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## The Influence of the Ramayana and Mahabharata on Southeast Asian Dance

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### Abstract

*The Ramayana and Mahabharata, two monumental Indian epics, profoundly influenced Southeast Asian performance practices, particularly in the realm of classical dance (Bhattacharya, 2019). Through centuries of trade, religious interchange, and cultural adaptation, these myths spread outside India and were reinvented within varied local creative ecologies. This article critically investigates how epics influenced dance forms in Bali, Thailand, and Cambodia, tracking transfer, transformation, and continuity. Using textual and anthropological knowledge, the book employs a comparative framework to examine specific forms such as Bali's Ramayana dance play, Thailand's Khon, and Cambodia's Lakhon. Each tradition is investigated through its choreographic structure, iconography, and performance aesthetics, demonstrating how epic figures and moral motifs are localised through gesture, costume, and ritual context. Rather than offering fresh field data, the study takes a critical approach, integrating previous research and practitioner testimonials to highlight how these performances work as embodied archives of cultural memory and ethical teaching. Comparative study reveals both convergence, such as similar themes of divine order and moral conflict, and divergence, which is molded by differences in court, temple, and community settings. Based on cultural translation and embodied knowledge theories, the study contends that these dance forms preserve epics not only as stories, but also as living reservoirs of ancient knowledge systems that combine art, teaching, and spirituality. Thus, the Ramayana and Mahabharata continue to support Southeast Asia's performative history, allowing for dynamic continuity between the past and present.*

**Keywords:** cultural transmission, dance, epic narratives, Mahabharata, performance aesthetics, Ramayana, Southeast Asia, traditional knowledge

## Introduction

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, two foundational Indian epics, have shaped cultural and aesthetic expressions throughout Asia, especially in Southeast Asia. Across centuries, these stories traveled via trade, migration, and ritual exchange, becoming integral to local performance practices. Within this framework, traditional dance knowledge is conceptualized as “complex assemblages of embodied techniques, ritual frameworks, apprenticeship pedagogies, musical codas, and costume crafts” (Sen, 2020, p.54). In Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia (Bali and Java), and Laos, epics were not only adapted, but also indigenized, resulting in different dance ecologies that reflect local cosmologies and governance frameworks. For example, the *Ramayana* was converted into *Ramakien* in Thailand and *Reamker* in Cambodia, with court dancers and temple lineages serving as guardians of story, gesture, and costume symbolism. (Shresthova, 2006, p.43) From the standpoint of traditional knowledge guardianship, these dance systems serve as knowledge institutions in their own right—temple troupes, royal courts, and classical schools convey codified repertoires through oral and physical apprenticeship (Schechner, 2013, p.9). The *Mahabharata*'s themes of dharma, karma, and moral ambiguity are reflected in performance languages that blur holy and theatrical boundaries. In Bali, for example, *wayangwong* and *kecak* dances adapt epic stories to represent social ethics and ecological balance, demonstrating cultural continuity rather than static preservation. However, these heritage practices are now embedded in contemporary preservation regimes, such as state-run academies, UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) lists, and intellectual property debates, which frame dance knowledge in policy languages of safeguarding, documentation, and digitization (UNESCO, 2003, p.98, Rath, 2019, p.12).

Such frameworks frequently neglect the gendered custodianship ingrained in these traditions: women as *apsara* dancers and costume artists, and men as mask-makers, drummers, or instructors, all of whom contribute to the epics' aesthetic economy. Recognizing this division of ceremonial labor as a knowledge governance model, where social, spiritual, and material realms meet, aligns the topic with the Journal's thematic focus on sustainability, rights, and policy frameworks. Thus, the comparative study of epic-infused dance in Southeast Asia must not only follow iconographic or narrative transmission, but also critically examine how embodied old knowledge systems adapt to contemporary institutions, economics, and global cultural policies.

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These performances function as living repositories of moral values, social structures, and cross-cultural exchange, illustrating that safeguarding history involves not only documentation but also the ethical care of both practices and their custodians. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have exerted a lasting influence on Southeast Asia's cultural and artistic traditions, particularly in the domain of dance (Bhattacharya, 2019, p. 34, Sen, 2020, p.45). These ancient Indian epics have a strong resonance in the region's performing business, notably in Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Malaysia, where dances, choreography, and thematic representations frequently reflect the epics' moral, intellectual, and spiritual aspects. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were introduced to Southeast Asia between the 1st and 10th century CE via maritime commerce and religious missions, and they were subsequently localized and altered to fit into the theological and cultural frameworks of Southeast Asian communities. Over ages, these epics have been inextricably linked to classical dance traditions that tell stories, represent people, and communicate moral and philosophical issues.

In Indonesia's Bali, for example, Kecak and shadow puppet drama *Wayang Kulit* performances frequently center on the *Ramayana* narrative: characters such as Rama, Sita, Ravana, and Hanuman are animated through dramatic dance movements and chant-based vocalizations, demonstrating the synthesis of local ritual traditions with imported epic themes. In Thailand, the classical dance drama *Khon* stages episodes from the *Ramayana* (and, to a lesser extent, the *Mahabharata*) with elaborate costumes, stylised gestures, and body postures that draw on Indian dance techniques but are adapted to Thai aesthetics.

