The Indigenization of the Rama Story in the Philippines

Juan R. Francisco

*Philippine Studies* vol. 37, no. 1 (1989) 101–111

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder’s written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.
The Rama story may have reached the Philippines between the middle of the seventeenth and the early part of the nineteenth centuries. This gives a frame in which to visualize the length of time during which the Rama story became part of the folk literary tradition of the Philippines and was indigenized in the Philippines.

Let us begin by looking at the word indigenization in its more basic meaning. The nominal form of the term is indigenous, meaning, “that which is native to a given place.” Indigenization, therefore, is a process by which an alien idea, or concept, or artifact of culture has been made a part of the local culture or society into which it has been introduced. The use of the word indigenization in this note, as applied to the whole concept of culture change, is arbitrary, although it could properly be substituted for by the term adaptation. But indigenization is more appropriate for the process that is described here.

The process of indigenization presupposes cross-cultural borrowings and cross-cultural borrowings presuppose cultural contacts between two nonstatic societies, in a state of constant pulsation. In the

This note is a revision of a paper originally delivered at the International Seminar on Ramayana Tradition and National Cultures in Asia at Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India, 2-6 October 1986.

1. The background of the introduction of the Rama story in the Philippines has been discussed extensively in Francisco, where the story was presented in the context of Asia (Maharadia Lavana [see note 4 below], pp. 10-34), with a text and translation. Further elaboration of the background of the Ramayana had been done in subsequent works of Francisco: “Sanskrit in Philippine Language and Literature,” in Studies in Indo-Asian Art and Culture, vol. 2, ed. Lokesh Chandra (New Delhi: Acharya Raghu Vira Commemoration Volume, 1973); and “The Ramayana in the Philippines,” in The Ramayana Tradition in Asia, ed. V. Raghavan (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1980). The 1973 and 1980 articles were a discussion of Sanskrit in Philippine language, i.e. Maranao, that has the Rama story in its literary tradition. The 1980 article became part of the volume on The Ramayana Tradition in Asia which presents all available data on the Ramayana tradition in Asia.
context of contacts between the societies under study, the period during which the cultural interphasing occurred falls between the middle of the 1600s and the early 1800s or even earlier, when contacts were primarily facilitated by maritime trade and traffic. Maritime trade and traffic involved shipping and trade networks between the Southeast Asian regions and the Indian subcontinent, and between and among the former. It is to the credit of those mariners in pre-European colonial times that cultures came in contact with each other. The result was that the contact was not confined to the exchange of goods but included "artifacts" of culture, like literature, philosophy, belief systems, world views, etc.

At this point, however, the focus of our discussion is the maritime trade and traffic between India and Southeast Asia across the Bay of Bengal, which brought to Southeast Asia Indian cultural goods that became part of the life and culture of the societies that were infused with them. As these societies were Indianized, a process of indigenization occurred, which obliterated all knowledge of these Indian sources which were alien to the local cultures and became part of the whole fabric of these cultures. The process was long, sometimes painful, but perhaps more exhilarating for the local cultures, because even though already rich as they were, they were further enriched by the new elements in their cultural life. A specific example of this was the introduction of the Rama story into the literary traditions of Southeast Asian cultures, particularly the Indonesian and Malay. Focus on the Indonesian (Javanese) and Malay becomes more meaningful to the introduction of the story into the Philippines and its subsequent indigenization. This is understandable in terms of the broad sociocultural, and indeed, the more specific linguistic, affinities between the Malay/Indonesian (Javanese) and the Philippines. Moreover, it is through either Malay or Javanese or both that the Indianisms in the Philippines have been borrowed. Perhaps even the indigenization process may have already occurred in Malay or Java before reaching the Philippines, and been further indigenized to suit Philippine cultural perspectives and orientations.


THE INDIGENIZATION OF THE RAMAYANA IN THE PHILIPPINES

The discussion of the process of indigenization will focus on three important elements in the Maharadia Lawana, the Philippine version of the Rama epic. These are the names of the principal characters, place names, and episodes and events.

