Literature in transmigration: The Rama story in Southeast Asia

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Abstract—The story of Rama, known as *Ramayana* in the Indian subcontinent where it originated, has migrated and spread to nearly every culture and society in Asia. In each place the story has been introduced, it has been adopted, adapted and absorbed into the local culture. Given the universal themes in the tale, the basic outline of the story has shown a remarkable flexibility to be able to sustain change and adaption, both in interpretation and interpolation. This article examines and compares the presence of the Rama story in various cultures and societies of Southeast Asia, showing how the tradition has moved and been shared from one locality to another and, therefore, has the ability to serve as a cultural peace ambassador promoting mutual understanding among the people of this region.

Introduction

In the panoply of the world's great literature, there is one piece that stands out for its breadth of scope, range of transmission and variety of representation. This piece, although not as well known in the Western world, is of paramount importance in South and Southeast Asia, being represented in one form or another in nearly every culture and civilization in the area. This piece is the classic tale of Rama, a tale generally known in India as Ramayana, with the first composition being attributed to a poet named Vālmīki (*Vālmīki Rāmayaṇa*), and by various

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other titles in the many cultures of South and Southeast Asia where it has been transmitted.

The Rama story is a piece of literature in which one can find time-honored themes of love and devotion, good versus evil, truth over ignorance, faith and fidelity, all presented through intricate plots involving a multitude of characters. From abstract ideas of 'ideal' behavior, to concrete depictions and live performance, this tale has been both a reflection of and a reflection on traditional societies for centuries.

In Southeast Asia, there is a clear relationship between the many tellings of the Rama story in the various cultures and localities of the region, which is evidence of the transmigration of peoples, cultures and traditions throughout the area. In some cases, such as Javanese/Malay and Khmer/Thai, the relationship appears to be quite strong, while in others, it is more tentative. This review of the literary and cultural tradition of the Rama story in the societies of Southeast Asia will help provide an understanding of one of the many ways people have migrated between areas of the region.

The Rama story in Southeast Asia

In the early period of exploration and trade, sailors and merchants in the area of Southeast Asia, many of whom were from the Indian subcontinent, had to spend time waiting for goods and the appropriate winds before sailing. It seems likely that there was some sort of entertainment to keep them amused during their leisure time. This entertainment would certainly have included recitation or performance of some form of the Rama story that they would have brought with them from India. It is in this way that the earliest transmission of the Rama legend likely made its way out of its place of origin and into foreign lands: "…the earliest stream of the Rāma saga flowed toward South-east Asia with the priestly class, the Brahmin and the Kṣatriya adventurers, traders and others, who sailed down the course of the river Ganges and the coastal belt of the Bay of Bengal" (Sarkar 2003, 207).

Thailand

Early literary history of the Rama story

While there are no written texts of the Rama story remaining from the Sukhothai period (13-14th century), it seems evident that it must have been well-known in this first Thai-identified organized polity. The usual evidence for this is a reference to a "Phra Ram Cave" in Sukhothai Inscription No 1 (*The Inscription of King Ramkamhaeng the Great* 1984, 42). From the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767), there are many manuscripts remaining, including those of the Rama story, notwithstanding the frequent statement that all the literary texts were destroyed when Ayutthaya fell to the Burmese in 1767. The many Rama related texts and the references to episodes or characters from the story in other literature, particularly during the reign of King Narai (r. 1656-1688), indicates that the Rama story was well known at that time. With respect to the Thonburi kingdom (1767-1782), there are a number of compositions remaining from that period. The most important is attributed to King Taksin, who, notwithstanding spending most of his time at war, particularly during the early part of his reign, was able to find time to compose verses based on the Rama story.

Rattanakosin (1782 to present)

It is at the start of the Rattanakosin period, 1782 to the present, under King Rama I, the first ruler of the present Chakri dynasty, that the Rama story in Thai took its full form as we know it today. Rama I directed the composition, or perhaps the compilation and re-composition, of a complete rendition of the Rama saga (*Rama I Ramakien*) as part of his extensive efforts at reconstruction after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 and the establishment of a new capital and dynasty.

