



Shadow Play

(The Nan)

THAI CULTURE, NEW SERIES No. 3



SHADOW PLAY (The Nan)

BY

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KROMAMÜN BIDYALABH BIRDHYĀKORN



Mural depicting a shadow play performance, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha



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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

*It is important to note that certain names and terms in this edition follow the contemporary spellings as adopted by the respective authors; thus we have generally preserved the older spelling of Thai words, and words derived from the Pali and Sanskrit languages concerning names of places, and terms relating to Buddhist and religious matters.

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Phrot, an ascetic

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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 as the Private Secretary to the Queen Mother and later Private Secretary to the king (foreign correspondence section) as well as 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 as one of the members of the Supreme Council of State. He was Regent of Thailand until the King returned and assume his duty in B.E. 2494 (1951). After that 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. (Silpākorn Univ., Bangkok).

Outside of government service he was a member of the Siam Society Council, Hon. President of the Siam Society, and the Hon. President of 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 Rāma I of Bangkok, in J. Siam Soc. XLIII, 1; The Rāmakien, in J. Burma Res. Soc. etc. Commemoration Vol. II; Hide Figures of the Rāmakien, in the Ledermuseum at Offenbach, J. Siam Soc. LIII, 1 ; SEATO Lectures 1961, Allegories of the Monsoon in Siamese literature, Univ. of Indiana 1966, etc.



The Nang Yai Performance



SHADOW PLAY (The Nan)

In B.E. 2490 (1947) a lecture was delivered under the auspices of the Siam Society in the theatre of the Royal Fine Arts Department on the subject of *The Shadow-play as a possible origin of the Masked-play*, to illustrate which the Department authorities kindly assisted by giving performances of the *Nan** and the *khōn* the proscenium of the theatre. The hypothesis was formed on various grounds and will be quoted at the end of this monograph. The lecture was published in the Journal of the Siam Society, vol. XXXVII, part 1.

The present brochure is, however, written from an opposite angle. Rather than trying to prove that the *nan*, or Shadow-Play, might have been the origin of the *khōn*, or Masked-Play, I am now restating my hypothesis by taking the latter and tracing it back to the Shadow-Play. This new approach to the subject necessitated rewriting it altogether.

In looking up authorities, the first one that came to my mind was the article by my late friend, René Nicolas, entitled *Le Théâtre d'Ombres au Siam*, published in the Journal of the Siam

Society vol. XXI, Part 1 (1927). On examining this in greater detail I found that it was mainly based on another authority, in the Thai language, but rather an inaccessible one. It was first contributed to the *Vajirañān* magazine of the early days of King Chulalongkorn's reign. It was reprinted twice as No. 6 of the *Customs and Tradition* series of the National Library. One of the reprints was issued in 1920. Prince Damrong, then President of the Library, was of the opinion that either Prince Kromamün Sthitya or Prince Tosini or both were responsible for the article, for they were well-known artists of that time. To this Nicolas added historical data to make the treatment scientifically complete.

Working therefore on these authorities, one in French and the other in Thai, I found that it was necessary to supplement and rearrange the material, for the latest of the two was written nearly 27 years ago. A record of gratitude should be made to Phya Anumān Rājadhon and Mr. D. Yūpho who have respectively suggested to me the idea of the paper and helped to find materials.

* Nan or Nang



A black Monkey.



The Nang Talung Performance

ORIGIN OF THE SHADOW-PLAY

The earliest shadow-play in the East existed in all probability in India. To quote from the authority of Nicolas,* Pischel established that the shadow-play existed in India from a very remote period. In the Buddhist text of *Therī-gāthā* (songs of the nuns) which belonged to the Pālī canon, we have the young nun Subhā who spurned the love of a young man too engrossed with worldly realities. As he described to her the splendour of this world the virgin replied : “Blind man, thou enthuse over a thing which is unreal, as a shadow which you see, as a tree of gold seen in a dream, as a shadow figure exhibited to a crowd of people”. Moreover several allusions are made in the *Mahābhārata* to the action of kings, ministers, etc. exhibited by means of figures to hide on a screen of thin cloth ; and lastly he mentioned theatrical plays called the *chāyanātaka* which he translated as *Schatten-schauspiel*, ‘shadow-play’. It should be added here that marionettes projected on screens were also common in ancient India.

