



# The Khon



# THE KHŌN

BY  
H.H. PRINCE DHANINIVAT  
KROMAMÜN BIDYALABH BRIDHYĀKORN  
AND  
DHANIT YUPHO



*Rāma Versus Ōsakanth*



PUBLISHED BY  
**THE FINE ARTS DEPARTMENT**  
BANGKOK, THAILAND  
B.E. 2558



Rāma and Lakshaman in a Khōn Nang Rao  
(Khōn performing on a bar)

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#### PUBLISHED BY

The Fine Arts Department, Na Phra That Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand  
Tel. 0 2224 2050, 0 2222 0934

#### PRINTED BY

Rungsilp Printing Company Limited  
85-95 Mahanakorn Road, Bangrak, Bangkok 10500, Thailand,  
Tel. 0-2236-0058, 0-2266-5486 Fax. 0-2238-4028

# Preface

Thailand is very rich in precious arts and cultural heritage which represents a long-lasting independence, prosperity and stability of the country. These various fields of heritage have been preserved, accumulated and inherited throughout generations until the present. This legacy brings pride, dignity and prestige to Thai people. Therefore, it should be shared with the world so that Thai wisdom can be appreciated.

The Fine Arts Department is responsible for the preservation, promotion, transmission and dissemination of arts and culture of the Thai nation. As such it has compiled and published a book series of 25 volumes written by experts in their respective fields. Their areas of knowledge include artistic works, architecture, music and dramatic arts as well as language and literature. Each series has been reprinted from time to time. In this publication, there are no alterations to the contents although some illustrations have been added for the benefit of the readers.

The Department hopes that this series of books will be a resource among the international community to help them understand Thailand better through its unique arts and culture.

(Mr. Borvornvate Rungrujee)  
Director General  
The Fine Arts Department

#### THE KHŌN

FIRST EDITION 1954
SECOND EDITION 1958
THIRD ENLARGED AND REVISED EDITION 1962
FOURTH EDITION 1968
FIFTH EDITION 1973
SIXTH EDITION 1989
SEVENTH EDITION 2001
EIGHTH EDITION 2006
NINTH EDITION 2015

AUGUST, 2015 (B.E. 2558)

ISBN 978-616-283-185-0



**H.H. Prince Dhanivat, Kromamün Bidyalabh Bridhyākorn** was educated at Rugby School and Oxford University, where he took a second class in the Honour School of Oriental Studies and a B.A. On returning home he first served in the Ministry of the Interior and later became Chief of the Administrative Bureau of the Circle of Ayudhyā. When King Rama VI came to the throne he was appointed Private Secretary to the Queen Mother and later Private Secretary to the King (Foreign Correspondence Section) as well as a clerk of the Cabinet Council and Secretary of the Privy Council. Under King Prajadhipok he was appointed Minister of Public Instruction. During this time he also served as Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and Literature, a Civil Service Commissioner, and Vice-President and Commissioner-General of the Boy Scouts Association. Retiring in 1932, he was later appointed in 1947 one of the members of the Supreme Council of State. He was Regent of Thailand until the King's return and assumption of duties in B.E. 2494 (1951). Since then he was appointed President of the Privy Council. He was also Hon. LL.D. (FEU. Manila) & Hon. Litt. D. (Chula-U., Bangkok), Hon. Ph. D. (Silpakorn Univ., Bangkok)

Outside of government service he was a member of the Siam Society Council and other bodies as well as Hon. President of Siam Society and the Boy Scouts Association.

**Publications** : in English---The Coronation of Prajadhipok, King of Siam, Bangkok 1926; The Siamese Version of the old Javanese Tale of Panji, in *India Antiqua*, Leiden, 1948; The History of Buddhism in Siam, in the Ceylon Government *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*; The old Siamese Conception of the Monarchy, in J. Siam Soc. XXXVI, 2; The Rāma Jataka, in J. Siam Soc. XXXVI, 2; The Reconstruction of Rama I of Bangkok, in J. Siam Soc, XLIII, 1; The Rāmakien, in J. Burma Res. Soc., etc. Commemoration Vol. II; SEATO Lectures 1961, etc.

**Mr. Dhanit Yupho**, Director-General of the Fine Arts Department (1956-1968), and the Editor of Thai Culture, *New Series*, was a graduate of the ecclesiastical doctorate of Thailand. He entered the government service in 1934 and became Chief of the Research Section of the National Library in 1943. He was Director of the Division of Music and Drama in the Fine Arts Department from 1946 to 1956. Formerly Mr. Yupho was also a lecturer in history of Thai literature at Chulalongkorn University.

**Publications:** The Economic Conditions of India in the Buddha's Time; The Khōn; The Classical Siamese Theatre; Artists of the Thai Dance Dramas or Lakon Vol. I; The Preliminary Course of Training in Thai Theatrical Art; Thai Musical Instruments, etc.



Sītā and Rāma in a love scene





## THE KHŌN



### MASKED PLAY

One of the Thai classic dances, known from time immemorial as the Khōn, implies the wearing of masks by performers. These masks indicate the personality of its wearer and have a wide variety of design. By reason of the fact that performers wear masks and are therefore unable to utter any kind of sound, there must be a reciter, whose role resembles somewhat that of the “chorus” in the old English dramatic sense. This, however, does not apply to the clowns who wear no masks and carry on their dialogues in the ordinary way. Later on it became the preferred habit for those taking human roles as well as roles of celestial beings not to wear masks. These performers still keep to the former tradition of non-utterance. All performers of the Khōn, therefore, have to adapt their steps and poses to the recitations and songs of the chorus.

