

Mindanao, Women, and a New Ramayana: Transcreating the Epic in MSU-IIT IPAG's *Sita: The Ramayana Revisited*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the manner the MSU-IIT IPAG re-reads the character of *Sita* of the Indian epic in the process of a two-level transcreation. Through the transcreated play *Sita*, the position of women and the image of Mindanao in the 21st century are investigated.

This paper unpacks how *Sita* lays bare the political and ideological realities in Mindanao by presenting indigenous nuances such as *maratabat* (sense of pride, sense of shame, sense of honor) and *buddi* (culture of reciprocity through debt of gratitude) that play important parts in the peace building efforts in the island. Also, transcreating *Sita* forwards the feminist cause by confronting society's expectations of women today. *Sita*, who represents women, shows the importance of women in their role of conflict mediation and peace advocacy. Furthermore, as a product of a university theater from the Southern Philippines, *Sita* shows that drama is inextricably interwoven with the Mindanao peoples' fight for the elusive genuine peace and national liberation. By dissecting the play *Sita*, the paper offers a closer view of the peoples of Mindanao who have long endured generations of unsolved conflicts brought about by cultural misunderstanding and social inequalities.

KEYWORDS

Theatre Studies, Mindanao Studies, *Sita*,
Ramayana, Transcreation

The Integrated Performing Arts Guild (IPAG) of the Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology (MSU-IIT) prides itself in being the most well-travelled university theater company outside Manila. Founded in 1978 by Steven Patrick Fernandez, along with *pangalay* researcher and guru Ligaya Fernando-Amilbansa, the group is known for its productions that combine dance, music, literature, and the visual arts derived from the Hispanic, Islamic, native, and cosmopolitan artistic expressions of its base in the southern Philippines.

For its theater philosophy, IPAG commits to a "quest for ideal Orders towards a compassionate, empowered, and liberal society" (www.ipagarts.com). As the resident theater company of the MSU-IIT, it provides training for young talents in the art of theater including dance, music, and stagecraft. It is known for original and adapted plays that highlight issues and realities of Mindanao, including the arrival of foreign powers (*Datu Matu*), clan wars (*Ming-Ming*), conflict with traditions (*Sarimanok*), and environmental degradation (*Uwahig*). The group has received citations from important figures in the industry such as dance scholar and performance critic Basilio Esteban S. Villaruz, who once described IPAG as, "...heir(s) of...(the) pioneers (of Southern culture) ... versatility... in conception, direction, and musical writing and leadership" (www.ipagarts.com). It is also a recipient of various awards, such as the 2015 Unyon ng mga Manunulat sa Pilipinas (UMPIL) Pambansang Gawad Pedro Bukaneg. The Guild was cited for "showing the world the colorful and various cultures of Mindanao, and for bringing

Filipino theater closer to the people of the whole archipelago and the world...Always, a play or cultural presentation of IPAG is an unforgettable aesthetic experience (because it is pure art), and equally an ethical one (because it is connected to relevant social issues)" (www. msuiit.edu.ph).

Sita: The Ramayana Revisited is IPAG's latest full-length production. IPAG's *Sita* shifts the story's subject from the hero Rama to his wife Sita, who is the female protagonist. The play focuses on her ordeals at the hands of her husband's arch-nemesis Lawana (Ravana), and on the events following her rescue, where she has to go through a burning pyre to prove her purity to her husband. The narrative is told through song and dance appropriated from Mindanao indigenous expressions. In his unpublished production notes, IPAG Director Fernandez (undated) explains that while taking liberties to pluck parts of the source epic, the challenge lies in "how conflicts in our settings could fit into and become relevant in this classic tale." He added that in doing so, the company worked with artists abroad and around the country, adapted an indigenous movement medium called *pangalay*, and integrated elements from indigenous Mindanao gong and flute music that would accompany the patterns of choreography, verses, and musical score needed to tell the story of Sita and the re-situated *Ramayana*.

The *Ramayana* is an epic replete with images that are readily transferable into performance. Proof of this is the many theater performances of the epic around the world and the existence of the International Ramayana Festival in Bangkok (Fernandez 2004, 150; Tiatco 2015, 31). These works offer a window for viewing how theater is so intimately connected to literature. In *Sita*, literature is rewritten to tell a Mindanawon narrative. This allows me, a student of Comparative Literature from Iligan City, Mindanao, to see the negotiation of theater and literature not only as adaptations but more so as translations and transcreations. Thus, in analyzing *Sita*, I believe it is imperative to look into the elements of the narrative that are amplified as well as those that are silenced in the transcreation in order to critique of a cultural performance.

The process of producing *Sita* exhibits the congruent relationship among literature, theater, and society. In this particular case, Sita's story is transcreated into theater from the *Ramayana*, showing how literature can inspire theater and how theater can reflect an analysis of the society that inspired it.

This paper focuses on the manner of MSU-IIT IPAG's *Sita* in re-reading the character of Sita through the process of a two-level transcreation. This paper also investigates the position of women and the image of Mindanao in the 21st century. I shall endeavor to answer the following research questions: How does MSU-IIT IPAG's *Sita* re-read the source text of Valmiki's *Ramayana*? What are the transcreative processes employed in re-situating the *Ramayana* and reconfiguring Sita? What ideological underpinnings are involved in the process of transcreation? What images of both women and Mindanao are imbricated and/or transgressed in the process of transcreation?

