art/improvisation of the puppet master/artist), or *sanggit* (Central Javanese artists’ term for innovative compositional skill) (Sedana 2002: 33). Such new works creatively transform literary texts like the Ramayana into theatre performances through what Sedana has referred to as “*trisandi*” (literally, “three innovations”)—the dynamic interplay of genre, plot, and character. By “genre,” we mean all the particulars that feed into the artistic form (music, structure, patterning, etc.). By “plot,” we mean simply the narrative—in this case, that of the Ramayanas of Indonesia, not those of India, which are very different. For example, in Indonesia, Hanoman [Hanuman] is considered the son of Siwa [Shiva] and this



FIGURE 1. This scene, *Wedding Contest of the Princess of Mantili* [Mithila], is also a popular one in Indian Ramlilas. After Rama (far left) wins the hand of Sinta [Sita], Ramaprasu [Parashuram] (far right) challenges Rama to fight. It was performed by Pancer Langit dance company on the occasion of the Bali Arts Festival, on 19 August 2015. (Photo by I Nyoman Sedana)

monkey general has many lovers including Trijata, here, the daughter of Wibisana [Vibhishan]. However, these details are not common to Indian versions of the Ramayana. Finally, by “character,” we mean the typology a performer creates through movement, voice, and other elements when playing a role.

The many different oral versions of the Ramayana are used in performance, and the performances themselves are shaped by both regional style (Bali, Solo, Yogyakarta, Banyumas, etc.), and the innovation of individual artists and groups. Indonesian dance dramas on the Ramayana may be divided into three general categories based on their narrative scope. The first category is *carangan kadapur* (trunk stories), which relate to major events in the core story, for example, Sinta’s kidnapping by Rawana [Ravan]. The second category is *carangan* (branch) stories, which relate to events that digress from the main “trunk” narrative but “fill it in” or explain it, for example, Hanoman’s birth to the monkey maid Anjani [Anjana] and Siwa [Shiva], not Bayu



FIGURE 2. Banished for twelve years, Prince Rama (left) and Princess Sinta (center), enjoy the natural beauty of the forest, accompanied by Rama's younger brother, Prince Lakshmana (right), prior to Sinta's abduction, in the scene *Dandaka Forest*. It was performed by Pancer Langit dance company at the Bali Mahalango Festival, on 24 August 2015. (Photo by Dewa Bayu)

[Vayu] as in India.⁶ And lastly, *sempalan* (twig) stories, which add new characters and tales that diverge even more from the trunk narrative, for example, the birth of Hanoman's son Purwaganti to a hermit's daughter, or the battles of Rawana's son Sweta Bama and grandson Wanasura against Hanuman's son Tugangga or Trigangga.⁷ Thus, in Indonesia, the Ramayana should be visualized as an ever-growing tree, with trunk-, branch-, and twig-stories. The development of new, innovative works through *kawi dalang* or *sanggit* is highly valued and encouraged in artists. It is important for winning contests and earning high grades on final projects in secondary and tertiary art schools. Samples of such creativity were on display at the Indonesia Ramayana Festival of 2012, and to this we turn next.

A National Ramayana Festival in 2012

As mentioned, the Festival Ramayana Nusantara was held to celebrate fifty years of continuous performances of a Ramayana-themed dance drama at the Prambanan Temple in Java. This dance drama known as the *Sendratari Ramayana*, has been performed there continuously, on four nights around the time of the full moon, every

month from May to October, since it was first performed there on 28 July 1961, for a Ramayana festival concurrent with a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁸ Organizers of the 1961 ASEAN conference chose to focus on the Ramayana rather than the Mahabharata, which is more popular in Indonesia, because the Ramayana is more widespread on mainland Southeast Asia. With its rich Ramayana imagery, the Prambanan temple complex seemed perfectly suited to the performances, so it served as the performance venue. Eleven Southeast Asian groups ultimately came together to share their own distinctive Ramayana performances. Of these, only the Javanese version continued after the ASEAN meeting. This award-winning production does not follow the standard practice in *wayang* (puppet theatre and traditional dance drama) of delving deeply into a single episode of the Ramayana. Rather, it presents a series of major highpoints—the kidnapping of Princess Sinta (night 1), monkey general Hanoman’s discovery of Sinta in Alengka [Lanka] (night 2), the death of the ogre general Kumbakarna [Kumbhkarn] (night 3), the demise of kidnapper/demon king Rawana, and the resulting reunion of Rama and Sinta (night 4).

