

## Conference Paper

# The Aesthetics of the Hanoman Character in the Performing Arts of the Indonesia-Thailand Ramayana Stories

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**Abstract**

This article explains the aesthetics of the Hanoman character in the performing arts of the Indonesia-Thailand Ramayana stories. Ramayana stories are written by Valmiki from India, and Hanoman is described as a “white monkey” in these stories. Indonesia and Thailand are two states in Southeast Asia where the characters in the Ramayana stories undergo the so-called adaptation process. Hanoman is one of the characters. Therefore, the objective of this research was to describe the aesthetics of the Hanoman character in the context of performing arts. Qualitative descriptive methods were used. Data were collected through interviews with key informants and observations of Ramayana legacies in Indonesia and Thailand. The results show that the aesthetics of the Hanoman character are created from the image of local wisdom that is influenced by the spiritual mentality of Hinduism.

**Keywords:** adaptation process, performing arts, spiritual mentality

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## 1. Introduction

Every character in literary works or performing arts has unique background that can enshape the imagination of readers or spectators [1]. Analysis on a character usually involves an examination on various elements that denote the character, such as posture, physical features, face shape, costume and its accessories, and also properties that indicate cultural values of the character [2]. Reviewing characters in performing arts is actually simple, but reviewing characters that undergo transformation (or adaptation process) is always difficult. Understanding transformative characters will involve a lot of things to consider and even require deep investigation.

The aesthetics of a character can be understood by exploring action and attitude of the character. Explanations about character aesthetics had been given by an article titled with *The Relevance of Batik Fashion Worn By Characters in The Yogyakarta-Style*

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*Ramayana Ballet Performance on Prambanan Open Stage* [3]. This article considers 'batik' as a symbolical costume for the characters who wear it. Among the characters is Hanoman. That is why it will be reasonable for this research to choose the review on Hanoman character aesthetics as the topic of discussion. Review on aesthetics seems quite relevant to the effort of this research to explore the aesthetical values of local culture characters, either in Indonesia or Thailand. The discussion of Ramayana stories in the context of Indonesia and Thailand will be in alignment with an article titled with *The Management of Ramayana Tourism Performing Arts in Indonesia and Thailand* [4].

Following up the statements above, this research intends to describe the aesthetics of Hanoman character in Indonesia-Thailand Ramayana stories' performing arts. Ramayana stories were originally written by Valmiki from India, and Hanoman was illustrated as "white monkey" in these stories [5]. The story of Hanoman was very popular among people in Southeast and North Asias. Indonesia and Thailand are two ethnic states in Southeast Asia where the characters in Ramayana stories undergo the so called adaptation process. Hanoman is one of the characters. Verbal folklores have told many versions of deity monkey with super power. Performing arts that play Hanoman story can take either of these forms, such as leather puppet, human puppet, and a dance called *Ketek Ogleng* [6], or creative works that take source from Ramayana carvings on Candi Prambanan [7]. Hanoman is a prominent character in Ramayana stories and greatly loved by Thailand people. Many candis in Thailand always have the delineation of Hanoman. In some candis, there is some Hanoman-like figurations with enormous size and designed to support pillars that are piled high. Hanoman story is also manifested in mural form on the environment of *Grand Palace* in Bangkok. It seems that Hanoman characterization is strongly dominant in Thailand, and even becoming aesthetical image on every artistical works, including candis where there is a repetition of Hanoman figurations from the lower part to the upper part of candis. It signifies that traces of the past are strongly influencing the effort in building ethnic mentality. In Indonesia, Hanoman character can be found in classical narration of Ramayana stories on Candi Prambanan and Candi Penataran. This narration describes Hanoman as very powerful in fighting against the giants.

Taking into consideration of the statements above, then it is reasonable if this research focuses on analyzing Hanoman character and also reviewing it from the lens of aesthetical aspect. Both Indonesia and Thailand are similarly blessed with strong ethnic root. In relation with the play of Ramayana stories, both often put Hanoman character in great proportion. Modernization era enables performers to present Ramayana stories

that contain Hanoman scenes with visual instrument that can help them publicize moral values of the society.

## 2. Method

Method of this research is qualitative descriptive. Data were collected with interview and observation. Researchers conducted interview with key informants, such as M. Soleh Adi Pramono (67 years old), and Ida Bagus (56 years old). Meanwhile, the observation was done on performing arts conducted in Indonesia and Thailand. Observation was also carried out on four sites, precisely on Candi Prambanan and Candi Penataran, which both are in Indonesia, and also on *Grand Palace* and *Wat Arun* in Thailand. All those sites similarly show protuberant visualization of Hanoman. It seems that such strong delineation of Hanoman is intended to give the highest appreciation, empathy and reflection to the most heroic character in Ramayana stories, which is, Hanoman. Structuralism analysis is often conducted to uncover the meaning of something through semiotic interpretation [8]. Paradigmatic consideration (the past) as contextual aspect and syntagmatic consideration (the present) as textual aspect are used to interpret in relational empathical way the existence of Hanoman character and various elements that constitute its aesthetical aspect.