Given the relative dearth of prior written texts, particularly complete versions, it is uncertain what sources were used to construct *Rama I Ramakien*. David Wyatt asserts that there was a "systematic collection" of all available material relating to the Rama story (1982, 34), while J.M. Cadet points out that it "…is not easy to estimate the extent to which Rama I drew on vernacular versions of the story handed down through the courts of the Mon and Khmer of Ayudhia

[*sic*]" (1982, 32). In any event, Rama I's version is the most complete rendition of the Rama story in Thai available, running to more than 53,300 verses, without chapter or section breaks (Rama I 1997).

Next to Rama I's version, the next most complete rendition of the Rama story in Thai is the dance-drama edition written by King Rama II, finished in 1815 (Rama II 2001). It appears that one of the possible motives of Rama II, who was quite adept at literary composition, was to create a piece that was more suitable for dramatic presentation. While the Rama I rendition is the most complete, its very length and detail make it less adaptable to performance.

In addition to the versions of the Rama story that are associated with the royal courts and central Thailand, there are a number of renditions of the Rama story in local languages that can be found in regional parts of Thailand. Given the local and folk-tale nature of these renditions, many of which have long oral traditions, their origins are not entirely clear. Perhaps the most prominent are those from the northeast part of Thailand: *Phra Lak-Phra Lam* and the *Rama Jātaka*. In addition, there are a number of renditions from the northern part of Thailand: *Horaman* and *Phrommachak*. Finally, there are several versions in other areas of the country that are generally associated with performance of the story, particularly shadow puppet performances – *nang yai*. Siraporn Thitathan points out that while all these renditions have the same basic story as their core and many similar characters, there is considerable variation in plot lines and focus, most being much more concise than the *Rama I Ramakien*. These differences can generally be attributed to local traditional customs and beliefs making the texts quite different from each other (Siraporn 1979).

Origins and connections of the Thai telling of the Rama story

While it is clear that the basic outline and plot of the Rama story known in Thailand today can be linked to the Indian subcontinent, tracing the origins and migration by which the tale arrived here is not so clear. Swami Satyananda Puri makes this point by stating that the "Ramakirti [*Ramakien*] carries in its body Ramayanic tales popular in very many countries…[which]…undoubtedly shows that the passage along which the story of Rama entered Thailand lay through many a different country" (1998, 8).

Prince Dhani Nivat, a frequent writer about the Rama story in

Thailand, makes the argument that the version used by the Khmer at Angkor, having come through the Javanese, is the most likely conduit from the Indian versions. In addition, he notes the supremacy of Phra Isuan (Shiva) in *Rama I Ramakien* as proof since the Khmer were Saivites (1941, 174). In any event, the many versions extant in the various regions of Thailand, along with the versions that existed before *Rama I Ramakien*, show an integral relationship with other tellings of the story in neighboring areas, with the strongest connection being that with the Cambodian-Khmer tradition.

Cambodia-Khmer

Epigraphic evidence and stone carvings

Sanskrit literature, which was popular with the Khmers from the early period, was likely appreciated both for its ethical and religious functions (Sharan 1974, 48-49). The earliest epigraphical evidence is a 7th century stele (K 359) from the Chenla period (c. 550-802) found at Prasat Ba An near Veal Kantel. This inscription, written by the sister of Bhavavarman I (r. 580-598), has been cited as some of the earliest evidence of written copies of the Rama story in the region (Bizot 2003, 264; Sharan 1974, 83, 236).

The popularity of the Rama narrative in visual narratives during the Angkor period can be seen by the many temples with carvings or statues depicting the story. Vittorio Roveda provides a fairly comprehensive listing of such carvings in his encyclopedic tome *Images of the Gods* (2005, 114-143), listing nearly 20 temple complexes that have some carvings from the Rama story. The most prolific and extensive stone reliefs can be seen at Baphuon and Angkor Wat in Angkor Thom proper, and at Phnom Rung and Phimai in present day Thailand. It is unclear whether a pure Vālmīkian version was used as the source of these carvings. Given the wide dispersion of variations on the story found in India and other parts of Southeast Asia, particularly in the Malay-Javanese realm, it seems probable that some other renditions were utilised, although when and from where is unknown (Roveda and Yem 2009, 184).