Nicolas goes on to raise a question. “It is very probable that the Siamese shadow-play had its origin in India, as most of the other kinds of spectacles. But was it directly descended therefrom? The problem is still difficult to solve, although one generally agrees in believing that it was through the intermediary of Java that Siam received from India her shadow-play.”

Nicolas wrote the above in 1927. Further research has since been taking place. It is now, in my opinion, proved without doubt that the Thai naṅ came up from the Empire of Srivijaya through the Malay peninsula to our valley of the Menam Chaophyā and had in the process undergone distinctive developments which have demonstrated the Thai spirit of originality and adoption.

* Nicolas : *Le Théâtre d'Ombres au Siam*, Journal Siam Society, Vol, XXI, part 1, pp, 37-51, quoting from Pischel's *Das Altindisches Schattenspiel*

DIRECTION OF ITS IMMIGRATION

Let us now make a sketch of the direction of the immigration of the naṇ to our country. As with the story of Rāma, with which the shadow-play is intimately associated, the shadow-play crossed the ocean from the eastern coast of south India to the Empire of Srivijaya in Sumatra, whence it went on to Java. There, besides the story of Rāma according to the version of Vālmiki's *Rāmāyana*, the story was already interpolated with extra episodes. Some of these no doubt crossed over the ocean with the main theme ; whilst others were of indigenous origin for the story of Rāma became identified with local tradition in due time. In Java too the epic of the *Mahābhārata* became an equally esteemed source of inspiration. Later on native romances were also screened. The shadow-play, however, which came up the Malay Peninsula seemed to have retained only the story of *Rāma*, thereby having a semblance of coming up direct from Sumatra where it is tempting to believe that they were still restricted to the original theme of the *Rāmāyana*.

We do not know exactly when the shadow-play reached the valley of the Menam Chaophyā of the Thai. The earliest authentic mention is to be found in the Palatine Law of King Boromatrailokanāth, enacted in 1458. There is of course a mention of the naṇ in the *Romance of the Lady Nophamās*, an XVIIIth century prose work depicting the court life of the Sukhothai regime of the XIIIth century. Nicolas while giving some value to this source of history had to admit that its chronological standing was “un peu plus sujet à caution” *.



Virunchambang

* “to be taken with a pinch of salt” The historical records are unvarifiable.



Shadow figure making with a wooden mallet and punch

THE WORD Nan

In Thai the shadow-play is called *Nan*, which may be translated as “Hide-figures”. The name has obviously been derived from the material from which the figures are made. When developments of it sprang up, the *nan* became known as *nan yai*, the “play with big figures”. When dancing became its accompaniment it was called *nan ram* or *nan rabam*. An innovation with smaller figures was introduced from the south was known as the *nan ‘Talung’* (The latter word being an abbreviated form of the name of the province of Pattalung). The latest *nan* is the modern cinema so-called because it too has to be screened. In this paper *nan* is used for the *nan yai* as it usually is in common parlance.

To judge by the number of figures known to exist in the country and abroad in private collections there must have been a wide popularity for this kind of entertainment in days past. At the Ledermuseum for instance at Offenbach near Frankfurt there were in 1963 over 200 of these figures collected without knowledge of the subject though well cared for. The writer was asked to help with cataloguing and rearranging them in proper sequence. The collection is described with detailed illustration in the Journal of the Siam Society, vol. LIII part 1, pp. 61-66.

ACCESSORIES

The main accessory of the *nan* is naturally the collection of hide figures. The whole process in the manufacture of the figures is described at great length in the anonymous Thai article. Cow-hide is first immersed in water till tender, then exposed to the sun to dry. It is then smoothed by an iron instrument. Soot is applied to both surfaces and the skin is left to dry in the sun. When dried it is rubbed over with a gourd so that it is polished by the gourd's smooth surface. The hide is now ready for the artist to draw figures on. The parts between the lines are then cut out.

Brahmā in standing posture on the platform.