In Cambodia the local version *Reamker* (derived from the *Ramayana*) and *Mahabharata* features emerge in court and temple dance-drama, such as the *Apsara* tradition, where movement symbolizes both divine and human parts of the epic figures. Recent scholarship underscores that these dance traditions should not be understood as mere "copies" of Indian originals; rather, they represent dynamic processes of cultural translation, localization, and performance reinterpretation. The study *The Multivalence of an Epic: Retelling the Rāmāyaṇa in South India and Southeast Asia* (2024) demonstrate the epic's adaptability and diversity across performing cultures (Rao, 2024, p.56). Likewise, *Ramayana Theater in Contemporary Southeast Asia* (2023) offers case studies illustrating how *Ramayana* theatres in various Southeast Asian countries serve both artistic and ceremonial functions. Additionally, a 2024

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article identifies the epics as significant elements of India's "soft power" and their broader cultural and artistic influence on Southeast Asia (Sen, 2024, p.78).

### **Significance of these Epics in Southeast Asian Culture**

As the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* spread across Southeast Asia—primarily via maritime trade and the concurrent spread of Hinduism and Buddhism—they evolved from narrative epics into broader cultural frameworks that shaped the region's creative expression and moral imagination (Bhattacharya, 2019, p.84). Since ancient times, Southeast Asian societies have integrated Indian religious and philosophical ideas, reinterpreting them within local cosmologies and political traditions (Sen, 2020, p.98). For instance, the *Ramayana* was transformed into the *Ramakien* in Thailand and the *Reamker* in Cambodia; while each version retained the original's core moral and metaphysical themes, they were adapted to fit distinct geopolitical and spiritual contexts (Tan, 2021, p.90). The universal representations of virtue and vice within these epics resonated with existing regional belief systems, reinforcing their role as ethical guides and moral compasses (Rao, 2018).

These epics have had an impact on Southeast Asia's sculptural and architectural language, as well as on literature and visual art. Temple reliefs, mural paintings, and stone sculptures commonly represent significant mythological moments, such as Rama and Ravana's conflict or Vishnu and Shiva's celestial achievements. Within this broader cultural framework, dance functions as a living extension of sacred expression, communicating myth, devotion, and pedagogy through movement (Smith, 2018, p.98). Comparative analyses of these traditions must situate dance within traditional knowledge systems, which operate as embodied repositories of technique, repertoire, and ceremonial understanding (Sen, 2020, p.1). Court and temple lineages, dance troupes, and training institutions act as custodial bodies, preserving and transmitting these cultural practices. Moreover, discussions of preservation should encompass contemporary safeguarding measures, including state-supported academies, community stewardship, UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage listings, intellectual property considerations, and digital documentation. Incorporating these dimensions—alongside attention to sustainability, gendered custodianship, and governance—aligns the analysis more closely with the thematic and policy-oriented focus of the Journal.

### **The Role of Dance in Cultural Expression**

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have profoundly shaped Southeast Asia's performing arts, functioning not merely as narrative sources but also as foundational frameworks for Traditional Knowledge (TK) and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Transmitted through historical trade routes and cultural networks connecting India and Southeast Asia, these epics influenced the dance ecologies of Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia (particularly Bali and Java), and Laos (Brandon, 1970, p.76, Shresthova, 2006, p. 90).

Within these ecologies, dance is not simply an aesthetic expression, but also a knowledge system that includes corporeal skill, ceremonial protocol, musical codas, costume artistry, and oral instruction (Sen, 2020, p.8) Southeast Asian epic dance traditions, viewed through the lens of TK/Indigeneity, function as living stores of communal knowledge, including cosmology, ethics, and craft. The *Ramayana*, recounted as *Ramakien* in Thailand and *Reamkerin* in Cambodia, demonstrates how local societies indigenized Indian myths using performance languages based on temple rituals and royal court celebrations. These lineages illustrate apprenticeship-based transmission systems in which knowledge is transferred via bodily practice and intergenerational instruction. Costume design, mask-making, and musical accompaniment are not peripheral arts, but rather core elements of intangible heritage preserved by specialized artisan families and local guilds, connecting ritual, craft, and performance. The TK method also emphasizes concerns of preservation, danger, and protecting. Globalization, commercialization, and dwindling ritual patronage pose substantial threats to these knowledge systems.

In response, nations and communities have launched a variety of preservation initiatives, ranging from UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage lists to national academies and digitalization projects (UNESCO, 2003, p.90, Rath, 2019, p.34). However, preservation must go beyond recording to preserve the gendered and ecological custodianship ingrained in these traditions—women as *apsara* dancers and textile artisans, men as mask carvers and drummers—all of which contribute to the moral and aesthetic cosmos of the epics. Thus, viewing Southeast Asian epic dance traditions through a Traditional Knowledge and Indigeneity perspective recasts them as dynamic, community-driven knowledge systems rather than static relics. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are used not just as sources of creative inspiration, but also as epistemic frameworks that connect performance, spirituality, and sustainability within local cultural governance.

