

Asia-Europe Cultural Festival Podcast Series Transcript

Podcast #1: Kamini Ramachandran

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Hello and welcome to the Asia-Europe Cultural Festival podcast series, a new initiative by the Asia-Europe Foundation, where we speak to artists from Asia and Europe who have been involved in one of our festivals in the past. My name is Grey Yeoh and I am the Project Manager with the Culture Department here at ASEF and also the host of this podcast series. I'm a Malaysian man in my 30s with a mid-length black hair and I use the he/him pronoun. Before I start, I'd like to give a little bit of context about what the Asia-Europe Cultural Festival is.

The Asia-Europe Cultural Festival is a public arts festival which celebrates the artistic expression and cultural diversity from Asia and Europe. The festival serves as a platform for showcasing brilliant artistic endeavours, while offering a stage for dialogue and knowledge sharing amongst the arts and cultural community from the two regions. The Asia-Europe Foundation in partnership with the European Union co-organizes this annual festival. As mentioned at the top of the episode, we will be delving a little deeper into what makes the cultural festival tick. The people at the very heart of it, the artists.

I'm going to be speaking with a few artists who have been involved in our festivals in the past few years. I am personally very interested in this not to mention the wider overarching Asia to Europe relations part of the whole project. Today, we are speaking with Kamini Ramachandran, a storyteller based in Singapore. Kamini, welcome to the show.

Kamini Ramachandran

Hi, Grey. Thank you for inviting me.

Grey

Let's start by telling us who you are, what you do, and perhaps some visual descriptors to help our listeners picture you.

Kamini

So, I am an oral tradition practitioner, a storyteller. I'm also a creative producer of StoryFest Singapore, an annual international storytelling festival. I founded the non-profit organization, The Storytelling Center Ltd in Singapore to advance the art of storytelling. And for more than 20 years, I've been director of Moonshadow Stories Pte Ltd, also based in Singapore. I am an Indian woman in my mid-50s, with dark long hair. And most of the time I wear dark rimmed spectacles.

Grey

Thank you, Kamini. Now, maybe you can talk a little bit about your work and your art practice like you know, maybe start with how did you get into the storytelling field.

Kamini

So, I studied English Language and Literature in university in the UK many years ago. And my late maternal grandfather was a community storyteller, a family storyteller. And being the eldest grandchild of nine grandchildren, I sort of inherited his repertoire. And being much interested in reading and writing books, I began to retell his stories when I became a parent myself, more than 20 years ago. And that's when I realized that if this tradition is not practiced, and kept alive, the nature of it being intangible inherently means that it can be easily destroyed, and it can easily disappear. So that became a kind of a responsibility for me to retell his stories and to carry on his legacy and to practice as an oral tradition, storyteller.

Grey

So, in thinking about oral tradition, and storytelling, how do you think that that has been different from the way that your grandparents used to tell stories to now that use you telling stories today,

Kamini

So, if my grandfather was still alive, he would be incredibly surprised that a storyteller can perform globally, can produce a festival, can teach the art of storytelling in an arts college or institution, can appear on television, and that people pay to listen to a storyteller tell in a performing arts venue. Because storytelling is one of the oldest traditional art forms. And for him, this would be very difficult for him to have even conceptualized or dreamt of. So, the difference is that it is who I am, it's a career, it's something that pays the bills. It can be applied in the corporate world, in health and wellness, in education, in community building. Storytelling has taken a different role now where it is no longer something that is practiced in families and in small communities. It's accepted in mainstream performing arts.

Grey

Talk to me a little bit about the practice itself. I know that you use a lot of props, sometimes you have puppets even. And is that quite similar to how your grandfather would tell that story?

Kamini

So, the similarities are that he may not have used props and puppets, but the vocal modulation, the engaging eye contact, the facial expressions, and the very larger than life, hand actions and hand gestures. That's how I remember him when he used to tell his stories. I still do a lot of that. But I think in the recent years, especially in the last decade, I find that young people and young parents and children, their attention span is a lot shorter than when I started more than 20 years ago. And I think that's definitely got something to do with being digital natives and the way we consume media, it's highly visual, right? So, I've learned to also include a lot of visual cues and visual tools to make the story, the culture, the heritage, the tradition come alive, because it's complimentary, and its support storytelling. But my late grandfather wouldn't actually need any of these visual tools, because there was nothing really to distract us grandchildren in those days.

Grey

Do you think that that is a challenge to continue telling stories using props? And how does that either help or hinder the imagination of young people.

Kamini

So, my personal preference and my style is do not use too many visual aids or props and puppets. I do use them, especially in the early childhood context. And when performing complicated stories for very young children, because they [the props] have a role and a purpose in breaking up the components of the story, and helping children follow the trajectory of the story, and for them to visualize complicated characters, right, that probably have names that children are not familiar with. But most of my storytelling is purely just the audience's imagination, my voice, and an ancient story that is there that is enveloping all of us. It's very true to its original roots, and its original form.

Grey

Talking about these Southeast Asian stories and myths and all that you employ in your work, can you share with us a little bit about your experience and being based here in Singapore? How has that helped you frame your work?

