

Pursuing Rama: A Study of Appropriation in a Philippine Context¹

Matthew Constancio Maglana Santamaria

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1968, Dr. Juan R. Francisco was shown “Maharadia Lawana: A Lanao Prose Version of the Ramayana, A Celebrated Hindu Poem” by Dr. Mimitua Saber, Director of the University Research Center, Mindanao State University in Marawi City. This encounter with a Maranaw text led to further research that put the Philippines in the list of “Ramayana countries.”² Finally, a living link was established with other Asian countries that had the tradition. The possibilities offered for a greater understanding of Philippine culture within the context of the country’s links with Asia was greatly expanded. As an artifact that changes its length, plot, cast of characters...indeed its very shape and color as it crosses cultural habitats, the Ramayana may be considered a repository of values that are subjected to society-specific processes of selection and ordering. The Philippines has not only been rendered comparable to other Asian societies, its approach towards the sacred through the study of the Ramayana text has also moved into the fold of reality.

This study looks at continuities and discontinuities in the ever-expanding diaspora of the epic. Two texts are studied, the original text of the Maranaw epic as transcribed by scholars and the unwritten text of a contemporary dance drama staged by Filipino expatriates at the La Mama Theater-New York.³ A comparison of the contents of the two texts reveals the highly variable nature of narratives as it travels from the field to the contemporary proscenium stage. In order to achieve some level of theatrical viability, the texts of oral narratives are modified or “translated” to suit the requirements of the new

medium. Translation however does have its share of dangers. A new artifact possessing significant changes may lead to an opposition of insider and outsider's views. Dissonance results when a new artifact, often representing outsiders' views, are presented as authentic or "closely following the original." When the insider's version becomes marginalized, a condition of effective bastardization prevails. The sacred is profaned and the act of appropriation effectively robs insiders of entitlement over their cultural property.⁴ In this vein, limits to license need to be determined through a thorough hearing and consideration of native voices. This study takes a small but hopefully significant step towards that direction.

FROM LANA TO LA MAMA

"Rajah Magandiri,"⁵ the La Mama-New York version of the Philippine Ramayana is a dance drama produced by Kinding Sindaw Company staged from November 30 to December 10, 2000. The artistic director/choreographer of the dance drama is Potri Ranka Manis (also known by her Christian name as Mae Monteclaro-Roca). She is referred to as a "princess from Mindanao" and "daughter of the Maranao Sultan of the Maranao tribe (sic)."⁶ The performers are mostly non-Maranaw residents of New York. The performance received mixed reviews from critics who seem to exhibit zero or almost no knowledge of the Maranao society and culture.

Table 1 compares the sequence of scenes between the original Maranao text and the La Mama Theater-New York Production of Rajah Magandiri. The Philippine Ramayana, unlike many other versions of the epic, is entitled Maharadia Lawana (Ravana). The narrative starts with Lawana causing trouble in Pulu Bandiarmasir because of his gossiping. The Sultan puts him in a raft and exiles him. He lands on an island and sets to sacrifice himself in a pyre. He wails to the high heavens. Diabarail (the Angel Gabriel) hears him and gets divine intercessions. Lawana's sacrifice is stopped. He is told that all causes of death will not kill him except for a weapon that is sharpened in the whetstone of the palace in Bandiarmasir. Lawana goes back to Bandiarmasir and meets no further opposition.

Table 1
Comparison of Sequences between the Original Maranaw Text
and the La Mama Theater-New York Production Text

