

**Name of the Element:** Ramlila, the traditional performance of the Ramayana

**Community/ies:** Ramlila artists

**Region:** The most representative Ramlilas are those of Ayodhya, Ramnagar and Benares, Vrindavan, Almora, Sattna and Madhubani.

**Brief Description:** Ramlila, literally “Rama’s play”, is a performance of the Ramayana epic in a series of scenes that include song, narration, recital and dialogue. It is performed across northern India during the festival of Dussehra, held each year according to the ritual calendar in autumn. This staging of the Ramayana is based on the Ramacharitmanas, one of the most popular storytelling forms in the north of the country. This sacred text devoted to the glory of Rama, the hero of the Ramayana, was composed by Tulsidas in the sixteenth century in a form of Hindi in order to make the Sanskrit epic available to all. The majority of the Ramlilas recount episodes from the Ramacharitmanas through a series of performances lasting ten to twelve days, but some, such as Ramnagar’s, may last an entire month. Festivals are organized in hundreds of settlements, towns and villages during the Dussehra festival season celebrating Rama’s return from exile. Ramlila recalls the battle between Rama and Ravana and consists of a series of dialogues between gods, sages and the faithful. Ramlila’s dramatic force stems from the succession of icons representing the climax of each scene. The audience is invited to sing and take part in the narration. The Ramlila brings the whole population together, without distinction of caste, religion or age. All the villagers participate spontaneously, playing roles or taking part in a variety of related activities, such as mask- and costume making, and preparing make-up, effigies and lights. However, the development of mass media, particularly television soap operas, is leading to a reduction in the audience of the Ramlila plays, which are therefore losing their principal role of bringing people and communities together.

Ramlila, the traditional performance of the Ramayana- Inscribed in 2008 on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, UNESCO