### KHŌN PAK

The “chorus” is known in Thai as the *kon pāk* (i.e. the reciter) and has the same role as the *dalang* in Javanese choreography. What they recite represents a form of poetry which poets of old wrote for the performance of the Shadow Play. These recitations are of two categories: the *kampāk* and the *čeračā*. The *kampāk* is *chanda* poetry of the type specified as the Kāvya, pronounced *kāb*, such as the poems of Samudraghosa and Aniruddha dating from the days of Ayudhyā. From the shadow play it developed into the Khōn. Its repertoire is taken out of the Rāmakien. In addition to the recitations there is also what is known as the *čeračā*, i.e. dialogue, which may also include descriptions of action on the stage. It is what should be described as “rhythmic prose,” known by the technical name of *rāi*. This kind of prose is identical with the prose adopted to the more formal official proclamations and law preambles of the present day.

The *kon pāk*, or reciter must, of course, be fully conversant with his subject and know the rhythm of the dancer’s movements so that he may be able to regulate his recitations and pauses in consonance with the requirements of the technique of the dance, for it is mostly his utterances that guide the dancer’s movements. The *čeračā* admits of interpolations on the part of the reciter. The Khōn, therefore, has to rely for its perfection upon the coordination of dancer, reciter and orchestra.





Tosakanth



The Masked Play, “Battle” Episode

## MUSIC

As above stated, there is a third factor which contributes to the success of the Khōn, namely the orchestra. Formerly the essentials of a Khōn orchestra consisted merely of five pieces, known as *The Five*. With the later developments of orchestral organization the number has grown in accordance with the nature and setting of the piece to be performed. Performers of the orchestra must be proficient not only with all the stock melodies and marches, etc., but also with the movements of the classic dance. The onus of the orchestra devolves upon the player of the *ranād*, who leads on most occasions and the player of the *sphōn* who sets the pace of the movements. In later years, there has been interspersed into the Khōn considerable singing in the fashion of the Court *Lakon* and extra singers have to be augmented into the composition of the chorus. The Khōn as it is performed now, therefore, consists of four categories of participants namely: the dancers, the reciter who also does the *čeračā*, the singers and the orchestra.



"Expelling Piphek" Episode

## KHŌN TEXTS

The story of the Khōn is the story of Rāma the Indian hero who is immortalised in the Hindu epic Rāmāyana of Vālmiki. The Thai version is called the Rāmakien. Savants have studied and made comparisons of the great epic of Vālmiki and versions in countries east of India. They have come to the conclusion that our version belongs to the latter class, was not derived from that of the seer Vālmiki, but from Indonesian versions no doubt prevailing in the epoch of the Sri Vijaya Empire. The latter in their turn might have been derived from various sources themselves originating from preclassical Indian versions as far back perhaps as the time of our Lord Buddha. We have for instance the Tamil episode of Mahirāvana in the localise form of Maiyarāb; we have also the tradition of Rāma commanding two monkey armies, one from Khītkhin (Sanskrit (Sk.) - Kīshkindha) and another from Jombū, whereas the Rāmāyana of Vālmiki records an army of monkeys from Khītkhin and another army under Jāmbavān consisting of bears. This role seems to correspond with the Jambūbān of the Thai version although the latter is a monkey from Khītkin in and not even a monkey commander of the monkey army of Jombū. This agrees with the non-Vālmiki version of Bengal. So, whether ours is derived through Indonesia from South Indian Tamil traditions or from the Bengali-- in which case the Pāla culture there might have been the key to the problem-- it seems clear that it is not derived from the *Rāmāyana* of Vālmiki. It is also clear that the origin and venue of our Rāmakien indicate cultural relationships between these oriental civilizations.



Rāma and Lakshman



Hanumān



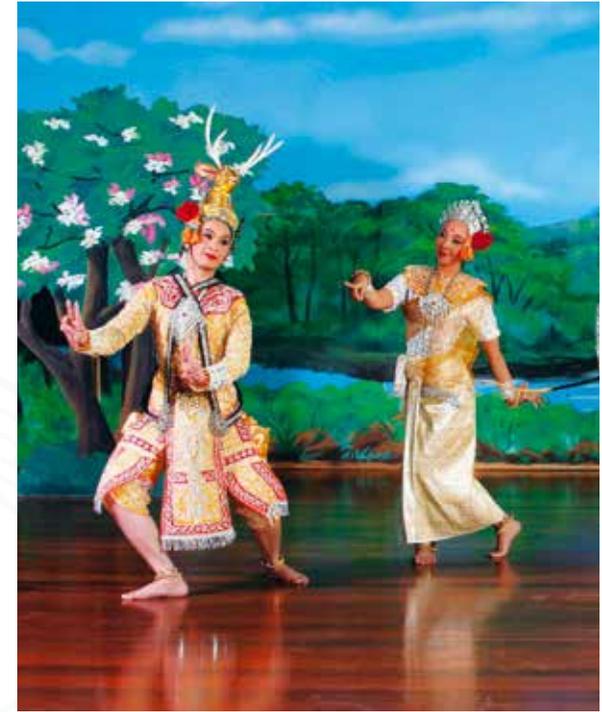
Īosakanth Versus Hanumān

The Thai *Rāmakien* which was composed for the classical dance exists in many versions. The only one, however, which is complete is the version of King Rāma I; while the one most suitable for representation on the stage is that of Rāma II. In more recent representations, however, the management of such representations often adapt the old version to suit circumstances or the special abilities of their performers. In the adaptations, for instance, of the Royal Fine Arts Department, the versions of Kings Rāma I and Rāma II form the main basis, namely the sung portions. The recitatives and the dialogues have, however often had to be composed for each of the episodes performed.

There are, however, Khōn texts which are not based on the versions of the two Kings above mentioned. The best known was written by King Rāma VI, who used as his authority for the story the classical *Rāmāyana* of Vālmiki through its English translation.