Kamini

So, my maternal grandmother was born in Malacca, and my mom was born in Johor (in Malaysia) and I was born in Selangor, in Malaysia. And I spent more than a decade in the United Kingdom studying, and then I've been in Singapore for more than 20 years. So obviously, there's a lot of travel, you know, whether it's for work, or whether for studies or whether for holidays. And I identify very much as a Southeast Asian person of Indian ancestry, specifically South Indian ancestry.

So, there are two types of cultural frameworks that influence my choices of the stories that I tell and what I'm drawn to and what I'm familiar with. I also speak, read and write Malay fluently. So that plays a big role in wanting to retell and share stories that I grew up with when I went to school stories that my *Cikgu* (teacher in Malay language) was used to tell me, stories that I heard and read growing up as a child. And these stories are not typically performed in an international platform. And I think that has been the work for the last two decades to position our regional stories globally. And to also create opportunities in Singapore through StoryFest and the other works that I do, where Southeast Asian and Asian mythology and legends and fairy tales and folk tales take precedence.

So, I'm drawn to stories that that I resonate with, and, and really, stories are about who you are, it connects very much with your identity and there needs to be an authenticity with the oral tradition practitioner when you tell and share these stories with your audiences. They need to feel that this is something that is believable because examples that you give, the descriptions that you use, the sensory elements of how you tell the story will all connect back to your own personal experience living and breathing and imbibing that culture, or your familiarity with a particular heritage or tradition. So that's very important for me to be an authentic storyteller. I do tell stories that are not necessarily from South India or Southeast Asia. But I'm also very mindful of how much research I conduct, other storytellers that I consult before I tell those stories, and I make it known to my audience that I only know a particular version of that story.

Grey

That's interesting, because, you know, being in Southeast Asia also, there's a lot of different versions, like you say, of various different myths. Stories involve, I think, by placing or situating the beginning of your story in a particular region, is very, very important.

Kamini

It's important because the audience is coming for an experience. And usually, they come for an experience that they can't get somewhere else. And each of us as storytellers, we have our own styles, our own voices. And we have our own repertoire that we sort of over time become identified with, right? So many of us have signature stories, and just like listening to your favourite music or an old song, why is it that people still want to listen to songs from the 20s, 30s, 40s, right? Why is it still resonant with younger and newer audiences or listeners? Because there is power in the message in the melody in the lyrics. There's also some kind of affinity that we have with the actual singer, or the musician. So, storytellers and storytelling is similar. It's timeless, because you will always find a new audience that wants to connect with the material that you share proudly, and in a very honest, and authentic form.

Grey

So, it's really great to hear all the things that you've accomplished so far, but Kamini, you took part in the Asia-Europe Cultural Festival in 2021. And that, of course, you know, we were all in the middle of a COVID-19 global pandemic. Like many other people, ASEF chose to pivot our activities online, including the festival. So maybe can you talk to us a little bit about your experience during this festival.

Kamini

So we're now in 2023, talking about something that I started brewing in 2020. Because that particular ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting), I believe it was the 13th edition was supposed to happen in Cambodia, towards the end of 2020. And when I was developing and designing my program, I had to bear in mind that I had to either present it virtually completely as a digital presentation. Or I could actually go to

Cambodia and share the story as myself. And so it was a interesting headspace because we really didn't know what would happen.

And then of course, as we all know, what happened was, the whole festival got postponed to 2021. And my project became 100%, online digital presentation. So, it was one of the many projects that I had to deal with in 2020 that had to pivot and adapt and reshape itself to a fully virtual digital iteration. And it was a steep learning curve, but something that now looking back has benefited me tremendously as a producer, because it really allowed me to develop my skills in thinking about how to transmit oral tradition through the digital medium, and how to tell stories effectively and still being authentic. When your audience is watching you through a screen.

Grey

Who did you collaborate with your project?

Kamini

So, the project is called 'A Tale of Two Shores', and it was mainly about one folk tale that could be found both in Asia specifically in Borneo, and in Europe, identified mainly in the regions of what we know today is Germany. And in Germany, this story is called 'Jorinde & Joringel', and in Borneo, it's called 'Umpong-Umpong & Babakud'.

[excerpt of A Tale of Two Shores is played for about 20 seconds]

Once upon a time, deep inside the jungle, there lived an old witch. This *Nenek Kabayan* lived in a cave surrounded by a magic circle. *Pada waktu siang, dia nya sebagai kucing liar atau burung hantu. Pada waktu malam, dia nya sebagai Nenek Kabayan semula.*

She had the power to entice birds and animals into her cave. And then she would kill them and she would hang get bones and skin on the walls of that cave. If a young man ever found himself inside that magic circle, he would become frozen. If a young maiden and found herself inside that magic circle, she would be transformed into a beautiful bird.

The young man would then have to wait until *Nenek Kebayan* came back and broke that spell and set him free. But that young maiden, she would never ever be set free. *Nenek Kebayan* would come and take that bird and place it inside a beautiful bamboo bird cage, pick up that bird cage and take it deep inside that cave.