NAMES OF THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Rama is Radia Mangandiri (RMd); Laksmana is Radia Mangawarna (RMw); Sita is Tuwan Potre Malano Tihaia (TPMT). Kusa/Lava is Laks[am]mana, who in the story assumes the character of Hanuman. Ravana is Maharadia Lawana.

Immediately, we are confronted by the retention of a Sanskrit title like Radia (from Raja) to indicate the high rank of the brothers Radia Mangandiri (Rama) and Radia Mangawarna (Laksmana) in the hierarchical structure of the society. The same is true of the use of Potre in Sita’s alter ego in the story, and that of Maharadia as the title of Lawana (from Ravana). We note also the name Mangawarna, which, if broken down into the word’s morphemic structure, would yield Manga and warna, which in Maranao nominalizes a descriptive word. Thus it means “one who is colorful” (in speech or action). Warna is perhaps Sanskrit varna meaning “color.” Mangandiri is an indigenous term, which in Maranao, means “one who creates or invents by supernatural power.”

Sita becomes, indeed, a character of legendary nature, following Maranao mythological accounts because her name is known to belong to myth. Hence we have the Lord (Tuwan) Lady (Potre) Malana (the one with a halo) Tihaia (unknown meaning).

Maharadia (from Maharaja) as the title of Lawana places him on a level higher than Radia Mangandiri and Radia Mangawarna. Laksamana is of supernatural birth, but his role in the story takes on that of Hanuman in the Ramayana. Here Laksamana takes the meaning of “presumptive, one who arrogates first opportunity to oneself” which seems rather the opposite of the character of Hanuman. Moreover, the idea of admiral which seems to assume the term Laksamana in Malay does not occur in the Philippine (Maranao) story.

These developments as they occur in the changes in the names and roles of the characters must not only be understood in the context of the story’s entry into an entirely “alien” cultural milieu, but also of the changes that occurred in the intervening stories. These will be discussed in the next section.
PLACE NAMES

Maranao mythological geography is fascinating as one moves into the realm of the supernatural. We have perhaps the most discernible process of indigenization in the place names, since we are dealing with an entirely different nomenclature of the Ramayana geographic names. For Ayodhya, there is Pulu Agamaniog, the legendary island (pulu) of Agamaniog. Whether or not Agamaniog could be broken up into morphemes, i.e., Agama, "village," and niog, "the coconut palm," it becomes meaningful to the understanding of the city/island, hence the "Coconut Grove Village."

For Lanka, there is Pulu Bandiarmasir, also a legendary island of Bandiarmasir. The term cannot be broken down into morphemes as was done with the name of the other (pulu). It seems reminiscent of an ancient city port of Bandjarmasin in the southeastern coast of Borneo on the Indonesian side of the island. It is possible that in the folk history of the Maranao Bandjarmasin (read Bandiarmasir) there must be a mythical island where a great king reigns (Maharadia Lawana) and supernatural events occur as described in the following section.

EPISODES AND EVENTS

It seems that the whole story revolves around the events in the life of the heroine, Tuwan Potre Malaila Tihaia [TPMT] (Sita), in four important episodes, namely the winning of TPMT, the abduction of TPMT, the search for TPMT, and the return of TPMT.

The playing of the agong and the kulintang presages an important event in the life of a young woman of high birth, exquisite beauty and charm. They announce to the world—the maritime world—that she is now ready for marriage. The game of sipa is to be played among the suitors, and whoever kicks the rattan ball to the lamin, where the princess lives with her retinue, will be wed to her. Radia Mangandiri (RMd) kicks the sipa to the lamin, and wins the hand of the princess Tuwan Potre Malaila Tihaia. But, alas, the Radia and the Potre do not live happily ever after.

