



Dance Exchange as a Vehicle of Cultural Diplomacy: A Case Study of Ramayana Joint Performances of Thailand's Khon and Indonesia's Sendratari

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Abstract

The implementation of culture as a tool of diplomatic soft power gave birth to the term cultural diplomacy. Culture is recognized as a source of soft power projection, and Thailand and Indonesia's governments have been promoting culture in enhancing their nations' image to the world. This study is based on the significance of soft power through the Ramayana epic as a well-known literature of Asia. It is a root of diverse forms of cultural expressions in Thailand and Indonesia which manifest as both a shared heritage and a distinctive identity. This study therefore centers on dance exchange as a vital feature of cultural diplomacy, focusing on Ramayana Joint Performances of Thailand's Khon and Indonesia's Sendratari. Khon and Sendratari are prominent artforms of Thai and Indonesian dance drama where the Ramayana epic is the core story of both dances. This research is aimed to provide a better understanding of how the Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari contribute to cultural diplomacy processes and outcomes, and deliver a clearer insight on the role they play in facilitating intercultural dialogue for cross-cultural understanding. This study finds that the Ramayana Joint Performances act as a form of dance exchange, signifying a common space for an interactive intercultural dialogue in transmitting cultural values and upholding interaction between artists, Thai/Indonesian officials and audience members through artistic expressions. It results in fostering long lasting friendships and mutual understandings between Thailand and Indonesia.

Keywords

Cultural diplomacy, Dance exchange, Ramayana Joint Performance, Intercultural dialogue, Cross-cultural understanding

Introduction

In the age of globalization, each country's reputation is based upon their image amongst nations in the global world. As Johnson (2018, p. 1) points out, Cultural diplomacy has been used to enhance the national image of a country. Johnson highlights that having a positive image helps to advance the agenda of foreign policies, encourage foreign investment, and to foster mutual understanding between countries (2018, p. 1) where cooperation and partnerships can be established (Nye, 2004, p. 2). Lo and Pan (2014, p. 4) state that China has demonstrated a considerable awareness of the strategic potential of cultural diplomacy as an imperative tool of diplomacy by establishing Confucius Institutes to promote "China's Peaceful Rise." This agenda aims to promote Chinese culture intentionally in an attempt to overcome the resentment towards communism and negative images (Lo & Pan, 2014, p.4). The cultural attractiveness therefore makes China's image more appealing to the foreign public. This illustrates that the implementation of image branding is closely related to the expectation that outsiders will associate cultural products and ideas with national identity. It suggests that culture is a pivotal element of national identity which provides government with political support and legitimacy.¹

Bound et al. (2007, p. 19) identify culture in the political context as a primary determinant of how people discern each other and negotiate their dissimilarities. It is observed in the sphere of cultural diplomacy that identity is strengthened by participating in culturally diverse societies. According to the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 27, "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits." Bélanger (1999, p. 678) highlights that as culture in politics is the essence of cultural diplomacy, culture therefore is positioned within foreign policy as the manifestation of a national interest, which contributes to the embodiment of national identity. Consequently, countries today make use of cultural diplomacy to project their values and reach out in the global space, as demonstrated by Thailand and Indonesia.

Thailand has long advocated cultural diplomacy. For instance, international relations were established with Sri Lanka through Theravada Buddhism. As Thailand's Ministry of Culture (2021) states, the Buddhist tie between Thailand and Sri Lanka dates back to the 12th Century. The cultural mission focused on proliferating Buddhism by assigning representatives to visit Sri Lanka with the aim of bringing monks to Thailand. The mission

¹ From 2004 to 2013, more than 400 Confucius Institutes and 600 small scale of Confucius Classrooms had been established in 120 countries and regions (Lo & Pan, 2014, p. 2). The Institute approaches focused on providing an understanding of China, in particular language learning.

continued during the Sukhothai period under the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng (1279 – 1298), who expanded Buddhism in Thailand. In the contemporary period, Thailand emphasizes the attractiveness of the nation's culture in utilizing cultural diplomacy to form engaging cultural events abroad (Chakraborty, 2013, p. 30). A policy statement from the Council of Ministers clearly states that the government recognizes the importance of cultures by "supporting social institutions in the cultivation of positive cultural values, including through fostering religions, preserving and revitalizing the cultural heritage and promoting acceptance of, and respect for, diverse cultures and traditions, so as to create a society of integrity, quality and morality, in which the people live in harmony" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs states for bilateral cooperation, Thailand has established diplomatic relations in terms of cultural relations around the globe with countries in Asia, Africa, Europe and South America (2019).

Indonesia's foreign relations with other countries have existed since Indonesia declaring its independence on August 17, 1945. Indonesia, together with partner countries, has devised a variety of international cooperative channels including bilateral, regional and multilateral treaties. Indonesia's country-partners are divided into eight regions: Africa, the Middle East, East Asia and the Pacific, South and Central Asia, North and Central America, South America and the Caribbean, Western Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Indonesia, 2019). In terms of international relations, as stated in the Law on Foreign Relations of Indonesia No. 37 of 1999, the execution of cultural diplomacy is aimed to enhance the positive image of Indonesia as a nation in the international community.

As Nye (2004, p. 2) emphasizes, the positive image of a nations is understood to advance the agenda of foreign policies, as well as to encourage foreign investment, and importantly to foster mutual understanding between countries, where cooperation and partnerships can be established. The notion of cooperation and partnership through cultural diplomacy is demonstrated by diplomatic relations between Thailand and Indonesia. Thailand and Indonesia have developed a long-standing relationship dating to the 18th Century. As the Royal Thai Embassy in Jakarta (2017) states, the Royal visit of His Majesty the late King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V) of Thailand to Indonesia in 1871 marks the cordial ties between the two nations. The king conducted follow-up visits in 1896 and 1901. Officially, Thailand and Indonesia established diplomatic relations on March 7, 1950. Relations have continually flourished at all levels. Both countries have developed official diplomatic relations through regular exchanges of high-level visits including the Joint Commission at the Foreign Minister level, the Joint Trade Committee, the Joint Working Group on Fishery Cooperation, and high-level military meetings (Royal Thai Embassy Jakarta, 2020).

In the sphere of regional cooperation, Thailand and Indonesia are members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 2005, all ASEAN Member States stated their commitment to ASEAN by consenting to the ASEAN motto: "One Vision. One Identity. One Community." The ASEAN motto of "One Community" indicates the ASEAN Community, which was officially launched in 2015 consisting of three pillars: the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Thailand and Indonesia are members of ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The aims of this community are to develop long-term solidarity and unity between the members of ASEAN countries, as well as to promote common identity (ASEAN, 2009). Nevertheless, diversity is embraced and nurtured as one of the distinctive characteristics of ASEAN identity (ASEAN, 2020, p. 4).