## 3. Data Exposition

Researchers keep trace on Hanoman character through Ramayana literatures. One of the most trustable sources is a book titled with *Kalangwang* written by Zoelmuher and translated to Indonesia language by Dick Hartoko. This book clarifies that Hanoman plays central role in almost all scenes of Ramayana stories [9]. This statement was supported by Claire Holet through the writings on art development in Indonesia [10]. Moreover, Hanoman character has been popularized through Ramayana serial comics, and the most popular one is Ramayana serial comics written by Kosasih. Actually, Indonesia tourism has developed Ramayana stories as the attraction for foreign tourists since 1961, and this effort was culminated at the inauguration of Prambanan Open Stage. The main show on this stage is Ramayana Ballet, and more detail about Ramayana Ballet was given by Soedarsono in a book titled with *Seni Pertunjukan Pariwisata* [11].

Observation was carried out on four sites, precisely on Candi Prambanan and Candi Penataran, which both are in Indonesia, and also on *Grand Palace* and *Wat Arun* in Thailand. In case of Candi Penataran, researchers found that the carvings on this candi

are characterized by features of magic, firm, and high contemplative power. This candi has been used not only for long-hour sacred rites but also for short-hour contemplation. During the rites, the pilgrims put themselves on the roofless upper layer of candi. They burn incenses overnight and fill the place with mystical sense, which somehow makes Ramayana stories' carvings on candi's wall become more seemingly contemplative. Scenes and figures in the carvings seem to be more crowded, detailed and obtrusive, which make the characters look more ferocious with magical and sacred impressions. The narrations of the carvings were dominated by the scenes of fighting between Hanoman and giants in Alengka Kingdom. Figuratively, Hanoman character in Candi Penataran looks more like human, and it becomes so because the decorative aspect of this character is less dominant. The weapon wielded by Hanoman is sword. The next object of visit is Candi Prambanan. Of several minor candis that constitute Candi Prambanan complex, researchers discovered the visualization of Hanoman character only in the carvings of two candis, namely Candi Brahma and Candi Siwa. Both candis are facing eastward and standing in a row because the narrations on both are chronologic. Carvings on Candi Brahma are telling about the journey of Rama and Sinta in Dandaka Forest, the abduction of Sinta by Rahwana, and the crossing of monkey armies to Alengka Kingdom. These are continued with the scenes in Candi Brahma that illustrates the fight of monkeys and giants that is ended by the defeat of Rahwana.

Ramayana carvings on Candi Penataran in East Java were observed cautiously. Researchers found that the profiles of Ramayana characters on the candi have resemblance to Ramayana characters in Bali leather puppet.

Hanoman character is depicted dominantly in Candi Siwa, and this depiction is essentially asserting that Hanoman is the son of Dewa Siwa. Hanoman has several names, and each name refers to his privilege, such as Anjaniputra (son of Dewi Anjani), Bayudara (son-disciple of Bhatara Bayu), Bayusiwi or Guruputra (accidental son of Bhatara Guru), Yudawisma (reliable warlord in cunning), Haruta (because he can fly like wind), Maruti or Palwagaseta (sacred white monkey), Prabancana or Ramandayapati (stepson of Sri Rama), Senggana (reliable warlord in physical strength), Suwiyuswa (longevity), and lastly, Sigma Mayangkara (sacred spirit, which is a title given after he became nobility at Padepokan Kendalisada) [12].

Researchers also carried out observation in Thailand. It was done by firstly visiting *Grand Palace* in Bangkok, Thailand. Despite its archaic appearance, there are some sections in the palace that have mural describing Hanoman. The narrations of Ramayana stories in this palace are not dominated by Hanoman, but the sections for Hanoman are specifically designed. Researchers watched performing arts of Ramayana stories



**Figure 1:** Hanoman fighting giants (photograph by Hidajat, 2020)

on *Sala Chalermkrung Royal Theater* in Bangkok City, Thailand. After the show, it was realized that the play of Ramayana stories in Thailand is called *Ramakien*. The show plays many scenes but all are centralized on one dominant character, which is, Hanoman. Therefore, it is not surprising if the scenes are about the romance life of Hanoman and fish princess or the encounter of Hanoman with mystical women. Second visit in Thailand was to a candi named *Wat Arun*. This candi is dominated by Hanoman characters depicted spectacularly. Hanoman is not described narratively in a set of story episodes, but he is expressed in a lot of figurations from the base to the summit. This arrangement gives a great monumental impression to Hanoman character.