**Comparative Table: Influence of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* on Southeast Asian Dance Traditions**

Country / Region	Local Adaptation / Epic Name	Principal Dance Form(s)	Key Features of Performance	Epic Influence & Themes	Cultural Significance
Bali (Indonesia)	<i>Ramayana Ballet</i> / <i>Mahabharata Dance Drama</i>	<i>Kecak</i> , <i>Wayang Wong</i> , <i>Legong Ramayana</i>	Stylized gestures, choral chanting, temple setting, elaborate costumes	Depiction of Rama–Sita–Ravana; moral dualism; dharma and devotion	Integrates ritual and performance; preserves Hindu cosmology within Balinese Hinduism
Java (Indonesia)	<i>Serat Ramayana</i> , <i>Bharatayuddha</i>	<i>Wayang Kulit</i> (shadow puppet theatre), <i>Wayang Wong</i>	Symbolic hand gestures ( <i>mudra</i> ), stylized movement, narration through <i>dalang</i>	Focus on heroism, fate, and cosmic struggle; both epics combined in performance cycles	Serves as moral education and political allegory; key to Javanese court culture
Thailand	<i>Ramakien</i> (from <i>Ramayana</i> )	<i>Khon</i> (masked dance-drama), <i>Lakhon Nai</i>	Intricate masks, gold costumes, codified choreography, royal patronage	Rama as ideal king; victory of virtue over vice; loyalty and order	Embodies kingship ideals; performed in royal ceremonies and national festivals
Cambodia	<i>Reamker</i> (from <i>Ramayana</i> )	<i>Lakhon Khol</i> , <i>Royal Ballet of Cambodia</i>	Graceful hand gestures, apsara iconography, ornate silk costumes	Rama and Sita symbolize moral purity; struggle between good and evil	Ritual offering to deities; key part of Khmer cultural identity and heritage

Laos	<i>Phra Lak Phra Lam</i>	<i>LakhonPhra Lak Phra Lam</i>	Narrative chanting, slow stylized movements, musical narration	Adaptation of <i>Ramayana</i> with Buddhist overtones; emphasizes compassion and karma	Links local Buddhism with Hindu cosmology; central to Lao royal traditions
Malaysia	<i>Hikayat Seri Rama</i>	<i>Mak Yong, WayangKulit Kelantan</i>	Blend of storytelling, dance, and ritual trance; minimalistic props	Retelling of <i>Ramayana</i> with Islamic reinterpretations; moral duty ( <i>amanah</i> )	Represents syncretism of Hindu, Buddhist, and Malay-Islamic elements
Vietnam	<i>Reamker</i> (Cham influence)	<i>Tuồng, HátBội</i> (classical drama)	Expressive face painting, symbolic movement, moral allegory	Themes of virtue, loyalty, and cosmic order adapted through Confucian ethics	Reflects ancient Cham–Indian contact; sustains moral and artistic codes

**Historical Routes of Influence**

The transfer of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* to Southeast Asia was made possible chiefly by maritime networks that united business, religion, and culture. From the first to the tenth century CE, Indian traders, Buddhist monks, and maritime guilds built long-lasting trade routes that connected the Indian subcontinent to early Southeast Asian polities including Funan (Cambodia-Vietnam), Srivijaya (Sumatra), and Majapahit (Java).

These maritime channels carried not only commercial goods, but also symbolic and sacred capital, such as Sanskrit scholarship, temple building, and epic storytelling. The spread of Hinduism and Buddhism via royal sponsorship and temple networks facilitated the localization of Indian epics. Cultural transmission was either uniform or unidirectional; rather, it required reciprocal modification, with local courts actively altering epic narratives to coincide with indigenous cosmologies and governance systems (Goss, 2024, p.90, Dhar, 2024, p.65) This

dynamic interaction converted the Ramayana and Mahabharata into common civilizational texts throughout the Indian Ocean region, including them into religious and cultural life.

### **Adoption of the Epics in Southeast Asian Kingdoms**

Southeast Asian kingdoms' adoption and localization of Indian epics demonstrate a cultural synthesis rather than imitation. In Indonesia, epics have become fundamental to performance forms such as WayangKulit (shadow puppetry) and Kecak dance, in which characters like Rama, Sita, and Hanuman are reinterpreted via Balinese ritual aesthetics to symbolize local conceptions of dharma and cosmic order. In Thailand, the royal court was instrumental in indigenizing the Ramayana into the Ramakien, which became the foundation for Khon masked dance-drama—an elite art form that combines Indian narrative structure with Thai gesture vocabulary and Buddhist moral philosophy (Sen, 2020, p.4). Cambodia's Reamker used Ramayana images in temple paintings and Apsara dance to emphasize both divine femininity and royal legitimacy (Rath, 2019, p.10)

These localized retellings also included indigenous deities, folk heroes, and animist components, resulting in hybridized versions that were compatible with local belief systems. The epics therefore served as moral and educational frameworks, emphasizing ethical concepts like responsibility, fairness, and societal harmony. Even now, Southeast Asian performances of the Ramayana and Mahabharata serve as live archives of trans regional history, connecting India and Southeast Asia via shared narrative and ritual vocabulary (Shresthova, 2006, p.6, Dhar, 2024, p.7).