In the case of coloured figures for the day performances, the sooted surface is first rubbed and then repainted in colours. Light colourless surface is obtained by just scratching out the soot from the hide. For other colours the following mixtures of natural colours are employed. For green a mixture of lime and copper sulphate ; for red sandal and alum; for yellow sandal rubbed over with lime and so on. A pole is now halved and a figure is framed between them

As for the design, figures are made in singles as well as in couples, the latter usually fixed in a fighting pose. Groups too are made, very often with backgrounds of celestial or human sceneries, such as mansions (*vimān*) forests, mountains, seas, etc. Superstition ordains many formalities in the process. The figures for instance of the gods of Hinduism, such as Vishnu and Siva, and the *rishi*, must be made of the hide of a virgin cow and considerable offerings of articles of food by way of propitiation of the Master of the *nan* would be required. For the *rishi* however the hide of a tiger or a bear is sometimes preferred. The artist who draws the patterns of these three exalted figures is moreover required to wear a ceremonial garb of white, and finish his work within the space of the day.

Next to be figures comes the screen. This is made of a thin piece of white cloth in the middle with double pieces at either side, so that the effect would be to show up the centre in the screening. The screen is duly decorated on either side with coloured cloth and held down to its position by ropes.

It is mentioned in this Thai article that an innovation in the decoration of the screen had been lately introduced at the time of writing of apertures at either side, over which were painted the walls of the city of Loṅkā on one side and the camp of Rāma on the other, whilst above are painted the goddess Mekhalā tantalising the demon Rāmasūn with the jewel of the lightning. This innovation was known as the *chô khwae*, or “apertured screen”. It would seem to suggest itself that this “apertured screen” might have heralded the *khōn* though the tone of the anonymous article seems to take it as being quite a late innovation in which the manipulators of the figures were enabled to make their entrances and exits through the apertures.



Rāma shooting an arrow on a pair of garudas.



Group figure. Rāma's sons catching Rāma's horse
which they caught roaming, dealt a heavy blow at Hanumān
who was sent to keep an eye on the horse.



A demon named Bibhek.



Rāmasūn (Sanskrit (Sk.) - Parasu Rāma) attributed in the Thai Rāmakien with the characteristics of the thunder.

TECHNIQUE OF THE REPRESENTATION

When all is ready with the screen, the figures are brought out and laid down in what may be called “sets”, the object of which seems to have been that the figures would be conveniently at hand for the successive requirement of them. Musicians and manipulators would assemble before dusk, which is as a rule the time for commencement. When the time arrives, the sponsor of the entertainment would hand to the chief representative of the performing troupe three candles and a ceremonial fee. At the time of the writing of that article this fee was two and a half quarters of a *baht*. The leader of the troupe then hands one of the three candles to the *chef d’orchestre*, who lights and fixes it to his *sphōn*, a drumlike instrument with which he sets the pace of the music, and generally keeps time for the whole orchestra. The *sphōn*, in fact, does the duty of the *bâton* in a western orchestra. The latter then commences a salutation to the impersonal Master of Music, consisting of six fixed airs. This done, the other two candles are lighted by manipulators in honour respectively of Vishnu and Siva and again the offering of candles is accompanied by stipulated tunes reserved for those two Hindu gods.

Invocations are now made by way of propitiation of the Master of the *naṇ* by reciters. They are worded in archaisms and very difficult to understand. The oldest form of these invocations is known as the *phāk sāmtra*. This is divided into 3 *thuay*, which may be rendered as canto. The first canto commences with a salutation to King Dasaratha and the hero Rāma. It then goes on to a quaint quasi-humorous passage describing the process of carving out a *naṇ* figure from cow-hide.

The second canto salutes first the *rishi* or ‘seer’, from whom is asked success : then the Buddha’s virtues are invoked, then Anirudh the ‘initiator’, and the genii of the forests, the streams and the mountains and lastly the ‘Old Master’, presumably of the *naṇ*. At the end of these salutations the canto goes on to announce that the story of the Rāmakien would now be exhibited on the screen.



Mekhalā, goddess of the sea in Tamil mythology, here attributed with the characteristics of the lightning.



