



KHŌN MASK

THAILAND'S HERITAGE

“ALTAR”

Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts,
Rajamangala University of Technology Thanyaburi



PREFACE

Thai traditional dramatic art is not only rightfully considered to be a national treasure, but is also a form of high culture that has accrued greater and greater value over the centuries. Considered aesthetically, this expression of Siamese civilisation is exquisitely detailed and arrestingly beautiful. The inspiration for producing such a rich body of artistic endeavour over such a long period of time stems from the collective endeavours of truly inspired artists and craftsman whose point of origin lies deep in the past of Siamese culture. What we now witness is a signature style characterised by a uniquely high level of craftsmanship that must be deemed auspicious for the nation that embodies traditional art forms that are at once expressions of a sophisticated long-evolving high culture and which yet has been of great popular interest and a source of inspiration to countless ordinary people for a matter of centuries.

In producing this book entitled *Khōn Masks: Thailand's Heritage*, the publisher is motivated by the desire to contribute to ongoing research into Thai culture and the ways of thought of the people of Thailand. At the same time, however, the publisher is extremely eager to share with discerning readers throughout the world what we have learned through exacting research and close analysis. Furthermore, it is our conviction that this book will constitute a precious heirloom for Thais of the next generation.

It should prove to be of great value to those desirous of having a greater appreciation of Thai culture and should readily yield valuable dividends in terms of a more knowledgeable and appreciative populace conscious of the need to safeguard its unique and ancient cultural heritage. Thus, these are the reasons we have felt compelled to present this book detailing the methods used in making *Khōn* masks in addition to providing descriptions and explanations of *Khōn* masked dance performances.

It takes a great deal of time and effort to collect and present the information found in this book at the high level it warrants. Those engaged in such a task must be meticulous and prepared to work hard. In this endeavour, as many pictures and as much information as can be feasibly collected concerning *Khōn* masks must be assiduously gathered and minutely examined. The methods used in recording relevant information must be akin to those of the sciences with the level of results comparable to what would be expected in an academic treatise suitable for a university-based audience.

The leading ideas of the *Ramākien* enhance and augment our knowledge by presenting us with many-angled perspectives, perspectives affording us opportunities to sharpen awareness and to become confident in our beliefs. These ideas deepen our understanding of divine beings and reincarnation, as well as how to treat others, truth itself and the importance of fulfilling promises and keeping vows.

As an act of gratitude, we have undertaken and completed the arduous task of preparing a second edition of this book in English. This occasion caused me to recall that the recently deceased and highly revered art master, Tawan Duchanee (1939-2014), urged informing our readers that the stalwart Thotsakan did not know that the beautiful Sītā with whom he had fallen in love was his own daughter. Had he known Sītā was his very own daughter by his wife, Nāng Mondō, Thotsakan would have never seized Sītā and spirited her away from her husband, Prā Rāmā, in order to make her his own wife.

Such an immoral incestuous attachment could not have occurred had it not been for the karmic retribution of actions committed by Thotsakan in an earlier reincarnation. In a previous life Thotsakan had been Nontook and Prā Rāmā had been Prā Nārāi (Viṣṇu). Posted at the foot of Mount Krailāt, Nontook was given the task of washing the feet of the deities who wished to ascend the mountain to pay homage to Prā Isuan (Śiva). As such, Nontook was bullied and mocked by the deities as he carried out his unedifying task. Distressed by this ill treatment, Nontook asked Prā Isuan for a diamond finger which he could point at any deity, person or creature, thereby killing them. Prā Isuan granted his wish, but Nontook came to abuse the power he had been given. Finally, Prā Isuan sent Prā Nārāi to subdue him. Through the use of erotic legerdemain by virtue of disguising himself as the maiden Absara and dancing beguilingly before him, Prā Nārāi duped Nontook into pointing the diamond finger at himself and so killing himself. But before he had expired, Nontook was able to implore Prā Isuan to treat him justly by providing protection for him in his next reincarnation because Prā Nārāi would be reincarnated with four arms allowing him to wield four weapons at once. Prā Isuan affirmatively responded by having Nontook reincarnated as Thotsakan with ten faces and twenty arms with a weapon wielded by each hand. Finally, both Prā Nārāi and Nontook were given the understanding that they would meet again in combat in their next lives.

Since the battle between Prā Rāmā and Thotsakan was fuelled only by their enmity in their previous reincarnations, Nāng Sītā cannot have been the cause of the bitter conflict between them. At the time Nāng Sītā was born as the daughter of Thotsakan and Nāng Mondō, Thotsakan's brother, Pibhek, a gifted astrologer, predicted that she would be the cause of the destruction of Thotsakan's entire lineage and the death of Thotsakan himself. Thotsakan accordingly ordered that the infant be allowed to drift in a golden casket in the water of a river so that she would perish.

However, the workings of karma dictated that the infant would be rescued by a hermit, Thao Janaka Chakravatti, who found her floating in the golden casket on the water. He subsequently buried the infant in the casket in the earth with the understanding that Mother Earth, Mâe Torrani, would take care of her. Having reached a certain stage in the practice of meditation, the ascetic hermit decided to return to Mithilā and took Nāng Sītā with him. At the palace in Mithilā Thao Janaka announced that whosoever could lift a certain magical bow would be awarded the hand of Nāng Sītā. Prā Rāmā alone could accomplish this deed and so he and Nāng Sītā were wed.