ASEAN Identity signifies a process of social construct demarcated by fair combination of "Constructed Values" and "Inherited Values" which aim to strengthen the ASEAN Community (ASEAN, 2020, p. 2). ASEAN clarifies that Constructed Values are defined as "values that of a group of people or nations who associate themselves with, as a product of active and deliberate intentions in order to develop an allegiance with certain mindsets to achieve a specific objective of a community" (2020, p. 2). These ASEAN values were constructed and developed by ASEAN leaders during the post-colonial era. During this period, ASEAN member states facilitated a common acculturation process through new values and ideas, within the framework of a new level of security and social welfare. Essentially, the constructed values of ASEAN Identity are illustrated in Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter, concerning, namely: respect, peace and security, non-interference, democracy, dialogue, freedom, and unity in diversity. These constructed values planted the seed for the frame of mind and outlook which later progressed and developed as part of the contemporary ASEAN community. Inherited Values, on the other hand, are defined as "values that the people of Southeast Asia region ascribe to, which have been passed on for generations, through the natural process of human interaction that develops into various type of communities" (ASEAN, 2020, p. 3). The values shared by ASEAN member states have subsisted in Southeast Asian countries long before the formation of ASEAN. As ASEAN (2020) highlights, the traditions, beliefs and customs since the pre-historic era laid the foundation for interaction and acculturation within the ASEAN community (p. 3). The ASEAN Identity underlines the substantial conditions that affect the dynamic of national identity of ASEAN member states with diverse and yet shared myriad of heritages and traditions.

In terms of promoting ASEAN Identity, the Thai and Indonesian governments are actively promoting their cultures. Various cultural exchanges have been held regularly, for an instance, the Ramayana Joint Performance presented by members of ASEAN countries. Ramayana Joint Performance is an implementation of dance exchange, which specifies

collaborative Ramayana dance practices that engage artists of different nations and cultural backgrounds in the domain of cultural diplomacy. Essentially, the Ramayana Joint Performance also holds a pivotal role as a vehicle in strengthening diplomatic relations at the bilateral level, between Thailand and Indonesia, through the collaborative performance of the Ramayana dance drama Khon and Sendratari. This form of dance exchange is a model of cultural exchange where the activities denote the core principles of intercultural dialogue.

It is important to highlight the significance of intercultural dialogue in the realm of promoting and protecting cultural diversity where distinctive cultural features are respected and recognized (Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, 2021). In this context, cultural creativity offers meaningful potential for reinforcing the value of otherness (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 33). However, cultural creativity is also a force of contradiction and symbolic confrontation regardless of a shared culture. The claim over common culture often leads to disputes between cultural groups within or across national borders.² This condition risks crossing the threshold of xenophobic nationalism (Ratzmann, 2019, p. 36). "Racism, xenophobia, intolerance and all other forms of discrimination refuse the very idea of dialogue and represent a standing affront to it" (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 21). In this aspect, intercultural dialogue holds a pivotal role in mediating challenges concerning commonality by means of peace-building, as demonstrated by the Ramayana Joint Performance.

The fundamental element of the Ramayana Joint Performance lies in the stories it tells. The universal nature of the epic of Ramayana results from the core stories of Khon and Sendratari appealing to people of different cultures. Khon is the expression of the Ramayana through vibrant performance of the Ramakien (Glory of Rama), the Thai adaptation of the Ramayana. The Ramakien is the most well-known piece of Thailand's classical literature. Its most prominent versions were composed in the late 18th Century by King Rama I (r. 1782-1809), the founding king of the current Chakri Dynasty (Yupo, 1953, p. 107). Sendratari, on the other hand, is the expression of the Ramayana through a dazzling performance of Serat Rama, which is the best-known version of the Rama story in Modern Javanese (Saran, 2004).³ Yasadipura I (1729-1803) is the author of Serat Rama, one of the most notorious

² In the context of ASEAN, the tensions rose over Ramayana masked dance of Khon of Thailand and Khol of Cambodia in 2016. Both nations had claimed to own the masked dance, and endeavored by each to win international recognition. As a result, in 2018, Cambodia's Khol Wat Svay Andet on UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage in need of safeguarding (UNESCO, n.d.-a), while UNESCO has listed Thailand's Khon masked dance drama as humanity's intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, n.d.-b).

³ The Modern Javanese is today the spoken language of Indonesia. Modern Javanese is to some extent different from Old Javanese, which was spoken in the 16th century. Modern Javanese developed during the transition from Hindu-Buddha culture to Islamic culture, and many of the registers of Javanese emerged occurred during this transition, particularly in the 17th century under the reign of Sultan Agung, the ruler of the Mataram dynasty (Widhyasmaramurti, 2008).

court poets in Modern Javanese literature (Ricklefs, 1974, p. xx). Thus, the Ramakien and Serat Rama are the Thai and Indonesian variants, respectively, of the Ramayana, expressed through the Thai Khon and Indonesian Sendratari. Ramayana, therefore, is a significant mechanism in the Joint Performance as the bridge between the different art forms of Khon and Sendratari.

This elaboration reflects the starting point of this research focusing on the Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari in representing the dance exchange instrument in the context of Thailand and Indonesia's cultural diplomacy. The analysis of this study centers on three different performances of the Ramayana Joint Performance held on September 24-30, 2005; July 21 and 23, 2017 and September 24, 2020. This study argues that the Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari facilitates intercultural dialogue in cultivating a deeper cross-cultural understanding through the Ramayana collective artistic expressions in the space of the political environment of cultural diplomacy. In this context, the universal quality of the Ramayana epic affects the attractiveness of the dance exchange in a way that appeals to the international community. Even though some dances can appear universal, Khon and Sendratari are still products of particular cultures interrelated to one another. At this point, the Ramayana epic as the core stories of Khon and Sendratari signifies a shared cultural identity between Thailand and Indonesia in the context of cultural diplomacy.

Objectives

1. To investigate how the Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari contributes to cultural diplomacy processes and outcomes.
2. To explore the role of Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari in facilitating intercultural dialogue for cross-cultural understanding.

Methodology

This study employed descriptive qualitative research. Qualitative research is suitable to answering the existing research problems and to process the analyzed data. The data used in this study are primarily collected from interviews. Secondary data were collected from literature reviews, written sources from related government websites and social media, and news that can support research analysis materials. The interviews were conducted with selected participants of the Ramayana Joint Performance, which included Khon and Sendratari performers, art administrators and audiences. The majority of interviews were conducted in person. Due to constraints of availability, one interview was conducted

through a teleconferencing platform. The interviews were conducted in English, Thai (with the assistance of translator) and Bahasa Indonesian. The interviews, observation and photo/video documentation were conducted through attending the Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari on July 21 and July 23, 2017, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, as well as the September 24, 2020 Virtual Ramayana Joint Performance on YouTube and Facebook.

Theoretical Framework

This research proposes using the conceptual framework illustrated in Figures 1, 2 and 3 as a guideline for assessing specific attributes of the Ramayana Joint Performance in representing dance exchange as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy. This framework is developed from four concepts: soft power, cultural diplomacy, intercultural dialogue and cross-cultural understanding. The confluent model of these four concepts is formulated to evaluate the implication of dance exchange as an instrument of soft power in facilitating intercultural dialogue for broader cross-cultural understanding in the space of cultural diplomacy (see Figure 3), as described in the following paragraphs.

1. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy in the notions of “Standing Out” and “Reaching Out”

Joseph Nye, the American academic who initially coined the concept “soft power,” defines it as “the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals” which is in contrast to “hard power,” the traditional tools that use “carrots” and “sticks” of economic sanctions and military (weapons, munitions, and armies) as persuasion instruments (Nye, 2002, p. 8). Nye explains, soft power signified the proficiency of agents from one state to influence the inclination of agents in another through attraction and inspiration, rather than oppression (2002, p. 8). The concept of soft power has gained prevalence over decades in international politics. Diplomats find this power as a resourceful instrument for conducting international relations. They strategically put into practice the three pillars of soft power, namely the nation’s culture, political ideologies and foreign policies (Cummings, 2003; Doerer & Nisbett, 2017; Johnson, 2018). Soft power is therefore purposely implemented to establish a mutual understanding between governments as well as people in the two states, extend international trust and cultivate ties of long-lasting relations (Nye, 2002).

