

## Dance as Cultural Collaboration: the 2023 ASEAN Panji Festival

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**Abstract:** The dynamic process of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) cultural encounters has been an important topic of study in the historiography of Southeast Asian performing arts. There have been many discussions in the 80s during the seminars of the ASEAN Performing Arts Festival (later renamed as ASEAN Dance Festival) and ICTMD (The International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance) in the recent years. In this paper, I draw on the in-depth discussions with the key artistes, cultural officers, and audiences of the 2023 ASEAN Panji Festival, and apply participant observation as a qualitative research method to examine the creative process of the 2023 ASEAN Panji Festival. The event was organized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia Festival from 07-28 October 2023. The dance drama “Tale of Panji” was collectively created by choreographers from nine ASEAN member states and performed by dancers and musicians in Yogyakarta, Kediri, Malang, Surabaya and Solo. The “content phase” of which defines the overall layout of the piece was done by prominent Indonesian choreographers and playwright, Bambang Pudjasworo, Bambang Paningron and Wasi Bantolo, months before the Festival and their script was disseminated by emails to the choreographers of the participating countries. The “structuring phase” in which the choreographers decide the form of dance he or she employs. They choreographed the scenes assigned by the host country before travelling to Indonesia. The combined rehearsals took place in selected arts institutions of the five cities in East Java. The choreographers then adjusted the their dances to make the flow of the movements smooth and yet

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able showcased the distinctiveness of Southeast Asian dance traditions in the 100-minute dance drama. The study reveals that the ASEAN spirit of ASEAN solidarity transmitted since the early 80s, remains strong. The collaborative experience was inspiring for all the participants. I argue that the success of the joint production is built on the spirit of ASEAN unity and the conviction of protecting cultural diversity in Southeast Asia.

**Key words:** Panji cultural diversity ASEAN unity cultural accommodation

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia hosted the “ASEAN Panji Festival” from October 7 to 28, 2023. This is the most recent ASEAN cultural event since 1981, when Indonesia hosted a large-scale arts festival to promote cultural exchanges in the region. Forty-two years ago, ASEAN had only five member states: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. As the host country, Indonesia selected veterans and promising young artistes who graduated from the National Academy of Arts in Java, Sumatra, and Bali to present performances to showcase its rich and varied traditions. Malaysia and Singapore both participated with dance troupes affiliated with the Ministry of Culture. The former performed the Malay dance drama “The Golden Bird” in the *Mak Yong* style that was born out of Kelantan’s court dance or Patani<sup>2</sup>, while the latter performed a multi-ethnic piece collectively choreographed by Lee Shu Fen, Som Said and Madhavi Krishnan of the National Dance Company. The delegation from Philippines Ballet staged a dance drama choreographed by Alice Ryes, based on Filipino folktale. It showed how dance embodies the space it signifies. Thailand was represented by young artistes who graduated from the Royal College of Dramatic Art, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Culture. It showcased classical dance and the folk traditions of different regions of Thailand, thus local identities are expressed and revendedicated through dance. One of the most important achievements of the first ASEAN Arts Festival was the inclusion of seminars and workshops. For the first time, scholars engaged in dance art teaching, performance, and dance research from ASEAN countries met and began their further communications in the following years, resulting in sharing research findings and academic exchanges<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The geographic origin of mak yong, whether from Patani or Kelantan, remains debatable (Sheppard 1972: 58; Yousof 2018: 21–22).

<sup>3</sup> Chua Soo Pong, ASEAN Dance Festival 1994, Bangkok: SPAFA Digest, Vol.4, No.22. 22–27.

## **The Committee on Culture and Information (COCI)**

The first ASEAN Festival of Performing was a highly successful project of the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (COCI). Since its establishment in 1978, the COCI has been successful in fulfilling its mandate of promoting effective exchange and cooperation in the fields of culture and information to enhance mutual understanding and harmony among the people of ASEAN. The inaugural festival helped the participants establish strong friendships. Later, from an annual event, it became a bi-annual event and was renamed the ASEAN Dance Festival, which was hosted by ASEAN member countries in turn<sup>4</sup>. Singapore has hosted the ASEAN Dance Festival twice, in 1985 and 1996. Brunei became a member in 1984, followed by Vietnam and Cambodia. In 1999, Laos and Myanmar also became part of the ASEAN family. Since then there have been a total of 10 member states. This dance festival promotes exchange among local folk dance workers and has far-reaching influence. An ASEAN project conceived in 1997, called “Realizing RAMA” to reinterpret Ramayana, was launched. The dance drama was conceived by Nicanor G. Tiongson, and composed by Rahayuh Supanggah from Indonesia. Originally the dance drama was to be co-choreographed by choreographer/Director Denisa Reyes of the Philippines and Phatravadi Mejudhon of Thailand. Another Pilipino Pilipino artist Salvador Bernal designed the costume, “to suit the demands and aesthetics of contemporary dance”<sup>5</sup>. However, Phatravadi Mejudhon and some of the dancers from nine ASEAN countries withdrew during the process, for various reasons. The idea of the producer and choreographer of asking the participating dancer to “rework” and “re-interpret” their dance genres “to create a language of contemporary expression” proved to be challenging.

