

## Within the Ring of Fire

### Regional Collective Work on Mutual Aid, Cultural Histories, and Precarity

#### Editor's note:

The Pacific Ring of Fire, encircling eastern Asia and Australia, as well as western America, produces the majority of the world's earthquakes, wildfires, and volcanic activities due to its proximity to tectonic plates. "Thinking of fire is truly like entering the troubled water", Dev Pathak writes. Fire is the physical or metaphorical element that rings the writing of this collective together. "The image alludes to larger international discourses on climate change, carbon emissions, and anxious ruminations about how to save the climate for greater common good" (Dev Pathak). Indeed, Neel Banerjee echoes this in his *Hemlock World*, in which he introduces his performance that draws upon ancient Indian text of the *Mahabharata*, the story of fire god against the king of gods, alluding to the destructed balance of nature as in the Ring of Fire encircling the Pacific. Erin Wilkerson's *The Smoke Rides on the Wind* performs a historiographical operation on three stories of fossil fuels within the Ring of Fire, and this film is "a plea for a multispecies performative connection, a collective work of embodiment, a collaborative call for epistemic disobedience and curating history that looks towards a future of living". In the uncertain times of fires and disasters, Alex Tam discusses the concept of "ruderal" in collective practices, of which one of the key elements is an exposure to an abrupt shift of ecological states, implying a direct response and prompt adaptation immediately after a disturbance event. This provides possibilities in the radical uncertainties we are faced with nowadays, such as climate change. Kenneth Tay's *Ringling in the Fires: Towards a Pyropolitics for the Future* investigates pyropolitics since the advent of "modernity", and the connection between burning of fossil fuel, modernity in Europe, exploitation of resources, banning broadcast burning, fire prohibition, and colonialism. He argues that we need to (re)learn from "those who slash and burn, those who practice a different pyropolitics", and those who are mutable and mobile and difficult for the central power to put under control. Zoénie Deng's investigation on woodcut movements in Asia, then and now, shows how collective woodcut practices kindle and connect like sparks in the inter-Asia context. With the spirit "art for people", woodcut movements were the sparks of anti-colonial movements in Asia. The recent spread of sparks of collective woodcut practices are the embodiment of anti-global capitalism and DIY/DIWO spirit, which open up democratic spaces in the society. Linda Kencana's work also looks into the inter-Asia cultural exchange: the virtual collective dance engaged three dance troupes from Thailand and Indonesia: Khon of Fine Arts Department Thailand, the Jakarta Bharata Wayang Orang and the Bali Paripurna amidst the fire of the COVID pandemic.

*Dev Pathak (co-convenor ISGS Cultural Precarities / South Asian University, India)*

Thinking of fire is like entering the troubled water. The mythologies imagined the primeval fire as divine, the touch of which cleansed the imprints of the deeds (*Karma*). The ancient fire-rituals across religious civilizations were the testimonials. The advent of modernity did not cease the mythological motifs. The imagery of fire remained a muse of poets and mystics.

The modern poet in colonial South Asia, Rabindranath Tagore<sup>1</sup> wrote one of his verses, in sync with the imagined sacredness,

*Aguner poroshmoni* (in Bengali)...

Purify my life/ with the purging touch of fire/ Purify my life/ With your blessings of searing pain/  
Make it pure like the gold/That passes the test of fire.

(Gupta<sup>2</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> Tagore, R. 1924. *Panchbhoot*. Translated by Devvali Singh. Calcutta: Pathak & Company

<sup>2</sup> Gupta, Smita. "The Two Gurudev's." <https://www.thehindu.com/thread/politics-and-policy/article8572707.ece>, The HINDU, <https://www.thehindu.com/thread/politics-and-policy/article8572707.ece>.