Cultural diplomacy is a prominent element of soft power. Cultural diplomacy is regarded as a practice which is performed with the purpose of accomplishing normative and idealistic aims, usually formulated in terms of “mutual understanding.” In this context, Cummings (2003) defines cultural diplomacy as:

the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding which can also be more of a one-way street than a two-way exchange, as when one nation concentrates its efforts on promoting the national language, explaining its policies and point of view, or “telling its story” to the rest of the world (p.1).

Cultural diplomacy in this study denotes the use of arts as a vehicle, specifically the dance exchange of the Ramayana Joint Performance. The use of arts as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy gave birth to the term “arts diplomacy.” Cohen (2019, p. 255) proposed a definition of arts diplomacy as “an aspect or subfield of cultural diplomacy involving strategic management and deployment of the arts in order for a nation or other political entity (such region or intergovernmental organization) to accrue economic or political benefits and cultivate soft power internationally.”

Doeser and Nisbett (2017) propose the rhetorical of “Standing Out” and “Reaching Out” which outline an initial heuristic method to reflect the concepts of soft power and cultural diplomacy. The notion of “standing out” is associated with power, business, leader, and identity (see Figure 1). It signifies the roles of soft power which are centered on a nation’s strategy of distinguishing itself and leadership actions which highlight power or capability to influence decision-making (Doeser & Nisbett, 2017, p. 14). As Doeser & Nisbett (2017) explain “reaching out,” however, indicates the features of cultural diplomacy comprising prevailing activities: to unite, socialize, communicate, and educate. It is about forming unity with other nations, developing political solidarity, and acting as a medium to bridge between other parties (p. 15) (see Figure 2).

There are five fundamental elements of cultural diplomacy (Bound et al., 2007, p. 8; Mark, 2009, p. 10) highlighting the notions of “standing out” and “reaching out” in the context of this study, which include: 1). **Agent**. Cultural diplomacy signifies a nation’s diplomatic practice, either for single governments or group governments. The Thai and Indonesian governments in this context can be viewed as agents of diplomacy as well as practitioners of cultural diplomacy; 2). **Vehicle**. Dance exchange of the Ramayana Joint Performance is the vehicle used in facilitating cultural diplomacy between Thailand and Indonesia; 3). **Objectives**. Cultural diplomacy is carried out for different purposes, in particular extending bilateral relationships between Thailand and Indonesia; 4). **Activities**. The cultural diplomacy activities manifest the aspects of culture, and includes the collaborative Ramayana dance drama, seminars and workshops; 5). **Target audience**. Cultural diplomacy engages an extensive range of participants which may include students, tourists, and expats.

2. Intercultural dialogue

The Council of Europe (2008) states the central objective of intercultural dialogue is to accomplish social integration and cohesion: "Intercultural dialogue contributes to political, social, cultural and economic integration and the cohesion of culturally diverse societies. It fosters equality, human dignity and a sense of common purpose. It aims to develop a deeper understanding of diverse worldviews and practices, to increase cooperation and participation, to allow personal growth and transformation, and to promote tolerance and respect for the other." In this context, the interaction between the nations is fundamental to promote respect and deepen understanding for each other's cultures while strengthening relations.

3. Cross-cultural understanding

Cross-cultural understanding through intercultural dialogue is the fundamental ability in recognizing, interpreting and reacting to people or situations which are vulnerable to misunderstanding due to cultural differences. Cross-cultural understanding involves learning to value other cultures and respect their outlooks. It comes from the understanding that "different" does not mean "wrong." Being tolerant and accepting the differences is therefore the core of cross-cultural understanding (The Critical Thinking Consortium, 2011). Cross cultural understanding therefore is more than realizing that cultures are different from one another. The road to cross-cultural understanding is to recognize and comprehend cultural differences and develop an appreciation, respect and knowledge of other cultures that are distinct from our own as The Critical Thinking Consortium (2011) points out.

4. The cohesion of the four concepts of soft diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, intercultural dialogue and cross-cultural understanding

Doeser and Nisbett's (2017) cohesive concept of "standing out" and "reaching out" outline an initial heuristic method to reflect the concepts of soft power and cultural diplomacy which combine the notion of leadership and collaboration, instilled through national projection and multilateral collaboration manifesting through cultural exchange. With regard to soft power and cultural diplomacy, UNESCO (2021) views cultural exchange as promoting respect and understanding for other cultures. In the context of this study, cultural exchange is implemented through dance exchange of the Ramayana Joint Performance in facilitating intercultural dialogue for enhancing cross-cultural understanding. Cultures therefore are fostered in their diversity in a globalized world. In the practical context of cultural diplomacy, the cohesion of the four concepts of Soft Power ("Standing Out"), Cultural diplomacy ("Reaching Out"), Intercultural Dialogue and Cross-Cultural Understanding is illustrated by the Ramayana Joint Performance promotion of international friendship and cooperation

(see Figure 3). The Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari therefore demonstrates that dance exchange programs can be effective tools for facilitating intercultural dialogue for cross-cultural understanding.

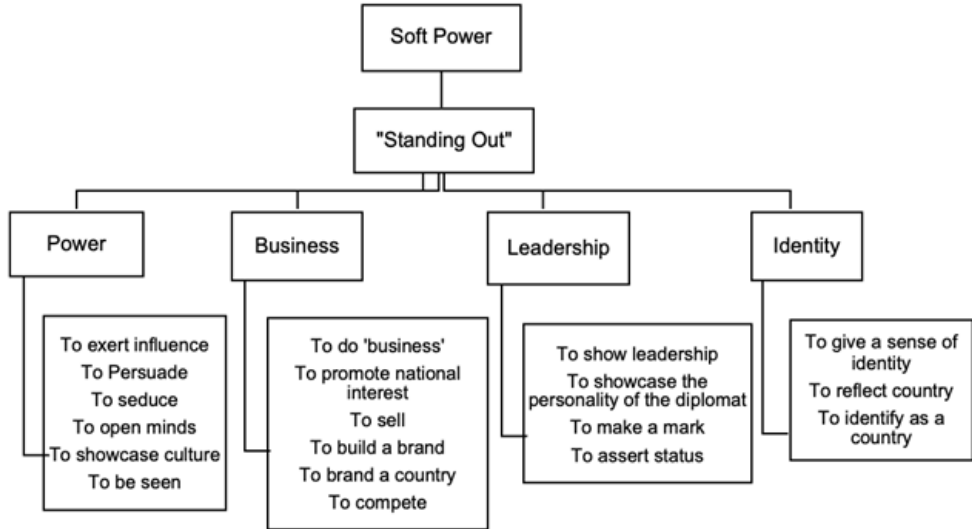


Figure 1 “Standing Out” as a reflection of the notion of Soft Power

Source: Doeser and Nisbett (2017, p. 15)



Figure 2 “Reaching Out” as a reflection of Cultural Diplomacy concept

Source: Doeser and Nisbett (2017, p. 15)