Having gone to live in Ayodhyā, Prā Rāmā and Nāng Sītā were forced to leave and to wander in the forest. It so happened that Thotsakan's younger sister became extremely infatuated with Prā Rāmā's younger brother, Prā Lāk, who in disgust reacted by horribly mutilating her by cutting off her feet, hands, nose and ears. In her fury and seeking revenge, she persuaded her older brother, Thotsakan, to go to war with the forces of Prā Rāmā and Prā Lāk. Thus, did Thotsakan come to see the beautiful Nāng Sītā, not recognising that she had been the daughter he had ordered put afloat in a golden casket in the river. Thotsakan was intoxicated and overpowered by Nāng Sītā's loveliness and became determined to have her as his own wife. As it turned out, he effectively used guile and cunning to hoodwink Prā Rāmā and was accordingly able to abduct Nāng Sītā.

Thus were the forces of Ayodhyā and its allies drawn into a long and protracted war with the demon forces of Thotsakan and his allies. Many demons and monkey soldiers were killed in the course of this extended and vicious struggle. Eventually whole lineages were extinguished just as had been prophesied by Pibhek, Thotsakan's elder brother. Thotsakan's immediate family, relatives and lineage were extinguished and he himself perished. None of these extremely untoward events would have occurred had Thotsakan known that Nāng Sītā was his very own daughter.

The message the late revered Tawan Duchanee brings to us is that as readers we must interpret the *Ramākien* correctly. This will lead us to grasp the genuine heart of this great epic work so that we avoid automatically loathing Thotsakan without taking into account a fully rounded view of his character, actions and lineage. After all, as Tawan Duchanee reminds us, Thotsakan belonged to a branch of the great Brahmanic lineage. Facile hostility and easy hatred of Thotsakan should be eschewed through expressing sympathy for him in his situation, a situation in which he was both giant demon in his current reincarnation (อสูร, asōon) and celestial divinity by lineage (เทพบุตร, tǎyp-pábùt) since belonging to the Brahmanic Demon Lineage.

After all is said and done, it seems clear he had redeemable characteristics—at least in some salient respects—all fair-minded readers should come to recognise. It might be added that one is accordingly reminded of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* in which the diabolical Satan qua fallen angel takes on the nobility of a tragic hero just as is the case with the fatally flawed protagonists of classical Greek drama exemplified by Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

Khōn masks are highly valued Thai art forms. The making of these masks is rightly taken to be a very delicate and detailed form of craftsmanship commanding the heights of artistic endeavour. An artist who is able to make these masks has to combine and wield a rare array of disparate skills. The artist must commence with a base imitative of the shape of the head. On this basic structure, the artist paints lines and symbolic motifs and emblems reflective of individual characters—the *dramatis personae*—in the *Rāmākien*, the Thai epic drama which ultimately stems from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the classical epic drama of ancient Indic civilisation. At final stages, the artist refines the work by adding decorative details so as to ensure the overall beauty of the mask at a very high aesthetic level. When the mask has been painted, it is then taken to be donned by *Khōn* masked dance performers such that all observers will instantly recognise that these masks are redolent of the exquisitely wrought craftsmanship of the artists who make these masks, thereby perfectly complementing the very high cultural level exemplified in these performances.

Without the assistance rendered by Mr. Kittu Yupo, who was the former Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, the compilation of this book would not have been possible. His father, Mr. Tanit Yupo, was the former Director General of the Department of Fine Arts. He wrote a book entitled *The Colour and Form of Khōn Masks*. I am very fond of this book. Mr. Kittu Yupo granted me permission to take some paragraphs from it to use in this book. I also wish to thank the Phra Nakhorn National Museum; The Institute of Traditional Thai Performing Arts; The Public Relations Department of the Department of Fine Arts, Mōmchaoying Kōnnikā Chitrabongs (The President of the Committee of Narisaranuvadtivongs Foundation), M.R. Chakrarot Chitrabongs and M.L. Rongrit Pramoj who generously donated photographs of *Khōn* masks made by the master craftsmen from their personal collections.

I was strongly committed to printing and publishing this book in view of my deep respect for Thailand and to express gratitude for what I have been given by our nation. I also wish to thank our ancestors who created this beautiful and priceless form of art. Through this unique form of art, the peoples of the world can come to know something of the refined nature of Thai culture.

Boonchai Bencharongkul

APPRECIATION

By lineage I am a “Chitrabongs”, a member of a branch of the Royal Family of the Kingdom of Thailand. As such, I have been the recipient of a bountiful artistic inheritance passed on by a great Siamese artist. It is with heartfelt pride and in a spirit of reverence that I call attention to the vast knowledge and unique capability in a wide array of fields displayed by my grandfather, His Royal Highness Prince Chitcharoen, Prince Narisara Nuvattiwongse (Prince Naris). On the basis of historical records we know that he was never trained in any craft, nor was he ever instructed by practitioners in any artistic field. It is accordingly astounding that he was entirely self-taught and yet was able to become a virtuoso in a remarkable number of arts and crafts.

Born on 28 April 1863 as the son of King Rama IV and Princess Consort Pannarai, Prince Narisara Nuvattiwongse or Prince Naris was given the title of H. R. H. Prince Chitcharoen. Greatly talented and profoundly devoted to the arts from an early age, he learned and practiced a variety of crafts on his own without instruction. In Thai, this kind of self-teaching is known as “learning by stealth” (Krū phak lak cham). In this vein, he once remarked that:

“Even as a very young child I was responsible for the daily prayers and chanting rituals at the Royal Palace. Having completed this task and with a bit of free time, I would visit the Temple of the Emerald Buddha where I would observe the artists painting murals. I committed to memory the images of the pictures they painted and how they mixed paints of different colours. I could only stand and watch without participating in the work of the artists. However, upon returning to the Royal Palace, I would at once take up pencil and paper and reproduce the pictures I had seen.”