From Source Text to Libretto

It is notable that the Philippines has produced adaptations and/or translations of the Sanskrit epic. In 1980, Ballet Philippines staged a dance interpretation of *Rama Hari*, which is a translated version of the Indian *Ramayana* by National Artist for Literature Bienvenido Lumbera. This was later transformed into *Rama at Sita* – a large musical production in 2012 by Sari Kultur and music composer Ryan Cayabyab staged at the University of the Philippines University Theater. In 2006, Teatrang Mulat ng Pilipinas interpreted the *Ramayana* through a puppet theater with an objective to introduce the epic to Filipino children (Tiatco 2015, 31).

But it is also interesting to note that the Philippines could possibly have its own version of *Ramayana*. Doreen Fernandez, in her book *Palabas: Essays on Philippine Theater History* (2004), reports that in 1993, Philippine theater stalwart Rody Vera did an extensive research on the Philippine version of

the *Ramayana* and came across the Maranao folktales collection of Dr. Mamitua Saber of the Mindanao State University. She adds that it is in Saber's collection where Vera learned of "Tutolan ko Radia Mangandiri" – the Maranao folktale with a striking similarity to the Rama story. Fernandez gives a summary of the folktale:

Mangandiri of Agamaniyog is young, princely, and adventurous. Voices in the wind call him to venture forth and seek a wife, whom he finds – Potri Tuwan Malano Tihai, daughter of the ruler of Nabandai. He encounters Maharadia Lawana, a monster with seven heads, because of whom he undergoes trials, including the temptation to ruthless power. He triumphs; he also errs grievously. He is aided by those who love him—his brother Radia Mangawarna, a son, friends, the woman who understood his erring. (151)

This inspired the creation and staging of Philippine Educational Theater Association's (PETA) *Ang Paglalakbay ni Radiya Mangandiri: Isang Pilipinong Ramayana* in 1993 and 1994 at the Dulaang Raha Sulayman in the walled city of Intramuros, with the play employing Maranao material culture such as the *malong*, *singkil*, and martial arts (Fernandez 2004, 151).

Written around 500 BCE to 100 BCE, Valmiki's *Ramayana* is comprised of 24,000 verses in seven cantos, and follows the adventure of Rama in his dramatic and daring rescue of his wife Sita from his arch-rival Ravana. The whole narrative of the epic basically demonstrates the virtues of surrender to divine law, loyalty, piety and sacrifice, worldly denial, and *dharma*. It also paints the dominance of Rama as the quintessential male hero, which reflects the patriarchal profile of the ancient society that produced the said epic (Gupta 1994, 213). The same is true with the Maranao version, but with slight variations in the plots and re-personifications of the main characters: Lacsamana is the monkey-child, Malaila Ganding is Sita, Maharadia Lawana is an eight-headed Ravana, and Radiya Mangandiri is Rama (Fernandez 2004, 151).

The enduring appeal and value of the *Ramayana* in the Philippines may have been sparked by our pre-colonial maritime trade and traffic that involved shipping and trade networks between Southeast Asian regions and the Indian Subcontinent. According to Juan R. Francisco (1989) in "The Indigenization of the Rama Story in the Philippines," it is to the credit of those mariners in pre-European colonial times that cultures came in contact with each other. This contact, explains Francisco, provided the opportunity not only for the exchange of goods but also "artifacts" of culture such as belief systems, world views, philosophy, literature, and much more. The cultural goods that were brought to our shores became infused in the life and culture of our forebears, resulting in a process of indigenization, which according to Francisco obliterated all knowledge of the source. In this instance, the source of the Rama story, which was alien to local cultures, was obliterated. In this same indigenization process, the foreign cultural goods became part of the whole cultural fabric of the receiving culture, enriching it with new elements. The process of indigenization presupposes cross-cultural borrowings that allowed *Ramayana* to suit Philippine cultural perspectives and orientations (120), thus allowing the Indian epic's appeal to endure and to inspire many permutations in Philippine theater and performance. Francisco's speculations, however, must be taken with a grain of salt as other scholars of Southeast Asian Studies claim that Hindu cultures and traditions have, as a matter of fact, already had tremendous influence in pre-Islamic worlds in Mindanao and Sulu. Malcolm H. Churchill (1977), in his article "Indian Penetration of Pre-Spanish Philippines," contends that preceding the arrival of Islam in the Philippine archipelago, the Indianized states in Southeast Asia have already been in constant contact with the early islanders. Churchill argues that there would seem to be strong presumptive evidence that the Philippines was exposed to the said influences which ultimately produced Hindu societies in the region (26). The probable features of an Indianized Philippines, says Churchill,

include Sanskrit religious concepts and terminology that have been absorbed into individual Philippine languages (32). In Mindanao among Islamized groups, a strong manifestation of this influence is the *naga* or *niaga* – a Sanskrit term for a mythical serpent or dragon which figures prominently in Philippine Muslim literature, visual arts, and architecture (Sakili 2003, 197).