Literary versions

The literary narrative in Khmer that is most well-known is called *Ramakerti* or *Reamker*, which was written in the 16-17th century by anonymous poets in the form of a dance-drama. The currently existing narrative comes from a manuscript, *Rioeṇ Rāmakert(i) (Reamker)*, published by the Institut Bouddhique of Phnom Penh in 1937. This text was compiled from two bundles of palm-leaf manuscripts, numbered 1-10 and 75-80. Saveros Pou, when she translated this text into French, labeled the two parts *Reamker I* and *Reamker II* (1977; 1982). The two parts are quite different and, since it does not appear that the intervening sections, i.e., 11-74, are really missing, most have accepted as two distinct manuscripts (Jacob 2006, xii-xiii). In fact, the second part bears such a striking resemblance in storyline and detail to the Thai rendition, especially *Rama I Ramakien*, that there must certainly be a relationship and connection between the two texts.

Buddhization

Reamker I was composed during a period when Buddhism was flourishing and the composers appear to have re-examined the narrative within a Buddhist context. The main traits of the Buddhization of the story have been amply explained by Pou and others (1977, 77-97). The most striking aspect is that Rama, while presented in his usual role as the incarnation of Vishnu, is also considered to be "…the Buddha himself" (Jacob 2006, ix). In this regard, Bizot points out "…the hybrid character of the beliefs…in all southeast Asia" (2003, 269-270), thus, allowing for Rama to be both an incarnation of Vishnu in the Hindu sense and the Buddha in a Buddhist sense.

Relationship to the Rama story in Thailand

There are many who have considered the Khmer version of the Rama story to be merely a subsidiary of the Thai rendition, which has received much more attention from scholars and has generally been given more prominence. This idea has been shown to invalid by Khmer literary and linguistic experts, including Pou and others. Pou has proposed that *Reamker I* and the Rama story in Thailand perhaps have similar roots but developed along different lines, with both

having influence on the more modern tellings in Cambodia (1986, 241; 2003, 257).

In this regard, it is interesting to note the similarity between the Khmer designation of the Rama story, *Ramakerti*, and the Thai designation, *Ramakien*. If one were to spell out the word in Thai completely, without changing the vocalization or the negated letters, it would be something like '*Ramakiarti*', which is very close to the Khmer, *Ramakerti*. This perhaps shows a connection between the Rama traditions in the two cultures.

Also, Pou has pointed out the linguistic relationship between the words for the dramatic performance of the Rama story in Cambodia, *lkhon khol* and the name for the masked drama in Thai, *khon*.[2] Pou, with reference to George Coedès, claims that the word *khol* "…is none other than the Khmer word for 'a species of monkey, his antics; anything burlesque'. *Lkhon khol*, therefore, can be understood as 'Theatre of monkeys'…" (2003, 231, Fn. 13). Thus, the connection between the two words makes sense in that the monkey characters are very important in the performance of the Rama story in both Thailand and Cambodia.

Indonesia-Javanese

In Indonesia, one can generally categorize the Rama story into two groups: one based on Old Javanese or the Kawi language and one on the more modern Bahasa Indonesian language. While there are many versions, *Ramayana Kakawin* or *Old Javanese Rāmāyaṇa* (*OJR*),[3] is the best known in Old Javanese and, for those in Bahasa Indonesian, the best known is *Serat Rama* (Saran and Khanna 2004).

The oldest inscriptional evidence of the presence of the Rama story in Java is from the 8th century, with the first reference in an inscription of King Sanjaya dated 732 (Sarkar 1998, 106-107). While it is not clear which narrative this inscription makes reference to, most

2 In Thai, the final 'l' in *khol* would be pronounced with an 'n' sound. Even though now the Thai word for *khon* [โขน] is spelled following the pronunciation with a final 'naw nu [น] (n)' consonant, it is possible the original spelling may have been closer to the Khmer.