Indrajit transfigured to be Indra on the elephant.

*“Wherein the figure of Siva, the Lord
Mounted aloft on a chariot celestial ;
While the brilliant sun moves on the firmament;
Where in the demons of Lonkā are
Depicted with the heroes of Ayodhyā
While you look on for your enjoyment,
and so on.*

The third canto dwells on the spirit in which the naṇ is staged on rival screens. The passage may perhaps be thus rendered to give an idea of the canto:

*“The cow-hide figures thus exhibited,
May the audience their projection see.
Clear and fine as a setting on a ring,
Old people say they good luck bring.
A secret told by the Master
handed down by elder men,
By the grace of the Sovereign ,
Protect the worsted side from shame.
If you lose, admit the loss;
If you win, instruct us too.
Quicken the fire, quick ,
my master of the torch”,*

It is now the turn of the “master of the torch” to set fire to the faggots. As the flames spring up the orchestra strikes up a march, the manipulators and the reciters at once commence their respective roles.

It is pointed out in the same article that an exhibition in the palace omits some of these formalities and starts at once with the exhibition called *Ushering in the early evening monkeys*, a duel between the white and the black monkeys. Then the performance commences.

Each hide-figure is help up by its two poles on either hand of the manipulator. The latter in *panung* fastened by a belt with a jacket and a head scarf. As he manipulates the figure he is automatically bound to bend and sway, at the same time keeping time with his foot movements. In between the recitations there may be pauses for an action without words such as a march when the orchestra would strike up appropriate music and the manipulator would more or less adopt certain steps in consonance with it. He in fact practically dances, the hide-figure often doing the mere duty of identifying his role. It was in every likelihood this fact which gave incitement in due time to the manipulator to discard the hide-figure and thereby transform the performance into what became later a *khōn* as suggested at the end of this monograph.



Group figure. Lakshman struck by an arrow, the Weapon of Brahmā.



Group figure. Rāma weeping over the prostrate form of his brother Lakshman, who had been shot by an arrow, the Weapon of Brahṃā.

According again to this article written in Thai, a favourite theme of old times was the *Campaigns of Tût, Khorn and Trīsian*. Two of these names would be recognised by those familiar with the *Rāmāyāna* of Vālmiki if they were written Dūshana and Khara. The third, Trīsian, is an additional role, possibly invented in this country. They were relatives of the demon princess, Samanakkhā (Sk. Surpanakhā) who came out to avenge the rebuff which she suffered from Rāma and his brother when she unsuccessfully made love to them and molested Rāma's wife, Sīdā. It is said that the exhibition starting at dusk usually reached the fall of Khorn at midnight when it was a signal to put an end to the screening. Hence the phrase lomkhorn, the "fall of Khorn", came to be used in popular parlance for the "conclusion" of anything. Such episodes as *The Weapon of Brahmā* (in Thai *Phromast*, from Sk. *Brahmāstra*) and *Maiyarāb the Magician* became more popular later.

Looking up records we find that the *Samudaghōs*, a poem written in first part by the jurisconsult of King Naraī, later XVIIth century, mentioned another story as having formed a story for the naṇ, which should be here quoted :

"His Majesty, Rāmādhīpati, of formidable might.... recollecting the story of the Great Teacher having been Prince Samudaghōs, who, reincarnating from a heavenly life in celestial worlds, was born on earth and became skilled in the art of the bow, winning victory in a rival contest among heroic royal warriors and thereby won the hand of the beautiful Bindumati.

*His Majesty therefore gave orders that a poem on the subject be composed and beautiful figures cut out of hide to depict this romance on the screen".**

Towards the middle of the XVIIIth century the romance of Panji, the hero of Javanese history, became popular in the regime of Ayudhyā. One, or perhaps two, versions in Thai dramatic verse is said to have been written, which has unfortunately disappeared. Those were days prior to printing. There might have existed only one or at best a few manuscript copy or copies, which probably suffered in the general sack in 1767 of Ayudhyā. A version of this romance, believed to have been composed in the reign of Rama I of the Chakri dynasty, was probably the source of inspiration to the wellknown *Inao* of King Rama II. In this latter work there is an episode in which hide figures were made to screen the story of Panji.