However, IPAG's *Sita* shifts the focus of the storyline by significantly putting the character of Sita in the limelight and re-directing the attention of the narrative to Sita from the dominant character of Rama, addressing gender issues that are relevant today. This gives impetus to the restructuring of the narrative to reveal the plight of a vexed powerless woman. As a result, this work centers on Rama's wife who by comparison has more humane characteristics than that of Rama, Lawana, and other warriors whose main preoccupation is conquest. A new plot is formed where Sita weighs her options between her husband Rama and her abductor Lawana. IPAG playwright/director Fernandez writes the new plot summary:

Held captive for a year, she (Sita) has been freed by Lawana to return safely but decides to stay with her abductor to warn Rama of the impending danger by Lawana's deceitful plan. She risks being caught between the warring armies. Rama, his brother Lacsamana, and ally Hanuman of Sugriva's monkey-people are ready to attack, but Lawana, confident of his immortality, knows he will thwart the invasion and kill Rama.

The invasion is successful. Sita is released but Rama doubting her faithfulness challenges Sita to walk through a pyre to prove her fidelity. (4)

With this re-worked plot, Fernandez composes a libretto that highlights the emotionally charged portion of the *Ramayana* where Rama insists that Sita prove her purity and integrity after spending a year in his arch-enemy Lawana's lair. This act of borrowing a motif, the highlighting of a portion that best suits the vision of the project, and the restructuring of the narrative such that the impetus is materialized in another medium, in this case the libretto, are the transcreative processes employed in the making of *Sita: The Ramayana Revisited*.

Fernandez, in his book *Making Theater: The Craft of the Stage* (2017), defines transcreation as the process of borrowing expressions for performance (166). He adds that the said process springs from adaptation and translation, but with use of other media besides words "as we take and reshape materials from their origins to present these materials to our kind of audiences for them to comprehend and experience" (167). In a manner of speaking, the underlying concept of adaptation and translation that form the foundation of transcreation requires careful study of the source, so that the borrowing and the ensuing transference are justified. However, fidelity and authenticity are no longer the primary objective of the transcreated production, as the artistic intention and vision are given premium.

The *Sita* libretto begins with a prologue where the monkey-warrior Hanuman narrates his experience in Lanka. This is already a re-working of the chronology of the original Sanskrit narrative which begins in the city of Ayodhya with a despondent King Dasaratha who is saddened for having no children despite his three wives. Rather, with Hanuman as the narrator of the transcreated text, the first scene opens with Hanuman's soliloquy in a flaming space resembling the conflagration in Lanka, where he recalls seeing Sita surrounded by the *tonong*, spirit minions of Lawana.

HANUMAN
(pa-awit na pag-ulat)

Sa Lanka bumulaga
Kuta ni Lawana
binakuran ng bundok
pinaligiran ng dagat
sa isla, nakita
Gwardiyado, bantay-sarado
napalilibutan si Sita!

My translation:
HANUMAN
(narrating through song)

Arrived in Lanka
Lawana's lair
is fenced by mountains
surrounded by sea
in this island, I saw
Sita enclosed
well-guarded!

Hanuman's verses establish the play's conflict, and the inferno that is about to ensue from the impending war. The scene changes to the kingdom of Sugriva where the monkey-warriors, together with Rama and the monkey-king Sugriva, prepare for the invasion of Lawana's lair.

Act One is set in Lawana's kingdom in Lanka. Sita is seen alone in a space that resembles a garden. To give the illusion of a glass prison, the libretto requires the space to be decorated with mirrors. Shadows move behind these mirrors to suggest the *tonong* guarding Sita who bears a troubled expression. She delivers her song about her longing for her husband despite her magical lodging. Sita reminisces what has happened in her consciousness. In a different space, Lawana is seen talking to the Keikeyi, Dasaratha's evil mistress, plotting the ouster of Rama. This establishes Lawana's adversarial role against Rama. The chorus composed of the *tonong* sings the backstory of Lawana, which leads to a dance segment depicting the abduction of Sita by Lawana who feigns the figure of a golden deer to lure her. The libretto gives the following *mise-en-scene* describing the abduction:

Sa eksena, si Sita lamang ang hindi anino,
babalikan ang nakaraan, mga pangyayari,
ang dahilan ng pagdukot, ang pagtukso sa
kanya ng isang huwad na usa na biglang
bumulaga sa anyo ni Lawana.

Ilang sandali, nakagapos si Sita na
lumilipad patungong Lanka kasama si
Lawana.

(Kapansin-pansin ang paghagis ni Sita ng
singsing, magpapahiwatig ng katibayan ng
pagsambil sa kanya.)

Sasabayan ng mga likhang galaw ang ulat
ng KORO.

*In the scene, everyone one else is a silhouette except
Sita, the past is revisited, the events, the reason for
the abduction, her seduction by a deer that turned
out to be Lawana.*

*In a few moments, Sita is captured and flown to
Lanka with Lawana.*

*(Conspicuously, Sita throws her ring, implying her
abduction against her will.)*

*The CHORUS dances while it reports this
incident.*

The abduction scene moves the narrative of the play as this gives Rama the reason to chase Lawana to his lair in order to rescue his wife. The next scene is in Sugriva's fortress where Rama, holding Sita's ring, sings his frustration over the abduction. The tension boils on stage with images and silhouettes of war projected on the scrim or proscenium wall, while a kneeling Sita is dressed in one portion of the stage, suggesting her state as captive. Rama and his loyal brother exchange thoughts on their upcoming venture against Lanka to fight Lawana. In this conversation, the longstanding enmity of Lawana and Dasaratha is revealed.