Since the “Realizing RAMA”, ASEAN COCI continued its many new projects that brought artistes of different fields together. The achievements of the COCI is captured in the “Images of ASEAN” publication, which documents activities delivered from 1993 to 2018, including recurring projects such as the “ASEAN Quiz” (since 2002) and the “Best of ASEAN Performance Arts” (since 2008). ASEAN most recent event was the the First Online Forum of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Research and Development Platform on Media, Culture and Arts. It was held virtually on

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<sup>4</sup> Lim Mei Hong, *Symbolic Solidarity in Cultural Expressions: ASEAN Dance Festival and ASEAN Theatre Festival 1990*, Bangkok: SPAFA Digest, 1990, vol 11, no. 3, 51–57.

<sup>5</sup> Nicanor G. Tiongson, *Realizing RAMA, Realizing ASEAN*, Bangkok: SPAFA Journal, Vol. 10 No. 2, 2000

16 November 2023. Under the theme, ‘The Development and Promotion of the ASEAN Creative Economy (ACE): Trends, Opportunities, and Challenges’, participants engaged in insightful discussions on how regional dialogue and cooperation are vital in fostering inclusive and sustainable development to nurture ACE.

While ASEAN COCI remain crucial, other regional cultural institutions and non-governmental agencies have also played an important role in promoting cultural exchanges in the last few decades. For example, the SEAMEO SPAFA Regional Centre for Archaeology had organized Panji/Inao – Southeast Asian Performance, Theatre and Dance in 2013, in Bangkok; *Mak Yong* Spiritual Dance Heritage: Seminar and Performances, in collaboration with the Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, in 2011, in Bangkok; Southeast Asian Labanotation Workshops in 1989, in Solo, regional seminars on traditional theatre and contemporary theatre in 1990 and 1991, in Bangkok, and the Singapore National Theatre Dance Circle, had in the 1980s organized many ASEAN workshops in Singapore etc. The ASEAN Puppetry Association established in 2006, had also organized many ASEAN puppetry festivals, seminars and workshops that helped the puppeteers and specialists in the region to connect and collaborate for a common goal. The Ministries of Culture of various ASEAN nations also have various initiatives that contributed to ASEAN unity in arts and cultures. The Ministry of Culture of Thailand opened the Asean Cultural Centre in 2015, and had implemented activities that “help educate the public on local knowledge and unique arts of each country”. Its interactive exhibitions, multimedia presentations and artefacts depicting local identities and ways of life, had also become one of the tourist attractions<sup>6</sup>.

### **The 2023 ASEAN Panji: Background and Content**

Ministry of Culture and Education (renamed as Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology) was the key supporter of the National Panji Festival in Kediri, East Java, in 2017. In the same year, The Tale of Panji was registered as one of UNESCO’s Memory of the World. This gave the impetus to artistes and scholars in Indonesia to revitalize the Panji heritage. As a continuation of the successfully implemented event in 2017, an international Seminar on Panji was held in 2018 at

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<sup>6</sup> Jay Cameron Lamey, *From the Past, for the Future: Defining Southeast Asian Identity at Thailand’s ASEAN Cultural Centre*. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies): Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, Vol. 36, No. 2 pp. 201–224, (July 2021).

the National Library of Indonesia. Speakers included Dr. Roger Tol, Dr. Karsono H. Saputra, Prof. Agus Aris Munandar, Dr. Henry Nurcahyo, Prof. Rujaya Abhakorn, Dr. Thaneerat Jatuthasri, Prof. Noriah Mohamed and Dr. Lydia Kieven. In 2019, Dr. Thaneerat Jatuthasri organized an International Inao/Panji Conference and Festival in Bangkok, to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of King Chulalongkorn's Royal Visit to Java, Indonesia. Speakers at the conference included Prof. Wardiman Djojonegoro, Prof. I Made Bandem, Assistant Prof. Thaneerat Jatuthasri, Dr. Lydia Kieven, Prof. Cholada Ruengruglikit, Prof. Noriah Mohamed, Prof. Chua Soo Pong and Mickey Hart. The gathering had helped to enlarge the Panji cultural circle. Participants apart from being enlightened from the presentations of the scholars, also enjoyed the transcultural and transdisciplinary performances of Panji by groups from Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand.