<i>Maharadia Lawana</i>	<i>Rajah Magandiri</i>
Lawana's Exile and Return to Bandarmasir (1-9)	Overture
Shipwreck of Radia Magandiri and Radia Mangawarna (10-17)	Shipwreck of Radia Magandiri and Radia Mangawarna
<i>Sipa</i> Game, the Winning of the Hand of Potre Malano Tihaia for Marriage(18-35)	<i>Sipa</i> Game, the Winning of the Hand of Potre Malano Tihaia for Marriage
The Search for Magandiri and the Sultan's Invitation (36-50)	Oracle asks Rajah Magandiri to Kill the Gigantic Snake, The Killing of the Snake
The <i>Bai</i> 's Test, The Killing of the Gigantic Snake (51-54)	Oracle gives a (magical?) Knife to Potre Malano Tihaia
Settling near the Forest (55-58)	The Wedding
Potre Malano Tihaia's Abduction (60-61)	Potre Malano Tihaia's Abduction
Birth of Laksamana (62-64)	Oracle Prepares Magandiri and Mangawarna
Laksamana's Offer of Help (65-75)	Befriending of Laksamana, Laksamana's Offer of Help
Laksamana tames the Crocodile King(76-78)	Battle Scene with Laksamana, Mangawarna, and Magandiri
Laksamana Rescues Potre Malano Tihaia (79-81)	The Death of Lawana
The Death of Lawana (82-83)	Potre Malano Tihaia's Test of Fire
Return to Agama Niog (84-86)	Passing the Test, The Lover's Happy Ending

In the La Mama-New York production, the epic in the form of a dance drama starts with a musical overture that introduces main characters of the play in bits of choreographed passages. The performance form, apart from an obvious difference in title, constitutes the first major departure from the original Maranaw text that was not performed as a dance drama. It was instead recited by an oralist or a story-teller.

Both versions converge in the second scene. This scene portrays the shipwreck endured by Radia Magandiri and Radia Mangawarna en route to Pulu Nabandai where the famed beauty, Potre Malano Tihaiia lives. The two are fortunately carried to the shores of Nabandai. A kindly old woman, Kabaian, adopts them. The character of Kabaian seems to be lost in the dance drama version whereas in the original version, she plays a substantive role as surrogate mother to the two noble men.

Again, both versions converge in the following scene. Upon fully recovering, the two brothers learn from Kabaian (the character again seemingly dropped from the dance drama) that Potre Malano Tihaiia's hand in marriage is offered by the Sultan to whoever can kick the *sipa*, a woven rattan ball, to her room. The original Maranaw version proceeds to narrate the two brothers' skill and Magandiri's eventual success. Potre Malano Tihaiia eventually gives her kerchief, betel nut case, and ring to Magandiri, who immediately leaves the scene of the game unannounced. The La Mama-New York dance drama flounders in this scene because of the performers' lack of skill in the game of *sipa*. Instead of *sipa* or what is known as *sepak* in other Southeast Asian cultures, the performers play a rather unconvincing round of kickball. This modified movement on stage may be seen by aficionados as an act of profanation of the well-loved *sipa* and perhaps even an unforgivable appropriation or modification of football.

In the original Maranaw text, the following part of the narrative tells about the Sultan's search for Magandiri. He eventually finds Magandiri in Kabaian's house. With him are Potre Malano Tihaiia's tokens of acceptance. With the search over, the Sultan invites Magandiri to the palace to perform ablutions and prepare for his marriage to Potre Malano Tihaiia. In the La Mama-New York production, no search is conducted. The next test or rite of passage is made known to

Magandiri by the character of the Oracle. Magandiri is asked to kill a gigantic snake. He does this single handedly, using a (magical?) bow that he receives from the oracle. The addition of this character is another major divergence from the original Maranaw epic. Her inclusion as a character who foretells the future, gives magical weapons and power-imbuing mystical training appears to give Magandiri an overwhelming advantage over the main antagonist. This toying with characters unfortunately dampens the drama and decreases the overall effectiveness of the plot.

The Sultan's plans for a wedding are temporarily delayed, in the original Maranaw text, by the *Bai* (the Sultan's wife). She asks Magandiri to go through another test, that is, to kill the gigantic snake in the forest. Magandiri and Mangawarna collaborate and jointly kill the snake with the use of bows and arrows that they made themselves. The collaborative act affirms Mangawarna's importance in the epic. His exclusion in the corresponding scene from the La Mama production seems to lessen his importance as a model of brotherly love and uncomplaining loyalty. In the fifth scene of the La Mama production, the Oracle once again contributes to the plot by giving Potre Malano Tihaiia what appears to be a magical knife. Its magical qualities and origins are, however, vaguely communicated in the movement text. (Perhaps, the program notes contained detailed summaries of scenes. Until one is made available for study, this statement remains in the realm of assumption).