Back in Lanka, the scene shows Hanuman conversing with Sita. The monkey-warrior explains Rama's plans of attacking Lanka, and Sita warns Hanuman of Lawana's cunning methods. Lawana appears suddenly, suspecting Sita of conversing with somebody. In their exchange, the dialogue reveals Lawana's humanity, that he is not a cardboard villain because he really cares for Sita's welfare. Lawana's adversarial stance against Rama stems from having to belong to opposing clans whose rivalry was never resolved.

LAWANA

Iginuhit na ipinanganak kami sa
magkabilang pangkat. Tadhana. Karma.

LAWANA

*It has been written that we are born in opposite
sides. It is Fate. It is Karma.*

SITA

Wala na ba'ng pag-asang magkasundo at
magsama ang mga tribu n'yo? Sa ngalan
ng kapayapaan?

SITA

*Is there no hope for your tribes to come to terms and
unite? In the name of peace?*

LAWANA

(hahalakhak)
nilikhang magkabila ang langit at
impiyerno.
(maiiba, seryoso)
Ngayon pa lang, nag-aabang sila sa
kabila, nasa tapat ng isla. Nakipagsanib-
puwersa sa mga hukbo ng mga unggoy.
Sugriva, hari nilang walang humpay,
laging may tangkang salakayin ang
Lanka. Karapat-dapat magsama ang mga
taksil.

LAWANA

(laughs)
Heaven and hell are created opposite each other.
(shifts to serious)
*As of this moment, they are now waiting at the
other side, across the island. They have joined forces
with the army of monkeys. Sugriva who leads them
has always wanted to attack Lanka. The traitors
deserve to be together.*

This conversation between Sita and Lawana, revealing age-old enmities of families, references the clan feud popularly known in Mindanao as *rido* (Torres 2014, 3). Adding this element to the transcreated plot makes the conflict even more relatable to the present-day audience who are familiar with the cultural nuances of Mindanao. It allows for the three-dimensionality to the characters, which contributes to an even more logical suspension of disbelief. The conflict is no longer just between two warring divinities but humans whose actions are motivated by a backstory that rationalizes their actions. At this moment, Sita realizes that Lawana is familiar, because the kind of treatment she receives from him is not that of a prisoner but that of a guest. She suspects she knows Lawana or that they must have met before. This is a clue to their relationship, which will be revealed in the later part of the re-worked narrative.

Hanuman, who is just hiding in plain sight, is then caught by the *tonong*. He and Lawana exchange insults and sarcasms, which would lead to Lawana commanding his minions to burn the monkey-warrior's tail to humiliate him, before letting him escape. By Hanuman's magic, he burns all of Lanka by the fire of his tail. Images of fire and flying embers fill the stage. Sita breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience, recalling the Keikeyi's siege of Ayodhya. This is another layer added to the transcreated narrative that is absent from the source text. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Keikeyi earns two boons from her husband King Dasaratha when she nurses him to health after being wounded in a military campaign. She uses these boons later in the narrative to install her own son Bharata to the throne and asks the king to banish Rama who is the rightful heir. Dasaratha renounces her and dies of heart break after Rama leaves Ayodhya. However, when Rama is able to return to Ayodhya, Keikeyi

asks for Rama's forgiveness, which the latter gives (Sarga 127). In other words, Keikeyi's character is reimagined as an ambitious woman who would usurp the throne of Ayodhya. But it is the relationship of the characters with each other that will thicken the transcreated. soon revealed in the succeeding acts.

Act Two shifts scenes back and forth from Sugriva's fortress to Lawana's lair. Hanuman opens this act with his monologue about his escape from Lanka and his knowledge about a secret entrance to the well-guarded lair. This gives continuity to the narrative of the play. The scene changes to Sugriva's fortress where the monkey-king convinces Rama to calm down. Rama then sings about his apprehension about Sita's captivity, if she is treated well. But the song puts emphasis on his worry if Sita has remained pure as a woman.

<p>RAMA (Awit.) At ang aking si Sita nasa mabuti kaya siya? Paano na? Paano nga ba? Puri ba'y nalabag? Napagdamutan ba ng habag ang aking nililiyag?</p> <p>Ligalig ang aking kalooban palaisipan ang iyong kalagayan labindalawang buwan kay Lawana'y naiwan Sa isang hayok sa laman ano ba ang aking aasahan?</p>	<p>RAMA (song) <i>And my Sita could she be fine? Now how? Was her dignity violated? My sweetheart, was she not given any pity?</i></p> <p><i>I am deeply troubled about your situation, twelve months in Lawana's charge What do I expect from a predator?</i></p>
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Although this issue of Sita's purity is also found in the source text, the transcreated play adds a cultural layer that re-works the theme of cosmic order, honor, and justice. The Sanskrit Rama is driven by the Hindu principle *dharma*. Meanwhile the transcreated Rama's apprehensions are motivated by *maratabat*, a term from Islamized ethnolinguistic groups in Mindanao and Sulu referring to the sense of shame, sense of honor, and sense of prestige of the family lineage or *bangsa*, which majorly factor in many clan feuds (Torres 2014, 11; Matuan 2014, 68; Burton, et al. 2014, 133). It is *maratabat* that moves Rama to launch an epic battle against his arch-enemy. But this cultural value is not only exclusive to Rama's character. Rather, it pervades through the transcreated text. Lawana acts the way he does because he is interpellated by the same cultural values. The libretto shows this in the dialogue between Lawana and his brother Vibhishana when the latter tries to persuade the former to avoid the war by letting Sita go:

<p>VIBHISHANA Ibalik mo na si Sita. Marami ang madadamay</p> <p>LAWANA Humiling ka na ng iba</p> <p>VIBHISHANA Walang kinalaman ang marami, labas sila sa pinag-aawayan n'yo -</p>	<p>VIBHISHANA <i>You have to return Sita. Many will be affected</i></p> <p>LAWANA <i>Ask anything but that.</i></p> <p>VIBHISHANA <i>Most of the people have nothing to do with your spat</i></p>
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LAWANA
Sinusubukan nila ang galing ko

LAWANA
They're trying my powers

VIBHISHANA
Wala naman talagang kayang bumangga
sa kapangyarihan mo. Ano pa ba ang
kailangan mong patunayan?

VIBHISHANA
*Nobody really can go against your powers. What
else do you want proven?*

LAWANA
Magiging ganap lamang ang
kapangyarihan ko kapag napataob ko na
sina Sugriva at Rama.

LAWANA
*My powers will only be validated when I destroy
Sugriva and Rama.*

In this exchange, Lawana is headstrong and refuses his brother's request to forego the ensuing battle. Instead he tells his brother that his power can only be affirmed once he destroys his enemies Sugriva and Rama. This refusal to bow down to one's enemy shows an aspect of *maratabat* which is predicated on the sense of pride to uphold one's dignity, sense of shame to never back down from a fight, and sense of prestige to preserve the family honor.

Even Sita tries her best to convince Lawana to change his mind when he said he is setting her free. She has been treated well by Lawana and she feels she is not a prisoner, which often softens her heart towards her abductor. As both Lawana and Rama are relentless in pursuing the bloody end, Sita is torn between her choice of either going home to her husband or staying in order to dissuade her husband from decimating Lawana. In this case, the transcreated play demonstrates how women, as embodied by Sita, can play a role in conflict resolution. Sita is given the title of *bai*. Among the Maranao, what the *bai* says in matters of peace advising is much respected and obeyed (Doro 2014, 175).

In the transcreated play, Sita cannot help but bear the burden of guilt of being the cause of the epic war that is about to ensue. But a more insidious truth is about to unfold as she prepares for her escape to freedom. In one scene Sita and Lawana's images are juxtaposed to suggest a deeper relationship between the two. The juxtaposition reveals Sita and Lawana's unmistakably similar features. The audience is made to realize a dramatic irony when in a duet that supposedly suggests Sita and Lawana's inner thoughts, Lawana reveals his secret: Sita is his daughter.

SITA
Pinalalaya ako
tinatangihan ko
pag-iisip ko ba'y matino?
salagimsim, unti-unting nabubuo

SITA
*I am offered freedom
I decline
Am I in my right mind?
I am slowly seeing the picture*

LAWANA
Sanggol ka pa
inaruga na kita
taon kang nawala
nawalay sa tunay mong ama

LAWANA
*You were still a baby
I already took care of you
you were gone for years
away from your father*

Sa tudling kunwa
Ika'y natuklasan

you were found in the trench

sa araro hinukay
ang una mong kandungan

*a pretense
the plow
was your first cradle*

SITA

Pakiramadam ko'y
hilo't lito
Ang bumihag sa akin
minsan ko nang nasalubong

*SITA
I am dazed
and confused
he who has taken me captive
I have met him before*

The next scene shows the two camps preparing for the battle. The libretto proposes that the stage is divided into two spaces to suggest the two camps are simultaneously gearing up to go to war. Towards the end of this act, Rama and Sugriva exchange words of encouragement and warning. In their dialogue, it is revealed that Sugriva incurred a favor from Rama not so long ago. The monkey-king explains that he joins Rama in this adventure to topple down Lawana as an act of reciprocity to his indebtedness to Rama.

RAMA
Ilang sandali na lamang
papalapit na sa islang kulungan
Sa pagsasanib, Datu Sugriva
sukli mo sa tulong noong una

*RAMA
In just a few moments
we arrive at the island prison
In this union, Datu Sugriva
you have paid for the favor*

SUGRIVA
Pambawi sa tulong mo
ang pagsasanib na ito
manubos namin mababatid
Lanka ni Lawana, sabay nating lusubin!
Lanka kay Rama, aangkinin!

*SUGRIVA
In payment for your help
is this joining of forces
we shall be redeemed
Lawana's Lanka, we attack!
Lanka for Rama, we conquer!*

This is an extra layer added to the libretto to show the cultural nuance of observing reciprocity as an essence of friendship, which the Tausug of Sulu call *buddi*. Wilfredo Magno Torres III (2014) explains this expression of social relationship:

...a type of reciprocity called *buddi* (debt of gratitude) is usually created in a person who has received a great favor and consequently feels a strong moral obligation to do something in turn for his friend. These obligations to repay a debt of gratitude can be observed in the daily life of the Tausug but is especially emphasized during times of conflict when persons in an exchange relationship can aid each other in providing military assistance, assisting in taking revenge, and lending out weapons. (13)

In a manner of speaking, the cultural layering of *buddi* in the transcreated text strengthens the narrative of the play and fortifies the source text by adding motifs of social relationships in Mindanao societies. The same *buddi* fires up Sugriva in aid of Rama as this leads to an ending of the second act, with an image of an epic war about to explode.