3 *Kakawin* is a genre of Old Javanese poetry of which the *OJR* is the oldest full-length work.

researchers point to the *OJR* (Acri, Creese and Griffiths 2011, xiii). While the source of the *OJR* is not totally clear, research has shown that about 60% corresponds very closely to a Sanskrit poem called *Ravana-vadha* (*The Death of Rávana*) or following its author, *Bhaṭṭikāvya*, a 7th century poem by Bhatti (2009). However, the second half of the *OJR* is perhaps from older or more local sources when "the poet of the OJR went his own way" (Hooykaas 1958, 5-7; Sarkar 1998, 108, 115). While generally following the story line of the original Vālmīki, one of the distinguishing features of the *OJR* is the higher status of Shiva, in which he holds the supreme position among the celestials. As with the Cambodian rendition, this feature was also noted by Dhani in making a connection between the Javanese Rama story and the story in Thai.

The modern version of the Rama saga in Indonesia, *Serat Rama*, was written by a Muslim poet, Yasadipura, in the late 18th century. While it has a "recognizable family resemblance" to the Malay versions and progresses generally along the same story lines, it is without the same degree of Islamization – Rama retains his status as an incarnation of Vishnu – and has a close affinity with the *OJR* and the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* (Saran 2004, 138-139, 198-199). The continued popularity of this version of the Rama story in Indonesia, particularly among the majority Muslim population, is because Rama is not "…a remote, miracle-working divine being, but…[he embodies]…the qualities of a perfect human being and of an ideal ruler" (Saran 2004, 199), very similar to how the story is treated in Thailand.

Malaysia-Malay

The earliest traces of the migration of the Rama story to Southeast Asia is perhaps provided by Chinese annals from the Liang Dynasty (502-560) which refer to the kingdom of Lang-ya, identified as being on the Malay peninsular near modern day Pattani, and include 'veiled' references to the Rama story (Sarkar 2003, 104-106; Sarkar 1998, 208). However, there are no inscriptions or stone carvings from that period to provide further evidence of the presence of the Rama story in the Malay area at that early date. Today, the Rama sage in Malaysia exists in essentially three forms: literary manuscripts, oral versions used by professional storytellers and, perhaps the most popular and best

known among the Malays, the folk versions used for *wayang* shadow puppet performances.

The Rama story appears to have touched the hearts and minds of the Malay people from an early period and references to characters is made in many Malay historical works, including comparisons of the glory of the ruler to Rama (Singaravelu 2003, 276), similar to what is seen in many pieces of Thai literature. In Malay, the best known version of the Rama story is *Hikayat Seri Rama* (*HSR*) by an unknown author, which "…was written in a newly created genre inspired by popular Arabic and Persians forms…[and, although]…the *hikayats* were in a written form, they were probably meant to be read aloud in public places" (Saran 2004, 135).

Literary versions in Malay

There are three primary manuscripts of *HSR* that have been the subject of intense study by Malay literature and history scholars, although there are reported to be many more volumes in existence (Hussein 1998, 142). These three are: (1) a 17th century manuscript housed at the Bodleian Library since 1633, edited and published by William Shellabear in 1915, which he notes is perhaps the oldest printed text in Malay script; (2) a text published by Sicco Ernst Willem Roorda van Eysinga in 1843, which he claimed was a translation into the Jawi script of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, a claim which was quickly refuted since it was clearly a localized story; and (3) a 15th century text called the Raffles Malay Manuscript No. 22, edited by R. O. Winstedt, which contains material not found in the other two manuscripts. This last text has clear elements of Islamization, particular the colophon with a specific mention of the Koran ("Hikayat Sri Rama" 1915; Shellabear 1917, 181; Winstedt 1944, 65-66). These literary versions, which likely originally emerged from oral transmission of tales by the many foreign travelers to the area (Saran 2004, 136), grew to great importance and are said to be "…regarded as the manifestation of the cultural ideals of the ruling elite in the traditional Malay society," and that since the Rama story and traditional Malay society shared many common elements, the saga was easily adopted, notwithstanding the change in religion from Hindu to Islam (Singaravelu 1981, 135).