In the sixth part of the narrative, the original Maranaw text portrays a homesick Magandiri. He decides to take his wife home to Pulu Agama Niog, through a land route. Somewhere in between Nabandai and Agama Niog, Magandiri, his wife, Mangawarna and their entourage decide to establish a settlement in a fertile flat land located near a forest. The La Mama production, in contrast, proceeds with a lavish wedding replete with songs and dances. The repertoire of dances shown in this scene strangely mixes movement vocabularies and whole dances from different Islamic groups of the South. The Oracle, played by Potri Ranka Manis, a person who claims to be a Maranaw, oddly dances a Tausug piece!

In the original Maranaw text, Lawana distracts Magandiri and Mangawarna by turning into a deer with golden horns. Lawana, in

the form of a deer, lures them away from home. As the two lose their way in the forest and go farther from their home, Lawana tears down the walls of the couple's house. He abducts Potre Malano Tihaiia and brings her to his palace in Bandiarmasir. In the corresponding scene in the La Mama production, Lawana does not turn into a deer. He sends a deer to lure the two men into the forest and abducts a surprised (and an unexplainably unaccompanied) Potre Malano Tihaiia, himself.

After the abduction, the original Maranaw text goes into a side plot that tells the story of the birth of Laksamana (Hanuman in this text). Magandiri becomes tired and falls asleep and dreams of being gored by a wild carabao (water buffalo). One of his testicles is thrown off to the East where Queen Langkawi, thinking that it was a jewel, swallows it and immediately becomes pregnant...eventually giving birth to a monkey, Laksamana. In the La Mama production, this side plot is omitted. Instead, a very assuring Oracle prepares Magandiri and Mangawarna for battle through a battery of martial arts exercises, prayers and rituals.

The original Maranaw text continues the narrative with a meeting of father (Magandiri) and son (Laksamana). After the revelation of their relationship to each other, Laksamana offers his help backed by the impressive force of an army of carabaos. In the La Mama production, since the birth of Laksamana was omitted, his character as magical monkey is reduced to a lucky twist of fate in a meeting with the brothers in the forest. The movement vocabulary in the form of mime clearly indicates that Magandiri befriended Laksamana through an offering of fruit. This modification seems to reduce Laksamana into a domesticated creature. His magical qualities are glossed over and his motive in helping Magandiri becomes unclear. (That is, unless an act of kindness through an offering of fruit is considered to be sufficient).

The next part of the narrative in the original Maranaw text further develops Laksamana's character. His strength and magical qualities are underscored in his taming of the crocodile king, whose minions (lesser crocodiles) join the army of carabaos in the following siege of Bandarmasir. The La Mama production, on the other hand, once again drops this section about Laksamana and goes straight to the

grand battle with Lawana. Laksamana, Mangawarma and Magandiri respectively take their turns in battling with Lawana. They all fail to overpower Lawana. Potre Malano Tihaiia, at one point, prevents Lawana from stabbing Magandiri by biting him from behind.

In the original text, as Magandiri, Mangawarma, and the army of carabaos and crocodiles wait by the shore, Laksamana rescues Potre Malano Tihaiia and brings her back to his father. In the La Mama text, death comes swiftly in this scene when Magandiri and Potre Malano Tihaiia, fighting side by side, corner Lawana and stab him in perfect unison with the weapons given by the Oracle.

The original text proceeds in the following section with the pursuit of the antagonist after the return of Potre Malano Tihaiia. The strength and skill of the brothers, the force of Magandiri and Mangawarna are, however, ineffective with the nearly invincible Lawana. Laksamana's intervention proves to be most fortunate. He gets Magandiri's *kampilan* (a double-edged sword) and sharpens it on the fateful whetstone of the palace. This transforms Magandiri's *kampilan* into a weapon that finally pierces Lawana's invincibility and brings him death. The La Mama text, meanwhile, adds a scene not included in the Maranaw version of the Ramayana. A lady of the court questions Potre Malano Tihaiia's purity. All characters including Magandiri turn away and start avoiding her. A sad Potre Malano Tihaiia bravely undergoes the test of fire.