With great diligence and constant practice, his artistic skills were honed step by step as he became more and more proficient. During the reign of King Rama V at a site in front of the Royal Palace known as Thung Phra Meru where royal cremation ceremonies had been held, it sometimes pleased the King to hold artistic competitions. Our grandfather submitted the painting “Elephant Round-up” (pāap pohn cháang) and received the first prize while only thirteen years of age. I have always been very fond of this youthful painting with its subtle impressionistic style in which sylvan shadows and sunlit colours are contrasted and juxtaposed in a style reminiscent of the chiaroscuro technique and so very unlike conventional Siamese art.

Becoming an adult, Prince Naris was afforded opportunities to serve King Rama V in a number of important positions. He became the first director of Public Works and Town and Country Planning for the Ministry of Interior. He later served in the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Defense after which he was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Navy.

In spite of holding such demanding official positions, he continued applying his incomparable talents to furthering the arts and sciences for the benefit and edification of the nation.

At the time, however, strong occidental influences were deeply affecting the Kingdom of Siam. Traditional Siamese art was notably inflexible stylised, rule-bound, and yet distinctive after its own fashion in techniques. It was thus inevitable that the striking differences with Western art would become a matter of pressing concern for all Siamese concerned with the arts and crafts. Recognising that a major pillar of the Siamese identity was its long history of intense cultivation of the arts and crafts, Prince Naris took it upon himself to study the history of Siamese art in depth and then to integrate it with Western approaches to the arts. In personally exemplifying this blending of East and West through his own creative work in the arts, he made contributions to architecture, painting and literature with his architectural work in particular reaching fruition both in the capital and in provincial areas.

He drew up the architectural plans for the *ubosot* or ordination hall for both Wat Benchamabophit (the Marble Temple) and Wat Rachathiwat (the Temple of the Royal Domicile). In order to illustrate events recounted in royal chronicles, he executed thematic oil paintings depicting events mentioned in royal chronicles and had them placed in Phra Thi Nang Borom Phiman (Borom Phiman Mansion). In the field of literature, he composed the lyrics for “Sanrasoen Phra Barami” (“Laud His August Grandeur”), the Thai Royal Anthem. In addition to writing several plays he composed lyrics to accompany music, especially the famous traditional melody, “Khmer Sai Yok”.¹ Furthermore, he and his close friend, Chao Phraya Dheves Wongwiwat, staged a radically modernised version of the classical dance known as “Lakhon Duek Dam Ban” involving an ensemble of female dancers and designed for theatrical performance. In this type of performing art, usually female performers danced, acted and sang in an adaptation of European opera. This art form was originally designed to entertain the guests of King Rama V, especially the European guests, as a part of elaborate welcoming ceremonies.

¹ The extremely popular song “Khmer Sai Yok” is usually referred to in Thai as “pleang kà-māyn sai-yōhk” (เพลง เขมร ไทรโยค with /ทร/ being pronounced as /s/ instead of the normally expected /tr/). This standard part of the Thai musical repertoire was composed by Prince Naris in 1888 when he and King Rama V made a trip to the famed Sai Yok Yai waterfall (น้ำตก ไทรโยคใหญ่ or nám dtòk sai-yōhk yài) on the Kwai Noi River (แควน้อย) in Kanchanaburi province near the Burmese border. Inspired by the natural beauty and tranquility of the scene, it is said that the King composed a poem which Prince Naris set to music with a melody based on a “Khmer lullaby” (เพลง กล่อม เด็ก เขมร or pleang glòem dèk kà-māyn) and so-called “Khmer boatmen songs” (เพลง เขมร พาย เรือ or pleang kà-māyn paai reua). The terms “Khmer” (เขมร or kà-māyn) and “Laotian” (ลาว or laao) are used to refer to music based on songs and melodies originating in northeastern Thailand (อีสาน or Isaan) in view of the ethnic origins of the original population. However, using the word “Khmer” in “Khmer Sai Yok” as the name of the song is also appropriate in view of the fact that an important set of Khmer ruins are found in the vicinity of the Sai Yok Yai waterfall at what is now the Prasat Mueang Sing Historical Park. Here are located the Prasat Muang Sing (ปราสาท เมือง สิงห์ or “City of Lions Citadel”) ruins of a temple and military post complex dating from the Lopburi Period (1157-1207). These ruins mark what is believed to be the westernmost extension of the Khmer Empire.



Thus, as a learned and skilled man of broad interests and abilities, he was appropriately called “The Great Artist of Siam” by King Rama V, his elder half-brother. It is also well to observe that on the centenary of his birth in 1963, UNESCO named him a World Personage.

Throughout his life, he devoted attention to a wide range of the arts and crafts. The results of his creative endeavours have become archetypal and have inspired subsequent generations of young artists. While modernising the rich Siamese artistic legacy by selectively adapting Western elements, he concomitantly ensured that this invaluable artistic heritage would be extended by the constant invigoration and renewal brought by new talent. He expended great amounts of energy in conserving the Siamese artistic legacy while at the same time lending support to new talent to the end that later generations of young artists and craftsmen would carry on the national tradition of assiduously pursuing the arts and crafts.