The 2023 ASEAN Panji Festival organized by Ministry of Culture, Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia is the biggest Panji Festival to date. The event started on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023, in and ended on the 28 October 2023 in five cities in Indonesia:

1. Yogyakarta: Art Centre of Indonesia Institute of Art
2. Surabaya: East Java Culture Park
3. Kediri: Sendang Tirto Kamandanu
4. Malang: Open Space in front of City Hall
5. Solo: Open Space in front of City Hall.

The objective of the Festival is to promote the living culture and shared heritage of Panji (Inao) among ASEAN member states (AMS)<sup>7</sup>. Except for Brunei Darussalam, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam were represented by Royal Dance Company of the Ministry of Arts of Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar University of the Arts Dance Company, National Theater Dance Company of Malaysia, Vietnam National Dance Academy, Philippine Performing Arts Integration Association, Singapore's Sheng Hong Arts Institute, Indonesian and five Indonesian national arts institutes in East Java. With artistes came from very dissimilar cultural traditions, the audience were able to appreciate a wide range of distinctive traditional acts centered on "Panji (Inao) in Southeast Asia".

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<sup>7</sup> Event Guidelines, 2023 ASEAN Panji Festival, Jakarta: Ministry of Culture, Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia, 2023.

The idea of this large scale festival was hatched a year ago by Prof. Ing. Wardiman Djojomegara, former Minister of Education. He led a team of distinguished artists of Indonesia that included Bambang Paningron, production manager; Bambang Pudjasworo, art director and script writer as well as Wasi Bantolo and Sandhidea Cahyo, principal choreographers. In order to provide opportunities to dancers and musicians of different art institutes in East Java to showcase the local dance tradition, the organizer engaged different choreographers from different cities. They were Anter Asmorotedjo, Angela Retno Nooryastuti (Yogyakarta); Ambarwati (Kediri); Sandhidea Cahyo (Malang); Heri Lentho (Surabaya); and Nur Diatmoko (Solo). A production of this scale, involving numerous dancers and musicians from different cities, meant that the artistes from other ASEAN countries would have to make adjustments each time when they moved from city to city.

### **Key elements of the Successful Collaboration**

“The Tale of Prince Panji” is the only folk tale besides “Ramayana” that has the longest history and the most far-reaching influence on the Southeast Asian stage. Many consider it a shared cultural heritage of Southeast Asia<sup>8</sup>. Panji’s is Panji Inu Kertapati in Indonesia and Inao in Thailand. There were oral versions of his story had spread in the eighth and ninth centuries. The earliest poetic form written in Javanese, “The Tale of Prince Panji”, appeared in the 14th century in the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit (1293–1500). This folklore had spread from East Java to Malaya, Singapore, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam and southern Philippines through trade, royal intermarriage, business performances or special channels, and had become a dance drama or shadow puppet show in Southeast Asia in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The Unprecedented large-scale collaboration in creating a Panji dance drama in 2023 ASEAN Panji Festival will no doubt generate lasting impact on the transmission of the shared heritage. The successful collaboration can be attributed to the following key elements.

Firstly, successful artistic collaboration depends on the existence of shared vision and strong trust. Artists and academics have since the first ASEAN Performing Arts Festival in 1981, built strong trust and in this case had the common goal of weaving

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<sup>8</sup> Chua Soo Pong, Creativity and Transmission of a Shared Heritage in Southeast Asia: “Tale of Panji” as Staged by Singapore Hokkien Opera Practitioners, Singapore: Journal of the South Seas Society, Volume 75 Page 1–11. December

the diversity of Southeast Asian Culture. Although every participating country has its own version of Panji story, all choreographers and composers created the scene they are assigned to in accordance with the script provided by Bambang Paningron. Every choreographer agreed to the idea and created their piece before travelling to Indonesia, as they recognise the value of the artistic experiment to tell the Panji collectively.

