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From Ayodha to Pulu Agamaniog, by Francisco

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From Ayodhya to Pulu Agamaniog: Rama's Journey to the Philippines.

By Juan R. Francisco. Quezon City: Asian Center, University of the Philippines, 1994.

In early March 1993, the Philippines Educational Theater Association (PETA) staged several performances of a play based on the *Maharadia Lawana*, the Maranaw version of Valmiki's well-loved Indian epic, the *Ramayana*, unearthed 25 years earlier in Marawi by Dr. Juan R. Francisco, then of the University of the Philippines. This production underlined PETA's interest in native, including non-Tagalog, drama, but at the same time drew attention to the deep cultural links between India and the Philippines. This aspect of the Philippine cultural heritage has been neglected more than observed, has interested few scholars other than Dr. Francisco, and apparently held even less appeal for the general population which persists in considering the few Indians in our midst simply as strangers from a completely unrelated world. But the links, whether we have chosen to see them or not, are there.

In the months running up to PETA's playdates in 1993, Dr. Francisco was invited to give a series of lectures to the play's cast and production staff, to acquaint them first with the social and cultural values expressed in the original Indian epic, and then with the variations and "local feeling" expressed in the Southeast Asian versions of the original. The four PETA lectures, starting with values and themes of the Valmiki *Ramayana*, then tracing the journey of the Prince Rama into Southeast Asia, and culminating with an examination of Rama's indigenization into the Philippines, constitute the bulk of this book. The appendices include a more detailed comparison of the various Rama texts in Southeast Asia, as well as the full text, with translation, of the *Maharadia Lawana*. It is basically the fruit of a lifetime of research by Dr. Francisco, which started out more than 30 years ago with a research project entitled "An Investigation of Probable Sanskrit Elements in Maranaw Language and Literature."

Valmiki's *Ramayana* is a rich epic of social order, domestic conflict, love, devotion, and, in the end, war. The hero Rama, as the embodiment of the god Vishnu, is God to the Hindus, and his behavior sets the standard for the kingly and the godly in India. Similarly, his beautiful, gentle, and faithful wife Sita is the ideal Hindu woman. When Rama is banished from the kingdom of Ayodhya because of the jealous ambition of one of his stepmothers, Sita joins him to wander in the forest as an ascetic—another Hindu tradition, but this appropriate only at a particular life stage, as a "winding—down" activity. Rama was banished when he should have been king. Out of the forest Sita is kidnapped by the demon Ravana, who came from Sri Lanka. Rama, assisted only by his brother Lakshmana, cannot even find Sita by himself, but soon meets the charming monkey-god Hanuman, to this day a favorite Hindu deity. Hanuman, son of the Wind God, leaps across the

water to Sri Lanka and discovers where Sita has been hidden. Then follows war between the demons of Ravana and the monkey army of Hanuman, under Rama's command. Rama of course is victorious, and Sita is rescued, as even the Sri Lankans themselves know it is wrong to steal a woman against her will. Sita must be tried by fire to test her purity, since she has been in Ravana's custody for slightly more than a year, but having passed this test, she joins the triumphal procession back to Ayodhya, beside Rama, who then takes his rightful position as King.

The basic thought patterns informing this epic are Hindu, and therefore one might suppose the epic to be culture-bound to India, as reluctant to cross water as a caste Hindu. But Rama slowly ventured east, first into the Buddhist societies that were highly Indianized in so many other respects—Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. The story of course took on variations, but Rama, Sita, Hanuman, and Ravana remained clearly recognizable and the story remained faithful to its original lines.

But crossing the water was no doubt inevitable, and Rama eventually made his way into Southeast Asia—to Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Here, however, he discovered that Muslim culture had preceded him, and that adjusting to the local culture would thus be more complicated. Dr. Francisco's greatest interest, it seems, is in what happened in this area. He focuses on variations in place—names, storyline, and characterization among four listed Islamic Southeast Asia Rama stories: the Malayan *Hikayat Seri Rama*, the Indonesian *Hikayat Maharaja Ravana*, a now-romanized Malayan tale called the *Fairy Tale*, and the Maranaw story *Maharadia Lawana*.

From our point of view here, the Filipino version, the Maranaw tale, is the "final" version, and the variations between this and Valmiki's original epic, as noted by Dr. Francisco, seem most appropriately Southeast Asian. To begin with, our Maranaw Rama was born in Pulu Agama Niog—Cocunut Grove Island—and he is named Radia (Raja) Mangandiri. His arch-enemy is, however, a Maha-raja—that is, a *greater* king, villain that he is. Dr. Francisco perhaps appropriately does not comment on this fact, but for this reviewer it is highly significant that in the Filipino version, the hero is *not* the one in highest authority but the one who challenges that authority, the upstart, the man of lesser fame and fortune. Maharadia Lawana comes from another island, Pulu Bandiarmasir, which Dr. Francisco says may be the Bornean island of Bandjarmasin.

At any rate, Radia Mangandiri voyages in the sea for ten years searching for his fate, and finally finds his love, Tuwan Potre Malano Tihai (Sita), whom he actually wins in a game of *sipa*! Later, Maharadia Lawana apparently kidnaps her without motivation and carries her off. Mangandiri has only his brother Mangawarna to help him in his search and thus is easily discouraged. At one point, Mangawarna finds his elder brother unconscious or asleep, dreaming that his testicle has been gored from his scrotum by a

carabao, and thrown to the east, where it is swallowed by a young woman named Potre Langawi, who thinks that it is a precious stone. Shortly thereafter, Potre Langawi gives birth to a Monkey-child, the Hanuman character of the original, but here named Laksamana (which is, confusingly enough, the name of Rama's younger brother in the original). This is Mangandiri's *dream*, but the child, a literal dream-come-true, soon appears before the two brothers and offers to help them find Mangandiri's kidnapped wife. This he does by taming the crocodiles, presumably in the Sulu Sea, and walking on their backs to reach the hidden island of Maharadia Lawana. After the battle has been won, Laksamana, unlike the prototype Hanuman, takes on human form. In this version, Potre Malano Tihaia does *not* face any ordeal by fire, and the victors make their triumphal procession home to Pulu Agama Niog on the backs of crocodiles.

Dr. Francisco's interest in the subtle differences between the four versions of the story found in Islamic Southeast Asia is centered on questions of cultural diffusion, the Islamization and indigenization of the stories, questions of dating, etc. He postulates, among other things, that a good deal of Islamization had gone on *before* the tale reached the Maranaws, as evidenced by the relations between the Maranaw version and the other three, the occurrence of references to Diabarail (the Angel Gabriel, functional in Islamic thought as well as Christian) in some of the versions, etc. Dr. Francisco speculates that perhaps Indian and Arabic influences arrived in the area simultaneously instead of serially. This apparently fits into the type of influence Sanskrit brought to bear on the Maranaw language—that is, borrowed vocabulary but limited structural influence. Using internal and external evidence, Dr. Francisco dates the *Maharadia Lawana* somewhere between the middle of the 17th century and the dawning of the 19th.

Dr. Francisco's scholarship in this study is intriguing, and it might well serve as an example of how the studies of linguistics, epics and folk tales, and history can be productively brought together to shed light on issues of cultural accommodation and change. Nevertheless, it is not an easy book to read, with scholarly terms and references distinctly interfering with the understanding of the nonspecialist reader. This reviewer fervently wishes that Dr. Francisco would apply his expertise to the writing of a more readable, more popular work which might actually serve to interest Filipino readers in the links between their culture and that of ancient India—links which have been little explored and which promise to be quite fascinating.

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