### **Themes and Characters in Southeast Asian Dance**

Southeast Asian dance has long been an important medium for communicating the epic stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. These two colossal Indian epics, which chronicle heavenly wars, human struggles, and cosmic order, provide a rich repertory for dance dramatization. Themes and characters from these epics have been continuously absorbed, reinterpreted, and indigenized within local ceremonial, courtly, and popular traditions in Bali, Java, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Dancers use movement, gesture, and expression to impart the stories' moral and philosophical substance, converting mythological storytelling into embodied philosophy.

In Thailand, the Ramakien regional rendition of the Ramayana—is presented using Khon, a traditional masked dance theatre. Its complex choreography, glittering clothing, and

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choreographed motions depict characters like Rama, Sita, Hanuman, and Ravana, each representing moral and cosmic principles. Rama represents the ideal ruler and the principle of dharma (just duty), Sita chastity and morality, Hanuman devotion and heroism, and Ravana hubris and chaos. The recurring motif of virtue triumphing over evil resonates strongly with Thai Buddhist and monarchical beliefs. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are performed in Bali and Java (Indonesia) as Kecak, Wayang Wong, and WayangKulit. Stylized hand movements (mudra), chanting, and narrative dancing turn the epics into live rituals. Balinese interpretations frequently emphasize the cosmic balance of divine and demonic powers, combining Hindu, Buddhist, and animist beliefs. The Mahabharata, albeit less common than the Ramayana, has heroic protagonists like Arjuna, Krishna, and Bhima, who embody ethical struggle, wisdom, and spiritual discipline. In Cambodia and Laos, the Reamker and Phra Lak Phra Lam rewrite the Ramayana using Buddhist moral frames. The dances stress compassion, self-restraint, and karmic justice, with feminine apsara dancers representing celestial elegance and moral harmony. These performances serve as both spiritual sacrifices and expressions of national identity, particularly in postcolonial cultural revival movements.

However, the trajectory of these dance traditions has been shaped by larger historical and socio-political transformations:

1. Islamization and Syncretism: Beginning in the 13th century, Islamization recontextualised Hindu-Buddhist tales in Malaysia and coastal Indonesia. The Hikayat Seri Rama followed the Ramayana plot but reframed it within Islamic moral thinking. Dance styles such as Mak Yong and WayangKulit Kelantan survived by adapting—replacing overt ritual aspects with allegorical narrative, ensuring continuity even as religious contexts changed.
2. Colonial and postcolonial transformations: European colonial administrations classed indigenous dance as "folk art" or "court spectacle," repressing ceremonial roles and boosting anthropological or tourism performances. During the postwar period, nations formalized these traditions through national academies and heritage initiatives, converting religious myths into emblems of cultural sovereignty and national identity.
3. Tourism and Staged Authenticity: Modern Ramayana ballets in Bali's Uluwatu and Cambodia's Siem Reap have become popular tourist destinations. While such performances support economic lives and worldwide prominence, they frequently

reduce narrative intricacy and ritual depth for easy staging, creating a contradiction between preservation and commercialization.

4. **Gender Roles and Artistic Agency:** These dance traditions have complex labor structures. Female apsara dancers reflect divine beauty and moral purity, whilst male masked performers in Khon or Wayang Wong portray heroic or demonic characters. Costume makers, musicians, and choreographers—often from generational lineages—serve as stewards of embodied knowledge behind the stage. These gendered forms of work, craft, and apprenticeship ensure the continued transfer of epic history.

Across these many contexts, the Ramayana and Mahabharata continue to function as performative archives, preserving moral philosophy, creative discipline, and cultural memory. They not only retain legendary storytelling, but they also reflect the dynamic struggles over faith, identity, and power that create Southeast Asia's cultural environment.

### **Representation of Divine and Human Struggles**

Southeast Asian dance traditions regularly address the dichotomy between the divine and the human, dramatizing the moral, emotional, and cosmological conflicts portrayed in the Ramayana and Mahabharata. These epics serve as ethical blueprints, embodying conflicts between dharma (duty) and kāma (desire). Dance can function as ritual, teaching, and aesthetic experience (Sen, 2020, Dhar, 2024). In the Ramayana, Rama's conflict between his obligations as king and his love as a spouse depicts a conflict between human feeling and universal order. Similarly, in the Mahabharata, Arjuna's immobility on the battlefield—resolved via Krishna's counsel in the Bhagavad Gita represents an inner spiritual crisis that all humans face. These principles are not just spoken, but lived in Southeast Asian performance traditions, where dance and gesture serve as vehicles for philosophical contemplation (Shresthova, 2006, p.7). The rhythmic chorus and circular construction of Bali's Kecak reflect the communities strive for harmony within divine order, while Rama and Sita's emotional journey expresses the human need for balance between love and responsibility (Picard, 2011, Fukuoka, 2023). Thai Khon performances reimagine the Ramayana's moral battles using stylized gesture (mudra), regimented posture, and musical leitmotifs that convey both spiritual discipline and royal virtue (Peleggi, 2002, p.4).