Mutual respect and malleable adaptability could be viewed as the other key factors for the successful collaboration in the making of Panji dance drama. As each participating group prepared its 10-minute segment separately in the style of its dance tradition, it was necessary to make adjustments so that the transition from scene to scene will be “smooth”. On the 8<sup>th</sup> October, the host organized a meeting at Yogyakarta Arts Institute for the group leaders to meet the creative team of Indonesia led by Bambang Paningron. The foreign representatives expressed their endorsement of the script provided by the host countries and assured Bambang Pudjasworo that everybody will support the artistic decision made by the principal choreographers (Indonesia) Wasi Bantolo and Sandhidea Cahyo. At the end of the first combined rehearsal in the afternoon of the same day they expressed their deep appreciation of the rich choreographic styles and well executed steps in different traditions by the visiting groups. Bambang and Wasi, both have unique skills in communication and their politeness as well as assuring words went well with the participants. They were able to establish a good rapport with the all the performers. Credit must be given to the Indonesia gamelan composer, co-ordinators and musicians too, as the music provided had added value for the dance drama. For example, the complex rhythms of the gamelan music often help to heighten the dramatic intensity at the right moments.

The team of officials from the ministry and volunteers also played significant roles in the success of the 2023 ASEAN Panji Festival as they carried out their duties with passion and made participants feel at home. Moving from city to city, from rehearsing venue to performing venue, all were well planned. It was a fun journey. There were also sightseeing trips in between that made enjoyable experiences of discovery with great camaraderie.

### **Diversity in Styles of the Shared Story**

On the first day, the organizer called a meeting chaired by Bambang Pudjasworo to meet the group leaders and choreographers. The dance drama was conceptualized by well-known Indonesian Artistic Director Bambang Pudjasworo and his brother script writer Bambang Paningron. They structured the plot into a nine-scene dance dramas,

plus a prologue and an epilogue. Bambang stated that this is a collective effort to showcase the similarities and differences in dance among the participating ASEAN countries. Heads of delegations and representatives introduced themselves asked about logistic arrangement and other questions about facilities of the performing venues in the five cities where the collective production will be staged. As soon as the cordial discussion ended, all the team member gathered at the main rehearsal space of the Yogyakarta Institute of Arts to begin its first combined rehearsal.

The dance drama was rehearsed according to the sequence of appearance. The chief choreographers Dr. Wasi Bantolo and Sandidea and all ASEAN choreographers watched the first combined rehearsals together and agreed that it was necessary to make adjustments so that the flow of the storyline would be smooth. As the production was going to travel to five cities, and in each city the artistes and students from the local arts institutes would present the eighth episode of the dance drama, it meant that each time a foreign team would dance with different group of Indonesia dancers. Many ASEAN artistes were delighted to learn that everybody would have the opportunities to work with the different dance styles of Yogyakarta, Surabaya, Kediri, Malang, and Solo.

The dance drama began with the four brothers of Prince Panji, Panji Brajanata (Panji/Inao's brother), Panji Kartala (Panji/Inao's brother), Panji Jaya Andaga (Panji/Inao's brother) Panji Kuda Gadingan (Panji/Inao's brother), offering Kingdom of Jenggala two goleks (small figurines) as a symbol of their proposal from Panji/Inao to the Princess of Daha. The two goleks were chosen by the principal choreographers as central props that run through the story and were seen at segments that linked the scenes.

The opening scene was performing by the four Laotian dancers. They employed classical Laotian dance to depict the four brothers of Prince Panji visiting the Kingdom of Doha to present gifts. In the melodious classical music, the four dancers moved forward slowly with graceful dance steps. The intense ritual formation constitutes the solemnity of entering the palace.

Then the Cambodian dancers came on stage, with noble temperament and slow-paced movements and steady dance steps. The heroine, Princess Dewi Sekartaji, danced with delicate and graceful movements while the Queen Consort Paduka's arms and palms movements have sharp edges. She has completely different attitudes towards her own daughter Galuh Ajeng and Princess Dewi Sekartaji. Having received envoys two pieces of golek as a gifts of proposal to the princess of Daha Kingdom, King Lembu Amiena asked his daughters Dewi Sekartaji and Galuh Ajeng to choose



one of the two goleks. Galuh Ajeng opted for the golek wrapped in silk, while Dewi Sekartaji opted for the golek wrapped in plain cloth. The golek selected by Galuh Ajeng turned out to be made of ordinary wood, while the one Dewi Sekartaji obtained was made of gold (Golek Kencana). The aggressive Galuh Ajeng attempted to seize the Golden Golek, but it was resisted by Dewi Sekartaji. King Lembu Amisena and Queen Consort Paduka Liku (Step mother of Dewi Sekartaji) were angry. She has completely different attitudes towards her own daughter Galuh Ajeng and Princess Sekartaji. Pustaka Liku's eyes reveal the ferocity in her heart and her "frustrated" emotion is evident in the air. Equally angry, King Lembu Amisena suddenly cut Sekartaji's hair short to humiliate her. At the end, Sekartaji was evicted from the palace of Daha Kingdom. The rhythm in dancing was communicative and achieved the dramatic intent effectively.