“Abduction of Sitā” Episode



“The Golden Deer” Episode

## THE RĀMAKIEN\*

The greater part of the story is concerned with the war waged upon Ūosakanth (Rāvāna), the demon King of Loṅkā by Rāma the righteous king of Ayodhyā and his brother Lakshman. The two brothers with Rāma’s beloved consort Sīdā (Sk. Sītā) had gone to take up a hermit’s life in the depth of the forest when the demon-king abducts Sīdā and brings her to his pleasance near the city of Loṅkā with the hope of marrying her. The brothers begin pursuit. Hanumān volunteers service and through him they win two allies in the persons of Sukrīp (Sugriva), King of Khītkhin, and Thao Māhajompū (“the great king of Jombū”). They then march with their allied armies to the seaboard to the south of the Indian continent, opposite the island of Loṅkā. They then acquire as another ally Pīpek (Vibhīshana),

a brother of Ūosakanth, who had been banished by the demon-king and is a first-rate astrologer. With these allies the brothers lay siege to the city of Loṅkā after they had crossed the ocean. After a long series of battles with the demons of Loṅkā and their allies, the armies of Rāma are invariably successful. Ūosakanth, having exhausted the sources of all help from relatives and allies, resolves upon going out himself to give battle to the enemy. He is finally killed in battle. Rāma then consecrates his ally, Pīpek, as King of Loṅkā; and returns with Sīdā to Ayodhyā where he resumes his reign. The Epic goes on to record many more battles but except for the single episode of the adventures of Rāma’s son,\*\* these subsequent campaigns very rarely find their way to the stage.

\* cf. Prince Dhani: The Rāmakien, a Siamese version of the Story of Rāma, Commemoration Vol. 1, Burma Research Society, 1961.

\*\* cf. The Programme of Rāma’s Rule in Ayodhya staged on Silpakorn Theatre, 1958.



Rāma and Lakshman with the Monkey Army

## TRAINING FOR THE KHŌN

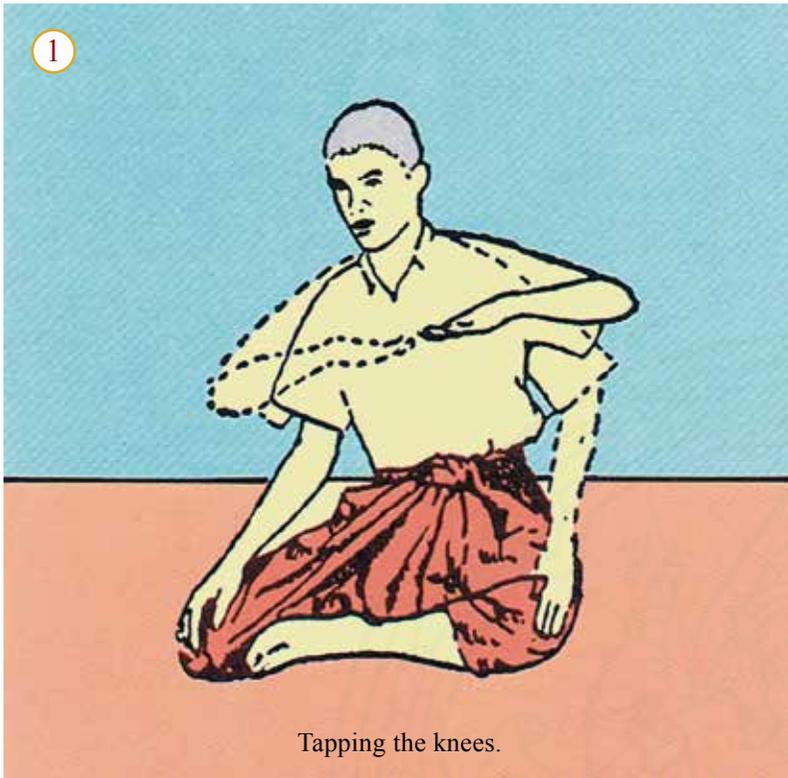
Performers of the Khōn are normally male, although at times the roles of human males and females are taken by women. They are trained from early childhood. Since the roles in the story of the Rāmakien are of four categories, the training is divided into four sections, namely those of the male human, the female human, the demoniac and simian parts. For the human roles the training is identical with those of the dance drāma which has been described elsewhere.\* It is here proposed to deal only with the demon and monkey roles, as follows:

Preliminary training for these parts is identical, and consist of:

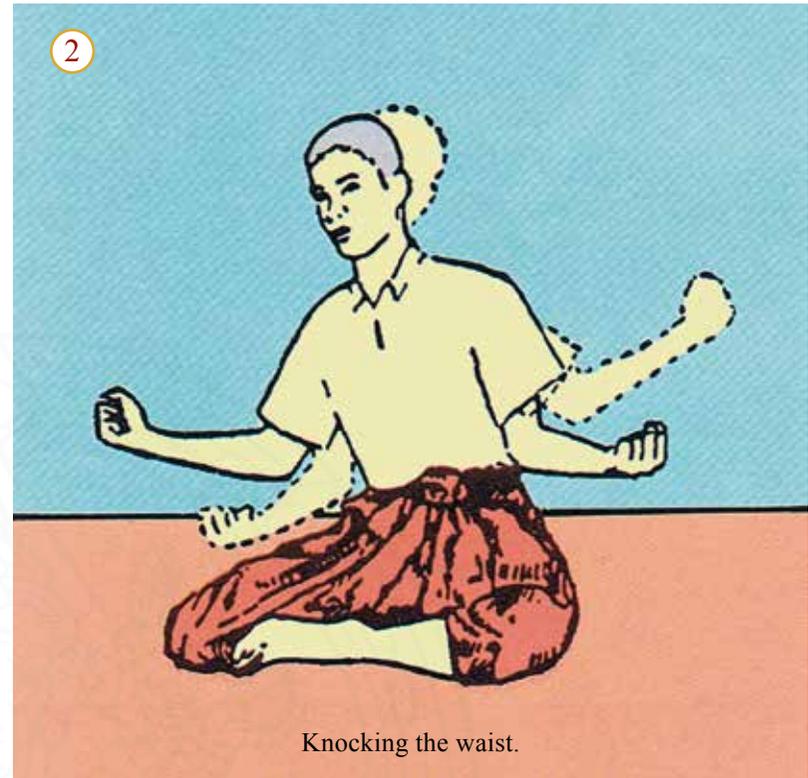
1. *Tapping the knees*, in order to train the pupil to realize a sense of rhythm and musicality;
2. *Knocking the waist*, accustom the upper part of the body to flexibility;
3. *Steps at the pole*, to accustom the legs to correct angular poses and strengthen them for angular movements;
4. *Pressing into angles*, to bend and retain the body, arms, legs and breast into fixed angles so that there could be no undignified stooping at any moment during the dance.

