

## Authentic Presentation of “Ramayana Ballet” Performance Art in Prambanan, Klaten, Central Java, Indonesia

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### Abstract

### Original Research Article

Prambanan Open Stage in Klaten, Central Java, Indonesia, is a starting point that gives a path to audiences to the entertainment of Javanese genuine exotic dance. Tourists come to Prambanan in Indonesia by expectation of sensing their own imaginary world while seeing the relief on *Candi Prambanan* and watching over the presentation of *wayang kulit purwa*. One important issue in creating tourist attraction is laid upon authentic aspect of the attraction. Authenticity is possible to achieve by developing synergy among various elements involved in tourist performance art, such as moves, music, lamp, and stage properties. The synergy is the early process before harmonization. This research uses qualitative descriptive approach. In-depth interview is conducted with key informants, respectively, Sumardi (54 years old), a choreographer for ‘Ramayana Ballet’ presentation on Prambanan Open Stage, and Sumaryono (62 years old), a dancer and also stylish dance choreographer from Yogyakarta. Direct observation is carried out to see how dancers are organized artistically to produce dramatic presentation. Analysis technique is mainly interpretation that must be explained descriptively. Result of research shows that performance art presented in Prambanan Open Stage is truly authentic and presumed as an effort to synergize “entertainment” with “education”. The synergy is the outcome of achieving authenticity that later gives audiences the power of appreciation and empathy.

**Keywords:** Stage, Prambanan, performance art, adaptation, Ramayana.

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## INTRODUCTION BACKGROUND

Prambanan Open Stage in Klaten, Central Java, Indonesia, was constructed in 1960 [1] as an actualization of entryway to foreign visitors to watch over Javanese genuine exotic dance entertainment. Masterminds behind this idea hope that audiences of this dance will presume Indonesia as one of world miracles that has been displayed in a presentation of *wayang kulit purwa*. To do so, masterminds keep with themselves the repertory of Indian-Hindu epic stories. Most of these stories have been acculturated into Javanese culture, and one of them is Ramayana, which since the launching of Prambanan Open Stage, conceptors decide to put it on regular play. Actually, Ramayana story was already popular among literature scholars since 1827 [2], and besides, Ramayana devotees among migrant labors in South Africa had introduced this story as a part of healing rite [3]. Migration phenomenon of Ramayana story shall ignite

any scholars’ mind to use it as fundamental concept before examining its logical connection with performance art presentation. They may already aware that in current days, tourism performance art shall not provide only entertainment but also serve the needs for knowledge, education and local wisdom. The literates consider these needs necessary for developing human character [4]. In Chitrakut, Uttar Pradesh, India, a new tourist site named “Ram Darshan’s Ramakatha” had been built with a purpose to offer a package of entertainment, knowledge, and character education [5]. Other possible concept is to combine “entertainment” aspect with “usefulness” goal in performance art presentation [6].

The possibility to synergize ritual performance art and tourism goal has been explored. For example, *wayang kulit* (leather puppet) is a kind of ritual performance art, but its authentic source is yet clearly known. Therefore, it shall not be wise to promote this

art to international domain as original work because it may trigger controversy. One solution to this matter is by adapting *wayang kulit* presentation to the favor of modern audiences. The adaptation involves converting the play of leather puppets into the play of real humans on spectacular stage. So far, the use of human as life puppets to play leather puppets' story has been a good alternative. Human puppeting, or widely known as *wayang wong*, actually has been popular already before the launching of Prambanan Open Stage [7]. Classical dance artists in Surakarta and Yogyakarta are becoming the options of creative capital because it is assumed that they have been familiar with choreographic pattern that modifies verblivity into body language that produces the moves [8].

Adapting traditional performance to the need for tourist attraction is a challenge that must be dealt wisely. Building open stage in vicinity of Candi Prambanan Tourism Park is truly a strategic step to give dance and performance art the impression of exoticism and spectacularity. Performing on this stage in front of tourist audiences will involve choreography created with ability to synergize various elements including moves, music, lamp and stage properties [9]. One item in *Candi Prambanan* tourist package is 'Ramayana Ballet' played on Prambanan Open Stage, and this item is the starting point from which this research is trying to answer research question, which is, "How can the phenomenon and existence of tourism performance art have potentials of entertainment and education?"