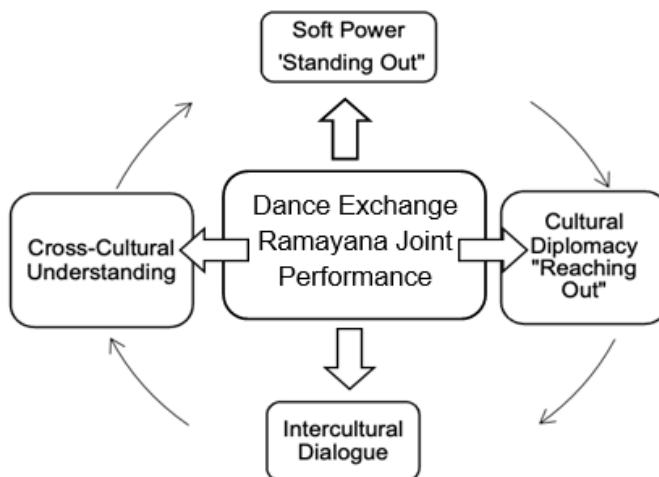


Figure 3 A confluent concept of soft power, cultural diplomacy, intercultural dialogue and cross-cultural understanding in projecting cultural exchange

Source: Author

Research Findings and Discussion

Dance exchange as a form of cultural diplomacy

This study found that dance exchange is an ideal form of cultural diplomacy and can lead to intercultural dialogue and cross-cultural understanding. Thailand and Indonesia regard the importance of dance exchange in sharing and exhibiting their cultures and presenting their national image. As Mark (2009, p. 22) points out, the prominence of national image within cultural diplomacy emphasizes cultural distinctiveness and the dynamism of a state. The use of dance exchange as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy not only represents the positive image of the country, but also promotes the nation's culture and unique identity to the world by means of sustaining, fostering and disseminating history, local traditions and cultural values. Promoting dance heritage abroad develops a harmonious diplomatic relationship with foreign governments as well as their people (Cohen, 2019, p. 255). It is designed to foster mutual understanding between countries. Dance exchange in this context suggests the pivotal function of dance as an instrument of cultural diplomacy. Dance in this aspect is therefore regarded as "dance diplomacy." Michailovskyte (2015) coined the term "dance diplomacy" which signifies dance as a non-verbal diplomatic communication. Messages and ideas are communicated through the dancers' body and expressions, music, costumes and stage settings which portray culture, traditions and people of states (Michailovskyte, 2015, p. 21).

Nonetheless, the use of dance as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy leads to negotiation between different actors involved in the cultural diplomatic events, such as institutions of state actors and the artistic companies. Dance in this context is a reflection of the social, political and cultural image of a nation. This can be observed in the selection of the types of dances to be presented in international exchange programs.

The Thai and Indonesian governments favor the Ramayana dance drama of Khon and Sendratari as part of their international diplomatic policies because these artforms are uniquely Thai and Indonesian. They are also culturally and politically reflective. In terms of artistic prowess, the style movement and overall dance presentations are appealing to citizens in both countries, making Khon and Sendratari Ramayana the seamless vehicle for representing what it means to be Thai and Indonesian. This elaboration suggests that Khon and Sendratari are ideal models of dance in representing Thailand and Indonesia on the world stage.

The prominent role of Khon and Sendratari for dance exchange as engagement and open dialogue has occurred on different diplomatic occasions. The governments of Thailand and Indonesia have sponsored and sent Khon and Sendratari troupes to perform abroad to promote more positive diplomatic relations. The governments of both countries have organized the Ramayana Joint Performance at regional and bilateral levels. In the sphere of regional cooperation, Ramayana as ASEAN's shared culture holds an imperative role in promoting intercultural and cross-cultural understanding between ASEAN countries. Indonesia hosted the first Ramayana Festival from August 31- September 17, 1971 in Pandaan, East Java. Delegated artists from Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand and India participated, with India as a non-ASEAN member in this dance exchange event. Over the last decade, Thailand and Indonesia hosted the ASEAN Ramayana Joint Performance for different occasions (see Table 1).

Table 1 The Ramayana Joint Performance hosted by Thailand and Indonesia

December 5-9, 2011	
Host	Thailand
Venue	National Theater, Bangkok
Participant	Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Singapore
Project Title	"International Ramayana Festival in Celebration of HM the King's Birthday"

Table 1 The Ramayana Joint Performance hosted by Thailand and Indonesia (Continued)

December 5-9, 2011	
Agenda	To celebrate His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 84th birthday anniversary.
September 6-9, 2013	
Host	Indonesia
Venue	Prambanan open-air Theater, Yogyakarta
Participant	Cambodia, India, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand
Project Title	Ramayana Joint Performance "Similarity in Diversity"
Agenda	To promote cross-cultural understanding through the Ramayana Joint Performance, seminars and workshops to discuss the continuity and change in the Ramayana.
April 20-24, 2016	
Host	Thailand
Venue	The National Theatre, Sanam Luang, the ASEAN Cultural Center, and Museum Siam.
Participant	Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia and Malaysia, and India.
Project Title	The Ramayana Join Performance "Differences and Similarities"
Agenda	To enhance cultural diversity of ASEAN through Joint Ramayana dances.

In the context of corporation at bilateral level, this study found that the frequent dance exchanges of the Ramayana Joint Performance marked the bilateral ties and friendship between Thailand and Indonesia. With the purpose of investigating how the Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari contributes to cultural diplomacy processes and outcomes, this research focused on three different performances of the Ramayana Joint Performance organized on September 24-30, 2005; July 21, 2017; and September 24, 2020.

This study found that these three dance exchange performances highlight the enabling factors for intercultural dialogue to occur, as elaborated below.

Dance exchange and the enabling factors of intercultural dialogue

The prominent role of dance for cultural exchange signifies the following enabling factors for intercultural dialogue to occur: **1). global interactions; 2). cultural diversity; and 3). dynamic culture** (Anderson, 2010; Ratzmann, 2019). The three different dance exchanges of the Ramayana Joint Performance described below fulfill these factors and signify the fundamental ideas of dance exchange in facilitating intercultural dialogue for cross-cultural understanding.

1. Global interactions

The year 2005 marked the 55th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Thailand and Indonesia. Atchara Seriputra, the Thai Ambassador to Indonesia, stated that the Royal Thai Embassy, jointly with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Indonesia, organized “The Joint Ramayana Project: A Tie of Two Countries.” by inviting the Royal Thai dance troupe of Khon from Thailand’s Ministry of Culture Fine Arts Department, to perform with the Sendratari Ramayana Prambanan troupe, both in Yogyakarta and Jakarta, Indonesia (The Royal Thai Embassy, 2005) (see Table 2). According to Jero Wacik, the Indonesian Minister of Culture and Tourism, the Joint Project encourages the continuing unity and cooperation between Thailand and Indonesia, specifically in regards to culture. He further stated “...the Ramayana Joint Performance is a manifestation to increase awareness and mutual understanding between two parties, and it is expected to be an integral part of exchanging and sharing ideas to preserve, develop and promote the epic of Ramayana” (The Royal Thai Embassy, 2005).