The original 1961 production was developed under the direction of General G.P.H. Djatikoesoemo (1917–1963), then Minister of Communications, Telecommunications and Tourism. Djatikoesoemo was a member of the Surakarta (Solo) royal family who was inspired to work on the production after seeing a performance of Khmer dance at another World-Heritage site, Angkor Wat, in 1960. As a military hero and son of the *susuhunan* (hereditary ruler of Java) in Surakarta, he was in a position to marshal significant government resources and court the best dancers, musicians, and other talent from the recently opened national academies of music and dance. To make the performance accessible to international viewers, the creative team made the strategic decision to jettison dialogue, and instead “tell” the story through mime, or rather expressive dance.

The cast in the original production had a hundred dancers. While there were probably a few Christian and Hindu dancers, the vast majority of the dancers were Muslim. As with ordinary Indonesians of all faiths generally, they found the Ramayana to be an apt story to teach Islamic virtues like purity, faithfulness, and loyalty. Women too were in the cast. As was normal in dance of the period, women danced female roles without any thought of impropriety. This is very different than the situation of Ramlila in India, where the performance has deep ties to local Indian interpretations of Hinduism (which were never shared in Indonesian Hinduism, where women participate in areas like Bali, freely dancing in temple ceremonies).

While some Indonesian critics found the outdoor spectacle at the Prambanan temple complex somewhat overwrought and lacking in the *alus* (refined) character of court dance, tourists, both national and international, loved it. Audiences were impressed by the refined dance techniques, svelte ladies wrapped in exquisite batik patterns of palace traditions, and dramatic stage techniques, as when Hanoman “torched” Alengka with real fire. Then too the setting was spectacular. Even some naysayers were won over when they saw the full moon float above the ninth-century temple complex, and savored the tale of love and loss.

Post-1961, the production has continued, thanks to government support. Since then, its cast of dancers has, of course, continually changed, but its basic format has not changed, due to its great success. During three decades, the production got a boost from President Suharto (r. 1967–1998), who had an explicit policy of supporting the highpoints of culture, which of course included Javanese dance drama. Indeed, in 1989 Suharto built a much more lavish open-air stage for the Prambanan performance, which is still in use. When Suharto’s government was tottering in 1997 due to the Asian financial crisis, the president again turned to the Ramayana, calling on loyal Indonesians to help him “Build the Bridge” to the country’s financial security. In his rhetoric, he projected himself as “Rama” in a battle with “Rawana” (International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), as the *rupiah* continued to fall.

Today the Prambanan Ramayana is still a must-see for millions of viewers, nationally and internationally. The four-day commemorative festival in 2012 reminded Indonesians of the long history of this production. The festival was funded largely by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and featured eight groups from seven different provinces of Indonesia (Yogyakarta, North Sumatra, South Kalimantan, Jakarta, East Java, West Java, and Bali).⁹ Each troupe presented its own regional style of dance, costumes, music, and narration. Two or three groups performed each evening. As in the 1961 production, the dancers were overwhelmingly Muslim. The Balinese group with Hindu dancers was an exception. Women again played female roles, as is normal in Indonesian performing arts. The goals of the festival were to preserve and support Indonesia’s cultural heritage, revitalize its regional theatre genres, support local artists in the traditional performing arts, promote tourism, and develop new styles of Ramayana-themed performance.