For as the couple, accompanied by Radia Mangawarna and a full retinue provided by the royal parents of TPMT, are on their way back to his kingdom of Agamaniog, a great calamity befalls them. The journey is long and arduous. They have to spend complete cycles of seasons to produce their sustenance. Thus,

while they watch the golden grains, their attention is caught by a deer with golden horns, grazing in a nearby cogonal area. Upon seeing it Malaila Ganding, immediately harbours a craving for the rare animal, such that if
it is not caught she will die. Radia Mangandiri, to satisfy such a desire, goes forthwith to catch the animal with instructions to his brother Mangawarna not to leave Malaila Ganding even if he should call for help.

The deer did not prove elusive to Radia Mangandiri. Rather it met him, and fought back. Radia Mangandiri in his difficulty cried for help, but Radia Mangawarna did not leave his sister-in-law. However, Potre Malaila Ganding, not being able to bear the predicament that Radia Mangandiri was in, threatened to die (to kill herself) if Radia Mangawarna did not go to help his brother. So he went telling his sister-in-law 'I think that when I go, you should close the window. Whoever knocks, do not open.'

He reached the site where Radia Mangandiri and the deer were fighting, and the deer seeing him thus, made himself into two and ran away. The brothers ran after each till darkness fell, and Radia Mangawarna finally found himself at their house. Radia Mangandiri had reached the forest, and the deer was nowhere to be found.

Radia Mangawarna upon his return saw the result of his action. The women were wailing because Potre Malaila Ganding had been forcibly taken away by Maharadia Lawana. The wall of their house was destroyed and everything in the house was in disarray. He said to himself, That which we were running after was Maharadia Lawana who disguised himself as a deer."

It is not the ruse of changing himself (Maharadia Lawana. [ML]) into a deer with golden horns that becomes interesting in the indigenization process but the long journey home which takes them through cycles of seasons to force them to grow food for their sustenance, the challenge that the deer throws at the feet of the hero, and the deception that the deer makes to draw the younger brother, Radia Mangawarna (RMw), from protecting his sister-in-law, who was forcibly abducted from their provisional home.

The search for TPMT is immediately launched, after assessing their resources. Then

Radia Mangawarna, upon learning of the abduction of Malaila Ganding and seeing that Radia Mangandiri had not returned from his search for the golden horned deer, returned to the jungle to look for his brother. He finds him unconscious (asleep).

Now Radia Mangandiri dreams that he fought a carabao and was gored, and one of his testicles was thrown east where Potre Langawi, Queen of the East, swallowed it, causing her to become pregnant and later to give birth to a monkey son named Laksamana. He awakes and sees his testicles missing. He thinks to himself that his dream may be true.

Subsequently, the brothers discuss the plans for the search and recovery of Potre Malaila Ganding. And they felt despair because there were only two of them. They had no arms, no army to pursue their search for the princess who has been brought to Pulu Bandiarmasir by Maharadia Lawana, who had deceived them.

Now, Radia Magandiri's dream is true. Laksamana, the monkey son, asks his mother Potre Langawi about who could be his father, since while growing up he had not seen him. She evades answering the question, for she knows that he 'has no father.' The monkey son, disappointed by such evasion, leaves home and goes in search for his father. In one of his adventures, he falls between Radia Mangandiri and Radia Mangawarna, and addresses them as father and uncle, respectively. Both were surprised to be addressed thus by a complete stranger who was a monkey at that. After proper introductions, and a presentation of their problems, Laksamana offers to help the brothers search for Potre Malaila Ganding. All their problems—weapons, soldiers, etc.—are now within solution. Laksamana gathers all his subject carabaos to attack Bandiarmasir. He also asks his father and uncle to help gather rattan to be used for building a causeway between Pulu Bandiarmasir and the land where they now are.

Laksamana ties one end of the rattan to a tree, and holding the other, prepares to leap to Pulu Bandiarmasir. He asks his father to support him on his (father's) palm. The leap is successful, and stringing the rattan back and forth, the causeway is finally constructed. They proceed to cross to the other side.