\* cf. The Preliminary Course of Training in Thai Theatrical Art by Dhanit Yupho, No. 13 in this Series.

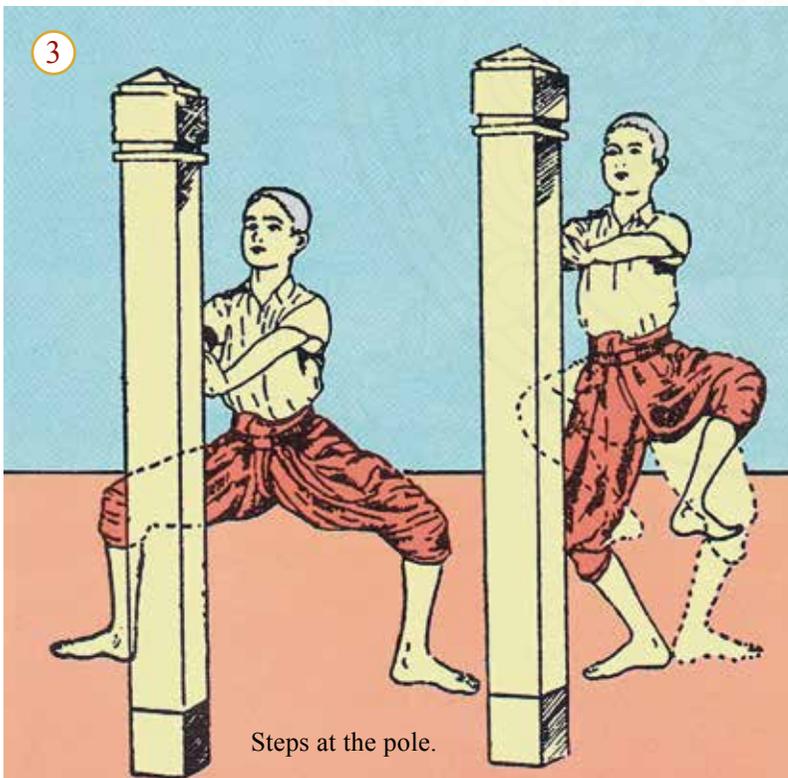




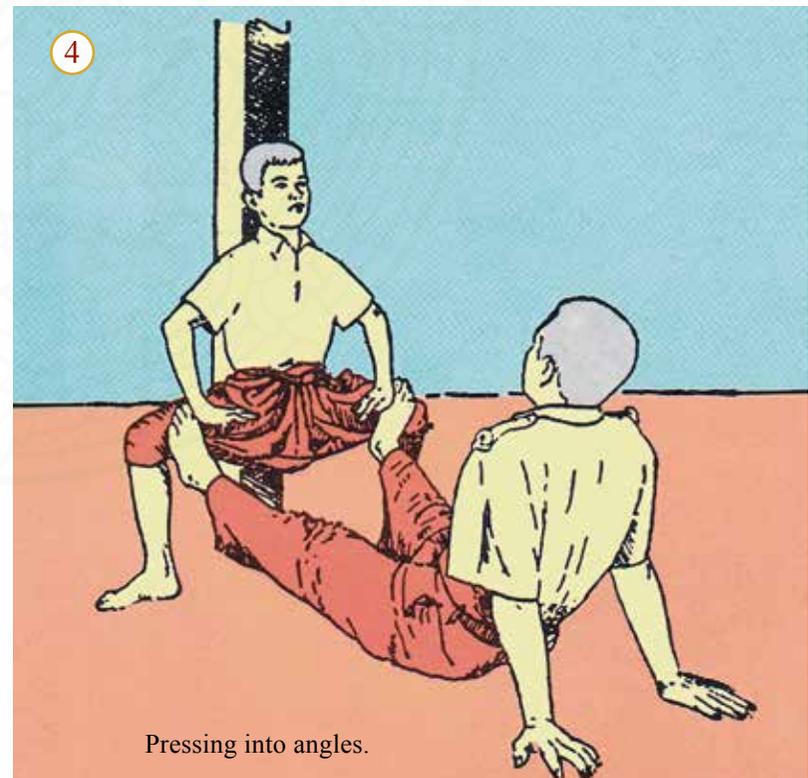
Tapping the knees.