Good peoples in fairy tales are always rescued by gods. Sure enough, when the eldest princess Dewi Sekartaji was wandering in the woods, Kamajaya (a sage divinity) descended to Earth with two other deities to help Sekartaji. As it is exigent for female to travel alone, Kamajaya transformed Sekartaji into a man, and instructed Sekartaji to learn "*tapa ngramé*", which was to endow her with martial arts skills and to cultivate compassion by giving selfless service to the people and helping those who are in need. Later, Panji took on the important task of helping the people enslaved by the tyrant of the Mingtawan Kingdom to escape from the sea of misery. In this scene, in conjunction with the Burmese actors' live drumming and pre-recorded instruments, the Burmese dance often has sudden pauses between movements, making it particularly creative and dramatic. This segment was presented by the Myanmar's University of the Arts Dance Company and choreographed by Ei Ei Thant.

The Myanmar dancers performed with the mixture of live drumming and pre-recorded music. Similar to the style of Balinese dance and Malang dance, the Burmese dance are always full of quick thrusts, sudden pauses, angular arm movements. The quick changes between movements, made it particularly appropriate for the unexpected encounter between Sekartaji and Kamajaya and the subsequent training in "*tapa ngramé*".

The next segment by the Malaysia team was equally attractive. King Klana Tunjung Bang of the Mintawan Kingdom sat on the throne enjoying the court ladies' refined Asyik dance movements. With him was Prime Minister Denda Satru and District Magistrate Suramadenda. Two royal courtiers entered the court with the tribute collection. They seized those who cannot afford to pay land taxes forcefully and attached then violently. Choreographed by Mohd Sehakirin bin Ayob, the well-trained dancers of the Istana Budaya portrayed the nasty royal courtiers and distressful

people with technical efficiency in dance terms. Then came then Panji Semirang and the two deities. They were sympathetic to the oppressed people who were unable to pay their exorbitant tax. King Klana Tunjung Bang was furious to see Panji Semirang defending his people. The combination of silat and contemporary dance vocabularies worked well in the fierce fight segment. King Klana Tunjung Bang and the royal courtiers of the Mentawan Kingdom were finally defeated, thanks to Panji Semirang's impressive abilities. The action packed scene showed the liberated people finally joining Panji Semirang's army.

On the other hand, Panji Inukertapati/Inao's troop was halted when they crossed the border by King Klana Tanjung Bang and his soldier. They wanted to take the dowry that Panji Inukertapati and his kinsmen had brought. With the plot developed like this, the next team, Vietnam Academy of Dance (Hanoi) had a perfect opportunity to show off the artists' acrobatic skills. Young Vietnamese artist Nguyen Anh Tai was responsible for the choreography of the scene of when Panji Semirang met Panji Inukertapati/Inao and their evenly matched battle. Tai used dance vocabularies of Vietnamese classical dance, combining a few movements and techniques from the Vietnamese traditional theatre "*Tuong*". Part of the "*Tuong*" actor training includes handling of stage weaponry. The two Panji started fighting. The scene performed by Vietnamese dancers shows the similarities between Vietnamese dance and Chinese classical dance. The two male actors' horseback riding, spear-wielding martial arts, dance, and rapid sparring are similar to the *bazigong* (把子功) which is the skill to handle stage weaponry of Chinese opera. Panji Inukertapati and Panji Semirang (Setakarji in disguise) were equally matched in martial arts. In this scene, Nguyen Anh Tai (Panji Semirang) used a long spear, Chu Quoc Tuan (Inukertapati/Panji Inao) used a sabre, while Nguyen Hung who played King Klana Tanjung Bang used a sword. The choice of different weaponry was desired to showcase the impressive stage fighting skills. There were a great variety of quick attacks and defences between Panji Semirang and Inukertapati/Panji Inao that made memorable stage pictures. Dressed in "*Tuong*" costume meticulously designed with beautiful embroideries, added to the aesthetic value of the presentation.