Islamization

A significant defining element of the Rama story in Malay is the 'Islamization' that has occurred to the tale. It is quite clear that there was a concerted effort made to suit local religious sentiment, with references to Nabi Adam (the Prophet) and Allah (Saran 2004, 136), a process that grew over time until "…the direct mention of Lord Visnu's reincarnation has been excised, leaving only certain traces of the original version" (Singaravelu 2003, 279-281). E. C. G. Barrett noted that "in all these versions the story of Rāma as an incarnation of Viṣṇu and Rāvaṇa, an incarnation of some other supernatural being has been avoided by the Muslin copyist, with varying degrees of effectiveness" (1963, 532). However, others have noted that there are still traces of Hindu values and views that remain in the Malay version, particularly regarding Hindu teaching and philosophy of life (Mohamed 1997, 179-180).

Connections to the Rama story in Thai

Many eminent Thai scholars who have studied the Rama story have identified numerous connections between the Malay and Thai renditions of the tale. Phraya Anumanratchathon noted in *Upakon Ramakien* the possible beginnings of the flirtatious nature of Hanuman in the Thai tellings might be traced to his characterization in the Malay version. Also, he pointed out the relationship with some of the names used in both versions (Sathiankoset 2007, 18). In addition, Dhani noted the similarity between *HSR* and some renditions in Thai (1974, 272, 276).

Laos-Laotian

There are generally three versions of the Rama story that can be found in Laos today: the most popular and wide spread, *Phra Lak Phra Lam*; the less popular *Phommachak*; and a more obscure version entitled *Gvāy Dvór̲abhī*. It is interesting to note that there appears to be a significant degree of connection between the Lao versions and those of the surrounding areas, showing the large degree of interaction and exchange between the people of the region.

Phra Lak Phra Lam

The best known and most popular version of the Rama saga in Laos is *Phra Lak Phra Lam*. In 1996, Sachchidanand Sahai published an English translation of this version based on six 19-20th century manuscripts which he had collected from around Vientiane and other parts of Laos and Northeast Thailand (1996). He notes that the Rama story is only one part of the narrative, with a description of local Lao places, customs and beliefs comprising a major part of the story (1996, Vol. 1, 2), noting that "the Lao author appears to have elaborated his narrative in order to describe the milieu in which he lived," particularly with respect to the geographical setting and locations identified (2003, 221), similar to what had been done in *Rama I Ramakien*.

The story of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* is presented in the general format of a *jātaka* tale, albeit a non-canonical one, and therefore, is sometimes called the *Rāma Jātaka* (Sahai 1996, Vol. 1, 10).[4] In this way, the Rama story was made a "…sacred text to be preserved and heard from generation to generation for the propagation of the Buddhist faith" and is often recited, along with the Vessantara Jataka, at religious gatherings. Sahai also points out that the *Rama Jātaka* was intended to teach many aspects of Buddhism, as well as the Lao/Thai belief system and other aspects of life in Laos at the time (1996, Vol. 1, 11, 12).

John Brockington makes note of the fact that *Phra Lak Phra Lam* appears to be indebted to the Thai rendition and can be linked to the Javanese, Khmer and Malay versions as well (1984, 299). Dhani also makes a strong connection between the Lao and Thai versions when he compares the text of a manuscript that he obtained from Roi Et province in Northeast Thailand with the *Rama I Ramakien* and *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, concluding:

> the foregoing analysis has shown how closely the *Rama Jataka* resembles the Thai *Ramakien* in its main details and in the extra episodes not found in the classical *Ramayana* of Vālmīki. This is an important fact to bear in mind for it supplies one of the essential missing links in the process of the development of the Thai version (1946, 21).

4 Both Sahai and Dhani make note of the fact that the *Rama Jātaka* has little in common, and thus should be distinguished from, the *Dasaratha Jātaka* (Sahai 1996, Vol. 1, 11; Dhani 1946, 2).