Curiously though, the same poet also presented a theatrical interaction of the *panchbhoot* (five essential elements interchangeably known as panchamahabhootas) that constitute nature. They are earth (prithvi), water (jala), fire (tejas), wind (vayu) and space (akasha). With Tagore's *Panchbhoot*, each element is seen in interaction, rivalling for supremacy of significance, and yet the most valuable is the significance of a balance-in-interaction. Fire, in the poet's imagination, is never alone. Instead, it is the interaction of the elements that provides significance for each in the constellation called *Panchbhoot*.

Thinking of fire is truly like entering the troubled water then. If we return to the mythologies' imagination of the sacred fire we begin to spot the presence of water, wind, space and earth playing their respective roles. The aesthetics arise in the interactive balance. Equally aesthetic is the poetic longing for the balance. And likewise, the aesthetics of fire does not disappear in the utter imbalance. The hell-fire in Milton's *Paradise Lost* is that inferno which presents an aesthetic of destruction. Whereas the icy-frozen hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy* unfolds the longing for a balancing fire that we often call warmth!

In this backdrop, there are two images from contemporary India that can regale the collaborative imagination of the artists and aesthetes. They curate a broad spectrum of thoughtfulness, as it were. One image is of the farmers' stubble burning in the fields across the northern countryside. The image alludes to larger international discourses on climate change, carbon emissions, and anxious ruminations about how to save the climate for greater common good. The vulnerable humanity desperately intends to unite against the intimidating fire that releases carbon leaping out to swallow the world.

The second image is a typical expression of under-developed societies. In wintry evenings and mornings, across northern countryside in India this is a common practice to put on a log-fire. The folks in villages and small towns sit around the fire and warm themselves, chit chatting and gossiping too. Seemingly, this is an act of warming up, physically and socially! Mostly those who do not have sufficient resources to maintain a warm household fulfil their need for warmth in such social warming up sessions. The vulnerable humanity huddles desperately to cope with the bone chilling winter.

In the end, then, it is all about the interaction of the essential elements to which we respond, as artists and aesthetes, and above all, as humans. The melodrama of the interaction is more manifest in the situation of imbalance, with fire, for example, superimposed on the other elements. From subtle to crude, fire is seldom without water! Or so does it seem when water color is the means of the artistic rendition of fire, literally and figuratively!

## **Hemlock World**

*Neel Banerjee, thespian, writer, producer and director, Australia*

### *Introduction*

For me, it is exactly out of the frying pan into the fire! So far, I've spent half of my life in India and half in Australia. From the tropical Calcutta weather to the depleted ozone layer in Australia. The Ring of Fire round the Pacific constitutes the biggest earthquakes, wildfires and greenhouse emission.

### *Aim*

To create a performance piece that is somewhat hybrid in nature, that will demonstrate how the present day politicians are failing to stop the climate crisis. This will be referenced to an ancient Indian text of the *Mahabharata* to build a socio-political context to the present-day war and the warlike situation in the world.

### *Objective & Implementation*

My work will create a storyline and a performance-based presentation of an episode (Khandava Dhahan) from the ancient Indian Vedic text the *Mahabharata*. The story will narrate how the two powerful men (Arjuna and Krishna) burnt the Khandava forest and displaced Nagas and Asuras who lived in the forest for centuries. The implementation will be self-resource driven.

Khandava Dhahan (Burning of Khandava)<sup>3</sup>

According to the Indian Epic the *Mahabharata*, Khandava is the dense forest on the banks of river Jamuna. Mighty warrior Arjuna along with his buddy Krishna who was the human incarnation of God, burnt the entire forest.

Mythology – The fire God Agni would try burning the land many times to feed his hunger but the king of the Gods, Indra would soak the fire with rain. (Ref: balance of nature/backburning/controller fire). One day when Arjuna and Krishna were resting by the bank of the river Agni approached Arjuna and with the help of Krishna they defeated Indra in a fierce war (Ref: Human destruction of nature). This allowed Agni the fire to burn the Khandava forest. This forest was the kingdom and habitat of Nagas (worshippers of snakes) and Asuras (Demons; Asura word comes from the Persian word Ahura). They all die due to the fire. One of the survivors was an artisan Mayasura (Mystic spirit) who took refuge with Krishna and was forgiven. Mayasura later built the kingdom Indraprastha which became the luxurious palace of Arjuna and his brothers to live in. Indraprastha is currently Delhi, the capital of India. (Ref: The fate of the marginalized community or the vanquished.)