In the last part of the original text, the whole entourage goes back to Agama Niog where the story of Magandiri and Mangawarna began and where it now ends happily with Laksamana transforming into a handsome datu. In the La Mama production, a grand finale reunites Magandiri with Potre Malano Tihaiia after she passes the test of fire.

At this juncture, it is worth mentioning that the two texts converge only in four of the thirteen sections or scenes. The La Mama understandably needs to modify the text written for a recitation so that it may succeed in the theatrical form of a dance drama. It, however, appears to have taken too much liberty. The character of Laksamana is reduced in terms of importance. The character of a powerful Oracle changes the power configuration and therefore reduces the drama of the narrative. The joint killing of Lawana elevates the female character but further distances the text from the

original. And last but not the least, the inclusion of the test of fire, although admittedly very colorful and theatrically one of the more effective scenes in the otherwise uninspiring production, reverses the earlier elevation of the female role and brings it to a level unknown to the value system of the collective of origin. Briefly, La Mama, as translation, does not show any effort in remaining true to the original in its plot, in its characterization, and in its instances of artistic omission and elaboration. Doubtless, it is safe to say that La Mama is a different Ramayana from the Maranaw original. Points of discontinuity outnumber points of continuity. License seems to have taken precedence over authenticity.

The Roots of License

After pointing out discontinuities, the issue of a liberal use of artistic license needs to be examined. Some clues may be gleaned from “allied texts” of the La Mama production. These are source materials that come in the form of press releases, newspaper articles, homepage features and the like. A review of these materials reveals serious gaps in knowledge. These gaps are rather incredible when exhibited by insiders or by people who have access to insiders. An introductory blurb for the performance found in Kinding Sindaw’s homepage for instance states the incredible:

Did you know that once upon a time ... (sic) the
Philippines was a part of the Indian Empire?

This rather extreme form of the Indianization of Southeast Asia reveals a very shallow understanding of not only Maranaw history but Philippine and Southeast Asian history as well. Following this erroneous text, a production poster contained in the same homepage shows Potri Ranka Manis, the apparently self-proclaimed princess and daughter of a Maranao Sultan¹, wearing what appears to be a Maguindanaon (not a Maranao) *malong* (tubular wear akin to the *sarong*). She also wears it in a manner that some informants from the region find to be rather improper. The *malong* tied over one shoulder is usually seen among women who are about to go to the bathroom. Furthermore, Potri Ranka Manis who as a child supposedly trained

“in all traditional dance, music, and martial art forms of her people,” (note: “all” not “many” or “most”) wears *janggalay* or ornamental nails/claws of the *pangalay* dance style of the Sulu Archipelago. Her appropriation of an artifact belonging to other ethno-linguistic groups is rather odd in the context of the traditional rivalry of these groups. Potri’s careless appropriation becomes even more apparent when one notices that the ornamental nails/claws are worn the wrong way out! Philippine practitioners of the *pangalay* and dancers of Southeast Asian court traditions will agree that the flexion of her wrists and the curvature of her fingers leave much to be desired. This visual assessment is similar to that of a poorly trained ballerina who does not know how to point her feet properly.

Similar lapses in cultural literacy are observable in other articles in the homepage. For example, in the preface of Kining Sindaw’s “Mission Statement,” another fallacy or myth is put forward as fact:

Once upon a time...

There was the Dunya Melayu Nusntara, an empire consisting of contemporary Malaysia, Indonesia, South Thailand, and the Philippines. Though this ancient civilization no longer exists, its rich cultural tradition of song, dance, storytelling, and martial arts has been preserved through the work of Kinding Sindaw...

Whereas an earlier reference to India puts forward an extreme view of Southeast Asian Indianization, this reference to the “Malay world” puts forward an extreme Malay cosmology. No such empire/civilization existed. No archaeological or historical evidence support this view, alas more creative than informative. Furthermore, another problem in grasping reality is revealed as the article mentions “royal court dances of the Maranao Sultanate.” Royal court dances in the same league of Khmer, Thai and Javanese court traditions never developed in the Philippines. A class of artists enjoying full royal patronage could not emerge because of late political development and the stunting incursion of Western colonial forces. Clearly, the “royal label” in Kinding Sindaw’s discourse should be seen in the light of “license.”