On July 21 and 23, 2017, Thailand’s Ministry of Culture led the Khon troupe of the Fine Arts Department to perform with the Sendratari Ramayana Prambanan troupe at an open-air Theatre in Prambanan, Yogyakarta (see Table 3). Thai Ambassador Pitchayaphant Charnbhumidol and other officials were part of the organizing committee and supportive team of this cultural diplomatic event. As the Royal Thai Embassy (2017) stated, the joint performance was presided over by H.E. Veera Rojjojanarat, the Minister of Culture of

Thailand, who officially opened the joint performance (the Royal Thai Embassy, 2017). H.E. Veera Rojpojanarat, in his welcome and opening remarks, stated that the Ramayana Joint Performance aimed to strengthen Thailand and Indonesia's relations as Thailand and Indonesia historically have a strong cultural connection. In a similar context, Ahmad Rusdi, Indonesia's Ambassador to Thailand, pointed out that the strong cultural relations between Thailand and Indonesia have spurred the two countries to enhance diplomatic relations in the realm of the ASEAN community. The audiences included Thai expatriates, Thai students in the Yogyakarta area, and domestic and international tourists.

To commemorate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Thailand and Indonesia, the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok in conjunction with the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture and Thai Ministry of Culture jointly organized a Virtual Ramayana Joint Performance, called "Two Nations: One Dance," held on September 24th, 2020 (see Table 4). As reported by Maryati (2020), approximately 4500 viewers of both countries watched this collaborative show through YouTube, Facebook and Instagram (as of September 24, 2020).

This elaboration shows that the factor of "global interactions" is evident in the three different dance exchanges of the Ramayana Joint Performance held in 2005, 2017 and 2020. This finding suggests that the dance exchange functions as a vehicle for interactions within global communities. The participants, which include artists, officials and audiences, embody global communities exhibiting, sharing and exchanging the richness of cultures.

2. Cultural diversity

The Ramayana dance drama of Khon and Sendratari represents the uniqueness of Thai and Indonesian culture. Harry Widiyanto, Director of the Cultural Property Preservation and Museums Directorate, states that "the Ramayana Joint Performance is an implementation of bilateral agreement on cultural exchange mission between Thailand and Indonesia, signed in 2002. This cultural event is a platform for sharing and learning each other's culture, as well as appreciating the similarity and respecting the difference."⁴ In the Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari, both dance troupes presented different dance movements, costumes and music.

Importantly, the Ramayana Joint Performance of 2005 consisted of various cultural activities which highlighted cultural diversity, including a seminar on the comparative aspects of Indonesia and Thailand Ramayana, an exhibition on Thai Ramakien and a workshop on Javanese-Thai classical performing arts. The cultural activities were organized for both Thai

⁴Yogyakarta. (Personal communication, July 21, 2017)

and Indonesian artists, students and teachers to exchange their dance knowledge and skills (see Table 2).

3. Dynamic culture

Culture is not a static concept. It is constantly re-negotiated between the members of a group (UNESCO, 2009). This study found that social changes affect the dynamics of cultures, as shown by the common space of the dance exchange. The Ramayana Joint Performance of 2005 and 2017 were organized at physical spaces including dance theaters and cultural centers. These physical spaces suggest conventional common spaces for holding dance exchanges. However, the Ramayana Joint Performance of 2020 was organized online (see Table 4). This dance exchange involved various social media platforms, including YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. The use of social media suggests that the change of the format of the Ramayana Joint Performance was influenced, at least in part, by the social changes in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. Interestingly, since the event was presented live through the internet, the target audience was not only limited to the governments and people of Thailand and Indonesia but was available for audiences around the globe.

The cultural dynamics was also demonstrated by the Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari through the interactions and exchanges within and between cultures. This notion is exhibited by the diverse artistic expressions of dance movements, music, costumes and the Ramayana adaptations as the core stories of the dances. As the Council of Europe (2013, as cited in Ratzmann, 2019, p. 9) highlights, the dynamics of culture is "expressed in the co-existence and exchange of culturally different practices." Therefore, Ramayana Joint Performance, in the sphere of dynamic culture, demonstrates the ability of dance exchange to support the global communities in understanding the cultural complexities within and between different cultures.

Table 2 The central elements of Ramayana Joint Performance of September 24-30, 2005

Ramayana Joint Performance of September 24-30, 2005	
Date	September 24-30, 2005
Venue	Yogyakarta and Jakarta
Agent	The Ministry of Culture of Thailand The Royal Thai Embassy Jakarta The Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia The Indonesian Embassy Bangkok PT Taman Wisata Candi Borobudur, Prambanan, dan Ratu Boko
Project Title	Ramayana: A Tie of Two Countries
Agenda	Joint project in celebration of the 55 th Anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Thailand and Indonesia
Program	Ramayana Joint Performance at Prambanan Open-Theater, Yogyakarta
	Workshop on Javanese-Thai classical performing arts
	Thai Khon Ramakien performance at Prambanan Open-Theater, Yogyakarta
	Seminar on Comparative Aspect of Indonesian and Thai Ramayana
	Exhibition on Thai Ramakien
	Javanese-Thai Cultural Night at Keraton of Yogyakarta
	Ramayana Joint Performance at Gedung Kesenian Jakarta

Table 3 The central elements of Ramayana Joint Performance of July 21 and 23, 2017

Ramayana Joint Performance of July 21 and 23, 2017	
Venue	Prambanan Open-Theater, Yogyakarta
Agent	The Ministry of Culture of Thailand The Royal Thai Embassy Jakarta The Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia The Indonesian Embassy Bangkok PT Taman Wisata Candi Borobudur, Prambanan, dan Ratu Boko
Performer	Khon troupe of Fine Arts Department Thailand Sendratari Ramayana Prambanan troupe
Project Title	International Special Performance of Khon – The Mysterious Epic Story of Ramakien Thailand
Agenda	Implementation of bilateral agreement on cultural exchange mission between Thailand and Indonesia, signed in 2002
Program	Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari Ramayana.
	Khon Performance

Table 4 The central elements of Ramayana Joint Performance of September 24, 2020

Ramayana Joint Performance of September 24, 2020	
Venue	online streaming networks: https://www.facebook.com/ThaiMCulture https://bit.ly/33VfRHd https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUrFQ-O6N5Y
Agent	The Ministry of Culture of Thailand The Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia

Table 4 The central elements of Ramayana Joint Performance of September 24, 2020 (Continued)

Ramayana Joint Performance of September 24, 2020	
Performer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Jakarta Bharata Wayang Orang troupe (instant live streaming) • The Bali Paripurna (pre-scheduled streaming) • Khon Fine Arts Department (live) at the Thai National Theater, Bangkok (instant live streaming)
Project Title	Two Nations: One Dance
Agenda	To commemorate the 70th Anniversary of diplomatic relations between Indonesia and Thailand
Program	A Virtual Ramayana Joint Performance

The three factors for intercultural dialogue mentioned above are manifested by intercultural dialogue through diverse artistic expressions, as discussed below.