Impact and Conclusion:

Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic<sup>4</sup> says that the fate of the master's self-consciousness is largely dependent on the slave's creation through which he reaches an awareness and starts feeling part of the society. This piece will question the concept of consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

**Erin Wilkerson:**

### **The Smoke that Rides on the Wind**

"We have increasingly lost the ability to tell the difference between our world and the natural worlds we make and destroy." – Nils Bubandt<sup>6</sup>

There is a manufactured societal blindness in ignoring the multispecies entanglements known as sympliosis. Scientists have begun to identify some holobiont, or multispecies synchronicities - the fungal and flora in lichen, bacteria essential to the health of the human body, algae and the small animal polyps of coral. When one is threatened, all are threatened, when one is removed, the other cannot survive. Life and death are intrinsically linked. Through our lack of knowing, there is potential to destroy the very species humans need for survival, perhaps within a large forest, or even as small as bacteria or a parasite. Survival depends on collaboration rather than competition, beyond the arbitrary boundaries we have established and been taught to value. This requires an immediate attunement and curiosity into collective multispecies life; a deliberate attack on our history of knowledge-making; an epistemic disobedience.<sup>7</sup>

Michel de Certeau's requirements for historiographical operations require a re-consideration of future, making place for the living through an interrogation of the past, in particular the production

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.apamnapat.com/articles/Mahabharata016.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ph/phba.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Bubandt, N. (2017). HAUNTED GEOLOGIES: SPIRITS, STONES, AND THE NECROPOLITICS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE. In N. Bubandt, A. Tsing, H. Swanson, & E. Gan (Eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (pp. 121–141). University of Minnesota Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1qft070.11>

<sup>7</sup> Haraway, D. (2017). SYMBOIOGENESIS, SYMPOIESIS, AND ART SCIENCE ACTIVISMS FOR STAYING WITH THE TROUBLE. In A. Tsing, H. Swanson, E. Gan, & N. Bubandt (Eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (pp. 25–50). University of Minnesota Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1qft070.20>

of our knowledge on the past, and the re-imagining of who we are in relation to who we have been.<sup>8</sup> My film, “The Smoke Rides on the Wind”, performs a historiographical operation on three stories of fossil fuels within the Ring of Fire. The tracking of goods from early globalization, to the present, tells the story of colonialism and settlement, the violent hierarchies established to control land, goods, people, borders, and movement, in direct conflict with the sympoietic collaboration necessary for survival.

Oil extraction performs two roles in globalization, as a highly valued mineral species which must be mined from deep within Earth, and as the fuel for modern era movement. Both roles threaten multispecies health, as ecological contaminations have become increasingly prevalent in drilling and fracking processes, pipeline breaks, and transport carrier crashes. This contamination is easily visible to the human eye as rainbow slick and animals immersed in viscous black death. Furthermore, we lack knowledge of potential holobiont relationships between fossil fuels and other substratum organisms, creating potential catastrophes we cannot yet see.

The histories re-interrogated are the Indonesian mud volcano, which began immediately following oil drilling and has continued for sixteen years, the beginnings of Shell Oil in colonized and unseeded territory in South East Asia, and the early settlement of California as tied to commercial oil extraction and the enslavement of the indigenous peoples. These troubled stories of power politics and theft speak to the trajectory of our current precarity of mass inequality and environmental revolt. Each extraction is also a story of displacement. Just as borders will not stop the spread of illness in a time of constant global trade and travel, borders will also not control the spread of global warming and climate catastrophe. As with fire, they move with disregard to wealth and privilege. This body of work is a plea for a multispecies performative connection, a collective work of embodiment, a collaborative call for epistemic disobedience and curating history that looks towards a future of living. It aims to reorient global extraction, creating deeper connections; a move towards modes of collective radical care.