## METHOD

Qualitative descriptive approach is used in this research. In-depth interview was carried out with key informants, respectively, Sumardi (54 years old), a choreographer for 'Ramayana Ballet' presentation on Prambanan Open Stage, and Sumaryono (62 years old), a dancer and also stylish dance choreographer from Yogyakarta. Besides this interview, researcher also conducted direct observation by watching Ramayana story presentation from inside and outside audience bench. The presentation plays "the full story" of Ramayana epic. The play was observed directly on May 7 and 9 of 2019. Dancers and *pengrawit* (musicians) were artistically organized in Yogyakarta dramatical style. Analysis technique involves interpretation, referential association, and logical analogy. Concerning with logics, there are chronological and argumentative logics, and both are descriptively presented. In other words, the analysis comprises few activities such as reviewing literatures and newspapers, watching over performance directly, looking for synergy, and building rational arguments based on interview result. Assessment on quality is done using art critical theory [10], which is then applied to both performance presentation and audience perception.

## DATA DESCRIPTION

It must be noted that *wayang wong* (human puppets) is a Javanese tourism performance art that has been regularly presented on Prambanan Open Stage. It is the play of non-verbal narration and supposed to be the early appearance to welcome the visiting of foreign tourists to Yogyakarta. Decision for Ramayana Ballet is considered remarkable by many art scholars, especially related to the fact that art-based economic growth in Yogyakarta is rather declining in recent days. Gendhon Humardani, a choreographer and an initiator of rejuvenation of Surakarta style dance, admitted that most choreographies of Ramayana Ballet are composed by Kusumokesawa, but its creative process is supported by Soeharso, the director of 'Rehabilitative Centrum' in Surakarta, and it is also said that some moves are possibly conventional and even on the process of experiment [11]. Sumaryono makes assertion that Ramayana story has been rarely played for long times in Yogyakarta, either through presentation of leather puppets or human puppets. Practitioners have reasoned that room for expanding original version of Ramayana story is quite limited, and not many parts of it are available for the making of spin off, or called *carangan* (result of interpretation and development) (Sumaryono, interview on May 3, 2019).

Furthermore, researcher has understood the fact that migration of Ramayana story to Java island has provided Javanese with repertory of tales to be played in puppet performance art. This fact remains strong despite specific conditions needed for playing the story on grand presentation (Sumaryono, interview on Mei 3, 2019). Despite using grandiose impression, 'Ballet Ramayana' presentation in Prambanan Open Stage is still considered original. Sumardi explained that the play of 'full story' of Ramayana epic in Yogyakarta style is using *public performance standards* (Sumardi, interview on May 7, 2019), precisely standards suggested by Soedarsono in a book titled as *Indonesian Performance Art and Tourism* [12]. Ramayana story has been rarely played for very long times, which therefore is reducing popularity. Conserving this iconic story in current days must need specific treatments, which among others is by presenting the play on the site that has historical and emotional bond with Ramayana story. The selected site is then 'Prambanan Tourism Park'.



**Fig-1: Ramayana Ballet on Prambanan Open Stage (Photograph by Robby)**

Based on observation data, it is said that performance art presented in Prambanan Open Stage is an effort to synergize *imaginary depiction* of Ramayana story carved on *Candi Siwa* and *Candi Brahma* with *creativity* of the performing artists. This imaginary depiction has actually been verbalized in many events through presentation of leather and human puppets. Both presentation methods are the adaptive capital that can be used to produce innovative tourism performance art. Choreographers exploit adaptive capital by emphasizing on Ramayana repertory's historical elements that can be seen in *Candi Prambanan's* environment. Artistical sensations are manifested through colossal choreography in which every appearance involves not less than 50-70 dancers and 30 *gamelan* player (musician) (Sumardi, interview on May 7, 2019).