The third act opens with Hanuman narrating to the audience that Rama and his team have become ready to attack Lanka. He also tells how Rama once helped defeat Sugriva's evil brother which led the monkey-king to have *buddi* for Rama. The stage is then divided into two spaces suggesting

Sugriva's fortress and Lawana's lair. At Sugriva's fortress, Lacsamana and Rama recall their banishment from Ayodhya. Rama says that after defeating Lawana, the next adversary to face is Keikeyi, one of his father's wives, who is now sitting on the throne. The transcended narrative unveils a subplot that Dasaratha's death was caused by Keikeyi's treason, as she is Lawana's cousin. This conversation reveals the intermeshed familial relationship of the characters.

In Lanka, Sita remains in Lawana's lodging as she refuses the latter's offer of freedom. She is doing this in order to save Rama from sure death when he faces the powerful Lawana. She believes she can stop the bloodshed by remaining in Lanka. Again, this demonstrates the role of women in Mindanao in the management of conflicts. However, Sita can only do so much in the conflict that has rooted so deeply in the past. In the dialogue between the brothers Lawana and Vibhishana, it is revealed that during the Dasaratha's attack of Bumbaran (a historic municipality in Lanao del Sur now known as Amai Manabilang and is believed to be named after a character in the pre-Islamic Maranao epic *Darangen*), the latter killed the brothers' unnamed sibling and Lawana's wife Mandadori, who at that time was with child. Vibhishana persuades Lawana that it was all an accident. But the latter is not convinced as there was no witness. Lawana then reveals that the child survived the attack.

The scene shifts to the skies of Lanka where Hanuman is seen leading the attack with an army of monkeys. This segues to the garden in Lanka where Vibhishana convinces Sita to escape immediately. Still, Sita refuses because she wants to save both Rama and Lawana from killing each other. Vibhishana then reveals the ultimate secret: Sita is Lawana's child who survived Dasaratha's attack of Bumbaran. Sita learns that her mother was Mandadori and that Hanaka and Keikeyi who stood as her adoptive parents were actually Lawana's cousins. This means that Sita and the people she considers enemies are after all blood-related. They belong to Lawana's *bangsa*.

VIBHISHANA

Pinsan namin ng kinakapatid kong si
Lawana si Keikeyi, siya na nag alaga sa
iyo bago dumating si Rama-

VIBHISHANA

*Keikeyi is our cousin, she who took care of you
before Rama came-*

SITA

Namatay ang ina ko, alam ko 'yun

SITA

I know for a fact my mother died

VIBHISHANA

Nadale ang ina mong si Mandadori sa
pagsalakay ni
Dasaratha, gulo ng dalawang mortal na
magkalaban, biyenan mong ama at si
Lawana -

VIBHISHANA

*Your mother Mandadori was killed when
Dasaratha attacked during the encounter of the
mortal enemies Lawana and your father-in-law*

SITA

Wala akong ala-ala kay Mandadori

SITA

I have no memory of Mandadori

VIBHISHANA

Nasa kabilang bayan ako noong salakayin
kami. Dali-dali akong ipinatawag upang
tumulong. Pero huli na ang lahat.

VIBHISHANA

*I was in another town when Daratha attacked us.
I was immediately called to send assistance. But it
was too late.*

SITA
Walang alitan sa pagitan ni Dasaratha at
Hanaka

SITA
*There is no enmity between Dasaratha and
Hanaka*

VIBHISHANA
Wala. Kaya nga ibinigay ka kay Hanaka
upang alagaan at mabuhay. Asawa
ni Lawana si Mandadori. Ina mo si
Mandadori. Tumayong ama-amahan mo
si Hanaka.

VIBHISHANA
*No. You were given to Hanaka so you will be
protected and survive. Lawana is Mandadori's
husband. Mandadori was your mother. Hanaka is
but your adoptive father.*

This is another layer of reworking the source text. In the Sanskrit version of the *Ramayana*, Sita is the reincarnation of the holy woman Vedavati who was raped by Ravana. It was also believed that before dying, Vedavati cursed Ravana that his undoing would be a woman. Sita is the fulfillment of the curse as she is the woman who brings Ravana his death (Book 7). In the transcreated version, the narrative is recreated in such a way that Sita is not a product of rape but rather of a legitimate family, although she still brings death to Lawana. This cements the motif of *bangsa* – a concept of kinship and lineage among the Islamized groups in Mindanao especially among the Maranao (Burton et al 2014, 133).

The final battle ensues. The dance sequence shows a fierce battle and vicious duels. In the end, Rama kills Lawana by throwing a spear right through the latter's heart. Lawana falls slowly to his death. The stage is still ablaze with images of fire and destruction. Sita appears and she approaches Rama who would turn his back to her. In a song, Rama points Sita to the raging fire suggesting she must prove her purity. Sita momentarily shows her confusion as to why her husband asks her this, when she has always maintained her faithfulness and when Lawana was always kind to her as she was held captive. But Sita obeys her husband. She slowly walks through the image of the blazing pyre and she is consumed together with the whole space. The scene ends in darkness.