The Thai delegation, led by Pisa Santhadkarn and performed by the dancers from the Fine Arts Department, presented the next scene. Artists from Fine Arts Department always maintains and preserves a royal composition written by His Majesty King Rama II which utilizes prosody in the form of dramatic poetry. Pisa explained that the theatrical style for the story of Panji/Inao shown at the ASEAN Panji Festival 2023 is a newly created performance. It was choreographed according to

the script provided by the Bambang Pudjasworo. Unlike traditional Inao performance, which uses songs and singing of poetry to narrate story, this version used the music from the wooden percussion band to accompany the dance movement to convey the narrative of the script.

Panji Inukertapati agreed to the marriage arrangement as he thought that he was going to marry his lover Sekartaji. He was astonished that the bride was actually Galuh Ajeng, Sekartaji's half-sister. Choreographed by Wanthanee Muangbun, a performing arts expert of the Office of Performing Arts, Thailand, the dance style is firmed based on Thai classical Thai dance tradition. Guluh Ajeng's capricious behaviour was unacceptable by Panji Inukertapati. Panji Inukertapati was so upset, he left the Palace. The emotion was highly dramatic with some miming passages. This scene was danced magnificently by the lead dancers of the Thai team.

The Integrated Performing Arts Guild(IPAG), representing the Philippines danced the next scene. As sorrowful as Panji Inukertapati, Panji Semirang wandered the forest in despair. In the forest, Panji Semirang encountered Dewi Kilisuci, a Kapucangan hermitess who advised Panji Semirang to transform into a Gambuh dancer named Gambuh Warga Asmara so that she would have a chance to meet Inukertapati Panji. Choreographed by the Artistic Director of IPAG, Steven P.C. Fernandez, he added tonong spirits, characters created by him to enrich the forest atmosphere. To illustrate Panji Semirang's distress, Steven embodied her desires mirrored through Panji Inao who re-enacted both Panji Semirang's longings and frustrations. Like almost all Southeast Asian dance conventions, dancers in Mindanao, the hands, and above all the fingers, have a rich and earthy expressivity. The dancers' flickering extended fingers, slow or quick in-out hand rotations, splayed knees, improvised steps with changing tension, feet balls and heels balancing the knees and turning torso in comfortable positions, were well used in this scene. The choreographer effectively used fans and scarfs, typical props in Mindanao. The sharpness and quickness in timing went well with the acerbity of the pre-recorded music. The scene ended with the departure of Gambuh Warga Asmara.

The next episode was the responsibility of the Indonesia team. The chief choreographer Dr. Wasi met Indonesia choreographers Anter (Yogyakarta), Ambarwati (Kediri), Sandidea (Malang), Heri Lentho (Surabaya), Nurdiatmokoin (Solo) in September, to share with them the overall layout of the dance drama. Dr. Wasi's tried to direct alternative choices of choreographic models for each city. The idea was to urge them to showcase their local traditions at each city. During this "structuring phase" all of them had a free hand to make decisions about the overall layout of the

piece. Dr. Wasi saw the dances of all delegation for the first time on the 8<sup>th</sup> October at the first rehearsal and studied the choreographic character of each country. He then started to consider the choreographic connectivity from one country to the next. In this version, the dispute started from the conflict between Dewi Sekartaji and Galuh Ajeng because of the two goleks presented by the Jenggala Kingdom. So Dr. Wasi decided to use Galuh Ajeng the golden puppet and the wooden puppet as a visual bridge to connect the various scenes. As he knows all the choreographers from each city well, it was easy to communicate with them and guide them to showcase the different styles of dances from Yogyakarta, Kediri, Malang, Surabaya, and Surakarta. Dr. Wasi said “the choreographers and dancers in each region are extraordinary. I am familiar with their works and they understand my thought, so it is comfortable for them to make changes and adapt to my ideas. The most important factor is how to work on space so the stage will be fully used. The result was satisfying. I was very happy to see that the collaborative experiment proceeded in very friendly atmosphere. Each delegation was elaborating on the essence of movements from each dance tradition.” As Indonesia is the host country, it is not difficult for Wasi to mobilize large number of dancers to enhance the dance drama. “In episodes that need extra dancers to enhance the choreography, “I asked the local institutions to provide more dancers to support. At times, I gave input on the choreography and clarified the motivation of the dancers’ movements. I greatly appreciate the interesting interpretations of our ASEAN colleagues and everybody was cooperative. It was such a valuable experience to work together for a common goal.”