The 2012 Ramayana festival was widely publicized and shared via public media and social media, but one performance, the *Sendratari Ramayana*, received special recognition. It received a Pacific Asia Travel Association Gold Award for Cultural Heritage, and also entered into

the *Guinness World Records* as the “Longest Ongoing and Largest Ramayana Prambanan Dance in the World.” At a press conference for the event, the premier Javanese dance maestro Retno Maruti explained that the *Sendratari Ramayana* began a half century ago (in 1961), when she was just fourteen years old. At that time, she said, they developed the new, innovative form *sendratari* (*sen[i] dra[ma] tari*, literally, “art of dramatic dance”), involving dozens of dancers, who mime the action while a *dalang* (narrator/puppetmaster) clarifies events in the story. Some characters like monkeys, she explained, wear *wayang wong*-style masks. Since then, *sendratari* has become a routine part of the local culture, and is often featured at national and international events centered on cultural exchange.¹⁰

Performances at the 2012 Ramayana Festival employed hundreds of actor-dancers, singers, and musicians, along with a *dalang*/narrator who delivered all the dialogue for each group. In the early days of the production at Prambanan, most dancers had to change their costumes repeatedly so they could present multiple roles over many scenes. At the 2012 festival, however, there was no need for such “doubling.” Most of the groups employed around 300 artists each; only one group, that from North Sumatra, employed less than a hundred artists. Each dance contingent only bit off a short section of the story so that it could provide a nuanced interpretation of a particular episode. During the festival, spectacular dance dramas from various regions were presented daily from 7:30–9:30 p.m., while daytime events included: (1) the regular performance of Prambanan’s *Sendratari Ramayana* (one episode per day, which is not further covered in this report); (2) a photo exhibition of Ramayana performances throughout the archipelago; and (3) a seminar at which scholars, performers, and dignitaries spoke on Ramayana-themed performance in Indonesia.

DAY 1

The festival began with a group from Yogyakarta performing the theme *Sang Gendawa Denta* (The Great Bow), which concerned Sinta’s wedding contest, under the directorship of Anter Asmorotedjo. (The title references the bow of Siwa which, of course, figured in the scene). This episode is more commonly referred to as *Sayembara Mantili* (The Wedding Contest of the Princess of Mantili [Mithila]). It showed Rama lifting the bow of Siwa and winning Sinta as his bride. Innovative music and choreography, which the *Jakarta Post* described as “glorious dance” were clearly evident (Sudiarno 2012). As is common in Indian Ramlilas, comedy also featured in this scene: one overconfident prince told other contest participants to go home and just come back in a week to attend his wedding with Sinta, but then was

unable to lift the weapon. Finally, Prince Rama lifted the bow and shot an arrow, hitting his mark.

On the same evening, another group performed a second episode from the “Ayodya Kanda” (Book of Ayodya), in which Dewi Kekayi [Kaikeyi], the beloved wife of King Dasarata [Dashrath] of Ayodya (Rama’s father), demanded that he crown her son Bharata [Bharat] king, and banish Prince Rama, the rightful heir. Forty Batak dancers from North Sumatra’s Ars Dance Theater (ADT Sanggar Tari Sumatra Utara), dressed in simple costumes, emphasizing pure Sumatran dance rather than dramatic spectacle. There were no extravagant touches, like crowns and royal accoutrement. Rama was bare-headed and Sinta wore a headdress that was a simple swathe of fabric.

Next, dancers from the Karo Batak ethnic group employed indigenous costumes, regional steps, and local music to show how Rama, his brother Laksmana, and Rama’s wife Sinta were banished to the forest, and how Sinta was subsequently kidnapped by Rawana. Unlike in Central Java and Bali, in Sumatra the Ramayana is not a regular part of the indigenous dance theatre repertoire. So this was a “made-to-order” production to fit the theme of the festival. Dancers appropriately mined Sumatran aesthetic resources and traditions to create an innovative, new offering.

