FIRST INTERNATIONAL RAMLEELA CONFERENCE

Conveners: The National Ramleela Council of Trinidad and Tobago Inc.(NRCTT Inc) in collaboration with the Faculty of Humanities and Education, The University of the West Indies, (UWI) St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

Date: July 12-14, 2013

Venue: Learning Resource Centre, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus Trinidad and Tobago

Theme: Ramleela in the Global Village: Traditions, Innovations and Future Directions
**CALL FOR PAPERS**

**RATIONALE:**

Wherever Indians settled they took a slice of India with them and kept alive their traditions and festivals. Ramleela is one such festival found in Indian communities worldwide. (Ramleela, open air folk theatre is the dramatic presentation of the life of Shree Ram taken from the Holy Ramayan). While many Indian Diaspora communities such as Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad were formed through indentureship, since the second half of the 20th century a re-migration process has been taking place from former colonial communities to metropolitan areas such as USA, Canada, England and Holland. As a result, large proportions of second and third generation Indians populate these areas. In the global village we now live in, many boundaries that separated communities and countries have literally vanished and been replaced by transnational links and conventions.

In the case of Ramleela, many Indian Diaspora communities share a commonality of experiences even though some communities retain the traditional settings of the festival while others have adapted to a new contemporary setting. Many of the Ramleela developments, problems and adaptations are not unique to one country or region and most of the evolving issues and complications that arise in the course of these celebrations can be compared with each other. Through these comparisons and the presentation of various viewpoints, we can begin the process of a fuller understanding of the present status of Ramleela in the diaspora countries and find answers that benefit Ramleela communities, practitioners and scholars alike.

Ramleela was introduced to Trinidad with the arrival of the indentured immigrants to the colony in 1845. Since then this festival has been celebrated uninterruptedly in this country. The earliest recorded organized community-wide Ramleela celebration in the country was in Dow Village in 1881. This inter-and multi-disciplinary festival explores religious, cultural and social landscapes combined with contemporary understandings of Indian communities in Trinidad and the wider Indian Diaspora. In Trinidad, as in other Indian diaspora communities, Ramleela has emerged as a major identity marker.
Conference Focus

Ramleela in the Global Village: Traditions, Innovations and Future Directions, encourages participants to respond to the ways in which Ramleela has been inspired and shaped by various traditions, beliefs, and practical approaches, as well as how these traditions and practices have become the emphases of contemporary Ramleela presentations over the years. This First International Ramleela Conference invites participants to reflect on Ramleela in its various forms as we chart future directions in the global environment.

This conference brings together scholarly and practice-based participants with an interest in Ramleela in terms of its diversity, values, traditions and community approaches.

Ramleela traditions and values, derived from the Ramayan are in many ways reflective of our present world order, and this conference aims to examine the range of religious, community and social experiences that engender positive values in society. The conference will examine the concept of Ramleela as a positive aspect of community life and will seek to discover the full range of the Ramleela experiences in varying modes of Ramleela presentations in different communities. This Ramleela conference provides a candid, collaborative environment for Ramleela leaders, practitioners, innovators and influencers to discuss opportunities and challenges facing Ramleela internationally while sharing ideas and experiences in local Ramleela operations in their respective countries. It is also hoped that this forum will serve to stimulate an exchange of ideas; set up new networks; strengthen existing networks and motivate greater sharing of Ramleela and Ramleela issues among all concerned.

The National Ramleela Council of Trinidad and Tobago was incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 2012 as the main representative body for Ramleela in Trinidad and Tobago. This council, in collaboration with the Faculty of Humanities and Education, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago invites proposals in the form of abstracts for presentation at the conference.

Proposal ideas that extend beyond the suggested thematic areas below will also be considered.

The sub themes to be addressed at the conference by the various panels include the following:
(a) **The Heritage and historical contexts**

This panel will explore the range of Ramleela legacies and historical experiences in shaping host communities in the diaspora. It would consider questions such as: what are some of the major issues that relate to Ramleela in terms of religio-cultural beliefs and practices? What are the ecological and environmental issues that relate to the Ramleela in host societies? What about the cultural and economic effects of Ramleela on such communities? How have Ramleela communities transferred Ramleela traditions from one generation to the next within the context of adaptations, assimilations and westernization? How have historical forces helped to cement Ramleela traditions in host societies? What about the social, occupational, religious and other backgrounds of Ramleela practitioners both past and present?