As they walk, the bridge sways and they fall into the sea, where crocodiles wait to eat them. But Laksamana battles and defeats them. The crocodiles promise aid to the cause of Radia Mangandiri and Radia Mangawarna. They are to battle those subjects of Maharadia Lawana who shall run to the sea for safety. They proceed to the palace of Maharadia Lawana. At the Palace, they witness Maharadia Lawana approach Potre Malaila Ganding but fire appears between them. They are surprised at such a phenomenon. Maharadia Lawana himself is perplexed by such a situation and is told by Laksamana that such a phenomenon occurs because Potre Malaila Ganding was abducted from Radia Mangandiri.

After this exchange, betel chew is prepared and exchanged between Radia Mangandiri and Potre Malaila Ganding. Then Laksamana takes the princess' hand and leads her to his father.

At this point, the battle between the forces of Maharadia Lawana and Radia Mangandiri led by Laksamana begins. Laksamana commands the carabaos to enter the village to fight Maharadia Lawana's army. Those who flee to the sea/water are eaten by crocodiles. Later, Maharadia Lawana enters into the fray and fights with Radia Mangawarna, who cannot equal the strength and power of his adversary. Radia Mangandiri takes over, but he cannot wound Maharadia Lawana. Laksamana, seeing that his father seems to be unable to cope with Maharadia Lawana's prowess, takes the kampilan of Radia Mangandiri and sharpens it on the whetstone set upon naga wood found in the palace. With this Radia Mangawarna wounds
Maharadia Lawana, who falls, for according to the prophecy Maharadia Lawana could only be subdued in the power he acquired while performing "austerities" during his exile, by any bladed weapon sharpened on the whetstone set upon naga wood. Thus the battle comes to an end.5

The episode contains a number of rather unusual events which can properly be part of the process of indigenization—the dream of fighting a water buffalo, his testicles being gored and thrown east where they are swallowed by a potre, causing her to become pregnant and later on giving birth to a monkey son named Laksamana, and the son in search of an unknown father. The battle is fought between ML and RMd, then between ML and RMw, but ML cannot be wounded. Laksamana knowing the weakness of ML takes his father's sword and sharpens it on a whetstone set upon naga wood, hands it to RMw, and wounds ML who falls, thus fulfilling the prophecy that ML can only be defeated after having been wounded by any bladed weapon that is sharpened on a whetstone mounted on naga wood. There are many other events in the episode. The above may be sufficient to illustrate the principle of indigenization.

The return of TPMT shows similar very interesting events. A brief account is in order.

. . . Tarrying in Pulu Bandiarmasir after their victory over Maharadia Lawana, they make preparations for their return to Pulu Agamaniog. For this Laksamana tells them he will effect such an event. He calls all the crocodiles on whose backs all the subjects may ride across the ocean to Pulu Agamaniog. The biggest crocodile with the broadest back becomes the mount of the prince and the princess, and Radia Mangawarna and Laksamana. After travelling through the sea they reach the shores of Agamaniog, and waves created by all the crocodiles were like those created by strong winds; 'also the forest seemed to tremble at the footsteps of the carabaos that were walking' escorting the party to land.

The people of Agamaniog were frightened, but Laksamana announces to them that they should not fear, for Radia Mangandiri with his bride Potre Malaila Ganding and Radia Mangawarna are returning from the long travel. They are welcomed with py instead of with fear. Laksamana metamorphoses into a handsome datu.6

The descriptions are quite vivid and show evident adaptations or localizations of the events in the episodes.

Maharadia Lawana is a major character in the story who cannot be ignored at this point. Without him there is no story. I present here the

5. Ibid., pp. 21-22.
most interesting aspects of his character, and his role in the narrative. In brief,

Maharadia Lawana commences with Maharadia Lawana described as the son of the Sultan and Sultaness of Pulu Bandiarmasir; he has eight heads (seven heads, in Par. 61, Text and Translation). He is to have caused the death of many a man in the realm because of his vile tongue intrigues. He is sent on a ship to Pulu Nagara in exile as a punishment for his false representations.