DAY 2

The second day of the festival featured a South Kalimantan troupe which presented the episode *Moksha Subali* (The Death/Transfiguration of Bali), from “Kiskenda Kanda” (Book of the Monkey Kingdom). Here, Rama helped the banished monkey ruler Sugiwa [Sugriv] by killing his brother Subali [Bali/Vali], who had usurped Sugiwa’s wife and rule. Then a group from Semarang, performing in the Central Javanese style, did an episode from the “Sundara Kanda” (Book of Hanoman’s Mission). In this performance, Monkey General Hanoman flew to Alengka and reassured the despairing Sinta that the two heads Rawana brought to her were not those of Rama and Laksmana, but were instead the heads of Rawana’s own sons. Next, Hanoman was captured by Rawana’s forces, and his tail was set on fire. But he made a daring escape, setting Alengka aflame.

DAY 3

On the third day, an entourage from Jakarta showed an incident from the “Yudha Kanda” (Book of the War), *Rama Tambak* (Rama Bridging the Ocean), in which Rama brought his troops to Alengka to attack Rawana. The Jakarta contingent deftly blended the classical story

and current metropolitan issues, showing how construction projects are often vulnerable to corruption. First, the crab monster Sayung Srani tried to undermine Rama's progress from his underwater abode by exhausting the state's budget before Rama could complete the necessary bridge. Hanoman morphed into an investigator and public prosecutor, bringing Sayung Srani to justice by dragging him out of the water. The narrator delivered the verdict: eighteen years in prison and a forty billion *rupiah* fine. Would that all public construction projects in Jakarta had such just outcomes!

The second performance on the third evening was *Anggodo Duta* (Anggodo's [Angad's] Mission) by an East Javanese troupe. Here, Rama dispatched Anggodo, Subali's son, to give Rawana an ultimatum—return Sinta or be destroyed. Rawana served Anggodo intoxicants, reminding him that his father, Subali, had been killed by Rama, and insisting that Anggodo should kill Rama in revenge. Luckily, Hanoman intercepted and detoxed the deluded Anggodo. This presentation referenced the contemporary problem of drug and alcohol abuse, one that sometimes waylays Indonesian youth. Anggodo, coincidentally, is the name of a man who was arrested near that time in the bust of a graft ring involving government workers. Anggodo Wijoyo, a small businessman who was implicated, tried to flee to Australia but ended up going to jail. He was only a small figure, while the whole government was riddled with graft.¹¹ *Anggodo's Mission* had a very traditional storyline, yet the audience could easily read the social commentary artists had infused in their rendition.

DAY 4

The last day was the climax, with three ensembles performing three Ramayana episodes from the war, thus bringing the tale to its end. First, an all-female ensemble from West Java staged *Kumbakarna Gugur* (The Death of Kumbakarna), dancing with military precision. Dressed in uniforms, they expertly used long white dance scarves as “weapons,” pulling them taut to create staves, and striking their opponents' staves (pulled scarves), giving an illusion of a heated fight. The scarves were also tossed, twirled, and swirled, creating intricate abstract designs in space. By the end of the fighting, Kumbakarna, Rawana's noble sibling who is loyal to his country, right or (in this instance) wrong, was defeated. Such scarf work by women dancing in a strong military style derives from the innovative work that female choreographers like Irawati Durban Arjo introduced to the national scene beginning in 1980.