The following are some suggested areas of relevance:

1. Cultural and religious reconstruction of Ramleela in diaspora communities: resistance, accommodation and survival.
2. Traditions vs innovations in the Ramleela productions
3. Ramleela exhibition in a climate of fiscal poverty
4. Symbolism in Ramleela
5. Infrastructure models for Ramleela presentations: open air and staged productions
6. Ramleela: ethnicity, race and politics
7. Voices from the Ramleela arena
8. Family histories, biographies and Ramleela
9. Documentation and archiving of Ramleela

(b) **Ramleela and the visual and creative arts**

This panel would explore issues such as: How does the visual and creative language of Ramleela provide new opportunities and challenges for creativity in Ramleela? How are the visual and creative opportunities presented by Ramleela adaptive and reflective of the scale and challenges of the evolving environment in which it finds itself? In a time of unprecedented changes in the
global village, how can the creative and visual aspects of Ramleela help to reshape and push forward our changed/evolving relationship and understanding of society, traditions and innovations? What is the mix of narrative challenges that arise in the negotiation of complex Ramleela issues from the text to the stage?

Persons presenting on the visual and creative narratives may consider the following:

1. Ramleela and the environment: constraints, responsibilities and sustainability
2. The development of Ramleela as a tourism product
3. Models for the construction of the effigy of Rawan
4. Voices from the Ramleela arena
5. Script writing, decor, props, costume design and fabrication
6. Music, lights, and other paraphernalia that go into the production of Ramleela.
7. Color, space, lights and Ramleela
8. (c) The intangible aspects of Ramleela

While there are numerous ways in which Ramleela is made visible, what are some of the ways in which the Ramleela appears almost invisible in many quarters? Why does Ramleela seem to escape the attention of the media and collective cognizance of state bodies and international organizations? To what extent is the Ramleela invisible because of ethnicity, race, politics or fiscal poverty? Is the invisibility of Ramleela the result of a lack of awareness or documentation by scholars and practitioners? Is their visibility actively repressed or passively encouraged? To what extent do Ramleela communities engage in making themselves tactically invisible as a kind of self-defensive mechanism necessary for survival? Do discriminatory or assimilationist ideologies/policies actively or passively ensure their invisibility over the course of time?

The following are some suggested areas of relevance

1. Social benefits to communities in Ramleela
2. Community capacity building through Ramleela
3. Values and ethical challenges in managing Ramleela in a westernized society
4. Managing the Ramleela

(d) Technology and e-Ramleela

Has technology altered the modes in which we think and present Ramleela? Has the internet, YouTube, e-mail, Skype, social media, pyro techniques etc. helped to fashion what has become known as the modern Ramleela? Has it played a major role in influencing the way that Ramleela communities interact with each other? Can increased connectivity through social media and networks deepen cross-border mobility of the Ramleela environment between Ramleela communities? And to what effect? What benefits can be derived from e-discussions among Ramleela communities in the global village? How do the technological innovations and the connections they provide permit the Ramleela to reshape itself within the diaspora? What about questions of copyrights and other related concerns?

Persons presenting on this topic may consider the following:

1. Recent Innovations in Ramleela productions: case studies as examples
2. The use of social media and mobile technology in Ramleela
3. Modeling Ramleela for 21st-century Ramleela practitioners
4. Perspectives for Ramleela in the 21st century
5. Traditions vs innovations in the Ramleela productions
(e) Boundaries and Limitations of the Ramleelas

This panel would consider issues related to the following: What are the ‘limits’ of Ramleela? What is its ‘footprint’? What are the inter-generational issues that cause Ramleela to evolve over time, to move toward or away from assimilation in the mainstream culture of the present home? How and why does Ramleela redefine itself? In what ways does ‘Ramleela identity’ perform a gate-keeping function that includes but also excludes? How are Ramleela identities contested? What are some of the methods to identify and delimit Ramleela in changing political boundaries where such cultural interactions are not amplified? What are the routes to social development and improvement of Ramleela in an age of increasing globalization? Do conditions in its diaspora country present Ramleela with a window of opportunity to redefine its social, cultural and religious position?

The following are some suggested themes around which papers may be presented:

1. Infrastructure models for open air Ramleela presentations
2. Symbolism in Ramleela
3. Transnational perspectives on the Ramleela in a globalized society
4. Western and other influences in Ramleela
5. Cost effective solutions to problems in the staging of Ramleela
6. Models for the construction of the effigy of Rawan
7. Voices from the Ramleela arena.

(f) The Evolution of Ramleela

While this topic is related to the previous one, it places a general emphasis on the discipline of Ramleela studies itself. How has Ramleela changed over the years in diaspora communities? How has it contributed to the development of the communities? What new perspectives have emerged and how have these viewpoints found parallel acceptability alongside traditional concerns? What new cross-‘technoscapess’, ‘ethnoscapes’ and ‘ideoscapes’ are evolving and what approaches can be used to explain complex forces that influence Ramleela in diaspora communities? What is the state of contemporary Ramleela studies and how can this be
improved? How does globalization influence the ways in which we understand Ramleela? To what extent are the realities of contemporary Ramleela problematizing the survival of traditional Ramleela in diaspora countries? What’s next?