Phommachak

Phommachak is an adaptation of the Rama story by Buddhist monks for religious purposes. While not as popular as *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, the story takes a similar form to a *jātaka* tale relating a previous life of the Buddha (Kamala 1998, 265). Ohno Toru has labeled this the "Muongsing" version and in his detailed research concluded that the "Muongsing version is quite peculiar in comparison with the Luangphrabang and Vientiane versions. It contains episodes shared with Lanka Xihe of Yunnan and the Burmese *Rama Thiri* version of the Rama story" (2000, 34).

Gvāy Dvó̱rabhī

Sahai translated into English an undated palm leaf manuscript written in Yuan script and dialect, prevalent in northern Laos, found in 1972 in the collection of the Royal Palace, Luang Prabang, of what the King of Laos termed a "minor version", and which Sahai labeled "an independent" version, of the Rama story entitled *Gvāy Dvó̱rabhī* (1976, 2). Sahai explains that the title of the story, *Gvāy Dvó̱rabhī*, which makes reference to tale of the buffalo Thoraphi (called as such in *Rama I Ramakien* and Dundubhi in *Vālmīki Rāmayaṇa*), is only a small part of the narrative, but shows the popularity of this episode in Laos and Thailand, including as it does legends of the burial spot of the bones of the buffalo and a mountain named after him (1976, 3).

Myanmar-Burmese

There is evidence that the Rama story was known in the area of present day Myanmar at least from the Pagan period (11-13th century) since there are stone figures of Rama *in situ* as the incarnation of Vishnu in the Hindu temple, Nat-Hlaung-Gyaung. During this period, there is evidence in the form of a stone inscription of King Kyanzittha (r. 1084-1112) linking the power of the rulers with Rama (Thein Han and U Khin Zaw 1976, 138).

Literary versions

With respect to extant literary works, there are nine versions of the Rama story that can be found in Myanmar, all of which were tran-

scribed in some form or another in the late half of the 19th century (Ohno 2000, 1-5; Ohno 1997, 32-36; U Tthaw Kaung 2002, 139-140; Thein 1976). The most important of these are:

1. *Rama Vatthu*: two recently discovered palm leaf manuscripts estimated to date back to the 17th century, which would make this the oldest version in Myanmar. This prose work, in which Rama is identified as being a former life of the Buddha, was translated into English by Ohno Toru, who compared the Moungsing version from Laos with a version found in Yunnan province, China, and the *Rama Vatthu* version in Myanmar and concluded they "…are basically identical…[such that]…it will be reasonable to regard the three versions…to be composed of a single group, separated from the other vernacular Rama stories of Southeast Asia…" (2000, 43). Ohno also compared *Rama Vatthu* to the *Rama I Ramakien* and concluded that there was likely to have been some influence from Ayutthaya (2000, 66).

2. *Thiri Rama*: a mixture of prose and verse for dramatic performance. The original was believed to have been created from the Thai version by a commission of high-ranking members of royalty, poets and officials created by order of the Crown Prince, the eldest son of King Bodawpaya (1782-1819) (U Tthaw Kaung 2002, 142; TMK, 3). U Thein Han compared *Thiri Rama* with *Rama I Ramakien* and found *Thiri Rama* to be a different work. He went on to note that this may have been because he used *Rama I Ramakien*, whereas the Thai version used for the translation came from an earlier version from the Ayutthaya period that is now lost (1976, 143).

3. *Pondaw Rama Lakkhana Yodaya Zat Vatthu*: a mixture of prose and verse for dramatic performance written by U Maung Gyi in 1910, is said to have been derived from a Thai version of the Rama story because part of the title, '*Yodaya Zattawgyi*', translates as the '*Great Jataka of Ayutthaya*'. It might be noted that, given the fact that the *Rama I Ramakien* is not styled as a *jātaka* in any form, the Thai version may have been one taken from Ayutthaya after its defeat by the Burmese in 1767.