Of particular concern to him was “*Khōn* mask making”, an expression of Thai high culture with which he and his friend, Chao Phraya Dheves Wongwiwat, were passionately engaged. In his view:

“The *Khōn* mask is an artwork that integrates the contributions of many master craftsmen—the modeler, sculptor, lacquer artisan, goldsmith and painter. This art form is a fully fledged and uniquely Siamese creation.”

With painstaking care, he continuously collected *Khōn* masks. From time to time he would exchange masks from his collection with those in the collection of his friend, Chao Phraya Dheves Wongwiwat, as if they were avid stamp collectors. His mask collection is nowadays preserved at the Plai Nern Royal Residence Museum (also known as Wang Plai Nern or Wang Klong Toey) in Bangkok’s Klong Toey District. The Wang Plai Nern is opened annually to invited guests on April 28 (Naris Day) and to interested members of the public on April 29. This collection is unique, since its masks are antiques with some of them made as early as the reigns of King Rama I (r. 1782-1809) and King Rama II (r. 1809-1824).

One of the most significant masks in the collection is the mask known as “Hua Krū Dam”¹ (“Master Black’s Head”). Without exception all classical *Khōn* performances in which scenes from that immortal work of literature, the *Rāmakien*, are presented, Thotsakan with his black visage is a dominating presence. With this in mind, consider that this mask representing Thotsakan is a unique specimen of fine craftsmanship with the jet black of the face brought out by skilled lacquer artisanship exemplifying the deeply forbidding, fearfully puissant character of the arch demon. An unusual type of mask is known as the “Hua Marān” (“Marān Head”) mask. In this unique type of mask, master mask makers exhibited their proficiency in an unconventional fashion. According to *Khōn* Master Chid Kaewduangyai, some master mask makers deliberately distorted their masks by making them too small for performance in order to show their technical expertise. In some cases,

Virtuoso mask makers did not complete their work by virtue of leaving the masks smaller than what would be required for use in performance. This is because they were cognisant that the mask at its current stage was at its most perfect state and that full development would derogate from its beauty and value as a work of art. In this light, then, it is assumed that the master mask maker who crafted the Hua Krū Dam mask deliberately refrained from completing the mask as a statement of the value of pure art without concern for actual use in performance.

In his autonomy in pursuing the arts, crafts and sciences, my grandfather was often viewed as a rebel against convention. Although self-taught, he yet viewed each work of art he created or each work of art he preserved as in themselves worthy “masters” that endlessly gave him lessons and inspired him to create more works of high aesthetic value.

With this in mind, on Naris Day, his descendants belonging to the Chitrabongs lineage stage a “Wai Krū Ceremony” (a Thai ceremony in which honour, gratitude and respect are shown to teachers).

In this vein, the descendants recall a story passed down in the family through the years. Once while he was deeply engrossed in his work, our grandfather heard the reverberating sound of clanging metal. Asking the maid to investigate, she reported that she saw nothing except the masks of celestial beings with metallic diadems. Recalling that these masks dated from the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767), he observed that perhaps the masters who had made these masks expected a Wai Krū ceremony to be held. Thus, it is that we execute this ceremony to pay respect to the *Khōn* mask masters and the artists of the past whose work has been reverently collected at Wang Plai Nern.

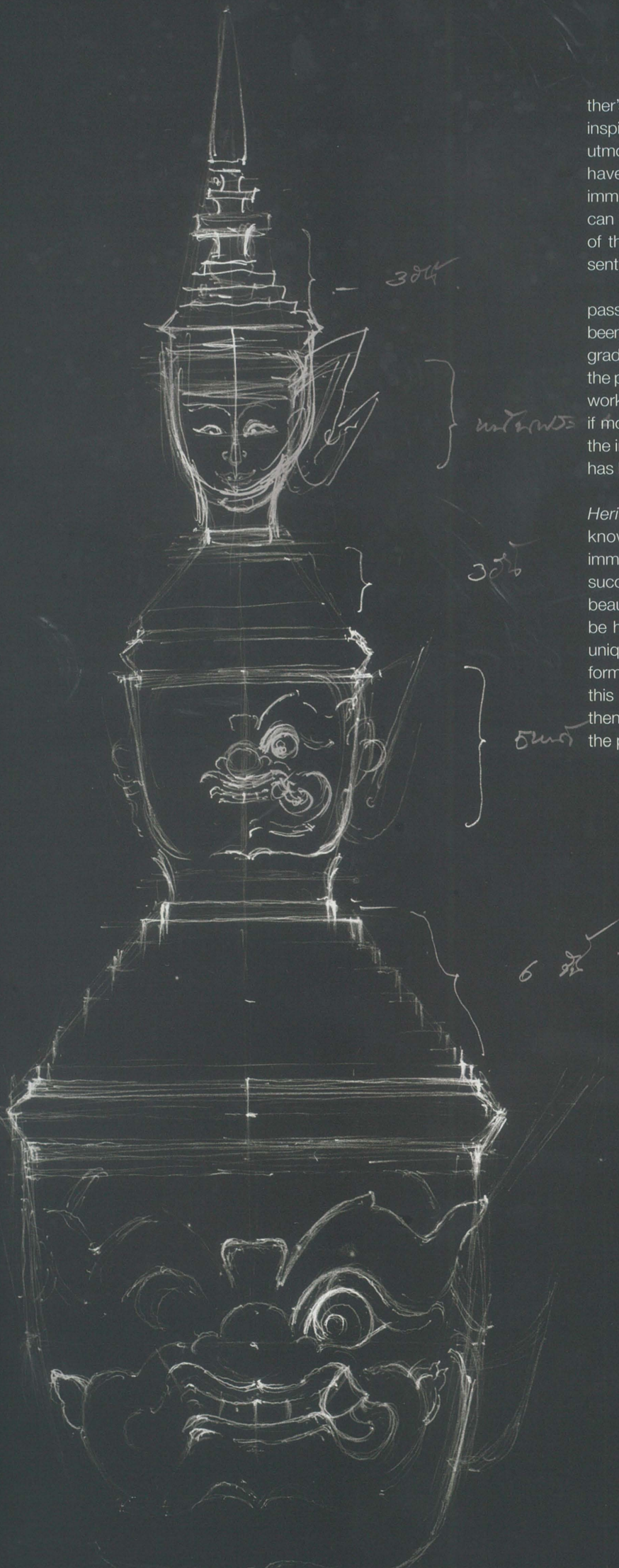
¹ The Thai term or title คุรุ carries the meaning “master” or “teacher” with overtones of respectful indebtedness redolent of religious significance. In Western languages, the closest analogues would be the German “Meister” or the Spanish “maestro” as honorific titles. The Thai term or title is ultimately derived from the Sanskrit गुरु or guru (Pāli: guru), which as romanised is now part of the English lexis as well, though sometimes used ironically. The reader will usually see romanised variants of Krū in line with officially sanctioned romanization. However, the reader should be aware that the Thai pronunciation is very close to Grū with a long vowel and the initial consonant having a phonetic value falling between the English /k/ and /g/.