Summary and Conclusions

In pursuing Rama, a significant number of discontinuities may be observed between Maharadia Lawana, the original Maranaw epic and Rajah Magandiri, the contemporary dance drama staged at the La Mama Theater-New York. Briefly, some of the major ones are:

1. modification in the sequencing of scenes or sections,
2. omission and addition of scenes,
3. omission, downgrading, and addition of characters,
4. modification of role-specific actions, and
5. liberal appropriation of non-native artifact.

The extent of discontinuities warrants the conclusion that the two Ramayana narratives constitute two entirely different texts, one authentic and original, and the other, inauthentic, negotiated, and quite divorced from tradition.

The liberal use of artistic license in the latter text seems to stem from a combination of the following factors:

1. faulty knowledge held by agents of culture, in this case the members of the Philippine diaspora in New York associated with the La Mama production;
2. the absence of both expertise and a knowledgeable “insider” (in this case, native Maranaw) community in the performance world of New York;
3. inadequate institutional arrangements that ought to have protected Philippine cultural property from irresponsible appropriation; and
4. the failure of criticism to bridge knowledge gaps and assess textual integrity.

The case of La Mama underscores the fact that the Ramayana continues to travel and change across space and time. This writer does not espouse rigidity in artifact creation. Instead, this writer tries to remind the performance world of the importance of treating the cultural property of others with respect. Expression for expression’s sake can never be an excuse for profanation. Perhaps, through this short piece that ends with calling a spade a dirty shovel, it is hoped that the joyful experience of realizing Rama in a great number of traditional forms remains realizable and continues to be truly profound.

Endnotes

¹Paper delivered in the South and Southeast Asian Association for the Study of Religion Conference, New Delhi, January 27-30, 2005.

²Juan R. Francisco, **From Ayodhya to Pulu Agama Niog: Rama's Journey to the Philippines** (Quezon City: Asian Center, 1994), p. 102.

³The La Mama Theater performance text analyzed in this work is based on a video recording of the performance lent by its director, Mr. Wayland Quintero to this writer through Mr. Garret Kam.

⁴The concept of profanation operationalized in detail by Paul Bouissac, "The Profanation of the Sacred in Circus Clown Performances," and James L. Peacock, "Ethnographic Notes on Sacred and Profane Performance," in Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, **By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual** (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵The Maranaw version of the epic was first adapted for stage by the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) in its 1993 staging of "Ang Paglalakbay ni Radiya Magandiri: Isang Pilipinong Ramayana," (The Travels of Rajah Magandiri: A Filipino Ramayana) written by Rudy Vera based on the original Maranaw text and directed by Lutgardo Labad. A brief history is found in Doreen G. Fernandez, **Palabas** (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1996).

⁶"NY Pinay dances to help promote Muslim Culture," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, September 29, 2001 p. 1. Also see Kining Sindaw Homepage, (searched February 6, 2003) "Kinding Sindaw Performance," by chini@concentric.net

⁶The existence of sultanates in Lanao is subject of a fierce debate. The region did not develop pre-modern states at the level of the sultanates of Sulu (established ca 1450) and Maguindanao (ca 1458) owing to the isolation of the upland mountain terrain. It is also quite strange that Potri Ranka Manis never mentions the name of her father, the exalted Sultan.

Matthew Constancio Maglana Santamaria is associate professor of Asian Studies at the Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman. He received the degree of Doctor of Law in Political Science from Kyoto University, Japan in 1999. He is a noted scholar of Asian culture, society and politics. He is also a dance artist-choreographer who specializes in the Sama Dilaut Igal dance tradition of the Southern Philippines. A veteran performer with a long theatrical experience with theater companies such as Dulaang UP, Repertory Philippines, Dance Theatre Philippines, Philippine Ballet Theatre, Powerdance, Alun-Alun Dance Circle and Tanghalang Ateneo, Dr. Santamaria combines the disciplines of performance and the social sciences in his research and academic works.