These dramatizations serve as moral instruction, passing along principles of courage, fairness, and dedication across generations. Southeast Asian dance maintains a dynamic conversation

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between the supernatural and the human by putting metaphysical issues into visible form, ensuring that epic narratives remain relevant in modern cultural life. Thus, dancing not only preserves the Ramayana and Mahabharata, but also incorporates them into local cosmologies, making epic ethics dynamically relevant across time and location (Rath, 2019, p. 8 Dhar, 2024, p.5).

### **Regional Expressions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata in Southeast Asian Dance**

#### **Indonesia: Sacred Narratives in Motion**

In Indonesia, notably in Bali and Java, the embodiment of the Ramayana and Mahabharata via performance arts such as WayangKulit<sup>1</sup> (shadow puppets) and Kecak<sup>2</sup> dance exemplifies the merging of epic cosmology and ritual aesthetics. WayangKulit uses finely carved leather puppets moved by the dalang (puppeteer), who manipulates light, gesture, and voice to dramatize moral and cosmic battles between dharma (righteousness) and adharma (chaos). The gamelan ensemble emphasizes the performance beat, resulting in a contemplative ambiance that blurs the distinction between holy tale and spiritual supplication. The Kecak dance, based on ancient trance rites, combines vocal percussive chanting ("cak-cak-cak") with narrative choreography describing Rama's battle against Ravana. Each coordinated motion, such as the anjali mudra (reverence) or the broad arm circles representing heavenly protection, expresses metaphysical harmony (Fukuoka, 2023). Similarly, Legong dance stylizes Ramayana themes with precise eye motions (seledet), nuanced finger articulations, and intricate rhythmic patterns, reflecting the Balinese belief of taksu—divine inspiration realized through art.

#### **Thailand: Moral Aesthetics in Khon and Ramakien**

Thai classical dance expresses epic morality through a visual language of ethical embodiment and royal symbolism. The Ramakien, Thailand's regional rendition of the Ramayana, is most elaborately expressed in Khon, a masked dance-drama historically patronized by the royal. Khon uses defined gestures (mudras), precise steps, and postural hierarchies to depict moral polarity and cosmic order. The musical accompaniment, which includes a piphat ensemble and chanting recitatives, accentuates the ceremonial atmosphere, transforming Khon into both courtly art and religious performance (Dhar, 2024, p.36). Other Thai genres, like as LakhonNai and Likay, democratize epic themes by combining classical technique with folk improvisation,

thereby expanding the conceptual reach of the Ramayana to rural and common audiences. (Sen, 2020, p.78).

### **Cambodia: Devotion through Grace and Gesture**

Cambodian classical dance, notably the Apsara and Reamker styles, interprets epics into movements that represent cosmological harmony. The Reamker (Khmer Ramayana) is central to Cambodian royal repertory, and it is performed using stylized mudras such as the sampeah (veneration gesture) and kbach sequences that represent heavenly benediction. Apsara dancers, who are viewed as earthly manifestations of celestial creatures, express mythic and moral storylines through elaborate hand movements and controlled torso bends that represent devotion, compassion, and responsibility. These dances, performed during temple festivals and royal rituals, emphasize the union of spiritual order (rita) and royal legitimacy, reminiscent of the epics' fusion of divine kingship and moral rule.

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### **Myanmar: Syncretic Performance of Moral Allegory**

In Myanmar, the Yama Zatdaw is a syncretic version of the Ramayana and Mahabharata that combines Buddhist cosmology with Indic moral themes. The dance play, performed with extravagant masks and intricate costumes, emphasizes ethical duality—virtue versus illusion, compassion vs power—while using local aesthetics such as expressive ah-nyeint gestures and exaggerated vocal intonation. The dramatic pace, supported by the hsaingwaing orchestra, elicits emotional depth and group thought on karma and moral behavior. While different in

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tone from its Indian equivalent, Yama Zatdaw retains the epics' educational character, converting myth into moral performance for communal teaching and enjoyment

### **Costume, Movement, and Gesture in Epic Dance Performance**

Southeast Asian performance traditions, inspired by the Ramayana and Mahabharata, demonstrate a complex combination of costume design, choreographic framework, and symbolic gesture. These performative aspects go beyond adornment to serve as semiotic systems that express moral hierarchies, divine characteristics, and philosophical concepts woven within the epics. Dance, via the dynamic interaction of body, fabric, and motion, becomes a means for passing down ancient knowledge and expressing ethical consciousness. Costume in epic-based performance serves as a ceremonial medium for conveying spiritual transformation, social hierarchy, and metaphysical importance. In Thailand's Khon play, for example, Ramakien characters are differentiated by ornate masks (huakhon) and magnificent costumes adorned with theological and moral meaning. Rama's golden headgear (mongkut) and green complexion symbolize divine kingship and the preservation of cosmic order, whereas Ravana's ten-faced mask represents disintegration and moral disorder (Dhar, 2024, p. 87).