For we believe that we are following in our grandfather's path by honouring the masters of the past and being inspired by their example to pursue the arts and crafts with utmost dedication. Any success we have we owe to what we have learned from those who have gone before us and left immortal works of art while leaving us with the hope that we can at least partially emulate what they achieved in our pursuit of the arts and crafts. In our grandfather's own words these sentiments are very aptly put:

"If we are satisfied with merely duplicating the lessons passed on to us by our teachers without improving on what has been passed down to us, then our field of endeavour will become gradually atrophied. However, if we take to heart the lessons of the past and modify them in a well-considered manner, then our work will be enhanced and ultimately flourish. On the other hand, if modifications in received methods are done at the hands of the incompetent and untalented, then even the knowledge that has been passed down to us will be lost to future generations."

The publication of the book *Khōn Masks: Thailand's Heritage* can be compared in significance to "Taxila", the knowledge centre for both *Khōn* mask production and the immortal literary classic, the *Rāmakién*. With this book in hand, succeeding generations will be able to learn to appreciate the beauty and great aesthetic value of the Thai *Khōn* mask. It is to be hoped that improvements will continue to be made in this unique art form. As an expression of Thai high culture, this art form powerfully contributes to Thai identity. If through this book this expression of the Thai spirit becomes world renowned, then this would constitute a most impressive achievement on the part of the production team.

M.R. Chakrarot Chitrabongs
April 2014





EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In the long Siamese cultural heritage of more than a thousand years, the *Khōn* masked drama and the *Rāmakién* epic have proven to be of paramount importance and even of significance nonpareil in the evolution of Siamese high culture. Moreover, if these cultural exemplars are properly understood, it will be seen at once that they are concomitantly vital components of humankind's world heritage.

A major goal of this, fully-illustrated and comprehensively documented book is to provide a complete guide to the making and use of the *Khōn* masks worn by performers in presentations of the *Khōn* masked drama. However, the masks themselves cannot be properly appreciated unless one puts them into the context of performance and so becomes aware of just who are the characters represented by actors and actresses in full-scale performances of the *Khōn* masked drama and this in turn involves an understanding of the *Rāmakién* treatment of these characters.

As for the *Khōn* masked drama itself, it is well to recognise that it is very much on the order of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total work of art" in which there is an "all-embracing synthesis of art forms." In the words of the nineteenth century German romantic composer and art critic Carl Maria von Weber in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* what we have as manifested in the German opera (*die deutsche Oper*) is "An art work complete in itself, in which partial contributions of the related and collaborating arts blend together, disappear, and, in disappearing, somehow form a new world" ("...[E]in in sich abgeschlossenes Kunstwerk, wo alle Teile und Beiträge der verwandten und benutzten Künste ineinanderschmelzend verschwinden und auf gewisse Weise untergehend — eine neue Welt bilden").

In reaching for Asian analogues of the European *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the Thai *Khōn* masked drama, the Japanese *kabuki* (歌舞伎, かぶき) immediately comes to mind. The staging of *kabuki* originated in the early seventeenth century with *kabuki*'s golden age occurring in the period between the late seventeenth to nearly the midpoint of the nineteenth century. *Kabuki* approaches the *Gesamtkunstwerk* criterion by virtue of combining dancing with singing, chanting, declamations (soliloquies) and narrations by the actors in the context of traditional music, elaborate costumes and makeup, as well as highly stylised scenic backdrops. Three different types of Japanese traditional music are used in the course of *kabuki* performances with the musicians being located at different areas. Moreover, the actors—often males performing female roles known as *onnagata* (女形, おんながた) as was also formerly the case in *Khōn* masked drama—are elaborately made up and wear highly stylised and ornately detailed costumes. There are also artistically designed scenic backdrops that are shifted at appropriate times by stagehands. A very fundamental difference between *kabuki* and the *Khōn* masked drama, however, is that individual playwrights have written all the lyrics or other spoken lines. For the most part, the *kabuki* plays were written by certain hugely popular authors of some centuries ago—especially the redoubtable Chikamatsu Monzaemon (近松門左衛門, ちかまつ もんざえもん)—in contrast to the *Khōn* masked drama which normally uses verses from the *Rāmakién* (with some exceptions in less formal performances, say, in provincial areas).