The play concludes with an epilogue where Hanuman narrates what happened after Sita walked through the fire. He says that many witnessed how Sita survived the fire unscathed. He also says that there are many who said they never saw Sita again after the fire consumed her and that what remained was her ring, symbolizing her purity and faithfulness to Rama until the end. In the Sanskrit version, it is said that in the final days, Sita finally showed herself to Rama with her two sons, after which she was spirited away by Bhumi Devi, her mother who is the earth goddess. In the play, Hanuman suggests two possible endings of Sita. This allows the audience, upon leaving the theater, to interrogate themselves on which of the endings they prefer. Whatever their choice reflects how they generally view Sita and her embodiment of women.

The Ramayana Revisited: Mindanao and Women in Sita

Re-working the Sanskrit *Ramayana* entails filling in gaps for the present-day audience. Playwright/director Fernandez explains that the virtues of surrender to divine law, loyalty, piety and sacrifice, worldly denial, and *dharma* (cosmic order), which are demonstrated in the source text, challenge relevance and reality. He adds that the manner in which Rama dealt with his co-characters, his situation, and his irrational demand for Sita to prove her innocence by walking through the fire would seem strange to the millennial audience. In a manner of speaking, these concerns are germane to the consideration of the ideological underpinnings of the transcreation decisions.

Re-creating the source into the libretto and presenting the libretto into the medium of theater distill cultural concepts in Mindanao, and depict our realities. *Sita* being re-situated in the realities of

Southern Philippines opens doors for the discussion of our relationships with fellow humans in our society by presenting indigenous nuances of *maratabat* (sense of pride, sense of shame, sense of honor) and *buddi* (culture of reciprocity through debt of gratitude). Presenting these folk concepts grounds the play in Mindanao realities of clan wars, which in turn points to how important the *bangsa* is in the power relations that pervade through and among the island's inhabitants.

In a 2010 research funded by The Asia Foundation, researchers Leslie Dwyer of George Mason University and Rufa Cagoco-Guiam of the Mindanao State University report that while clashes between armed opposition groups and the government dominate headlines, for many people in Mindanao the persistent threat of localized conflicts has a greater impact on their daily lives. The researchers cite a 2002 Asia Foundation study revealing that:

43% of respondents in Mindanao cited experiences in their communities with *rido* conflict, the periodic outbursts of retaliatory violence between families and clans. Only 38% cited experience with violent conflict between Muslims and Christians or the Philippines military and armed opposition groups. (7)

This goes to show that clan conflicts rooted in the premise of *bangsa* induce ethnic conflict and even military confrontations, which pepper the island of Mindanao. Dwyer and Cagoco-Guiam further expound that what begins as a dispute between families can end with organized armed forces clashing, as parties to the dispute persuade others to become involved through the observance of *buddi*. This could lead the Philippine military to mistake a clan clash as a separatist operation and intervene on its own. For example, the protracted Marawi City siege, which lasted five months and left several hundreds dead is said to have started as a clan feud. UP Islamic Studies Professor Darwin Absari (2017) explains in an interview that the Maute clan's takeover of the southern city of Marawi stemmed from the clan's desire to exact revenge against their enemies. He clarifies that the Maute, who run a construction business, apparently lost a bidding over one construction project against another bidder which resulted in a *rido*. The Maute, according to Absari, originally wanted to target a local politician from Butig, Lanao del Sur, but failed after the military intervened. As to how the family accumulated so much gun-power to commit brutalities of such scale, Absari expounds that this can be attributed to the Abu Sayyaf Group and other supporters of the Islamic State who, by the token of *buddi*, took advantage of the brewing family feud by bringing in more and more high-caliber firearms (ABS-CBN News 2017). *Sita*, through the intermeshed familial relationships of the characters, presents these local dynamics of violence in Mindanao.

However, the concepts of honor, shame, and reciprocity must not be dismissed as dysfunctions because while these folk psychologies are said to be a major culprit in clan conflicts, these also ensure the integrity and survival of the communities. For example, while *maratabat* or the sense of honor can be a driving force for revenge, the same cultural concept also factors in considering that vengeance should not be taken without proper logical discernment (Torres 2014, 13). It is therefore imperative that these elements of hostilities be discussed in the open, lest crucial opportunities to resolve hostilities or forestall their escalation, and ultimately interventions for peace-building, are missed (Dwyer and Cagoco-Guiam 2010, 7).

Furthermore, the interest of transcreating *Sita* leans towards forwarding the feminist cause. By focusing on *Sita* as the embodiment of women, this transcreation confronts Mindanawon society's expectations of women today. Transcreating the *Ramayana* to center around *Sita* pictures the issues facing women, especially Mindanao women. *Sita* embodies women caught in conflict. The troubles of her *bangsa* are her own troubles, too. In light of the Marawi City siege, Maranao lawyer Moumina

Sheryne L. Dumadalog, in an interview with journalist Nina Trige Andersen (2018) of *The Diplomat*, explains that while she is not proud of the age-old tradition of *rido* as it speaks also of the fault of her people, she also sees what could exacerbate the present situation of Marawi City. According to her, setting up another military camp in Marawi is dangerous. She adds that the government has to be cautious or their *maratabat* as a people will force a reaction. She expounds:

We know very well what military camps in a civilian area means: The presence of soldiers, predominantly male, and in Marawi their contact will be primarily with women, who in Maranao culture are the ones working in stores and with laundry.