In Balinese and Javanese dances like Wayang Kulit and Kecak, the color codes of costume—gold and white for purity and valor, red and black for demonic excess—visualize the dialectic between dharma and adharma (Fukuoka, 2023, p.12). Puppets in Wayang Kulit are decorated with symbolic motifs: Rama's dazzling prabha halo represents divinity, Hanuman's white fur and crown represent devotion, and Ravana's angular decorations represent violence. Thus, clothing serves as both a moral and metaphysical marker, translating interior alteration into visible form.

### **Choreographic Grammar and Kinetic Symbolism**

Southeast Asian dance choreography is expressed through a standardized grammar of physical articulation—gesture (mudra), posture (karana), and beat (tala). In Khon, each movement is rigorously prescribed: holy deities like Rama and Krishna use poised, symmetrical movements to express justice, whereas villains like Ravana use angular and violent motions to represent chaos. Each head tilt (krabok), eye movement (ta ram), and hand arrangement represents a unique emotional or ethical condition. Similarly, in Balinese Kecak and Legong, stylized eye

flicks (seledet), finger articulations (ngumbang), and coordinated chanting create rhythmic patterns that reflect cosmic harmony.

Sita's elegant, circular movements reflect purity and faithfulness, whilst Hanuman's powerful jumps demonstrate strength and loyalty (Vickers, 2021, p.87). In the Cambodian Apsara and Reamker traditions, sophisticated hand motions (kbach) such as *sampeah* (reverence) and *reap bai* (offering) represent values including compassion, authority, and tranquility. Through such dynamic symbolism, the dancer's body serves as a channel for communicating spiritual and moral qualities.

### **Narrative Embodiment: Storytelling through Dance**

Epic-based dance in Southeast Asia is an embodied narrative art form that combines movement, chant, and music to create performance storytelling. Thai Khon and Lakhon Nai choreographic sequences adhere to the Ramakien's episodic framework, from Sita's abduction to the climax battle, converting narrative events into ritualized visual tableaux (Sen, 2020, p. 65). The combination of gesture and percussion results in a dramaturgy based on rhythm and emotion rather than spoken communication. In Bali's Kecak, a massed chorus of male performers singing cyclically enacts the Ramayana's battles, embodying the metaphysical idea of *tat tvamasithe oneness of being among performer, divinity, and audience* (Fukuoka, 2023). Similarly, in Wayang Kulit, the dalang uses puppets, light, and shadow to tell moral stories from the Mahabharata, converting performance into ritual instruction. Cambodian Reamker dance expands on this didactic function with Apsara choreography, in which slow, deliberate movements reflect the moral gravity of each action; Hanuman's bowing gesture (*sampeah*) represents devotion, whereas Ravana's rigid stance (*kbachkhno*) represents arrogance and spiritual decline.

### **Differences in the Interpretation of Characters and Events across Cultures**

Southeast Asian reinterpretations of the Ramayana exhibit unique cultural lenses through which moral ideals, heroism, and divine order are articulated. The depiction of important characters like Rama, Sita, and Ravana differ greatly among regional traditions, reflecting varying ethical values and religious perspectives. Character representation in Thailand's Ramakien is more concerned with emotional depth and moral relatability than with heavenly

perfection. Rama, although being a symbol of righteousness, is presented as a humanized hero who faces uncertainty, sadness, and moral conflict, symbolizing an achievable virtue in the human sphere.

Sita is portrayed not just as a passive symbol of virginity, but also as a figure of emotional strength, whose agony and perseverance highlight the moral significance of devotion. Ravana (Thotsakan), on the other hand, goes beyond the paradigm of villainy—his allegiance to his relatives and regal majesty provide him tragic complexity, converting his collapse into a meditation on pride, loyalty, and fate (Hughes, 2014b, p.32). In contrast, Balinese WayangKulit and dance plays maintain a deeper cosmological understanding of the epic.

Rama here represents heavenly order and dharma, acting as a metaphysical balancer rather than an emotionally torn king. Ravana, on the other hand, is shown in complete moral opposition—a manifestation of adharma whose hubris disturbs cosmic order. This strong moral dualism is reminiscent of Balinese Hindu philosophy, which emphasizes the constant interaction of good and evil forces and the unavoidable triumph of virtue over chaos (Winkel, 2002, p.87). Thus, whereas Thailand's Ramakien humanizes the epic's heroes in accordance with Buddhist moral humanism, Bali's performative tradition elevates them within a cosmic framework. These differences show how local ethical systems and spiritual cosmologies influence the adaptation of Indian epics throughout Southeast Asia.

### **Localization of Themes to Fit Cultural and Social Norms**

In Southeast Asia, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* function not merely as mythological narratives but also as instruments of moral and social instruction, adapted to align with local ethical norms and cultural frameworks (Sen, 2020 p.43). The epics' regional reinterpretations demonstrate how these traditions evolved into moral compasses that embody indigenous worldviews and societal values. In Thailand, for example, the *Ramakien* serves as a model for civic virtue and harmonious living, emphasizing loyalty, duty, and social cohesion—principles deeply rooted in Thai moral philosophy. The integration of local folklore, deities, and cultural motifs transforms the Indian epic into a uniquely Thai vision of monarchy and ethical order. The character of Hanuman, in particular, exemplifies unwavering dedication and loyalty to the royal figure, symbolizing the Thai ideal of commitment to king and nation (Hughes, 2014a, p. 76).