Thai connections

Although music, song and dancing has been a part of Myanmar culture from the Pyu period (c. 2nd BCE to c. mid-11th CE), court drama developed quite late, in the late 18th century during the Konbaung era (1752 to 1885), starting with the introduction of the Rama story by Thai artists who were brought back after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. The Burmese courtiers who heard the music and songs had the Siamese help them to incorporate these into the classical music repertoire. Accordingly, there is no doubt that as far as dramatic performance is concerned, Myanmar scholars all agree that the Rama dance drama was obtained from Thai sources (Thein Han 1976, 140-142). U Htin Aung notes:

> …many of the Burmese scholars themselves were against any substantial changes in the presentation of the play at their court. They were for borrowing from and imitating the Siamese play but they held that the model must be kept unchanged and intact… Therefore, the scenes (of the *Rama* play) were presented in the same sequence as in the original, the characters were the same and the story remained the same (1937, 45).

Vietnam-Cham

Of all the mainland Southeast Asian societies, Vietnam appears to have the least long-term development of the Rama legend. However, some of the oldest evidence of the presence of the Rama story in Southeast Asia can be found in several inscriptions discovered in the area of present day Vietnam. The oldest is said to be from the 3rd century CE and includes the quotation of a famous line from the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* (Filliozat 2003, 192-193). This temple appears to be unique as well, in that it is one of the few temples dedicated to Vālmīki, as mentioned in a 7th century Champa inscription at a temple in which the image of Vālmīki was housed (Sarkar 1998, 106). The temple's founder, King Praksadharman Vikrantavarman (r. 653-686), the son of a Cambodian princess, was a follower of Vishnu and is said, given his attachment to the Rama story and his dedication to Vālmīki, to have been indebted to Khmer culture.

With respect to Cham literature, one of the five poems that represents the popular cultural heritage is the Cham version of the Rama story, *Pram Dit Pram Lak* (the story of Rama and Lakshmana). Gerard Moussay, who has studied these texts, found similarities with the Malay *Hikayat Sri Rama*, although the title appears to have some connection with the Khmer or Lao versions. Since there are no written texts remaining from that period, Geoffrey Marrison concludes by stating: "We have in fact what appears to be a folk tradition rather than an established literary one: perhaps we should look to the Cambodian dance-drama…as the source of the Cham work" (1985, 49).

Philippines

"In the backyards of the collective unconscious of the Philippines are repeated resonances of the epic of Rama" (Chandra 1998, 652), the farthest place in Southeast Asia that the Rama story has traveled (Brockington 1984, 305-306). Here, the story exists in a prose version called *Maharadia Lawana* (*Maharaja Ravana*) in the Maranaw script and language spoken in parts of the southern island of Mindanao.[5]

Juan R. Francisco has written extensively on this version of the Rama story, translating the narrative in his work "Maharadia Lawana" (1969, 188). He explains that before the arrival of Islam, this area was subject to early contact by Indian and Chinese traders, hence the possible transmission of the Rama story, although the tale has been "…reduced to almost microscopic size in the *Maharadia Lawana*" (1969, 202). Some have noted the connection between the Javanese and Malay folk versions and the *Maharaja Ravana* (Brockington 1984, 305-306),[6] while Kam points out that "…while some motifs may have come from Malay and Javanese traditions, the elements had evolved and changed so much between the mid-17th and early 19th centuries that the story can be considered as an independent tradition" (2000, 8). In this regard, Francisco gives a detailed comparison of many elements of *Maharaja Ravana* with the Malay versions and the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, pointing out many similarities and differences (1969,

5 Interestingly, Ravana has only eight heads in this version, as opposed to the usual ten in most other renditions (Francisco 1998, 155).

6 It might be noted that Maranaw is in the same language family as Malay and Javanese.

218). However, one aspect of similarity with the Malay versions is that neither is a serious religious or moral work (Francisco 1969, 218).

Discussion and conclusion

From this survey of the versions and renditions of the Rama story in Southeast Asia, we can see the widespread and diverse absorption of the saga in this region, as well as the relationship between the many tellings of the Rama story in the various cultures and localities of the area. There would appear to be a number of reasons why the Rama story resonated so strongly and was so readily adopted by the people throughout the ages in Southeast Asia.