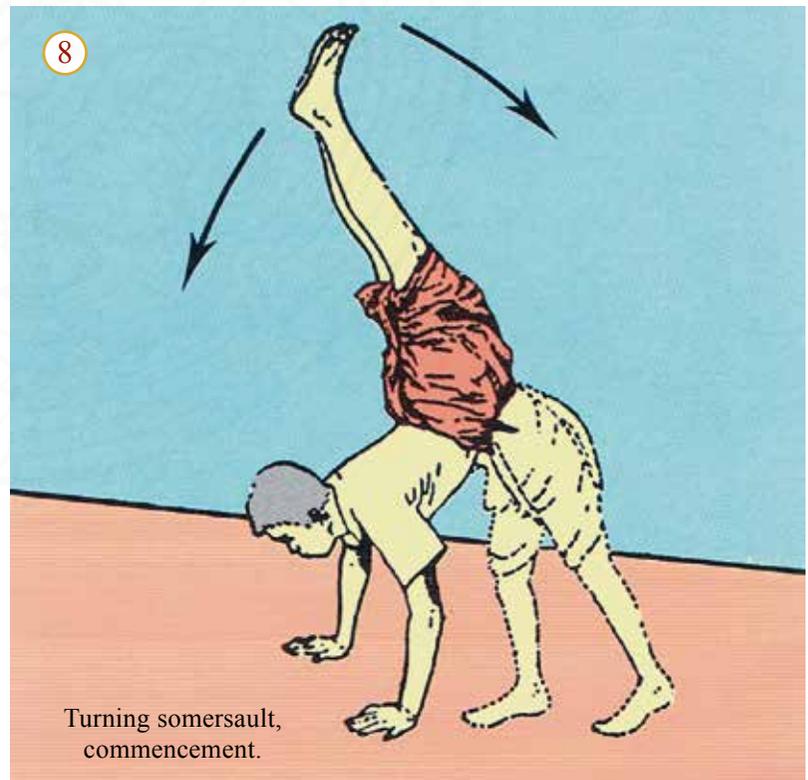
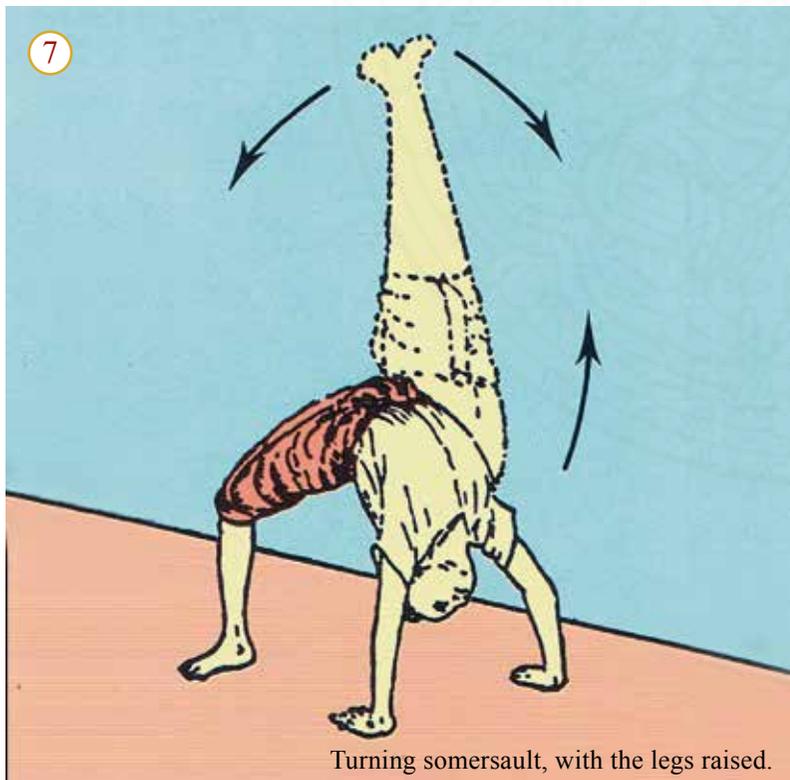
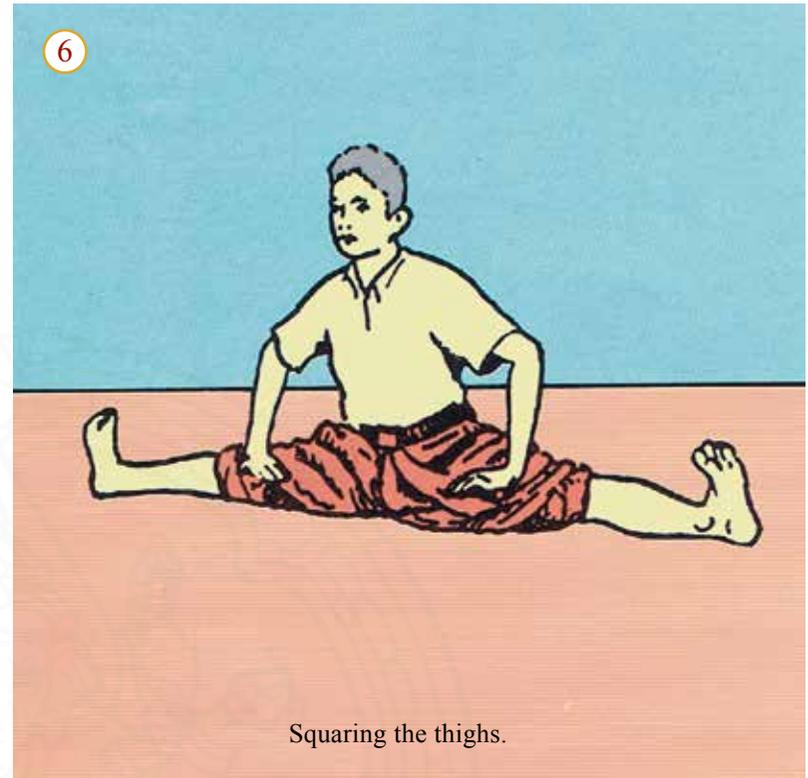
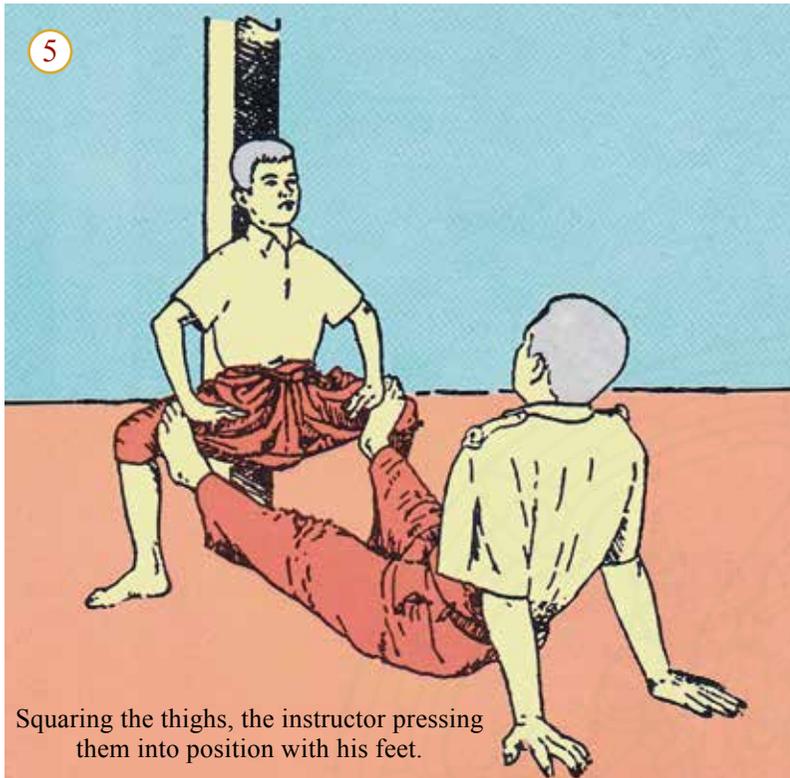
Knocking the waist.