Implementation of intercultural dialogue through diverse artistic expressions

As the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (2021) states, cultural diplomacy is known as a primary platform to foster intercultural connections between countries. Intercultural dialogue is posited as a soft power tool of international politics, by means of dialogue and diplomacy (Atwan, 2010). This study found that the diverse artistic expressions of the Ramayana Joint Performance hold an imperative role as essential instruments in implementing intercultural dialogue. These artistic expressions were articulated through different dancing movements, costumes, music and Ramayana adaptations. However, as the Ramayana epic is the bridge between Khon and Sendratari, the analysis in this paper focuses on: **1). The selection of Ramayana episodes in portraying the uniqueness of cultures; 2). The presentation of Ramayana episodes in a collaborative manner; and 3). The virtual presentation of the Ramayana Joint Performance.** The process of intercultural dialogue in this study suggests an integral part of exchanging and sharing ideas to preserve, develop and promote the epic of Ramayana and denoting intercultural dialogue within and between different cultures.

1. The selection of Ramayana episodes in portraying the uniqueness of cultures

The selection of Ramayana episodes in portraying the uniqueness of cultures is clearly shown by the Ramayana Joint Performance of 2005 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. This Ramayana Joint Performance presented eight episodes of Ramayana adaptations. According to Joko Pamungkas, a member of the Indonesian artistic team, the episodes were selected by both Thai and Indonesian dancing troupes.⁵

Table 5 The Ramayana episodes of the Ramayana Joint Performance of 2005

The episodes of the Ramayana Joint Performance of 2005, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia		Performers
Episode I	The Defeat of Nontuk	Khon
Episode II	The Bow Competition at the Kingdom of Manthili	Sendratari Prambanan
Episode III	The Abduction of Sita	Khon
Episode IV	The Argasoka Garden	Sendratari Prambanan
Episode V	The Building of the Causeway (the Pursuit of Supanna Matcha)	Khon
Episode VI	The Death of Kumbakarna	Sendratari Prambanan
Episode VII	The Battle between Rama and Ravana	Khon
Episode VIII	The Holy Fire	Sendratari Prambanan

The table above illustrates the selected Ramayana episodes. This research found that the critical essence of this Ramayana Joint Performance lies in the distinctiveness of the selected Ramayana episodes presented by the Khon troupe. The episode of “The Defeat of

⁵ Yogyakarta. (Personal communication, July 22, 2017)

Nontuk” (episode I) and “The Building of the Causeway (the Pursuit of Supanna Matcha)” (episode V) are an exceptionally Thai variant of the Ramayana. The characters in the episodes do not exist in Indonesian Ramayana adaptations. The characters and episodes are illustrated below.

“The Defeat of Nontuk” is the story about a character named Nontuk, an *asura*, who is assigned to wash the feet of the deities who visit Phra Isuan (Siva) at the foot of Mount Krailas (Kailasa). Nontuk is traumatized by the deities who keep knocking his head until he goes bald, so the anguished demon requests that he be given a diamond index finger that is fatal to those it points to. Siva then gives him a blessing by which his index finger becomes powerful. When the deities bully him again, Nontuk points his finger and kills masses of them. The gods and goddess, then approach Phra Narayana (god Vishnu) seeking help. Phra Narayana, disguising himself as a beautiful Nang Upsorn (Upsara) or celestial maiden, comes to where the asura was. Nontuk then falls in love with the maiden and agrees to dance in the same posture as her. The beautiful maiden dances to lure the demon to follow her dance and points his index finger at his own leg. This causes him to fall. Phra Narai curses him to be reborn with ten faces, twenty hands and magical power. Phra Narayana will be reborn a mere human with two hands, and his task will be wipe out the demon’s clan. After Nontuk has died, he is reborn as Tosakanth (Ravana) and Phra Narai is reborn as Phra Ram (Rama) (Kallayanapongsa, 2006, p. 38).

“The Building of the Causeway” (the Pursuit of Supanna Matcha) episode highlights the character of Supanna Matcha. Supanna Matcha is the daughter of a fish and Thotsakan (Ravana), the demon king of Longka. Hence, she has the form of a mermaid, half woman and half fish. Supanna Matcha ruled the ocean as a queen of the fish kingdom. She is the center of the story when Rama ordered his simian army to build a stone causeway from the mainland to the isle of Longka. Supanna Matcha has the piled-up stones removed by her fish subjects. On learning of this fishy operation, Rama sent Hanuman in pursuit of the culprit. Hanuman sought out Supanna Matcha in the depth of the ocean and captured her. Eventually, Hanuman won her over to his cause after an intensive courtship.

The selected exceptional episodes as demonstrated by Khon troupe suggests that Ramayana Joint Performance emphasized the freedom of expression as each dance troupe possessed full control in expressing and elaborating the episode based on their interpretations of the Ramayana adaptations. This finding shows that freedom of expression is a critical feature to facilitate intercultural dialogue for cross-cultural understanding. The Council of Europe (2008) in the “White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue,” justifies the correlation between intercultural dialogue and freedom of expression. Intercultural dialogue, in this context, is viewed as “a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic

backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It requires the freedom and ability to express oneself" (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 17).

Freedom of expression is also articulated in the collaborative manners expressed below.

2. Presentation of Ramayana episodes

This study has found two methods applied by the Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari in presenting the Ramayana episodes:

- 1) **Separate episode.** This denotes that each dance troupe is staged separately in sequence regardless of the assigned episode. This method was applied for the Ramayana Joint Performance of 2005 and 2020 (see Table 5 and 7);
- 2) **Collective episode.** This signifies the presentation of both Khon and Sendratari troupes in a shared episode. This "collective episode" method was introduced for the Ramayana Joint Performance of 2017 (see Table 6 episodes II, V, VII and VIII).

The approaches of "separate episode" and "collective episode" in presenting Ramayana episodes highlighted cultural integration (see Figure 4) where Khon and Sendratari integrated their separate expressions of dance movements, costumes and music into one collaborative performance. Essentially, this study found that the "collective episode" method suggests a "true collaboration" of a shared culture where both dance troupes of Khon and Sendratari were featured in a shared episode. This method highlights diverse artistic expressions in promoting the notion of "unity in diversity." As Dewi Cahya Ambarwati, an artistic and stage director of the 2017 Ramayana Joint Performance reveals, "the selection process of the Ramayana episodes has been accomplished with the objectives of highlighting the uniqueness of both cultures and to design new collaborative models which highlights collectivity."⁶

⁶ Personal communication, teleconferencing platform, August 23, 2021.

Table 6 The Ramayana episodes of Ramayana Joint Performance 2017

Episodes of the 2017 Ramayana Joint Performance in Yogyakarta, Indonesia		Performers
Episode I	The Bow Competition at The Kingdom of Manthili	Sendratari Prambanan
Episode II	The Abduction of Sita	Sendratari Prambanan and Khon
Episode III	Sugriwa and Subali	Khon
Episode IV	The Argasoka Garden	Sendratari Prambanan
Episode V	The Building of The Causeway	Khon and Sendratari Prambanan
Episode VI	The Death of Kumbakarna	Sendratari Prambanan
Episode VII	The Battle Between Rama and Ravana	Khon and Sendratari Prambanan
Episode VIII	The Holy Fire	Khon and Sendratari Prambanan

The “collective episode” method was divided into two approaches: **1). Separate character**; **2). Collective character**, as elaborated below:

- 1) **Separate character**. This approach was designed to highlight separate Ramayana characters featured by performers of Khon and Sendaratari in an assigned episode. This notion is observed in the episode of “The Abduction of Sita.” This episode highlights the major characters of Laksmana, Sita, Ravana and old Brahmin. In this episode, Sendratari performers played Laksmana and Sita, while Khon dancers performed as Ravana and the old Brahmin. The episode of “The Abduction of Sita” is illustrated below.