In modern days neither the *Samudaghōs* nor the panji romance is ever screened. Not a single hide-figure of either exists except the cardboard ones of the *Inao* romance made by order of His late Majesty King Prajadhipok, now preserved in the Museum. It was the King's intention to screen them but it never materialised. Not being made of hide they will not last. They remain at any rate to testify to the monarch's worthy aim to resuscitate an art which was and still is threatening to die a natural death.

* *Samudaghos*, National Library Edition, 278 pages B.E. 2468 (1925) and the Fine Arts Department Edition, 279 pages, B.E. 2503 (1960).



Lakshman struck by an arrow, the Weapon of Brahmā.

The *nan ram*, often called *nan rabam*, used, according to our Thai authority above quoted, to be performed in day-time with coloured figures. The manipulators might have been more ornately dressed as befitting a daylight performance in the open. They appeared on the stage to the accompaniment of song and music, depicting a celestial dance of the well-known episode of the spring season in which the goddess Mekhalā tantalises the demon Rāmasun with her jewel of a lightning. A beautiful specimen of a figure Mekhalā painted in blue exists in the National Museum and is herewith reproduced.

The *nan ram*, being usually performed in the late afternoon up to dusk, retained the screen but was not accompanied by a fire. It formed a prelude to the *nan yai*.

This variety of the *nan* mentioned by the Thai article, as a “recent development”, might have been in *its idea* much older than it was understood to be, for the author in saying “recent” seemed to have been more concerned with the *screen and its decoration* and was perhaps not referring at all to its idea. In any case, since we see now without much doubt that the shadow-play was the masked-play’s predecessor, the *nan ram* should supply us with the very important missing link in the development of the *nan* into the *khōn*. It would be in fact identical with, the *khōn before the screen** sketched out in that lecture of the Siam Society in 1947, which should be quoted here, thus : **

“The first variety, the ***Khōn before a screen***, was ofcourse the immediate stage of transition from the shadow-play, retaining as it does the screen, of the ***nan***. Although this fact has not been generally accepted, it seems to me obviously so for the following reasons. The presence of the screen is an indication of the transition ; the sidelong movements of the masked-players is also an indication of a former attempt to represent the hide-figures by means of human beings who thus try to show their profile rather than their full faces : the book of the ***Khōn before the screen*** was just the identical *kamphāk* of the shadow-play in use before the composition of the ***Rāmakien*** of 1798 by King Rama I.

This speculation has now been confirmed by the analogy of Java which I have only recently come across. According to an authority on the Javanese dance (R.M. Soeripno in ***Javanese classical dances***, London Geographical Magazine, Vol. XIX, Sept. 1946). ‘The dance dramas are derived from plays with puppets silhouetted from the screen, called ***wayang purva*** or ***wayang kulit***. ***Wayang*** means shadows, and the fact that the play with human beings is called ***wayang***, namely ***wayang wong***, indicates clearly that the play with silhouettes is the original form. This is further shown not only by the Mask-like lack of expression in the dancers’ faces but also by their poses, since they always try to imitate the carved leather puppets of the shadow-play and to move in two dimensional directions. This Javanese analogy fits into the letter with what I have been trying to prove.

* Khōn - na - cho

** *The Shadow-play as a possible origin of the Masked play*, JSS. Vol. XXXVII, 1, pp. 30-31.



A white monkey catching a black monkey.

*The mask-play before the screen was performed in old days without any other stage accessory than is used in the shadow-play. Its book was identical, that is to say the **kamphāk**. The action is quicker and more virile than the later types which are partly based on the elaborate dance-drama.....”.*

It only remains to be summed up that the Thai *naṇ*, derived from a very old Indian source, has rendered its service due to humanity both on its own merit and also through its development in the form of the *khōn*. In itself it does not look like being able to withstand the test of time, but its development, the *khōn*, has every chance of survival to testify to the independence of Thai art if sufficient and proper encouragement is forthcoming through the School of Choreography of the Royal Fine Arts Department of the Government.



Hanumān caressing Suwankanyuma.



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