In the twentieth century, perhaps the best Western analogue to the *Khōn* masked drama is the *Ballets Russes*, which as such is no longer extant as performing art in spite of being of incomparable significance in the history of the arts in the twentieth century. Initiated by Russian impresario Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev in Paris, the *Ballets Russes* was performed between 1909 and 1929. Although its focus was on exquisite ballet dancing, the *Ballets Russes* yet became an exemplar of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* by virtue of combining the work of often world-class artists ranging from dance and choreography to music in addition to scene and custom design. Diaghilev was able to command the services and use the talents of artists ranging from the choreographers Léonide Massine and Georges Ballantine to the composers Eric Satie, Igor Stravinsky and Claude Debussy and the painters Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse with the famous designer Coco Chanel being involved in the designing of costumes. Perhaps the most famous (and controversial) performances were “The Firebird” (*L’Oiseau de Feu*, 1907) with music composed by Stravinsky and *a fortiori* “The Rite of Spring” (*Le Sacre du printemps*, 1913), also with music composed by Stravinsky, choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky and stage designs and costumes by Nicholas Roerich.

Of direct interest is it that the *Ballets Russes* made heavy use of traditional Russian folk music, folk tales and narratives, most of which were entirely unfamiliar to Western European audiences. However, the *Ballets Russes* still radically differs from the *Khōn* masked drama by virtue of the fact that the latter almost exclusively draws on the Thai epic drama, the *Rāmakiēn*, of which there was no formal counterpart in the performances put on by the *Ballets Russes*.

Having given some context to the *Khōn* masked drama vis-à-vis analogous European and Asian multifaceted drama, it is now well to discuss the salient features of the work at hand and the approach taken by those of us who devoted many hours to developing this book such that it would become a veritable handbook for those striving to develop a well-rounded understanding of *Khōn* mask making.

The *Rāmakiēn* is a long Siamese epic poem comparable to the ancient Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and the Latin *Aeneid*, among others. Moreover, just as Virgil in writing the *Aeneid*, used his Greek predecessors as models even to the point of directly adapting characters and events, so does the Thai epic, the *Rāmakiēn*, follow its Indic predecessors with the ultimate source being the great Indian epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, though more immediate models were probably provided by Khmer, Tamil, Sinhala and Bengali versions of the great work traditionally credited to Vālmīki. As such, the Thai epic belongs to the tradition of Indic high culture and should be treated as such even though it still remains primordially and prototypically Siamese and contains characters, actions and episodes that are not found as such in other versions of the great Indian epic poem.

In our work, what has accordingly been done is to present the verses quoted from the *Rāmakien* in literary English emulating the poetic diction suitable to an epic. What this means is that for the first time there has been an attempt to present verses from the *Rāmakien* as poetry, whether or not we have been entirely successful in this endeavour. The diction used was modelled on sixteenth to early nineteenth century English poetry with the archaic character of the translated verses echoing the great poetry of these three centuries—including the poetic diction of Christopher Marlowe, Andrew Marvell, John Milton, John Dryden, Alexander Pope and Samuel Taylor Coleridge—in a conscious effort to present epic poetry as it should be presented in our view.

Epic poetry deals with the origin and foundation of whole civilisations, as we know from epic works, generally in poetic form, ranging from the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, the Welsh *Mabinogion*, the Icelandic *Sagas* (*Íslendingasögur*), the Germanic *Nibelungenlied*, the Russian *Bylyna* (былина) and the Hispanic *El Cid* to the Lusitanic *Os Lusíadas*, the French *La Chanson de Roland*, the Dutch *Joannes de Boetgezant* and even the Japanese mythological chronicle in epic form, the *Kojiki* (古事記, こじき), among others. Therefore, to reflect the primordial and august foundation of the epic, it is important for both historical and literary ends to use an earlier form of poetic language in conveying the proper associations with the great founding deeds of the past, the Roman *res gestae*, as it were. In addition, one must avoid platitudes and hackneyed or trite phrases, not to speak of the need to sound the changes in lexis as is appropriate in such endeavours. Upon occasion called upon has been unusual vocabulary taken from the sciences and European treatments of mythology or comparative religion and accordingly incorporated into the verses, though of course without—at least in our view—radically distorting the meaning of what is being translated or even less obliterating nuances.

It is indeed shocking that a major product of world civilisation, the *Rāmakien*, has only been translated as a whole into a single language, viz., Sanskrit by the incomparable Indian scholar and poet, Satya Vrat Shastri. There has been a partial German translation, which in turn has been rendered into English by a person who is not a scholar. It is a dreadful travesty to translate a work which itself is a translation and then to present this to the discerning public. What purports to be selections from the *Rāmakien* are presented in an English that is mediocre and completely unliterary. More important, comparisons with the Thai text show that the rendering is also inaccurate in any number of respects.