Interview was conducted with key informants, and most of them said that Hanoman is an extraordinary character. Hanoman has successfully survived two great periods in India folklore, namely Ramayana and Mahabarata, which are very popular among the people in Southeast Asia. Hanoman character is not only presented in the cycle of Panji Stories, which are played in Indonesia, but also appearing in *Khon*, traditional performing arts in Thailand. Surasak Jamnongsorn, a lecturing staff at *Department of Traditional Thai and Asian Music, Srinakharinwirot University*, said that the characterization of Hanoman in Thailand is different from that in Indonesia. People in Indonesia describe

Hanoman as a great hero, while in Thailand, Hanoman is a romantic creature with many romance stories. M. Soleh Adi Pramono explained that Hanoman is a magical creature and only presented in certain scene of Panji stories. For instance, in the story of *Rabine Panji* (the wedding of Panji), Hanoman is said to have been in heaven but required to go back to the earth in order to be the companion of the groom, which is, Panji Asmarabangun. Of course, the role of being groom companion in a wedding is symbolical but the presence of Hanoman in the wedding gives strong emphasis to the essence of the story, which is indeed about the wedding of Panji. The relation between Hanoman and wedding is in alignment with the depiction of Hanoman in Thailand, which always identifies Hanoman with romance stories. Ida Bagus, a choreographer who lives in Jakarta, describes Hanoman as a heroic character with a great power. By intention to exploit heroism nuance of Hanoman, Ida Bagus once organized a colossal choreography on Hanoman.

#### 4. Analysis and Result

In its various visual or non-visual forms, Hanoman character has inspired the development of performing arts in Indonesia and Thailand. Many performers in both states have settled on agreement about the physic of Hanoman. They build same perception and say that Hanoman is “a monkey”, or mammal with a long tail. Hindu temples, either in Indonesia and Thailand, are always crowded by a population of monkeys. Visitors who come to Uluwatu Temple in Denpasar, Bali, and tourists who visit Batu Cavas in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, surely will see the occupation of monkeys on the environment of the site. There is a strong correlation between the worshippers of Dewa Siwa and the monkeys that dwell on spiritual or sacral environments around Dewa Siwa sites. It can be said that this correlation represents the so called *aesthetical relation*, where a form of animal (monkey) is considered as having aesthetical image that inspires performing arts that play Hanoman character. If it is understood from visual and spiritual perspectives, the monkey in performing arts is not presented in vulgar form as animal, but it is played in symbolical manner, which is precisely styled with color, as shown in the character of *wanara seta*, a white monkey. In this context, white is a color that people associate strongly with universal perception of sacredness, and that is why Hanoman as white monkey is named as *Palwagaseta*.



**Figure 2:** Mural at Buddhist Temple of Zamrud in Bangkok. Hanoman model is acted out by a Thailand legendary artist, Prasit Pinkaew.

Prasit Pinkaew is a Thailand artist who often plays Hanoman character. His talent in monkey-dancing is remarkable and widely known by the players of Khon, Thailand-based traditional performing arts. People in Thailand are accustomed to see the accentuation of Hanoman's original profile, which includes monkey face and protuberant fang. Somehow, in describing Hanoman face, Thailand people and Javanese people have similar perception in which they use monkey physicality to represent Hanoman character. Such same interpretation on Hanoman character can be found in the play of Hanoman character in Surakarta style dance and also in the play of Hanoman character at *Sala Chalermkrung Royal Theater* in Bangkok City, Thailand. Both plays similarly characterize Hanoman as energetic, dynamic, cute and sometimes annoying (naughty).

Furthermore, performing arts that play Hanoman character start to decorate the character with styles. To ensure that the character is identical to the reality, performers wear mask. But, it must be noted that this mask is not only a technical symbol to achieve perfect similarity to the original character, but also an aesthetical representation of that character. M. Soleh Adi Pramono, one of informants, clarified that anything about base and essence are usually hidden from the common view to minimize the emergence of non-expert judgment. Within the context of performing arts, the instrument to hide the essence is "mask". Through mask, however, spectators cannot recognize the dancers in front of them, but the dancers can know any person who watch them dancing.