Presenters on this topic may consider the following:

1. Open air Ramleela vs indoor staged Ramleela productions
2. Traditions vs innovations in the Ramleela productions
3. Socio-religious context of Ramleela
4. Ramleela in India and in the Caribbean: shifts and possibilities
5. The influence of migration, assimilation and acculturation on Ramleela productions
6. Modeling Ramleela for 21st-century Ramleela practitioners
7. Event management: risks, vulnerabilities and management issues in Ramleela in the 21st century
8. Ramleela then and now
9. Perspectives for Ramleela in the 21st century
10. Ramleela and the education system
11. Youths and Ramleela: challenges and opportunities
12. Ramleela, ethnicity, race and politics
13. Involvement of government and private sector in Ramleela
14. Youth in Ramleela

(g) Gender issues in Ramleela

Can Ramleela shape identities in the modern world? How are Ramleela communities involved in the general social practices that reinforce inequalities or abuses within those communities? Do differences between sexes play a major role in Ramleela activities and do they produce different perspectives on what constitutes Ramleela identity? Are Ramleela identities or activities tied to sex and gender identity? How does Ramleela offer opportunities for change on perspectives of
sex and gender issues? Does Ramleela offer opportunities for diaspora Ramleela communities to break with the ancestral traditional approaches to Ramleela and create their own version of the Ramleela? To what extent can we speak of ‘gendered’ Ramleelas?

The following are some suggested thematic presentations in this category:

1. Gender issues in Ramleela celebrations
2. Women in Ramleela: contribution, challenges and vulnerabilities

(h) Film/short documentary

The conference committee also invites film submissions for exhibition on Saturday 13 July 2013 from 6 pm. Documentaries must be based on some aspect of Ramleela. Individuals and groups are asked to limit the film/video presentation to fifteen minutes. Videos must be sent in before the conference on either DVD or USB flash drives, accompanied by relevant information such as: Name of Producer, Title of Presentation, a short description (abstract) of the video, length of video, sponsor (if any) and any other relevant information.

Presenters in this category are also asked to follow the general guidelines set out below for presenters.

Guidelines for submission of Abstracts:

An abstract must have a short, specific title, which clearly defines the content of the paper.

Length of Abstracts — Abstracts should be 250-400 words or less and should be submitted by e-mail as Microsoft Word attachments.

All submissions should contain the following information: sub theme, paper title, author's name, institutional affiliation (if any), mailing address, e-mail address, telephone contact followed by the text of the abstract.

Abstracts should be written in English, using 12-point Times Roman font, single-spaced.

Abstracts should be submitted together with a copy of the author’s CV and should be addressed to:
First International Ramleela Conference (2013)
Abstract Submission Committee
c/o Primnath Gooptar
pgoopta@hotmail.com
Tel: 1868 663 0435
  1868 470 0133

DEADLINES: The following deadlines will guide our preparations:
a. Final date for the submission of proposals: 15 April 2013.
b. Final date for the submission of accepted papers: 30 May 2013.
c. Final date for confirmation of attendance at the conference: 10 June 2013

CONTACTS:

1. Primnath Gooptar:
   Chairman, Ramleela Conference Committee 2013
   pgoopta@hotmail.com
   Tel: 1868 663 0435
   1868 470 0133

2. Kamalawatie Ramsubeik
   President, National Ramleela Council of Trinidad and Tobago Inc.
   kramsubeik@hotmail.com

FORMAT: All conference participants whose proposals are accepted will receive confirmation from the coordinators within two weeks of submission of abstracts. All papers are to be submitted in typewritten form. Papers should be approximately 5000 words in length, should reflect original, unpublished work and should be of publishable quality.
REGISTRATION: There will be no registration fee for participants. However, foreign participants will be required to fund their international travel and local accommodation. Suggested available accommodation and associated costs will be provided later. The conference committee will provide internal transport to and from the airport for all foreign delegates to the conference. Breakfast and lunch will be provided for all paper presenters during conference days (13&14 July).

AFFILIATED ACTIVITIES: There will be a formal opening ceremony on Friday 12 July and a film/video evening on Saturday 13 July 2013. A cultural tour to interesting Indo-Trinidadian sites can be organized for Sunday 14 July 2013 from 3. pm for foreign delegates courtesy the conference organizers.

The conference will select the best papers to edit as a volume for publication in early 2014.