Sita became worried about Rama who left to hunt the golden deer. She asked Laksmana to find Rama. To protect Sita, Laksmana made a magic circle. Sita was not allowed to stick any of her limbs out of the circle. Ravana (*Thotsakan*) moved to get closer to Sita, as soon as Laksmana left searching for Rama.

As Ravana's attempt did not work, he then disguised himself as an old Brahmin to give the Brahmin some alms. The Ravana in disguise then grab Sita's hand and pulled the princess out of the magic circle. Ravana succeeded in kidnapping Sita and brought her to his Alengka Palace.

- 2) **Collective character.** This approach was designed to feature a specific Ramayana character which was played interchangeably by performers of Khon and Sendratari in a selected episode. This notion can be observed in the following episodes:

- a) "The Kidnaping of Sita" episode.

This episode features the supporting characters of Ravana (played by a Khon performer) and Jatayu (played by a Sendratari performer). Essentially, the notion of "collective character" in this episode is signified by the appearance of the main character Sita performed by separate performers of Khon and Sendratari. The episode captures the following scene:

On the way to Alengka, a garuda (big eagle) named Jatayu conducted an ambush to rescue Sita. The big bird knew Sita since he was a good friend of King Janaka, Sita's father. A fight soon erupts between Jatayu and Ravana. Jatayu loses the battle. During the fighting scene between Jatayu and Ravana, Sita (who was played by a Khon performer) withdrew from the stage. The character then reappeared in the same scene but replaced by a Sendratari performer.

- b) "The Holy Fire" episode.

The concept of "collective character" in this episode is easily noticed by the appearance of Sita and Rama as the characters were played separately by both Khon and Sendratari performers in the same scene, as illustrated below:

After the death of Ravana, Hanuman accompanied Sita to meet Rama. But Rama doubted her purity after a long imprisonment by Ravana. In this scene, the character Rama was played by a Khon performer. Sita requests to prove herself to Rama by walking through a fire to see whether she will be burnt or survive by her purity. In this act, the character of Sita was played by a Sendratari performer. Sita enters the flame and stays unburned by her purity and faithfulness to Rama. In the scene when Sita is touched by the flame, with the help of lighting and effects, the Sendratari

performer who played Sita disappears from the stage, then the character Sita is replaced with a Khon performer. Simultaneously, Rama who was played by a Khon performer was replaced by a Sendratari performer. The episode ended by the reunion of Sita and Rama. Essentially, lighting and effects played a significant role for smoothing the transition of substituting characters from one dance troupe to another dance troupe.

3. Virtual Presentation of the Ramayana Joint Performance

The implementation of intercultural dialogue through diverse artistic expressions is also illustrated by the virtual presentation of the Ramayana Joint Performance, as shown by the 2020 Ramayana Joint Performance. There were six episodes presented in this Ramayana Joint Performance (see Table 4 and 7).

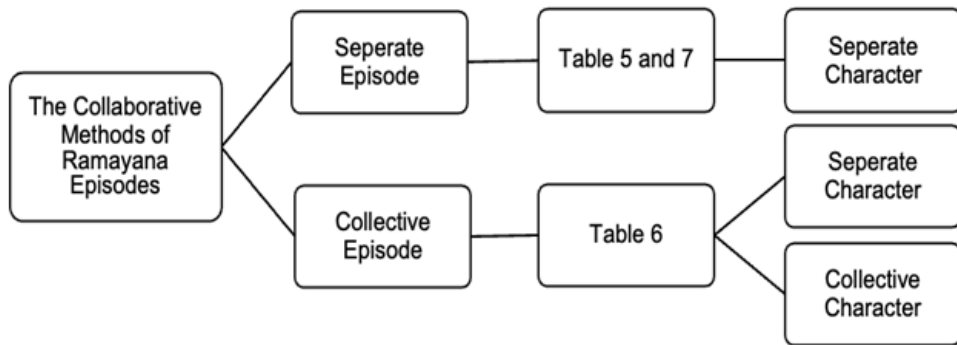


Figure 4 The Collaborative Methods of Ramayana Episodes

Table 7 The Ramayana episodes of Ramayana Joint Performance 2020

The episodes of the Virtual Ramayana Joint Performance 2020		Performers
Episode I	The bow competition at the Kingdom of Manthili	The Bali Paripurna
Episode II	The abduction of Sita	The Bali Paripurna
Episode III	The building of the causeway	Khon of Fine Arts Department
Episode IV	The death of Kumbakarna	The Jakarta Bharata Wayang Orang troupe

Table 7 The Ramayana episodes of Ramayana Joint Performance 2020 (Continued)

The episodes of the Virtual Ramayana Joint Performance 2020		Performers
Episode V	The battle between Rama and Ravana	Khon of Fine Arts Department
Episode VI	The return of Rama to Ayodhya	Khon of Fine Arts Department

There were two different approaches applied in presenting the episodes of this Virtual Ramayana Joint Performance:

- 1) Instant live streaming, which signifies streaming while the performers are dancing (International Consortium for Advancement in Choreography, INC., 2020). The instant live streaming method was conducted for the performance of Khon of Fine Arts Department Thailand which occurred at the Thai National Theater, Bangkok, with a guest performer from the Indonesian Embassy in Bangkok. This performance presented episodes III, V and VI (see Table 4 and Table 7). The Jakarta Bharata Wayang Orang applied instant live streaming in staging episode IV “The death of Kumbakarna.”
- 2) Pre-scheduled streaming, which denotes a format of a pre-recorded dance presentation, where the dance is performed, filmed, and then streamed (International Consortium for Advancement in Choreography, Inc., 2020). The Bali Paripurna troupe applied this method in presenting episode I and II (see Table 4 and Table 7).

The virtual approaches above were integrated and streamed live on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. This Virtual Ramayana Joint Performance shows that dance exchanges add value to art expressions by presenting the uniqueness of cultural diversity through the incorporation of new forms of artistic expressions of digital platforms. This elaboration suggests that dance exchange is becoming a mixed-media process as new ways to connect with global audiences through digital technologies. This study found that the application of new digital technologies in creating, presenting, and distributing the art works provided an opportunity for intercultural interaction in the dimension of cultural diplomacy in the times of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study proposes that diverse artistic expressions have the potential to be applicable instruments to enhance the understanding of cultural differences. Therefore, arts

and artists are able to sustain and foster cultural identities through artistic expressions. This elaboration also reflects the importance of intercultural dialogue by way of finding common ground to cultivate cross-cultural understanding in the global community. The reflections of cross-cultural understanding shared by artists, art administrators and audiences are described below.

Reflections of cross-cultural understanding

As elaborated earlier, the Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari signifies dance exchanges organized in the format of collaborative projects between Thailand and Indonesia. It signifies how Thai and Indonesian artists act as ambassadors of their cultures and have the ability to build cross-cultural understanding in the context of cultural diplomatic spheres of global communities. The following paragraphs provide participant testimonials from artists, an art organizer and audiences to show how the Ramayana Joint Performance provides an opportunity to explore and understand different cultures and expand national, political and cultural boundaries through artistic expressions.