## Ruderal Collectives

*Alex Tam, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong*

A flame of fire is an unpredictable disturbance in nature, while at the same time offering plant species an evolutionary simulation for resprouting and reseeding. When the coronavirus pandemic has disrupted almost all aspects of our lives, the arts and cultural sector has been no exception. Whilst many exhibitions and events were put into a halt, many artist collectives have been able to continue their work and further deepen the quality of their interaction with local communities. Becoming especially relevant to the present time, artist collectives have been drawing wide attention from the art world. Following the news that a Jakarta-based artists' collective *ruangrupa* is going to curate the Documenta 15 in Kassel, the shortlist of the prestigious Turner Prize in 2021 are all made up of artist collectives for the first time ever (Jhala 2021)<sup>9</sup>. In a sense, disruption challenges accustomed ways of working, but also inspires new potentials and unearths new aspects of artist collectives' practices that create new kinds of collaboration and collective action.

The notion of “ruderal” may provide a conceptual framework to the emergence of these new artistic practices taken by artist collectives. Derived from the Latin word “rudus”, the word “ruderal” originally means rubble and is often associated with a rugged and turbulent landscape affected by disasters – both natural and human-made (Cowles 2017)<sup>10</sup>. Growing on rubble of old buildings,

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<sup>8</sup> Hartman, S. (2008). Venus in Two Acts. *Small Axe* 12(2), 1-14. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/241115>.

<sup>9</sup> Jhala, K. (15 October 2021). “All in it together: what do collectives mean for the future of the art market?”, *The Art Newspaper* [online], accessed 7 November 2021. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/10/14/all-in-it-together-artist-collectives>

<sup>10</sup> Cowles, S. (2017). Ruderal Aesthetics, 105th ACSA Annual Meeting Proceedings, accessed 7 November 2021. <https://www.acsa-arch.org/chapter/ruderal-aesthetics/>

roadside verges, slopes and wastelands, ruderal plants are an indication of renewal, reclamation and resilience as they adopt means to overcome harsh habitat conditions. They are often the first plant species that reclaim lands devastated by forest fires and rebuild damaged habitats for a variety of wildlife.

An exposure to an abrupt shift of ecological states is a key element to the concept of “ruderal”. Describing an artistic practice as “ruderal” implies a direct response and prompt adaptation immediately after a disturbance event. As intensifying social struggles emerge against the backdrop of the pandemic with severe implications for both the individual and society, there is a certain necessity for artist collectives to negotiate uncertain, ambivalent and vulnerable processes.

The extension of the concept of ruderal in the context of artist collectives, especially in South East Asia, suggests that their practices can be framed as self-propagating, socially-embedded and relational with the potential to create synergies for resources. It also prompts discussion and opens up understanding of how heterogeneity between artist collectives is accounted for by their capacity to unfold a sense of agency to share and exercise collective power within and with others. Furthermore, it suggests to us possible trajectories for developing new strategies for artistic production and operating models that incorporate ongoing community engagement with a focus on traditional cultures and values.

Embodied in the concept of “ruderal” is a framing that is characterised by a focus on new possibilities in the margins. It allows us to reveal the obscure nature of artist collectives and investigate the multifaceted ways in which they leverage the potential of a dynamic relationship with wider communities as a vehicle of social change and creative renewal. With radical uncertainty beyond their control, empathy is central in the artist collectives’ practice.

## **Ring in the Fires: Towards a Pyropolitics for the Future**

*Kenneth Tay, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore*

The world, we’re told, is on fire. But the source of global warming and climate change has come largely by way of anthropogenic combustions that are hidden from view – from the gas flares of oil refineries around the world, to the billion combustion engines that power global logistics. Yet, rather than focusing on these often invisible combustions, it is the spectacular fires of our burning forests that have somehow come to symbolise climate change and environmental justice.