The episode assigned to Indonesia was the court scene showing King Lembu Merdadu receiving the commanders of the Gagelang Kingdom that included Prime Minister Jaya Sembada, District Magistrate Mahesa Pradah, and District Magistrate Mahesa Bungalan. In order to show the grandeur of the Court, large numbers of ladies-in-waiting, court officials, and dancers were required. It is an occasion to show off the group dance. In each city, this scene impressed the audience with many young dancers displaying their skills in local dance styles, with excellent individual moments. Then came Panji Inukertapati to see his uncle King Lembu Merdadu. To celebrate the arrival of his nephew, King Lembu Merdadu commanded a Gambuh performance to welcome Panji Inukertapati. This was an opportunity to showcase the Javanese classical singing too. Gambuh performance began with calmness and strong inner control, as the Gambuh dancer (who is actually Setakarji in disguise) knows that her lover is so near to her. The performance came to the moment when Panji Inukertapati noticed that of Gambuh Warga Asmara’s singing and dancing while cradling Golek Kencana

(Golden Figurines). Panji Inukertapati/Inao was surprised and believed that Gambuh Warga Asmara is none other than Dewi Sekartaji, the princess of Daha Kingdom whom he has been searching for. The encounter of the two lovers sets the stage for the dramatic climax. Panji Inukertapati/Inao hurried to approach Gambuh Warga Asmara to hug her, but Gambuh Warga Asmara dodged his embrace and ran outside the arena. This added suspense is used here by the script writer to create tension.

Next on stage was the Singapore team. Representing Singapore were the dancers from the Sheng Hong Arts Institute, established in 2008 to preserve and promote Chinese culture, heritage and the arts of Chinese music, dance and theatre performances. Prof. Wardiman Djojonegoro invited me to consider bringing a dance group from Singapore to participate in the 2023 ASEAN Panji Festival when we met at the Oral Tradition Association of Indonesia in March of the same year. I accepted without hesitation as I have in the recent years been introducing Panji as a Hokkien opera to local and international audiences. Tan Thiam Lye BBM (L), President of SHAI, was very pleased to receive the invitation. He said: “This is an excellent opportunity to promote art exchanges and cooperation in ASEAN. It would be good to organize a cross generational team and cross-ethnic team to participate in this regional festival to showcase the multicultural characteristics of Singapore.”

As soon as I was asked to choreograph the episode of “The Meeting of Panji Inukertapati/Inao and Dewi Sekartaji”, I made the following artistic decisions. Firstly, I would work with Singaporean composer and musicians, and secondly I would include elements of various dance traditions of Singapore, and uncover the potential of dancers and let dancers play to their strengths to the fullest. The combination of Chinese opera movements and classic Chinese dance movements formed the base of the choreography of the segment I created. Thus balletic steps were also included in the piece as the 12-years-old dancer Tyara Chynta Puteri Noor Azhar is a well-trained ballet dancer. The challenge is to coach Obed Wai who plays the role of Inukertapati/Inao who had no training in Chinese opera movements, although he has been attending classes at the Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre. Called *yuanchangbu* (圓場步), basic step for travelling on stage in circle. The dancer almost walks without lifting her knees and the torso is kept like daily walking. The performer must move smoothly forward without changing the overall body posture. The desired result is to make the dancers almost look like gliding on ice or floating along the floor. The difficulty for Obed Wai initially is that Panji is supposed to be riding a horse to chase for Setakarji so he had a “horse whip” in his right hand. However, the 23-years-old dancer diligently practiced the dance and his performance was striking. His execution

was neat, and his deportment was convincing and his solo won large applause at the premiere in Yogyakarta.

For the role of Gambuh Warga Asmara, I used a white scarf to create dance phrases of movement that demonstrating the unique shapes and style of the long sleeves dance movements of classical Chinese dance called *shuixiu* (水袖). She played with water at the river bank recalling her romance at the location. The melody of “Virtuous Heart” (心贤) composed Wang Chenwai (王辰威) was used when she reminisced about her first encounter with Prince Panji Inukertapati. Suddenly Prince Panji Inukertapati rushed in with a ‘horse whip’ in his right hand, symbolizing he was riding on a horse in a great hurry. In order to avoid knocking down “Asmara” in front of him, the horse suddenly jumped up and threw Prince Panji off the horse. “Asmara” stepped forward to help Prince Panji, and held his hands to assist him. At this moment, “Asmara” transformed back to the appearance of Setakarji. The lovers are now re-united. The lyrical music of “Virtuous Heart” was played again for the pas de deux of Panji and Setakarji.