Kamini

I've been telling the story of 'Umpong-Umpong & Babakud' for many, many years. And when this opportunity came about to collaborate with artists in both countries, I wanted to use this story as a starting point, to show how though we are different we always find similarities there are universal similarities between cultures, all around the world. And we share similar narratives that are adapted to your local context.

So, I collaborated with a visual artists that I've worked with before called Annalisa Salis and Annalisa is based in Sardinia, in Italy and in Edinburgh in Scotland. She divides her time between these two places. So, she illustrated the story that was presented eventually as a video format. And in Singapore, I worked with a musician, whom I also collaborated with previously Raghavendra Rajasekaran, and he is a trained classical Indian musician specializing in Indian flute. So Ragha composed the soundtrack, the sound effects and the music that accompany the story that I tell in 'A Tale of Two Shores'. All of this was filmed locally by Zeetrope productions, a Singaporean filmmaking company.

And I wanted to situate this story for this version of 'A Tale of Two Shores', not necessarily in Borneo, and not necessarily in Germany. I wanted to situate it somewhere in Singapore, and reach out to a contemporary audience that can recognize these spaces, especially in Singapore. So, Zeetrope went about to Clementi Forest, and they filmed footage of jungle trees, and a tunnel that resembled a cave

that appears in my story. So, it's really nice when you watch the video, and you listen to this ancient, traditional folk tale that can be found in two different continents. But the visuals are here in an older part of Singapore. So, this collaboration is actually for way between Ragha, the musician Annalisa, the illustrator, myself a storyteller and Zeetrope as the filmmaker that put the whole thing together.

Grey

What was the reaction of the audience's watched the show?

Kamini

So, if you look at the video on YouTube, right, there are a lot of comments. And one comment that really stood out for me was about a parent whose child is from a mixed marriage and has shares two cultures, both European and Asian, and how this parent felt so grateful and thankful that this story could be shared with their child, and allow the child to celebrate both cultures. And through storytelling, the parent was able to bridge the gaps that they felt that they couldn't find ways to connect with the child.

And other comments were about the magic of the story, the suspension of imagination, how it was really nice to listen to narration. And then, other comments that I got on my social media because I shared it on Instagram and Facebook, were really about how people don't really know that folktales travel across time and space. And same stories can be found in different versions in other parts of the world. So the same same but different or different, but still same same. That was the general strand of the comments that I got.

[excerpt of A Tale of Two Shores is played for about 20 seconds]

Umpong-Umpong began to sink to the ground singing the saddest song of all. Babakud could stared at her, unable to move, he was rooted to the ground, unable to cry, unable to speak, unable to move. And right before his eyes, he saw his beloved transform into a beautiful peacock.

Grey

Can you maybe share with us a little bit about your thoughts on the Asia Europe cultural relations and exchanges today?

Kamini

I think today we are a lot more aware of who we are, and what our local context is. But at the same time, we are aware of this in relation and in connection with our global peers and colleagues and friends. And as an arts practitioner, I'm always thinking of audiences and other artists, right. So other people who work in arts and culture. And the pandemic has its very negative impact on the whole world. But at the same time, it really opened up access for artists to share their works in a way that we usually wouldn't consider and to open up to audiences that in a way we historically haven't managed to connect with.

So, I think that the Asia and Europe, connections that have been fostered in the last three years especially, have not just been forgotten. We're all continuing these exchanges and collaborations, and we're all continuing to think about long term projects that we want to do. Because I think that digital arena that was opened up to us, meant that it's almost like waving through a window and saying hello to your friend that's 1000 miles away, or two or three thousand miles away.

And I really didn't look at this as a challenge. I'm looking at this as a way to have a universal culture that we can celebrate, especially through stories, and it's something that I'm curating and programming for the next few editions of StoryFest and something that I'm doing especially this year. A lot of collaborations and fellowships and mentorships with people, not necessarily in Singapore.

Grey

We're coming to the end of the podcast now, was there anything else you'd like to add about our conversation, Kamini?

Kamini

Well, please go watch the video, 'A Tale of Two Shores'. And I also have another video, which is more about the behind the scenes between Annalisa, Ragma and myself and the conversations we have, and what it was like to collaborate during the pandemic and to work on something so traditional and so tangible, you know. You're telling a story, you are playing music, you're composing, you're illustrating with ink and paper, but at the same time, we're doing all this from different parts of the world. And how did it all come together? And how did Zeetrope produce this film?

So, I think the artists conversation is very valuable, especially if you work in cultural diplomacy. It's a way to understand how we can get to know each other and learn new skills from each other and create something beautiful and long lasting, that has impact.

Grey

Great, fantastic. For listeners we'll add the links to the two videos on our show notes. Kamini, thank you so much for appearing on this episode of Asia-Europe Cultural Festival podcast series. This has been really enlightening listening to you and your experience at the festival, albeit an online version this time.

Listeners do keep a lookout for our next episode of the podcast where we will speak to yet another artists who was involved in the festival in one way or another. This is Grey Yeoh, Project Manager at the Asia-Europe Foundation Culture Department signing off. Thank you for listening and goodbye.