How do you think this situation will be received by Maranao men? Militarization might mean peace right now, but how long? This is the perfect recruitment argument for groups like Maute. By setting up this camp rather than rebuilding the city, they will have offended us in the worst possible way.

Like Sita, Dumadalog is one of the many Mindanao women caught in the imbroglio of conflict. And where conflict affects women foremost, women weigh in on conflict resolution and management. As frontline eyewitnesses of these conflicts, their judgment on militarization and its effect in their own war-torn community must be wisdom that all stakeholders should heed, most especially because Martial Law in Mindanao is in place and sees an extension, causing more uncertainties and frustration among deeply affected societies.

In the same study by Dwyer and Cagooc-Guiam, Mindanao's women do not see themselves as passive observers to the conflict (8). Like Sita who bravely danced in between the sharp weapons of the warring Rama and Lawana, women play important roles in pacifying hostilities in Mindanao. As a matter of fact, women as conflict mediators have been described in many other literatures. The Maranao's *Darangen* presents the participation of women in resolving conflicts. Thus, among the Maranao, women are highly regarded in their ability to serve as peace advisers. The title *bai*, which is also given to Sita, gives Maranao women equality to men, as the titleholder takes part in policy and decision-making, settling disputes, enforcing Muslim laws, promoting the rights of women, and many other functions (Doro 2014, 175).

Sita: The Ramayana Revisited has thus breathed new life to the Sanskrit epic. It has given the source text a new dimension by fearlessly laying bare the issues that are germane and current to our realities now.

Coda

In Chapter 1 of *Entablado* (2015), theater scholar S. Anril P. Tiatco advocates that our theater direction should not look at the Asian-ness, but at the Asian-nesses of the so-called Asian theater and/or the Philippine-nesses of Philippine theater. This should lead to the construction and affirmation not only of a Philippine theater identity but Philippine theater identities (28). In the same vein, our study of the *Ramayana* should not entrap us toward celebrating one *Ramayana* but rather a plurality of *Ramayana*. The theaters of the Philippines are thereby challenged to create many *Ramayana* that not only aim at the instructional level of introducing the epic to audiences but to rather go beyond: to re-situate the epic wherein the old and foreign are re-worked into the relevant and real.

IPAG's *Sita* is a product of a transcreation. Materials from the Sanskrit *Ramayana* were taken and reshaped in ways that allow our kind of audiences to comprehend and experience it. In the

transcreative process that entailed making a libretto, *Sita* interrogates and lays bare the position of women and the image of Mindanao in the 21st century by shifting the focus of the storyline on the character of Sita and re-working the plot. This reveals cultural nuances that plug the gaps between the Sanskrit society from which the source text is taken from, and the millennial audience. The libretto is transposed into the medium of theater. At this level, the confrontations of power relationships that exist in Mindanao are embodied through the actors' movements and tableaux.

In re-reading the *Ramayana*, *Sita* opens the political and ideological realities in Mindanao by presenting indigenous nuances such as *maratabat* (sense of pride, sense of shame, sense of honor) and *buddi* (culture of reciprocity through debt of gratitude) that play important parts in the peace building efforts in the island. Also, transcreating *Sita* forwards the feminist cause by confronting society's expectations of women today. Sita, who represents women, shows the importance of women in their role of conflict mediation and peace advocacy.

Sita presents a narrative that seeks to overcome the subaltern status of women. Its alternative storyline resulting from the transcreative process allows for re-examination of the struggles of women being the subordinated class, against the pressures and restrictions of a prevailing and formidable hegemony. As it challenges the assumptions of a male-dominated society and deconstructs patriarchy, it becomes part of the people's struggle for national liberation. And like all other transcreative works produced in the past, *Sita* offers a view of a people's subjugation with which the audience must come to recognize as part of their humanity that is lost. *Sita* forwards that this humanity should be recovered through the struggle for a national culture and a national literature, in order to liberate themselves. Furthermore, as a product of a university theater from the Southern Philippines, *Sita* shows that drama is inextricably interwoven with the Mindanao peoples' fight for elusive genuine peace and national liberation. It is about the peoples of Mindanao who have long endured generations of unsolved conflicts brought about by cultural misunderstanding and social inequalities.

Subsequently, it is in this same light that theater can be viewed as an educational tool. With the dual functions of art, which are to delight and to instruct, *Sita* as a performance, and a transcreation for that matter, hews towards the instructional function aimed at effecting critical thinking for its audience. Caroline Hau (2000) writes about literature as the "ethical technology" that shapes our consciousness as individual subjects of history, thereby shaping a body politic. What Hau emphasizes in her essay is the role of teaching literature as the counterhegemonic movement's "ethical technology" intended to produce the Filipino subject of moral and political knowledge and action (17). But the same can also be said of theater, and in this instance IPAG's *Sita*. Known for being a theater company that aims to promote the cultures of Mindanao, IPAG (as should all theater groups) comes with the responsibility of forming Mindanao and producing Mindanao's model citizens.

This goes without saying that watching *Sita* for its "moral" and "truth-telling" content allows for the exploration of the problems of fostering nationalist consciousness. Sita's experiences in an age-old society seem to repeat even today in our country. Sita's suffering is perpetuated with the rise of a new face of dictatorship founded on toxic masculinity, that seems to look past the real issues of peace affecting Mindanao today.

Finally, *Sita* is a new *Ramayana*.

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