In 2008, the UN initiated its Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), rolling out financial incentives to mostly developing nations in an effort to encourage the switch from swidden agriculture to more commercial agroecosystems. Since then, Indonesia has been a prime recipient of these incentives. Nevertheless, forests continue to burn every year in Indonesia – not always because of indigenous groups insistent on their tradition of broadcast burning, but also by way of state actors burning up the hinterland to make way for urban expansions. Fires, of course, are never easy to control; they spread and move without regard to political boundaries and artificial lines drawn across the surface of the earth. The ensuing haze from these fires have also been a transboundary issue in the region of Southeast Asia.

But as Nigel Clark and Kathryn Yusoff remind us, “there remains a strong tendency to conflate all forms of combustions – cyclical biomass burn-offs, permanent forest destruction, and the mass consumption of fossilized hydrocarbons – into a single register of destructive carbon emissions.” A conflation that may be traced back to a peculiar moment in the history and developments of European modernity, when urban intellectuals began to admonish the tradition of broadcast burning. What had long been thought of as a means of managing and renewing the forest’s resources was now seen as a “manifestation of waste and disorder.” Thus began the European turn away from open-range fires, and towards enclosure pastures and intensified farming. And as Europe’s appetite grew, so too did its colonial ambitions to secure seemingly limitless resources from elsewhere. Just as European states began demarcating the boundaries of the respective territories, so too did they take it upon themselves to “impose strategies of fire prohibition on some of the most fire-prone places on

Earth.” What began fundamentally as a provincial regime of fire prohibition had spread like wildfire, and continues to shape the norms for global policies and representations of climate change.

For this is where we ought to begin, again, for a world on fire. Pyropolitics – the “collective decision-making over fire” – is a space to rethink and pluralise the various combustions of our present time. Efforts and incentives aimed at controlling the pyrotechnics and open fires of swidden agriculture ignore the European bias that has since encoded the world in its preference for contained fires and internal combustion engines, for enclosed pastures and intensified farming, for clear political boundaries on the surface of the Earth. Those who slash and burn, those who practice a different pyropolitics, are thus far too mutable and mobile, and must instead be planted down – for only when they are sedentary, can they be accountable and manageable as resources.

Another pyropolitics is possible. Just as the tectonic plates around us continue to move and animate us, those of us living in the Ring of Fire must learn never to ring-fence ourselves, but to ring in the fires.

Never miss the forests for the trees. But perhaps more importantly, never miss the fires for these forests.

*Liwen Deng (Zoénie), Waag | Technology&Society/ art writer, poet, curator, the Netherlands*

Woodcuts in Asia were like sparks in the decolonial, anti-imperialist, and independent movements in Asia. There are sparks of woodcut collectives in Asia since the late 1990s, even though not directly related to the past.

Kuroda Raiji explored the inter-Asia exchanges in woodcut<sup>11</sup>. According to Kuroda, there were three reasons why woodcuts were popular during the independence and decolonial movements across Asia: first, the physicality and corporeality of the process; second, accessibility—general public including children and amateurs could make woodcuts; availability of materials; third, the easiness of mechanical representation<sup>12</sup>. There were collective efforts that emerged during these movements, expressing the advocacy for liberation and people’s empowerment via woodcuts. For instance, Woodcut Movement in China in 1930s, influenced by the work of Käthe Kollwitz, had the motto “art for people”<sup>13</sup>, and a mandate to create a “visual Esperanto” that would not only represent the subalterns but involve them in a dialogue on art<sup>14</sup>; the establishment of the Proletarian Print Art Institute in Tokyo in 1930. In post war Japan, the woodcut was rekindled in Japan: more than 200 exhibitions of Chinese woodcuts were held all over Japan of which the prints were exhibited<sup>15</sup>. In Indonesia, in 1930s, different artist communities joined LEKRA (Institute of People's Culture), with the spirit “art for people”, and they also used woodcuts to depict the working class, which was related to the communist movement.<sup>16</sup> The Chinese woodcuts were also introduced in Indonesia then.