What is urgently required is a variorum edition of the *Rāmakien* in Thai with full textual apparatus, detailed commentary, full explanatory annotations, a complete recounting of what is known concerning the history of the extant manuscripts and especially analytic comparisons with other versions in any number of languages found in the Indic cultural sphere, especially those from Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lankā. Thai scholars are hampered by the fact that numerous valuable literary works and manuscripts were destroyed in the sack and destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767 at the end of the bloody Burmese-Siamese war of 1765-1767. Despite this highly untoward event, still available is the extremely long version produced during the reign of King Rama I (r. 1782-1809), the additions and complementary works produced during the reign of King Rama II (r. 1809-1824) and the work done during the reign of King Rama VI (r. 1910-1925).

All of these versions, along with other available manuscript versions, should be integrated into a variorum edition by a team of Thai specialists. It would be hoped that in future a comparable team of foreign Thai specialists would render this variorum Thai version into English and other European and Asian languages. However, sad as it may be, it is unlikely that any such work will be published in the foreseeable future.

Having provided some context to the *Khōn* masked drama vis-à-vis European and Asian multifaceted drama and epic analogues and briefly discussing some of the background to the work we have done on both the Thai and English texts, it is well to discuss in brief compass salient features of the work at hand. It is thus important at this point to describe the approach taken by those of us who devoted many hours to developing this book such that it would become a useful handbook for those striving to develop a well-rounded understanding of *Khōn* mask making and its inseparable connection with *Khōn* masked drama and the Thai epic, the *Rāmakien*.

First of all, attention should be called to the careful photographs and informative diagrams prepared for this text. This illustrative material, in our view, is complementary to the written text in both Thai and English with full understanding depending on combining text and illustration in the fashion best suited to each reader.

A frequently occurring difficulty in grasping the text and even the masks themselves stems from the fact that the same characters are given different names in addition to having varying epithets applied to them. Part of the problem originates in the fact that different versions of the *Rāmakien* text are used in *Khōn* productions and even the same version will use different names in different contexts in a work that is quite massive in its most complete form in Thai. As for the names themselves, even the primary language used often differs. Sometimes the name is only given in Thai Sanskrit, while at other times the name given is heavily influenced by the Theravāda Buddhist sacerdotal language, Pāli, or even by medieval Khmer, Tamil, or Bengali. Frequently vernacular Thai is used in giving names, especially for animal characters, and these names often tend to reflect dominant behavioral or anatomical features of the characters, including onomatopoeic names for animals such as crows (กา gaa) and geckos (กิ้งก่า dtūk gae). In addition, as is the case in virtually all Asian languages, there is very often heavy use of honorific prefixes and suffixes in addition to special titles for celestial beings and leaders or important figures, such as dominant religious personages, particularly the exceedingly important hermits. Even the names given to the few demons with celestial origins are given special suffixes added to their names, though all demonical characters will have features of their names specifying the category to which they belong and even their gender.

In the English text, we have dealt with this problem in a number of ways. Usually, on the first occurrence of a name, we give the variants of the name and sometimes attach appended footnotes showing in particular the meaning in Thai of the name if it is highly descriptive of dominant features of the character in question. We have also constructed detailed spread sheets containing the names of the characters arranged in accordance with the overall category to which they belong (celestial beings, rulers, hermits, monkey, demons, animals) and often some descriptive characteristics of their appearance in performances. All names are given in Thai script and in romanised form in these charts. These charts should prove to be very helpful in understanding the role of individual characters wearing their distinctive masks.

As anyone who is at all familiar with Thai culture knows, the Thai people are extraordinarily concerned with colours, colour coordination and colour symbolism. For example, in view of the Indic zodiac inherited by the Thais, each day of the week is associated with a particular god after whom the day is named with the god corresponding to a particular planet, other celestial bodies or astronomical phenomenon of astrological significance. Moreover, particular colours are associated with these celestial beings and Thais consider it auspicious to wear apparel, such as coloured shirts, reflecting these associations (e.g. green on Wednesdays during the day). The Thai sense of order (best expressed in one fundamental sense of the term by the German *Ordnung* or the Dutch *Orde*) is also reflected in coordinating colours and shapes, as even seen in the laborious practice of street fruit vendors in the meticulous fashion in which they display their wares. As such, colours have taken on vast significance in the making of *Khōn* masks and devotees of the *Khōn* masked drama learn to associate the colours, especially the colours of the face, of the different characters with expected behaviours. Not only this, but the shape of the eyes and the mouth are carefully coordinated with the colours used in painting the masks, just as are the crowns, headdresses, or even the bald heads of different characters, not to speak of ornaments. The upshot is that master *Khōn* mask makers are extraordinarily exact and take great care in mixing the dyes and preparing other materials used in making and painting the *Khōn* masks.

Thus, a special feature of this work is that it contains an elaborate account and charts of the colours of dyes and pigments, including materials such as shellac, used by master *Khōn* mask makers. Of great interest is the fact that often the Thai terms used for shades of colour are very descriptive in view of calling attention to natural phenomena such as the colours of clouds under different meteorological conditions, or in, say, developing terms for the different shades of red by reference to the exact shades, hues and tints of the colours of the blood of various animals and different kinds of soil by taking account of ferrous content and oxidation processes, not to speak of varying shades of blue or green sea water under differing conditions and at varying locations. In general, we have given romanised versions of these colour terms in the text proper, whereas in the section on mask making the colours are categorised and labelled in romanised Thai (with some attention paid to Thai Sanskrit), English translation and sometimes with parallel Malay, Chinese and Japanese terms (with the Chinese and Japanese given in Chinese or Sino-Japanese characters and romanised) as well whenever pertinent.