The first is that, wherever the Rama story has been introduced, it has become thoroughly infused with elements that are familiar and comfortable with the local people. This ranges from the inclusion of local customs and traditions, to the manner of dress and detailed descriptions of architecture, landscape, geography, flora and fauna. All of these elements make the story, either in visual depiction, performance or as read, comfortable and appealing to local readers, no matter of what culture or society.

The second reason is that, as a result of the localization process, people can easily identify with many of the characters in the Rama story. Rama, the exemplary ruler, is often closely identified with the ruling monarch as one who is above reproach because of his deep moral integrity, sense of duty to the people and his ability to bring peace, prosperity and protection to the realm. Sita is the faithful and dutiful wife, sacrificing and enduring in the name of her love and devotion to her husband. Hanuman, the loyal soldier, is one who shows unquestioned duty to the ruler and realm, even though he also plays the obligatory role in many classical literature traditions of being the flirtatious playboy enjoying many amorous exploits. These reflect the deeply held beliefs in social hierarchy, including the roles and position in society that local people are so familiar with and can identify. Even Ravana (Thotsakan), the apparent embodiment of evil, is one whose actions allow the reader to have an enemy to root against but who, in most versions, has some redeeming qualities so that he is not universally reviled and is sometimes even pitied. In fact, one could say that Ravana is a much more 'human' character in that he expresses

many different emotions and feelings, much as the average reader or viewer might experience.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, is that the Rama tale, in addition to all its symbolic, moral and didactic aspects, is an adventure story that appeals to audiences in all its forms: written, performed and visually depicted. This is perhaps one of the most important reasons that this tale has been adopted and adapted into nearly every culture and society in Southeast Asia. The universal nature of its themes, right over wrong, faithful love and devotion, the triumph of honesty and integrity, enhances the wild adventure and fantastic imagination of the authors and thus makes the story enjoyable to read and watch. Notwithstanding the classical nature of this piece of literature, which many people struggle to read with its ancient words and poetic nature, the story resonates and has continually appealed to audiences.

Finally, this ostensibly 'Hindu' story has been infused with many other elements such that it can be easily understood and accepted by cultures that are predominantly non-Hindu, such as Thai Buddhist or Muslim Malay societies. This is perhaps also the reason why the story has been readily adapted with depictions and representations into non-Hindu religious settings. Also, this provides further support for why it has been so significant to and influential on local audiences. It is for these reasons that the Rama story has had such success in being integrated into many cultures and societies.

Looking at the Rama story more universally, from the survey of the versions and renditions of the Rama story in Southeast Asia as detailed above, we can see that there has been widespread and diverse adoption, absorption and adaptation of the saga throughout Southeast Asia. The basic outline of the story has shown a remarkable flexibility to be able to sustain change and adaption, both in interpretation and interpolation. In addition, the story, which started as a clear Hindu narrative of a sacred and religious nature, has been successfully absorbed into a wide variety of spiritual or religious environments as it was introduced to diverse cultures and societies – Rama could be Hindu, Jain, Buddhist or Islamic. The story, being so universally understandable, has shown the remarkable flexibility to absorb and adapt as necessary in order to become accepted by each different society and culture.

In this regard, many have expressed opinions and views regarding the relationship between the many versions in Southeast Asia. Such

relationships, rather than merely showing differences between various cultures and traditions, also show a commonality and basis for potentially creating ties between the many societies. Someone who is familiar with the Rama story in their own culture comes with some background and understanding when exposed to the story in another culture and setting. This means that given the shared tradition of the Rama tale among nearly all the cultures of Southeast Asia, this story has the ability to serve as a cultural peace ambassador promoting mutual understanding among the people of this region. This was clearly shown at the International Ramayana Festival, held in Bangkok in December, 2011, where dance and music troops from eight countries held a performance of the entire story, each performing a separate scene. This gathering highlighted and reinforced the sense of cultural pride and appreciation for each other that the Rama saga has been able to foster as it has spread. The Rama story has endured the ages and movement from culture to culture, from region to region, to remain both popular in performance and captivating in depiction – truly a case of "Literature in Transmigration".

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