A few decades after, around 1998, when the Suharto regime collapsed, a new woodcut movement emerged in Indonesia, without any foundation on the past history or relation to practices in other regions, by Marjinal, punk rock band in Jakarta, and Taring Padi, formed by artists, students, musicians, and activists in Jogjakarta. DIY spirit, anti-Capitalism and anti-Globalism were the

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<sup>11</sup> Kuroda, Raiji, “Woodcut Movements in Asia: Genealogy of Modernisation with Media of the People”. *Blaze Carved in Darkness: Woodcut Movements in Asia 1930s - 2010s* (2018), Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, p13.

<sup>12</sup> Kuroda Raiji. p14.

<sup>13</sup> It was initiated by Lu Xun, and it used woodcuts to spread the anti-imperialist messages, and mobilise people to join the struggles against Japan’s invasion.

<sup>14</sup> Tang, Xiaobing, *Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Kuroda Raiji. p15.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p17.

commonalities among these two<sup>17</sup>. This spark spread to the neighbouring country— in Malaysia, Pangrok Sulap was founded in Sabah in 2010. Another commonality of the three collectives is that the woodcut bears a role in their activisms for changing the societies by presenting their woodcuts in music concerts, political rallies, community spaces, and streets, to support the socially underprivileged, and collaboration with institutions such as NGOs, while they sometimes show their woodcuts in exhibitions and sell them to support their activisms<sup>[8]</sup>. Woodcut is the spark that kindle conversation, embodied togetherness, collaboration, and change. Pangrok Sulap inspired activists and artists in Tokyo to form A3BC (Anti-War, Anti-Nuclear, and Arts Block-print Collective) in 2014. A3BC emphasises on collaborative and collective making of woodcut prints. “From brainstorming the composition, sketching the draft, carving the figures, and lastly to transferring ink and printing the works together by stepping on the plate, the whole process is done collectively. Members are encouraged to communicate with each other, in order to build up a common motivation”<sup>[9]</sup>. This collective way of creating woodcut prints was a spark of methodological inspiration for Wong Yik, who initiated Woodcut Wavement in 2019 in Shanghai. Prior to his participation in A3BC’s Thursday woodcut workshop in the spring of 2019, he already had wanted to make collective woodcut prints with others. But only until he had this embodied experience of the process of collective making, did he apprehend this method and start to use it in the woodcut activities of Woodcut Wavement<sup>[10]</sup>. Woodcut Wavement is a nomadic woodcut workgroup/working method. The group members carry some of the necessary equipment to different localities, and connect with local communities to make woodcut printings around their matters of concern.

There are also other groups that use the woodcut as a connecting or working method. Around New Year’s Day of 2019, artist Ou Feihong hosted a woodcut workshop in Guangzhou, Han Lilin, the founder of Echo Books (2008-2017), an independent book store in Dalian, brought the woodcut workshop to Dalian, and then to Shanghai as she moved there. She hosts guerrilla film screenings and woodcut workshops afterwards, providing simple woodcut techniques and materials to the participants and inviting them to discuss the film while making woodcut prints. For her, the woodcut has a low threshold—people without fine art training can also make it, and it is a way to connect with others<sup>[11]</sup>. Although this is not from the genealogy of Marjinal, Taring Padi - Pangrok Sulap - A3BC, it also shares the DIY spirit and the connecting function of woodcut.

These sparks of woodcut practices in Asia still carry the seed of the fire in the historical movements—art can influence society. Taring Padi considers art as a medium for collective creation, in working with people, woodcut printings open up democratic space in the society<sup>[12]</sup>. This spirit also sparks in the collective woodcut practices emerged in the 2010s in Asia.

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[9] Lee, Chun Fung, “‘To Exist Like a Mystery’: The Dynamic of Trans-Local Cultural Activism Network in East Asia”, Mapping on the Development of Self-Organised Woodcut Collectives in Inter-Asian Context (1990s-2010s). 2019. p19-24:22.