Steps at the pole.



Pressing into angles.





“The Five” orchestra accompanying Khôn performance

For the simian parts there are other acrobatic movements to be trained for. Additional training for the simian roles consists of:

1. *Squaring the thighs*, in order to strengthen them and to enable the legs to stretch out to their full length (figs. 5 & 6);
2. *Turning somersault*, a special somersault for the simian role in which the pupil first places his hands and feet on the ground, keeping his face upwards as in fig. 7 and then raises his legs up to the position shown in fig. 8. In such a pose he is trained to “walk with his hand” in that position (fig. 8) and then brings the legs down to complete the circle, thus regaining the position of fig. 7, all this

and a few other movements being done to render the body supple and quick of movement.

After this the pupil is taught either singly or in batches of two or three in the simian movements, the instructor is not only setting example but always ready to help in balancing or setting the limbs in correct positions.

After these preliminary exercises, the pupil is trained, very often individually or in groups of two or three, in movements of the classic dance in general.



“Diamond Forefinger” Episode

## DRESS \*

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The most distinctive item of dress for the Khōn is, naturally the mask, which, in the cases of the demoniac and simian parts, conform to stipulated shapes and colours. Other sartorial items are also conformable to certain characteristics. The dress of a demon is designed to create a sense of ferocity and strength; whilst that of a human hero majesty and grace; female parts beauty and gentility, and the simian role a restlessness characteristic of its original.

Aside from sartorial properties there are, of course, other accessories, such as movable dais, war chariots, bows, arrows, batons, tridents, royal canopies, etc.

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\* cf. Traditional Dress in the Classic Dance of Siam, Journal of the Siam Society, Vol. XL, Pt. 2 pp. 133-146



Rāma - Lakshman (in childhood)

## THE MASK

The mask is perhaps the most important characteristic of the Khōn, for through it more than any other agency one distinguishes the variety of roles.

Generally speaking, divine and human roles no longer wear masks and are represented in natural colours. In pictorial art, however, Rāma is still green of complexion, whilst the brothers Phrot, Lakshman and Satrud are painted red, yellow and purple respectively as the masks used to be in former times.



Treechada, Pipek and Benyakai

Demons for the most part still hold to masks with the exception in more modern representations where female demons have demon features painted on to their natural faces. As for the individual features, *Ṭosakanth*, the King of Loṅkā, has generally a green complexion with a ‘crown of victory’ which is however differentiated by two tiers of faces within the crown, one of demons representing, though numerically inaccurate, his ten faces, and a top

one of a celestial face. *Ṭosakanth* now and then, such as in peace-time episodes, wear a golden-complexion with the same crown. *Indrajit*, his son and heir, is also of a green complexion with a peaked crown. According to Khōn tradition, this role is attributed with a few human characteristics not usually associated with demons, such as the human ear flaps and his dance movements. *Kumbhakan*, next brother to the King of Loṅkā, being attributed with an ascetic disposition, wears no crown but a coronet. He too is given a green complexion. *Pipek*, another brother, also green of complexion, wears a gourd crown. The King of Loṅkā had also other brothers who were killed by Rāma before the actual campaign of Loṅkā commenced. They were *Tūt*, King of Chārik, (Sk. Dūshana) purple of complexion with a crown of flames, *Khorn* (Sk. Khara), King of Romakal, green of complexion with a pleated crown; and *Trisian*, whose name may be transcribed in Sanskrit by *Triśira*, though so far unidentified with any character in the Rāmāyana. This last wears a mask of white with a triple headed crown. His kingdom is given as Majavāri. *Tūt*, moreover, had a son *Viruñčamban*, one of the later leaders of the demon hosts, and like his father was a powerful fighter with the ability to assume invisibility on a battlefield. He too wears a crown of flames and has a blue-black complexion. *Khorn* had two sons, *Mankarakanth* (Sk. Makarāksha), green with a crown topped by the head of a Makara and *Sēṅ-Ātit*, red with a crown of flames. The name signifies sunray. *Trisian* had a son *Trimegh*, with a dark red complexion and a crown drooping in a tail. A few masks have individual features in accordance with the story of their parentage. The two sons of *Ṭosakanth* by elephantine mothers have miniature trunks fixed on to their noses. The sons of the Crow-Demoness, *Svāhu* (Sk. Sutābu) dark-red in complexion and *Mārič* (Sk. Mārici) white in complexion, have wings affixed to their crowns in the fashion of old Teutonic warriors though of smaller sizes. The other demon relatives and allies in the Loṅkā as well as the later wars are given a variety of crowns and complexions some of which are highly artistic.