Then came Panji Inukertapati’s uncle and aunt, King and Queen of the Gagelang Kingdom with the double-reed instrument, played skillfully by Singapore well-known musician Yong Phew Kheng and music arranged by Tan Qing Lun. The couple were dressed in embroidered robes of the traditional Chinese opera thus allowing them to make *shuixiu* movements that expressed their joy. With the support of Indonesian dancers, this segment ended with a red ribbon dance choreographed by Huo Cheng Cheng of Sheng Hong Arts Institute. The dance added much to the exuberant atmosphere. There were quick thrusts left and right, sideways and leaps, and all were done quick changes in blocking. Finally came the finale, dancers from all the participating countries attended the magnificent wedding ceremony of Panji Inukertapati (Inao) and Dewi Sekartaji. The grand ceremonial music played by the 90 musician gamelan orchestra greatly elevated the performance to a much higher level. The dance drama ended with prolonged applause in all cities where the dance drama performed. It was the touching interpretation of the Panji story and the moving collaboration spirit that won the hearts of everybody.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have described my observation of the collaborative creative process in the 2023 ASEAN Panji Festival organised by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia Festival from 07–28 October 2023 in Yogyakarta, Kediri, Malang, Surabaya and Solo. The dance drama based on

the script provided by Indonesian script writer involved professional choreographers, musicians as well as students and small number of non-professional dancers from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. The large scale project was successfully implemented and affirmed the spirit of cordiality in which ASEAN affairs are conducted.

At the meeting close to the end of the Festival, chaired by Prof. Wardiman Djojonegoro, all heads of delegates expressed their gratitude to their Indonesian colleagues who conceptualized, prepared, and executed this creative munificent cultural event, far beyond the expectations. That was because participants had laid down a solid foundation of mutual respect<sup>9</sup>. The choreographers, dancers and musicians from ASEAN gave followed the synopsis crafted by the content of the dance drama. The artistes did not use the narrative of Panji from their countries, but followed the guideline provided by the Indonesia team. Together, the participating artists adjusted some choreographic arrangement and music to make the transitions from scene to scene flow smoothly. Together, the participating artists adjusted some choreographic arrangement and music to make the transitions from scene to scene flow smoothly. At the end, everybody is pleased that their dance traditions were presented fully and were satisfied with their contributions to the whole production.

The close collaborative efforts made the intensive rehearsals before the performance in each city completed and a happy learning experience for everybody. Within the limit of time, not only was the dance drama was successful produced, but it was also greeted by huge crowds of young audience, arts intelligentsia, dance theatre practitioners, musicians, journalists, and also people from all walks of life in all the cities performed. There were also seminars held at the Gadjah Mada University and Surabaya University, and an Exhibition on Panji held at the Taman Candra Wilwatikta. Speakers at Gadjah Mada University on the 12<sup>th</sup> June included Dr. Lydia Kieven, Prof. Thaneerat Jatathasri, Dr. Lono Lastoro Simatupang, Dr. Chua Soo Pong, Thae Ei Ei Thant and Dr. Rudy Wiratama. Speakers on the 16<sup>th</sup> at the Surabaya University included Prof. Nadi Surapto, Dr. Lydia Kieven, Dr. Noriah Mohamad, Dr. Chua Soo Pong, Dr. Karsono H. Suputra, and Setyo Yanuartuti. During the festival, the participants were also treated with tours of the Prambanan Temple and The Borobudur Temple

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<sup>9</sup> Alex Dea, *Reaching Beyond Collaboration: A Close Look and Evaluation of Three Inter-Cultural Experiences in Central Java*, *Global and Local: Dance in Performance*, Mohd Anis MD Nor and Revathi Murugappan, Malaysia: Cultural Centre, University of Malaya and Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage, Malaysia, 317–333. 2005

as well as other places of interest. For the dancers, the highlight was the workshop held at the auditorium of Surabaya University. Choreographer and lead dancer of each country took turn to explain the artistry and aesthetics of their movement traditions. Participants greatly enjoyed the session as gave insights of cultural background of each dance tradition to understand new possibility of using traditional dance as cultural resource to allow traditional dance to tell new stories.

The 2023 ASEAN Panji Festival has inspired us today the spirit of creativity. Like Panji, everybody has to find ways to cope with life's struggles. Panji and Sekartaji are an example of ideal human values: compassionate, courageous, persevering in their journey of life. At the end they found ways to find each other, and succeeded in the end. It is a story worth telling.

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