In the second performance that evening, a large group of dancers, musicians, and puppeteers from Bali performed *Rawana Gugur* (The Death of Rawana). This performance was unique for

integrating elaborate giant puppets and dance. Rawana's son Indrajit or Meganada first launched a huge dragon (*naga*) that materialized from his Nagapasa (Snake Arrow) to entrap Rama and Laksmana. The dragon was depicted as a huge glittery puppet manipulated by several people. After recovering, Rama and Laksmana shot Rawana, portrayed as a gigantic figure with ten heads, causing him to collapse. The Rawana puppet was so large that when it fell, it covered the entire staircase of Prambanan's open stage. To conclude the whole festival, the host troupe, Yayasan Roro Jonggrang (Association of Roro Jonggrang) presented "Sacred Fire," in which Rama tested Sinta's fidelity by requiring her to walk through flames, which she did successfully.¹²

Conclusion

The extensive display of Ramayana-themed dance dramas at the Festival Ramayana Nusantara in 2012 continued and celebrated the long tradition of intercultural and intracultural *sendratari* dance dramas that began in the 1960s. The original 1961 event at Prambanan led to monthly, multi-night dance performances of the Ramayana in Central Java and this is still a major tourist attraction for Indonesian and international viewers. The production has remained a critical success for two major reasons. First, the ninth-century Prambanan temple complex, with its sumptuous Ramayana iconography, is site-appropriate for the performance, and second, the Ramayana story resonates deeply with national and international audiences. The original performance was generated to suit the cultural commonalities of the Southeast Asian countries of ASEAN. Historically, the Ramayana has been favored over the Mahabharata in mainland Southeast Asia, from Myanmar to Vietnam. Thus, the Ramayana was a more convenient choice for the ASEAN event in 1961, even though the Mahabharata is generally much more popular in Indonesia.

Fifty years of Ramayana performances on the open-air Prambanan stage have made the story of the Ramayana well-known to Indonesian artists—even artists from Sumatra, where it had little indigenous traction before the 1960s. Now Sumatran audiences and dancers are quite familiar with the Ramayana, having seen it in festivals and on TV for decades. Performances at the National Ramayana Festival of 2012, representing various provinces of Indonesia, enlisted a host of teachers working with current and former students from nationally funded arts schools, all on government payrolls. With the possible exception of some Hindu-Balinese participants, the artists did not have a fervency for Hinduism or its Vaishnava branch. Performances were more a celebration of regional identity in the national mix, and a show of appreciation for values ensconced in the

story. Competitiveness among provincial ensembles was emplaced within shared national pride for the unique World-Heritage site of Prambanan, which abounds with Ramayana imagery.

Indonesia is a predominantly Muslim country, and the dancers that appeared in the 2012 event were almost all Muslim, except those in the Balinese troupe. Yet for most of them, the Ramayana is still an important narrative, one that still has philosophical meaning and practical life teachings. Many connect it to local understandings of the good life and local spiritual values.

In Indonesia, no one talks about Sinta's later banishment and invocation to Ibu Pertiwi (Mother Earth) to take her home. There is no "#MeToo" for Sinta in Indonesia.¹³ But women have always been very involved in the performance at Prambanan. The nation continues to work toward mitigating economic and social inequities twenty years after the fall of President Suharto, an event which many had hoped would usher in good governance. For those with hope, the Ramayana continues to resonate.

When the *Sendratari Ramayana* was first staged at the 1961 Ramayana Festival at a meeting of ASEAN, it became an inspiration for many new works across Indonesia. To an extent, the commemorative 2012 National Ramayana Festival, with its free admission and huge casts, was a moment of intranational cohesiveness and friendly regional rivalry. At the same time, it was a celebration of fifty years of aesthetic virtuosity appreciated by audiences from around the world. It was less a celebration of Hindu religion than a celebration of "national unity in diversity," Indonesia's national motto. The Ramayana dance drama at Prambanan is a major tourist draw, but due to high ticket prices, it has mostly been seen by elite audiences over the course of its fifty-year history.

Ethics and life lessons for contemporary Indonesians were part of the 2012 performances, as they often are in Ramayana- and Mahabharata-themed performances in Indonesia. In *Anggodo's Mission*, superhero Hanoman encouraged youth to stay away from drugs and alcohol which were linked with Rawana's world, and the play attacked government officials engaged in corruption and bribery. In another performance, Rama's building a causeway to Alengka was linked with Jakarta's state construction projects and graft. The epic itself interrogates what happens when truth and justice are confronted by evil. The Ramayana invites people to seek out and follow just rulers, and to expect trials and tribulations while working to create a more perfect world—the Ayodya of our dreams.