Saksom Panthong, a Khon performer from the Thailand Fine Arts Department, who participated in various collaborative Ramayana dances, shares his cultural exchange experience in collaborating with the performers of Sendratari in the 2017 Ramayana Joint Performance. According to him:

Participating in a cultural exchange program, in particular the collaborative Ramayana performance, served me unforgettable experiences and lessons. It has been mind-opening and has expanded my perspective and understanding on how I perceive the dynamics of Ramayana dance at regional level. It has enriched my understanding towards the foreign cultures which affected my appreciation and respect regarding cultural similarities and differences.⁷

In line with Saksom, Anggara Wisnu, a performer of Sendratari Ramayana Prambanan, points out that:

With language barriers and limited knowledge of Khon performance, I feel very grateful as a team member to work with Thai artists. I have learned so much how to bridge the gap in terms of communication and execution of artistic expressions where both parties have developed the common ground to satisfy our audience. It is not only about artistic exchange projects, but it is more about how we present the positive image of our countries through arts and cultures. Importantly, there is no

⁷ Yogyakarta. (Personal communication, July 21, 2017)

'competition.' It is a collaborative work where both parties are equally responsible to the success of the collective performance.⁸

The perspectives shared by the performers above reflect the effectiveness of cultural exchange programs in facilitating the building process of mutual understanding between people of different nationalities and cultures and in cultivating a sense of belonging to the global community.

Dewi Chaya Ambarwati, an art administrator of Sendratari Prambanan who was responsible in managing the collaborative aspects of artistic expressions, offers an interesting view as she points out:

I find it as a challenge to generate ideas of collaboration with artists across international borders. The cultural exchange programs possess vital roles for educational and artistic experiences for artists and audiences. My cultural exchange experiences through some projects have raised my awareness of how important it is for people to reach out in learning and understanding each other's cultures. By knowing each other's cultures better, we can develop respect and trust, and therefore strengthen our relations.⁹

This quote from an art organizer, highlights the importance of creating opportunities for people to experience and respect cultural differences through art. It underlines the potential of art to broaden one's outlook towards the world. Therefore, each individual can benefit from the cultural exchange program where the project can deliver a sense of wholeness.

Audiences also shared their perspectives and impressions regarding the Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari. Meriana, a university art student in Yogyakarta mentioned "I was amazed to witness the commonalities between the artistic presentations of Khon of Thailand and Sendratari of Indonesia in terms of the Ramayana adaptations. The similarities have enhanced the Ramayana themes within their artforms."¹⁰ Ria Junita, a domestic tourist from Jakarta highlighted that "the collaborative show of Khon and Sendratari Ramayana has guided me to appreciate the commonalities of the Ramayana narrative presentation and respect the uniqueness of the dance movements, music, and costumes offered by both dance troupes while seeing the harmony of the entire performance."¹¹ Nanny Suharyo, an elementary school teacher in Yogyakarta shared her insights "I have never been to Thailand, but I have tasted the beauty of Thai culture through this collaborative

⁸ Yogyakarta. (Personal communication, July 21, 2017)

⁹ Personal communication, video conferencing, August 23, 2021.

¹⁰ Yogyakarta. (Personal communication, July 21, 2017)

¹¹ Yogyakarta. (Personal communication, July 21, 2017)

performance. The only issue I faced during the performance is the difficulty to distinguish Ramayana characters of Khon as Javanese and Thai dance costumes are very dissimilar. Unlike Sendratari, Khon characters are differentiated by various unique masks.”¹²

The quotes above illustrate the perspective that the Ramayana Joint Performances encouraged comparison between the two cultures, giving rise to the realization of the commonality and diversity. It offered opportunities to develop a sense of a shared space for artists and their creativities in the diverse cultural contexts. As indicated by the artists, art organizer and audiences above, the intercultural dialogue has enhanced their ability and aspiration to step outside the familiar cultural environment and explore the diverse cultural experiences through arts and cultures as the common platform.

Challenges

While discussing their exchange experiences, the participants and art administrators also mentioned the following challenges:

1. **Language barriers.** Although it is known that dance is non-verbal, some vital aspects and qualities of the art might be disregarded entirely if the concepts and inspiration behind the art expressions are not understood due to language barriers. It is a challenge for artists and art administrators to overcome the language barriers. As Khon performer Saksom Panthong shares, “We cannot speak Bahasa Indonesia. We do not expect Indonesian performers to speak our language. We rely on English as the bridging language. Unfortunately, many members of our team cannot speak English and neither do the Indonesian performers. But each team have a mediator in assisting the process of sharing and conveying the creative ideas. However, we could get the process of sharing ideas and practice during the rehearsals faster if the language was not the issue between the dance troupes.” This study therefore finds that language became a barrier in communicating and understanding for both artists and art administrators and slowed the exchange process.
2. **Collaborative artistic presentations.** It is a challenge to understand the needs of audiences in unfamiliar cultural settings. Artists cannot be expected to fully understand foreign audience expectations in the same way they would understand their own audiences. Therefore, artists have to test and try different formats and approaches to best deliver solid performances. Some formats and approaches can therefore be expected to be less than successful in this trial-and-error format. Therefore, artists have put their efforts in developing artistic experimental approaches by means of enhancing artistic expressions from time

¹² Yogyakarta. (Personal communication, July 21, 2017)

to time to please the audiences. This is evident as shown by the different formats and various approaches in presenting the notion of collaborative performance as demonstrated by the three different Ramayana Performances in 2005, 2017 and 2020.

This elaboration shows that intercultural dialogue in this context was designed to promote unity in diversity where societies can draw closer through shared values, despite cultural differences. The findings of this study suggest that for achieving sustainable relations across international borders, it is necessary to focus on and overcome the challenge of cultural compatibilities between people, communities and nations. Essentially, with some challenges, Ramayana Performances exhibit a successful vehicle in strengthening the relations between Thailand and Indonesia and enhancing the positive image of the countries in the sphere of cultural diplomacy.

Conclusion

This study illustrates how the Ramayana Joint Performances can promote cross-cultural understanding, the ultimate goal of cultural diplomacy. It documents how the collaborative performances were employed without having a literal political presentation or message while promoting cross-cultural interaction. It explains the approach that dance can be a vehicle for politics without being explicitly political (Kolb, 2011, p. 26). In this sense, as Kolb (2011) points out, the art form of dance does not necessarily need to be political in order to transmit political meaning and convey political messages or an agenda (p.17).

As a non-verbal diplomatic communication, dance exchange of Khon and Sendratari Ramayana delivers an abstract but prevailing soft power approach in disseminating cultural epitomes to the global community. It suggests that dance is a socio-political phenomenon that possesses a powerful force in both enhancing international relationships and promoting Thai and Indonesian culture. Dance exchange therefore plays its role as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy in projecting the nation's positive image.

Both the Khon and Sendratari Ramayana Performances exhibit pivotal roles in "standing out" and "reaching out" by means of mediating intercultural dialogue and achieving the long-term goal of building cross-cultural understanding. This notion suggests that the dance exchange practice will help international communities be aware of, and be familiar with, cultural differences and similarities, and therefore construct a psychological environment where international borders do not model cultural barriers for cross-cultural interactions and cooperation. As Dandavate (2006, p. 102) argues, the exchange experience, as shown by the Ramayana Joint Performances, in many manners will contest ethnocentrism, cultural relativism and national chauvinism, which today posit an extreme danger to world peace. This elaboration in itself reflects the significance of dance exchange as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy.

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