In Pulu Nagara, he gathers leaves and wood, ignites these, and climbs a tree over the fire. He cries that the world is chained . . . ; thereby, Diabarail (Angel Gabriel), hearing it, appears before the Lord (Tohen), informs the latter that Maharadia Lawana cries because the world is in chains. The Lord (Tohen) instructs Diabarail to tell Maharadia Lawana to desist sacrificing himself, because nothing can cause his death, except when he is cut with any tool (knife, sword, etc.) that is sharpened upon a whetstone kept in the heart of the palace of Pulu Bandiarmasir.7

Whether or not ML's death by means of a sword sharpened on a whetstone mounted on naga wood is a local development, it becomes meaningful in terms of the rather wide distribution of the motif in the area. Moreover, whether or not this is an indication of indigenization, it can be said of the borrowers that they possess a natural inclination for creating motifs for their enjoyment and appreciation.

The interpolations and accretions in ML may properly be identified within the process of indigenization.8 At least three major accretions and interpolations have been pointed out. The first is the birth of Laksamana, the monkey son of RMd. He was born of Potre Langawi after she swallowed RMd's testis thinking that it was precious stone. The testis was gored by the carabao with which RMd fought in his dream, and was thrown far into the east.

The question of Laksamana's father becomes significant here in the light of the structure of Maranao society. He could have been sired by his grandfather, in whose house his mother lived, as an act of incest, an irreverent taboo in the society. Thus, the very deep, if congenital concern for genealogy, the salsilah, that is employed not only in the establishment of what is recognized as correct uncorrupted bloodline, thus strengthening kinship ties.

The second interpolation consists of the exploits of Sugriva, Bali and Hanuman which in the ML are all done by Laksamana. One of the exploits is his leap between Pulu Nabandai and Pulu Bandiar-

8. Ibid., pp. 27-31.
masir to enable him to tie rattan vines on both shores to form a causeway for RMd's army to cross the island redoubt of ML. But his leap had to be from the palm of his father and not from the summit of Pulu Nabandai, for the summit crumbled under his weight.

The third interpolation is that the death of ML presaged peace and prosperity in Bandiarmasir, and for many years they remained there. Laksamana promised RMd and TPMT, as well as RMw that they would return to Agamaniog. The promise was fulfilled, for Laksamana called upon his subject, the crocodiles, to transport RMd, TPMT and RWw, as well as all their retinue across the ocean. They reach Agamaniog safely—a maritime voyage that in the epic past was a feat of great courage. Upon reaching Agamaniog, Laksamana (in the ML) metamorphoses into a handsome datu. Thus, the story ends.

THE ROLE OF THE MALAY VERSIONS

The events in the story that have been related in the previous sections are indicative of the significant role of the Malay versions of the epic story in the changes that occurred in the Philippine version. Perhaps, it is not possible to propose here that the process of indigenization may have already begun in the Malay Peninsula. In other words, certain events and elements in the story had begun to take on characteristics of the local folk literary traditions.

If the appearance of Islam as the religious orientation in the Hikayat Seri Rama (HSR) and the Hikayat Maharaja Ravana (HMR) is an indication of the process of indigenization because of its widespread influence in the lives of the Malay (as well as the Indonesian), then it is of great significance to our view that changes suit the contemporary culture patterns already internalized in the society. Portions of the story underscore this point:

/5/ . . . . He gathered all the leaves under the tree, which he piled higher (exceeded the height of) than the highest (tallest) tree in Pulu Nagara. He climbed (and mounted a) branch of the tree; from there he threw (built) fire below (the leaves) and started a fire and smoke. When the leaves (ian) were [already] burning, he cried that the world was chained.