Ṭosakanth, Mondho, Pīpek, in the Episode “The existence of Sītā”

It is not clearly evident by what principles the various roles are assigned their individual masks. Most of the principal demon roles are given a green complexion. A few demons wear crowns which are easily traceable to their parentage. The leading ones wear a ‘crown of victory’. There are additional features for distinguishing the demon characters, such as the eyes which are made of two types-- bulging or crocodile. The mouths are also of certain types, namely clamping or snarling. Take the mask of Ṭosakanth for example. Here the crown is one of ‘victory type’ with rows of visages to signify his ten faces; the mouth is of the snarling type and the eyes bulge. *Maiyarāb*, however, has clamping mouth and crocodile eyes. The mounts they adopt in battle are usually chariots but some ride a horse or an elephant. The weapon though usually a club is often varied; the leading demons being given bows.

Another feature to be noticed is that demons wear coats of mail on top of their vests which are usually made to distinguish the colour from the coats. We do not see therefore their bodies though it is taken for granted that the completion of the face represents that of the whole of the body. On the other hand the monkey roles, even if they are generals, wear coats of an identical colour with the masks on which are designs of hair indicating their bare bodies.



Sītā and Ṭosakanth

On the whole the simian masks are simpler to those of the demons. The simian kings, *Pāli* (green) and *Sukrīp* (red) as well as the King of *Jompū* (blue) wear the ‘yodbat’ crowns with an insertion at the top. The crown is also worn by the demon *Indrajit*. This type of crown seems to indicate a high royal rank. *Oṅkot*, however, though heir to the *Khītkhin* throne as *Indrajit* is to the throne of *Loṅkā*, wears a gourd crown. Three monkey leaders though of great eminence do not wear crowns but are given coronets. They are *Hanumān* (white), *Nilanol* (red, being an incarnation of Agni the Fire-God) and *Nilapāt* (black, being an incarnation of the God of Death). There are other monkey officers who wear coronets and can only be distinguished by the colours of their complexion. One or two have similar colours and they are usually distinguished by their open or closed mouths.\*

The reader who is acquainted with the Wayang Purva of Java will find here the difference in the colouring of the masks. Whereas *Sukrīp* (Sk.Sugriva) is here invariably red, the one in Indonesia is of another colour. The same applies to the other masks also.

\* cf. No. 7, this Series.



Lakshman



Tosakanth



Rāma, Lakshman and Hanumān in a battle with Ṭosakanth

## PRESENTATION

The Rāmakien is a long story and has been written by various authors in several versions. For the purpose of presentation, therefore, adaptations into episodes have been necessary. Such an episode is called a *chud* (ชุด); whereas in other forms of dramatic presentation such an episode would be known as a *ton* (ตอน). The latter term signifies a section; whilst the former means a “set”. The reason why the *chud*, or set, should be adopted only for the Khōn, and not for other forms of entertainment seems to lie in the following fact. The Khōn was originally inspired by, or even originated from the nang, i.e. the shadow-play, When a shadowplay was to be presented it used to be necessary to select from screening, the figures which were very numerous and arrange them in sets for due presentation in the order in which they were to be screened. Thus the word set came to be used for episodes of the *Khōn*, such as the ones which have been presented by the Royal Department of Fine Arts from time to time at our theatre since the conclusion of the Southeast Asian War, namely the sets designated as *the conquest of the Demon-crow*, *the Lady Afloat*, *the Magic of Maiyarāb*, *the Snake-noose*, *the Weapon of Brahma*, *Hanumān the Volunteer*, *the Fire-Ordeal of Sīdā* etc.



Hanumān Capturing Benyakai

## FORMS OF REPRESENTATION

There have been forms of representation of various kinds in the past. Nowadays there are five, namely:

**a. Khōn-Klaṅ-Plêṅ**, the open-air mask-play, in which it is understood that military reviews and battles are the order of the day. The accompanying music would be appropriate marches whilst the text would consist of recitatives (*khamphāk*) and dialogues without singing.

**b. Khōn-roṅ-nôk** also called **Khōn-naṅ-rāo**, a variety in which the play is performed on the stage with a pole, the latter serving as seating.\* The pole is placed towards the back of the stage, flanked by a simple curtain on which is painted a scene of mountain or forest. Like the above variety there is no singing, only recitatives and dialogues taking place. There are as a rule two *piphāt* bands, one at either end of the stage.

A development of this variety, called the **Khōn-nôn-rōṅ**, is often adopted, in which a preliminary performance takes place on the first day and the main representation on the second, the troupe staying the night in between on or near the stage. The preliminary performance would consist of inaugurative music (*the hōmrōṅ*), a sort of overture but repeated in every set and the episode of a performance. Then performers would do the pole-dance, which is in turn followed by the short episode of *Īrāb*, the demon who, being in the habit of catching for food any living being straying into his park, tries to devour Rāma and his brother while wandering in search of Sīdā. *Īrāb* is eventually killed. This demon is found in the Sanskrit *Rāmāyana* under the name of *Virādhā*.

**c. Khōn-na-čō**, or the “mask-play before the screen”, is a variety in which the representation takes place, like the shadow-play, in front of a screen of white cloth which acts as the back of the stage.