The Indonesian Ramayana Festival of 2012 was an important celebration that showcased Indonesia's distinctive regional dance steps,



FIGURE 3. In the scene *Wibisana's Coronation*, Rama places Rawana's virtuous brother Wibisana, on the throne of Lanka at the conclusion of the war. It was performed by Paripurna dance company at the Bali Arts Festival, on 19 April 2015. (Photo by I Nyoman Sedana)

costumes, styles of music, and interpretations of the Ramayana. Significantly, choreographers were given the freedom to share their individual “takes” on the epic material. Their interpretations were secular but hearkened back to the underlying values that people still derive from the epic. These include: (1) *satya*, the truth that is central to each dramatic scene; (2) *dharma*, the duty or social obligation of every individual; (3) *bhakti*, respect for the divine which may be variously defined—as Hindu Wisnu/Vishnu or his incarnation Rama, Islamic Allah, or the Christian God; (4) *ahimsa*, non-violence; and (5) *santi*, peace for all that exists, including human beings.

This short report has highlighted a sample of contemporary Ramayana performances from a single festival in Indonesia. Yet such performances are ongoing and ever-evolving. Take, for instance, the colossal staging of *Wibisana's Coronation*, performed by Paripurna dance company at the annual Bali Arts Festival, on the 244th anniversary of the founding of Gianyar regency (an administrative district) in Bali on 19 April 2015 (see Fig. 3), or the neoclassical, Ramayana-themed *legong*

dance piece “Legong Maya Stri” (The Fake Princess of Kosalya [Kaushalya]), in which Dasarata tricks Rawana, by sending a “fake” Kosalya to marry him. This dance piece was created by Ni Wayan Seniasih in 1996, and performed by students of the Institut Seni Indonesia-Denpasar in Bali, for their graduation projects.¹⁴ Later, it was revised and performed in Northeast India and New Delhi for the Workshop and Festival on Intercultural Dialogue between Northeast India and Southeast Asia, from 20 February to 21 March 2010.

In Indonesia, as in Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian countries that share the Ramayana, there is no Ramlila with Indian religious trappings. Rather, in the post-WWII period the epic has been part of what we might term a secular religion, one which envisions a just world. It provides a model of exile and struggle to make the ideal real. In the 2012 festival, the narrative was divided up among ensembles from across Indonesia’s provinces, and director-choreographers were invited to choose specific episodes to stage as they wished. The result “added up” to a larger whole—a perfected country under a just leader. The old story of the Ramayana with its Hindu-Buddhist messages still has great relevance to this largely Muslim and secular nation state.

NOTES

1. The outdoor performance sells about 27,300 tickets per year (1,140 seats × four nights a month × six months a year). Tickets ranged in price from 125,000–400,000 IRP (\$9.00–28.00). During the remaining six months, an indoor performance is given at a smaller venue.

2. Character names are glossed with their common Indian equivalents in brackets on first mention.

3. While the Ramayana is often thought of as a Hindu story in India, in Southeast Asia it is considered the shared spiritual and literary legacy of the region. It is an important narrative reservoir for Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as Buddhists in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Those who say the Ramayana is “Hindu” and therefore “un-Islamic,” are often swayed by the rhetoric of Islamic fundamentalism. In the 1970s, Islamic revivals in the Middle East began affecting parts of Malaysia and Indonesia, making some start to see the Ramayana as “un-Islamic.” But most Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia reject such a view, and see fundamentalism as a threat to their national heritage materials.