/6/ Diabarail (Angel Gabriel) heard (the cry of Maharadia Lawana), and he (Dia.) appeared before the Lord (Tuhen). He said, <My Lord! Why does Maharadia Lawana burn (himself) in Pulu Nagara, and (why) he cries (because) the world is in chains: Alkamundo lila i laila, hi laila ka ilala, Alaho Akbar, alakaola o alakoatiil, adubila hi Allah Alim.9

One cannot escape the view that there were substitutions in the narration of the story. But the fact should not be overlooked that the farther away in time from the Indian period of Malay/Javanese culture greater are the possibilities of change. While losing perhaps much of the cultural essence of India in the story, we are confronted by the presence in different clothing of the substance of the earlier culture. But, the concepts and nuances expressed in the passage remain internalized in the people.

Laksamana’s search for his father (in the ML) and Kra Kechil (in HSR) impelled by the desire to cleanse both of the stigma of possible incest committed by their mothers with their grandfathers is quite Malay and Philippine in character. While the incest taboo may also be found in other societies than Southeast Asian, this seems very significant, for insinuations of incestuous relations do not seem to be known in the Ramayana.

Bali, Sugriva, and Hanuman remained as simians as the Ramayana ends. But their counterparts in the ML and the HSR metamorphose into human beings and become part of the society into which they were ‘born.’ This metamorphosis seems to have been influenced by a very important literary tradition or motif in Indonesian which found its way into Malay literature at various dates.¹⁰ I refer to the Panji tales whose hero in the course of his adventures changes his name in every important episode in the story.¹¹ We have not noticed the change of the name of Sita in the ML, which at the start of the story was Tuwan Potre Malano Tihaia. Towards the middle and at the end, she is called Tuwan Potre Malaila Ganding. This is indicative of the changes within the society, evident perhaps from the earlier influence of the Panji tales.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In discussing a problem like indigenization of a given cultural element, or of a piece of literature in a given cultural milieu, it is inescapable that problems will arise in the process. Nonetheless, it is a valid exercise to attempt to understand changes that occur in the process of borrowing and subsequent adaptation, and the internalization of a cultural element into the fabric of a given society.

The ML is a case in point. Perhaps one of the recognizable problems is that as the ML becomes part of the literary or cultural traditions


¹¹. Francisco, Maharadia Lawana, p. 34.
of the Maranao (or the Philippines for that matter), acceptance of alien cultural elements that may be in conflict with those already internalized in the society becomes inevitable. The process of internalization of the new elements resolves this inherent conflict that attends the adaptation of such elements.

In concluding this note, let me advert back to an earlier point. With the introduction of Islam, and its subsequent acceptance as well as internalization into the culture, the introduction of cultural elements into that milieu will have to conform with those of the local systems. Concepts in the literature that conflict with the Islam will have to be modified and assume the aspect of Islam, (e.g., the introduction of Diabarail [Angel Gabriel] in the prayers). Of course, it must be construed at that point in time when Islam 'made' itself a 'native' element of the culture. Let me illustrate this point.

In an earlier essay, I discussed the introduction of Islamic literature in the Philippines. In that essay I posed the view that Islam was indigenized by the Islamized Filipinos, namely the Maguindanao, the Maranao and the Tausug. There then followed a significant process of Islamization of every cultural element, including the literature, i.e., "which are attempts to infuse in them Islamic thoughts because the religious leaders frown upon these stories which do not carry with them such teachings as would help propagate the faith."13

In the long years of encounter between Islam and the indigenous cultures, as well as the culture that was introduced by Spaniards and the Americans in the later years of Philippine history, conflicts were inevitable. But in the process certain adjustments had to be made by each to be able to coexist peacefully later on. These adjustments, one of which is seen in the development of the song or hymn as part of the Islamic literature in the Philippines, are important and meaningful. For the indigenous and the alien—Islam, and Christianity—shall be in constant contact in the years to come. The alien had come to stay, and yet it has to draw its nourishment from the soul and soil of the indigenes.14

It becomes itself an indigenous element, becoming a reason for the indigenization of cultural elements that came later.

14. Ibid., pp. 43-44.