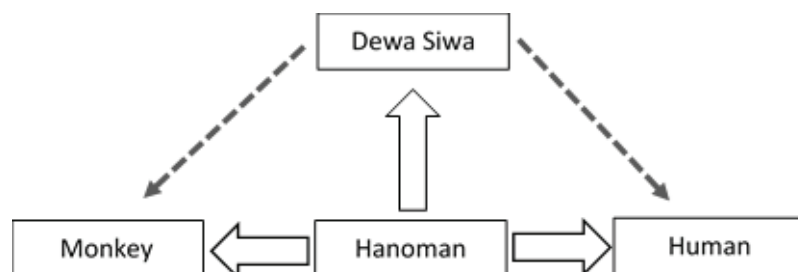
In various presentations in Java, Hanoman is described as a robust character with unique moval style called *kambeng*. Costume design to present this character is dominated by Javanese traditional ornaments.

Aesthetical experiences are achieved through an adventure that develops the senses of divinity, transcendental, and purity regardless whether the journey is for good or bad purposes [13]. Aesthetical objects should be able to be observed deeply through semiotic, or in other words, by interpreting the objects with total comprehension [14].



**Figure 3:** Hanoman character in human puppet version of Surakarta style

Symbolical aspect that constitute Hanoman character aesthetics can be understood through paradigmatic and syntagmatic frameworks. Ramayana stories or *Ramakien* are similarly profiling Hanoman as “monkey” but with divine nature. Besides monkey, Hindu mythology also mentions many divine animals such as cow, peacock, elephant, horse, dragon, and others [15]. Hanoman character is played by performers wearing “mask”, and this arrangement is analyzed through relational triangle as following:



**Figure 4:** Triangle of relations that constitute Hanoman aesthetics

Relational analysis was conducted on Hanoman character aesthetics, and the analysis process was done by exploring relational texts. Anjani is Hanoman’s mother. She was human but cursed to become a monkey, which that is why Hanoman is a monkey. According to the scheme, the text “monkey” is put on the left section, which is considered negative or representing badness. The text “Hanoman” is resided at the central



section because it is the center of attention (the focus of discourse). The text “human” is describing positive function of Hanoman for being as the guidance for morality, which is then considered representing goodness. Vertical relation refers to the divine power that makes Hanoman to have positive life purpose despite his negative background, and later, this power enables him to become a remarkable hero.

It was told in Ramayana stories that Hanoman is not only the accidental son of Dewa Guru (or Siwa) but also son-disciple of Dewa Bayu (Master of Wind), and therefore, it is not surprising if Hanoman inherits the avatar features of deities. During the play of Hanoman stories, the dancers still wear mask although all parts of their costume already impress monkey character. This mask symbolizes the covering of badness, or hiding it from being seen. In other words, the mask is intended to cover the true origin of Hanoman and to proclaim him as human despite his unpleasant background that involves monkey damnation against his mother.

Although Hanoman has a form of monkey, he is always personified as human. His humanity gives him a positive value, while his animal power is considered magical. Regardless this description, his resemblance to human is his true power. Essentially, his humanity is related with his motivation to become exemplary of goodness or sacredness. This relation can be seen from the attributes worn by Hanoman dancers, including necklace, bracelet, or *jarit* (cloth) that covers thigh section. Type of *jarit* used by Hanoman dancers is *batik poleng* [3]. An attribute that indicates Hanoman as son-disciple of Dewa Bayu (Master of Wind) is *kuku pancanaka* [16].

So far, the result of research basically shows that the aesthetics of Hanoman character are influenced by the imagination of artists after they adopt local values that associate with Hinduism spiritual mentality. It is also found that there is an integration between people’s spiritual comprehension and rulers’ intention to build legitimacy from people spirituality. This is possibly the reason why King Rama II (Thailand King) conceptualized *Ramakien* (Thailand version of Ramayana) as an instrument to build spiritual power on the people because the spiritual mentality of people is a great support to royal ideology. The image of Hanoman character in Javanese culture is always identified with human who has achieved purity and longevity. Therefore, it is not surprising if Hanoman character is still present in three classical grand narrations reverberated in Indonesia, namely Ramayana, Mahabarata, and Panji Story.

## 5. Conclusion

Ramayana stories (Indonesia) and Ramakien (Thailand) are similarly positioning Hanoman as central character. His mother was cursed to have monkey face, but Hanoman still inherits her humanistic motivation, such as defending rightness and spreading compassion. He is gifted by deities with super power. The presence of Hanoman as the icons of exemplary and kindness cannot be separated from the construction of his character that leans on local wisdom and understandings about Hinduism spiritual mentality. All these statements represent aesthetical aspect of Hanoman character.

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