**d. Khōn-roṅ-nai**, meaning the Court mask-play is a variety which has the greatest affinity to the dance-dramas of the Court, consisting of singing as well as recitatives and dialogues. The staging is naturally more elaborate.

In these four varieties of the mask-play, the story presented is not divided into acts or scenes, nor is there any kind of *mise-en-scène*. There is yet one more variety and that is....

**e. Khōn-chāk**, i.e. the mask-play on a modern stage, such as the performances of the Royal Fine Arts Department which have been regularly staged since 1946.



“Hanumān Capturing Suphanmatcha” Episode

\* cf. Prince Dhanivat's shadow - play in the journal of the Siam Society, Vol. XXXXVII, part 1, p. 30



"Expelling Piþek" Episode

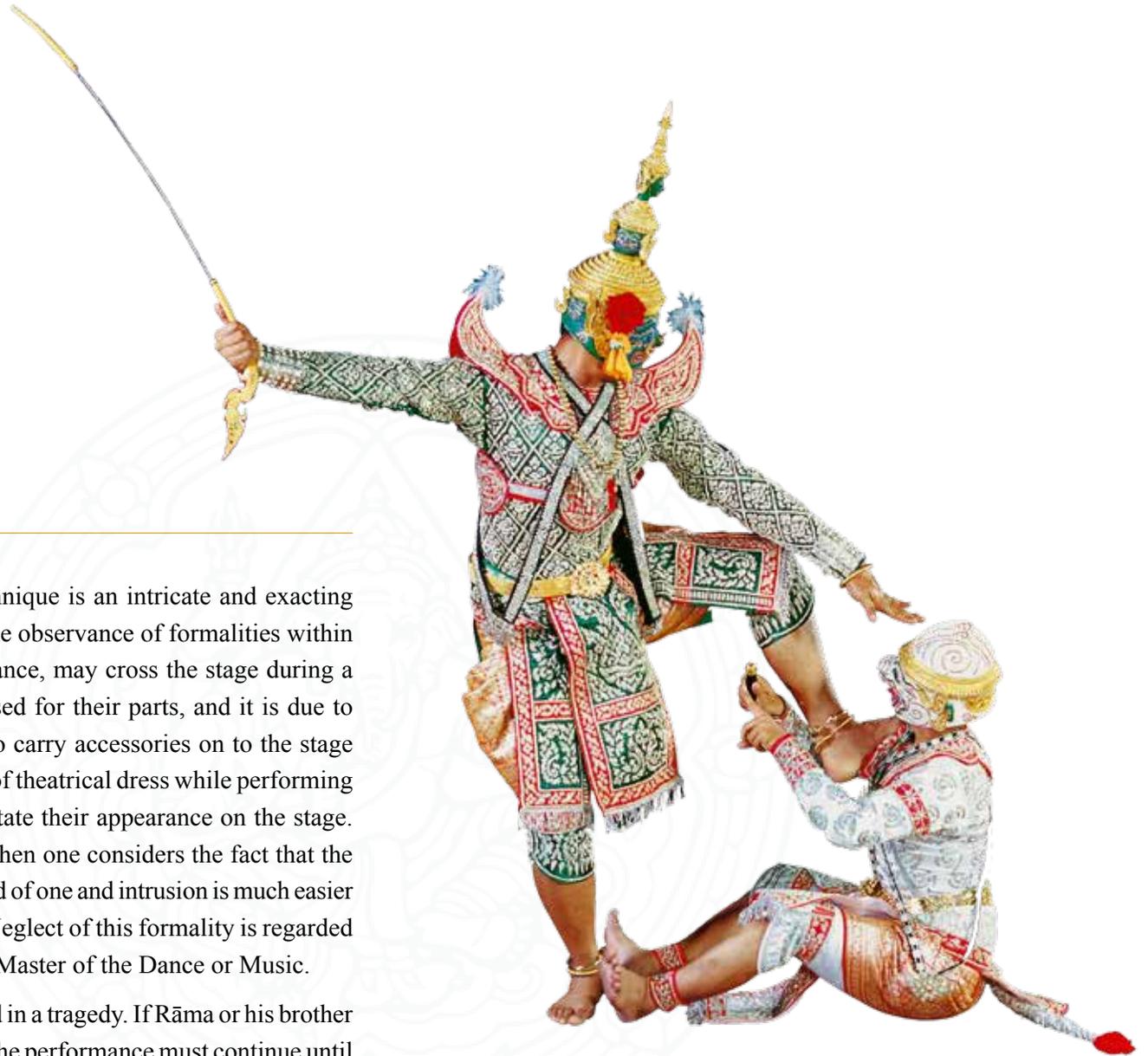
## FORMALITIES

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Thai choreographic technique is an intricate and exacting one, indicating how strict was the observance of formalities within the profession. No one, for instance, may cross the stage during a performance, except those dressed for their parts, and it is due to this reason that stage hands who carry accessories on to the stage are required to adopt some kind of theatrical dress while performing their duties if the duties necessitate their appearance on the stage. The reason for this is obvious when one considers the fact that the stage is open on three sides instead of one and intrusion is much easier here than on the western stage. Neglect of this formality is regarded as discourtesy to the traditional Master of the Dance or Music.

No performance may end in a tragedy. If Rāma or his brother is wounded or worsted in battle, the performance must continue until they are cured or restored to life. Similarly, the final defeat and death of Ūosakanth is considered by professionals as a taboo and is never played. Exception to this ruling has been known at times but then it is only permissible through the express command of the sovereign.

The Khōn, or masked play, has been regarded among Thai people from olden days as an art which is composed of various forms of the fine arts and is a key to all other forms of dramatic or choreographic manifestations of the arts because of its classic traditions.



Ūosakanth - Hanumān

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