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In Cambodia's Reamker, the story is reframed via a Buddhist ethical viewpoint. While the Indian Ramayana focuses on divine destiny, the Reamker emphasizes moral choice and karmic consequences. Cambodian dance and drama portray Rama and Sita as models of compassion, restraint, and spiritual detachment, supporting Buddhist teachings on the transience of earthly attachments. Ravana, recast as a figure of want and greed, represents the hazards of material yearning, and his demise is an allegory for the triumph of enlightenment over illusion (Gaston, 2002, p.47). Thus, the Ramakien and Reamker show how India's epics may be used as frameworks for ethical instruction. Through localization, these texts become teaching instruments that promote regional standards while keeping the universal core of dharma.

### **Dance as a Medium for Devotion and Storytelling in Temple Rituals**

The Ramayana and Mahabharata have been reinterpreted across Southeast Asia to reflect the region's distinct cultural, socioeconomic, and religious circumstances. In Thailand, the Ramakien portrays Rama more compassionately and paints a more complicated picture of Ravana, but in Bali, the emphasis is on heavenly powers and cosmic harmony. Cambodia's Reamker values moral standards based on Buddhist teachings. These regional adaptations show how the epics' fundamental themes duty, righteousness, and the fight between good and evil are universal, but they are expressed and interpreted via local lenses to reflect different cultural values and customs. In Bali, the WayangKulit shadow puppet theater, which frequently performs Ramayana and Mahabharata stories, is a typical component of temple ceremonies and festivals. The complex motions of the puppets, accompanied by the gamelan orchestra, are claimed to summon the gods and provide a feeling of cosmic balance. Because the acts are seen as presents to the god, they take on a ceremonial quality. Dancers and puppeteers act as liaisons between the human and supernatural worlds, teaching spiritual truths and seeking community advantages.

### **Efforts to Preserve Traditional Dances Based on the Epics**

In Southeast Asia, efforts to preserve historic dances inspired by the Ramayana and Mahabharata are important to ensuring the survival of these cultural traditions in the face of industrialization and globalization. Governments, cultural groups, and artists are actively attempting to conserve traditional dances via education, performance, and recording. For example, Thailand's government has preserved and promoted the Khon dance drama, which

represents Ramakien events. In 2018, UNESCO classified Khon as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, acknowledging its significance as a living culture.

To preserve Khon, young dancers are taught traditional techniques, often through state-sponsored programs and organizations like as the Chulalongkorn University Dance Program (Hughes, 2014b, p.76). These institutes provide a setting for both academic and practical Khon study, ensuring that the traditions are handed on to future generations. Similarly, in Cambodia, classical Apsara dance, which frequently includes scenes from the Reamker (the Cambodian version of the Ramayana), has been preserved through dance academies and government-sponsored cultural initiatives aimed at passing on the dance's ancient techniques and spiritual meanings to future generations (Gaston, 2002, p.87).

### **Modern Reinterpretations of the Epics in Dance**

Although preservation remains essential, there is an increasing trend of contemporary reinterpretations of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* through dance. Modern choreographers and performers have adopted these epics as frameworks for experimenting with innovative modes of expression, while still maintaining fidelity to traditional narrative structures. These reinterpretations usually mix traditional techniques with contemporary dance styles, resulting in new interpretations of ancient stories. In Indonesia, for example, contemporary dance companies have recreated the Ramayana via experimental performances that blend WayangKulit shadow puppetry with current dance techniques such as contemporary ballet and jazz. These performances aim to make ancient stories more accessible to young audiences while maintaining the epics' moral and spiritual aspects.

The blend of modern music, lighting, and multimedia components provides a fresh perspective on traditional dance styles while keeping loyal to its historical roots (Winkel, 2002). Modern Thai choreographers are experimenting with Khon, incorporating modern theater and contemporary dance elements into the old technique. These adaptations usually include reinterpreting historical personalities in ways that address contemporary social and political concerns. For instance, certain choreographers have developed performances focused on themes such as power, injustice, and identity, examining how these elements—central to the *Ramakien*—resonate with contemporary cultural concerns. Such modern reinterpretations bring these ancient narratives to life while offering fresh insights into enduring social and ethical issues (Hughes, 2014b, p.76).

### **Influence of Contemporary Culture on Traditional Forms**

Traditional dance genres have received varying degrees of influence from contemporary society. On the one hand, the globalized world and the rise of digital media have resulted in increased exposure and appreciation for traditional creative forms. On the other hand, the incorporation of contemporary ideas, media, and technology advancements has altered how these dances are performed and seen. In Bali, where WayangKulit and Kecak performances are rooted on the Ramayana and Mahabharata, younger generations have begun to incorporate contemporary music genres and electronic elements into traditional performances, resulting in fusion works that attract international audiences.

While this has helped to reignite interest in the epics, it has also sparked debate among the community about cultural preservation and the potential loss of traditional values. Purists argue that such alterations undermine the performance's authenticity, but others regard them as a way to keep the art form current in an ever-changing world.