[10] Wong, Yik. Interview with the author. 2021

[11] Han, Lilin, Interview with the author. 2021

[12] Chen, Wei-Lun, The Left-Wing Spirit of the Indonesian Artist Collective Taring Padi Mapping on the Development of Self-Organised Woodcut Collectives in Inter-Asian Context (1990s-2010s). 2019. P3-6.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p17.

## Promoting Intercultural Dialogue through a Virtual Ramayana Joint Performance of Thailand's Khon and Indonesia's Sendratari in the Wake of the Covid-19 Pandemic

*Linda Kencana, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand*

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. As of November 1, 2021, the “ring of fire” of Covid-19 outbreak had included over 221 countries and territories which infected over 247 million people worldwide (Worldometer, 2021). ‘Social distancing’ and ‘stay-at-home’ have become state policies imposed by many countries.

As the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020) reports, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to new forms of racism and xenophobia against different groups, such as a rise in anti-Asian attacks reported in many countries which linked to the first cases of the virus found in the Chinese city of Wuhan. UNESCO states that intercultural dialogue holds a critical role in eliminating ethno-cultural racism and promoting mutual empathy, respect and understanding (2020). UNESCO (2014) defines intercultural dialogue as the “equitable exchange and dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples, based on mutual understanding and respect and the equal dignity of all cultures as the essential prerequisite for constructing social cohesion, reconciliation among peoples and peace among nations.”

There have been new practices of intercultural engagement and solidarity come to the fore on account of “creative individual and collective initiatives” as the global responses to the pandemic (UNESCO 2020). Arts and artistic performances have played a pivotal role in facilitating intercultural dialogue. In this context, online platforms have been crucial in enabling cross-cultural collaborations and maintaining social connectedness (Ibid.). Governments and civil-society around the globe have initiated virtual collective artworks, as demonstrated by the governments and artists of Thailand and Indonesia.

To celebrate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Thailand and Indonesia and to promote intercultural dialogue in the emerging crisis, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture and Ministry of Culture of Thailand jointly organized a Virtual Ramayana Joint Performance of Khon and Sendratari, called “Two Nations: One Dance,” held on September 24th, 2020. This virtual collective dance engaged three dance troupes from Thailand and Indonesia: Khon of Fine Arts Department Thailand, the Jakarta Bharata Wayang Orang and the Bali Paripurna (YouTube, 2020).

The fundamental element of this Virtual Ramayana Joint Performance lies in the narratives of the Ramayana epic as the core stories of Khon and Sendratari. The “universal language” of Ramayana can be understood by culturally diverse performers and audiences. It holds a crucial role as a common “language” in promoting intercultural dialogue for cross-cultural understanding.

The dance troupes collectively presented six episodes of Ramayana (see Table 1). The episodes were integrated and streamed live on the digital platforms of social media YouTube, Facebook and Instagram.

The episodes of the Virtual Ramayana Joint Performance 2020	Performers
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I	The Bow Competition at The Kingdom of Manthili	The Bali Paripurna
II	The Abduction of Sita	The Bali Paripurna
III	The Building of The Causeway	Khon of Fine Arts Department
IV	The Death of Kumbakarna	The Jakarta Bharata Wayang Orang
V	The Battle Between Rama and Ravana	Khon of Fine Arts Department
VI	The Return of Rama to Ayodhya	Khon of Fine Arts Department

### 1: The Ramayana episodes of Virtual Ramayana Joint Performance 2020

Khon and Sendratari integrated their separate expressions of dance movements, costumes, music and Ramayana adaptations into one collaborative performance. The virtual qualities added value to artistic expressions by presenting the uniqueness of cultural diversity through the incorporation of artistic manifestations of digital technologies. This collective dance suggests that freedom of expression is a critical feature to facilitate intercultural dialogue. It shows how the pandemic affects collective artistic expressions and constructs new ways for cross-cultural interactions with global audiences.

In essence, the application of digital technologies in creating and presenting the collective artworks signifies challenges and opportunities in promoting intercultural dialogue in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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