Effort to conserve Ramayana story by presenting it as tourism entertainment shall produce strong attraction, at least because India's Hindu mythology has been a worldwide memory [13]. With respect to this statement, the relief in *Candi Prambanan* is therefore considered as authentic source of tourism performance art. Identifying Ramayana story as authentic is possibly right because the relief is representing "authenticity" [14]. Tourists not only get satisfaction from a spectacular stage attraction but they also obtain deep knowledge about Ramayana story. This story was carved as relief on the walls of *Candi Siwa* and *Candi Brahma*. Scene sequence of the performance is based on this relief, and it was told in a book titled as *Monumental Java: History of Candis and Monuments in Java* [15]. It seems that Ramayana story has been incarnated into *wayang batu* (stone puppet) carved as relief on candis' walls. Hindu adherents consider this relief as visual artifact and then use it in leather puppet presentation performed at various community events, which since then, this presentation adaptively transforms itself into tourism performance art.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULT

Prambanan Open Stage was constructed to be a tourist destination. This construction has been underlined by theoretical considerations including phenomenology, history, and functionality. Data about this Stage have been reviewed and three aspects are found to be vital to connect tourism performance art with tourist audiences. These three aspects are: (1) environmentally authentic, (2) historically authentic, and (3) attractively authentic. Each aspect is in a synergy with the other and elaborated in the following:

### 1. Environmentally Authentic

Prambanan Tourism Park and Prambanan Open Stage are two places considered as authentic because both have historical quality. The relief of Ramayana story carved on walls of *Candi Siwa* and *Candi Brahma* is a visual narration that also becomes a source of authenticity. Historical values

are something that can be used as endorser to educational values.

### 2. Historically Authentic

Historical authenticity of Ramayana story and *Candi Prambanan* has been confirmed by many literary books and folklores and then supported by testimony of elders of *dalang wayang Jawa* (Javanese puppet masters). All of these are proof that Ramayana story has strongly rooted into the brain of Javanese people.

### 3. Attractively Authentic

'Ballet Ramayana' is a creative attraction played by local dance artists (mostly Javanese) who domicile at Surakarta and Yogyakarta, and profess traditional dance as livelihood. Almost all of them are main performer in authentic tradition that they conserve at their dance studios or even at palace environment. Scenarios and structures of choreography are adapted from *Candi Prambanan's* relief. Costumes, moves, and attraction are explored from authentic sources, and then are organized to be watched simultaneously and played in open stage with *Candi Prambanan* as a background. When the presentation is happened to be held in full moon, Prambanan Open Stage is becoming a sense of magic.

Researcher believes that there is a strong synergy involving elements of authenticity, and these elements are environment, history and attraction. Tourists are not only entertained but also obtaining information and historical knowledge about Ramayana story besides what is given by Hindu's spiritual literacy. South Africans who worship Rama (a character in Ramayana story) believe in to the story and even use it as a guideline for healing and prosperity. Among Javanese elders, Ramayana story has been used as a part of the procession of *tolak balak* (communal immunity). When this story shall be performed in front of massive audiences, it must be functioned as to entertain people. However, when the story is functioned as entertainment, it is like forcing Ramayana story to transform its existence from sacred realm to profane domain. Despite this transformation, the story is not losing its persuasion power because it is telling about love and struggle, faith and persistency, and good and bad, which all humans are ever experiencing with. One way to make all these happening is by presenting art performance on Prambanan Open Stage.

## CONCLUSION

'Ramayana Ballet' is a performance art played on Prambanan Open Stage. It is an authentic harmonious integration involving many elements such as historical background, performance art attraction, and artists' creative potential. Massive presentation on Prambanan Open Stage shall put the Stage as the center of worldwide attention. The Stage will be the place for audiences to enjoy the past time aesthetical richness and while doing it, also to muse over humanitarian ethics

about life and spiritual concept that is always moral oriented. Indeed, 'Ramayana Ballet' in Prambanan Open Stage is the synergy of "entertainment" and "education". This synergy is achieved by determining authenticity of presentation, and this authenticity then provides audiences with power of appreciation and empathy.

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