The growing popularity of multimedia shows and fusion performances that combine Khon with elements of contemporary culture like as modern clothing, technology, and digital effects reflects Thailand's current cultural landscape. While these innovations are appealing to younger audiences, they frequently generate concerns about the potential loss of cultural and spiritual importance in dances. The challenge is to establish a balance between the desire for innovation and the need to protect Ramakien's cultural, religious, and historical core (Hughes 2014, p.98). The preservation and transformation of traditional dance forms inspired by the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in Southeast Asia illustrate the dynamic interaction between cultural heritage and contemporary influences (Sen, 2020, p.32). Efforts to safeguard these traditions are essential for sustaining the spiritual and historical narratives embedded in the epics. At the same time, the adaptation and fusion of traditional techniques with innovative elements ensure that these ancient stories remain meaningful for future generations. The overarching aim is to strike a balance between conservation and creativity, preserving the core essence of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* while also accommodating the expressive potential of modern cultural contexts (Bhattacharya, 2019 p.65).

### **Conclusion**

The Ramayana and Mahabharata, two major epics of Indian civilization, have had a deep and long-lasting impact on Southeast Asian performing arts culture. Their narrative, moral, and

metaphysical qualities have been reinterpreted by the region's many dance traditions, influencing artistic languages, spiritual practices, and communal identities. These epics have transcended their Indian beginnings and are now vital parts of Southeast Asia's artistic, religious, and cultural landscapes in Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Myanmar. In Southeast Asia, the Ramayana and Mahabharata serve not just as literary sources, but also as frameworks for moral teaching and ritual expression.

Each area has localized the epics by incorporating indigenous mythology, courtly aesthetics, and religious sensitivities into the inherited narrative patterns. In Thailand, the Ramakien, a reworked version of the Ramayana, serves as the textual framework for Khon, a royal masked dance-drama that depicts Rama's courage, Sita's love, and Hanuman's faithfulness via choreographed gestures, lavish costumes, and rhythmic choreography (Hughes, 2014a, p. 65). In Indonesia, the Wayang Kulit (See -1) shadow puppet theatre and Kecak dance (See -2) bring the Ramayana's cosmic fight to life via movement, music, and light. Dalang (puppeteers) and dancers use stylized gestures (mudra) and symbolic patterns of motion to convey spiritual meanings that go beyond verbal storytelling (Fukuoka, 2023).

### ***1. Wayang Kulit:***

*A traditional Indonesian shadow puppet theatre, Wayang Kulit uses intricately carved flat leather puppets (wayang) manipulated by a dalang (puppeteer) behind a backlit screen. Performances combine storytelling, music (typically gamelan), and ritual elements to convey mythological, moral, and spiritual narratives, often drawn from epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata (Fukuoka, 2023).*

### ***2. Kecak Dance:***

*Kecak is a Balinese dance-drama performed by a large male chorus, accompanied by rhythmic chanting of “cak” sounds, rather than traditional instruments. It dramatizes scenes from the Ramayana, particularly* Kecak Dance:

*the battle between Rama and Ravana, emphasizing communal participation, hypnotic rhythm, and stylized movement to convey spiritual and narrative meaning (Fukuoka, 2023).*

*In Cambodia, the Reamker—the Khmer rendition of the Ramayana—is presented through Apsara dance, with beautiful hand gestures (kbach), regulated rhythm, and peaceful expressions reflecting themes of duty (dharma), devotion (bhakti), and moral virtue (Gaston,*

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2002, p. 76). These forms represent the adaptive vigor of Southeast Asian performance ecologies. Each tradition has kept the epics alive via ceremonial continuity, royal sponsorship, and communal practice, making them into living collections of customary wisdom. Costumes, gestures, and musical codes serve as epistemic systems, embodying and transmitting spiritual, ethical, and aesthetic values throughout generations. The moral allegories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata—the triumph of virtue over vice, the conflict between desire and duty, and the pursuit of cosmic order—are still profoundly imprinted in the region's cultural awareness. In recent decades, choreographers and cultural organizations in Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia have attempted to reimagine these traditional repertoires for modern audiences.

They reimagine epic narratives by using modern stagecraft, multimedia projection, and cross-genre collaboration to address current social, ecological, and ethical problems (Sen, 2020). Such improvements demonstrate the dynamic resilience of old knowledge systems, keeping ancient performances relevant to current sensibilities. Beyond the stage, the epics' moral and philosophical precepts continue to shape civic life, religious practices, and educational discourses across Southeast Asia. The trans regional spread of Ramayana and Mahabharata-based performances has also promoted cross-cultural discourse and regional unity. Collaborative festivals and multicultural productions honor a common heritage while recognizing the variety of local interpretations.

These connections confirm Southeast Asian communities' interconnected history, as well as the ongoing vitality of epic narrative as a medium for moral reflection, creative expression, and cultural diplomacy. Finally, the Ramayana and Mahabharata molded Southeast Asia's ethical and metaphysical imagination, in addition to inspiring creative forms. These epics continue to serve as tools for cultural memory and spiritual education through dance and drama. As traditional and modern versions evolve, they demonstrate epic tales' lasting ability to reconcile beautiful form with moral vision, preserving the rhythm of legacy through changing times.

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