Taking the *longue durée*, we may note that Muslims have been performing the Ramayana in Indonesia since the fifteenth century. At that time, Wali Songo (Nine Saints) are said to have converted people to Islam by performing both the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

4. The political use of the Ramayana as an ideological support for monarchies, for example, by declaring the king an incarnation of Wisnu, has proved useful in Southeast Asian contexts historically. This has remained a feature of Khmer and Thai monarchies through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Even now in Thailand, one cannot show the death of Rawana (Thosakan in Thai), as this is considered both bad luck and denigration of the King. These Theravada Buddhist kings of mainland Southeast Asia identified Rama as the model *chakravartin* (righteous Buddhist ruler).

Historically, the Mahabharata has also been deployed for political reasons. The Hindu king Jayabaya, who ruled the Kediri kingdom (in Central Java) in the twelfth century, claimed he had descended from the Pandavas in the Mahabharata. Baladewa [Balram] (the brother of Kresna [Krishna]) is thought of as an originating king of the island of Madura, etc.

Court use of the Ramayana in Indonesia has been more recent as well. The Yogyakarta minister Danuredja VII, also known as Yudonegoro III, made the Ramayana a popular theme in courtly entertainments in nineteenth-century Yogyakarta. In 1890, he created the form *langen mandra wanara* (literally, entertainment of many monkeys), which involves dance drama and singing *macapat* (Javanese verses). This form flourished in the Yogyakarta court under three Sultans, Hamangku Buwana VII, Hamangku Buwana VIII, and Hamangku Buwana IX, who staged it during Ramadan after breaking the fast in the evenings. (See, for example, [Krida Beksa Wikarama 2018](#).) After independence, this form was preserved by court dancers who established a group called “Irama Tjitra.” Since 1949, women have taken over female roles which were, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, played by men ([Barata 2017](#)).

5. The status of female dancers varied in premodern times. Women who performed in palace troupes of course had status, but village women who performed in quotidian contexts might be thought of as courtesans or, in the lowest ranks, prostitutes. (See [Foley 2016](#) for more discussion of gender representation in Southeast Asian performance.)

6. Siwa’s sperm enters Anjani’s mouth while she is meditating, impregnating her. Later, Siwa marries Anjani and recognizes Hanoman as his son.

7. Purwaganti is known for finding the *Kalimasada*, an heirloom that belongs to Yudistira [Yudhishtir], the hero of the Mahabharata, and is the Islamic Sahadat (“There is no God but Allah, . . .”), after the treasure goes missing. More such tales are discussed in [\[Soetarno\] and Sukerta 2006](#).

8. Member states of ASEAN include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

9. Other sponsors of the event included the construction company PT. Persero, and the government organization PT. Taman Wisata Candi Borobudur Prambanan Ratu Boko (Tourist Heritage Group for Borobudur Temple, Prambanan Temple, and Ratu Boko Palace).

10. The 1961 event inspired many other groups around Indonesia to create similar presentations of the Ramayana. In Bali, by 1965, a *Ramayana*

dance drama was offered regularly and author Sedana frequently performed in such shows for tourist audiences. By the 1980s he would perform up to three characters in a performance every Wednesday at Sanur Beach Hotel. First, Sedana would play the hermit (Rawana in disguise), who lures Princess Sinta out of her protective circle. Then, he would frantically change costumes to almost immediately re-enter as the bird Jatayu to fight the already transformed Rawana and try to rescue Sinta. Finally, Sedana quickly would change into his favorite character, the white monkey general Hanoman, and fly to Alengka to find Sinta for Rama.

11. This case was labeled the “gecko” (businessman) vs. “crocodile” (government corruption). See [Bhaskara 2009](#) for details.

12. The Association of Roro Jonggrang is named after the eponymous Princess of a Javanese legend, who is herself associated with Durga and linked to the Buddhist Sewu temple near Prambanan.

13. In mainland Southeast Asia where the Ramayana has more historical importance, modern women are more active in using the Ramayana to make feminist points. See [Diamond 2012](#) for a discussion of some of the uses of the Ramayana there.

14. *Leggong* is a classical Balinese dance form performed by women.

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