In these sections, it is important to note that scientific information is also given concerning the products used in making the masks, such as providing the scientific names for certain plant and insect products, just as in the text proper scientific names and apposite explanations—involving geographical, geological, meteorological, ethological, zoological and botanical considerations—are often given in notes appended to the discussion of animals characters and even flowers and trees, as well as occasionally elsewhere. It will be found, finally, that the *Rāmakiēn* text is often wonderfully accurate concerning the natural history of certain creatures even when mythologised, thereby showing the keen observational talents of not only the Thais but also others in the Indic cultural sphere.

Very important to grasping the overall context for the making of *Khōn* masks vis-à-vis *Khōn* masked drama and the *Rāmakiēn* epic is the extensive materials found in the Introduction and the first chapter. What is said there should go some distance in putting the phenomenon of *Khōn* in its historical and cultural context as it has developed over the centuries. Considerable comparative work is done in carrying out this task. In order to be of use to scholars and to satisfy the curiosity of readers, terms and titles are often given not only in Thai script, but also often in other Asian languages, especially those of Indic or Southeast Asian provenience. However, without exception, romanised forms are always given in parallel.

We would also like to point to the List of Selected References given at the end of this work. By no means inclusive, we are yet morally certain that the works listed and used by us in our endeavours to develop the best possible text for foreign readers will constitute a guide to further reading and investigation and will inevitably lead the assiduous reader to many other sources.

In conclusion, we are confident that this work will prove valuable, instructive and interesting to both Thai and foreign readers who are eager to understand at a deeper level three of the heavily interwoven and highly intercalated manifestations of Thai high culture—*Khōn* mask making, the *Khōn* masked drama itself and the *Rāmakiēn*. These three manifestations of the Siamese spirit are worthy of fully becoming an integral part of world culture at its highest level, as we trust our readers will fully realise in the course of using this book.

Jack M. Clontz, editor

THAI NAMES AND ROMANISATION

The italics for Thai terms in Thai script and in romanised form are omitted in this work for the sake of facilitating reading, in as much as italicising distorts Thai characters bearing diacriticals or tone markings. The exception is in the quoted verses in view of the fact that all wording in the verses is italicised. The common practice in such cases is not to italicise words in verses which would ordinarily be italicised in the body of a text in prose. However, observing this common practice would strongly detract from the aesthetic appeal of the verses on the page and so was discarded in this work. Words or terms from other Asian languages are in italics when romanised unless they are very commonly used in Western languages. However, words or terms in Asian scripts, including of course Sino-Japanese characters, are not italicised. Proper names taken from Asian languages are normally not italicised when romanised with the exception of when there is a need to call attention to certain features of the name itself. Normal conventions for italicising words, terms, or names in European languages, including classical Greek, are honoured. However, minor exceptions to these rules will sometimes be found in the text of this work, but the context should always indicate why this is the case in specific instances.

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KHON MASK

THAILAND'S HERITAGE

INTRODUCTION

THE *KHON* DRAMA AND
KHON MASK IN THAI LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

THE *KHŌN* DRAMA AND THE *KHŌN* MASK IN THAI LITERATURE

In a paper presented at a seminar at Thammasat University, M.R. Kukrit Pramote, former prime minister and master of the *Khŏn* dance drama, claimed that:

Since ancient times, the Siamese way of life has involved music and drama. This is because the Thai people believe that making merry or having fun (ความสนุก kwaam sà-nùk) is an important part of life. A good wholesome life was one that was filled with sà-nùk and that is why music and drama is an important part of Thai life.

Long before the Thai people made extensive contact with the West social life was centred on entertainment. The saying, “Sing, dance and play music” (ร้องรำทำเพลง rŏng ram tam playng) was a common utterance. As Sujit Wongthet, an art historian and critic, has pointed out:

In those days, when the saying, “Sing, dance and play music” was used, it was not used in the context of the performing arts as it is today. In the early phases, entertainment and relief from tension were not the only reasons for engaging in these activities. These fun-filled activities were conducive to the maintenance of stability for both the individual and society. The entertainment was mostly intertwined with rituals and ceremonial rites, which had to do with the work and wellbeing of the community.

Archaeological evidence for this type of merry-making can be seen in many cave paintings in Thailand. In these paintings, we can view not only the performances of musicians and dancers, but also the daily activities of the people such as farming and hunting. These cave paintings gradually changed in tandem with changes in society, climate and the overall physical environment.



Many scholars believe that the martial art of *Sapayuth* involving the throwing of knives evolved into a more complex martial art in which combatants used a single-edge sword and a staff as weapons. This martial art became known as *Krabee-Krabong* (กระบี่กระบอง *grà-bèe grà-bong*, literally "Sword and Staff"). In addition, *Silat Pattani*, a Malay martial art in which an array of weapons was used, especially the use of bamboo staffs, originated with the Tamil *Silambam* (Tamil: சிலம்பம்) in which the weapon of choice was a long bamboo staff. It is believed that this Tamil martial art became closely connected with the Siamese martial art known as the *Sapakila*. Accordingly, it is supposed that these two martial arts were predecessors of the *Khôn*. Both used performers and dueling combatants who fought or executed dance steps or combined dancing and fighting.

In his book earlier quoted, Sujit Wongthet observes that in all world cultures, the war dance is a ritualistic entertainment which differs in accordance with climate and other environmental conditions. The Thai war dance is known as *Ram Aawuth* (รำอาวุธ; "Weapon Dance"). As the Weapon Dance evolved, it became known as *Krabee-Krabong* ("Single-Edge Sword and Staff") and incorporated elements from both the *Sapayuth* and the *Sapakila*.

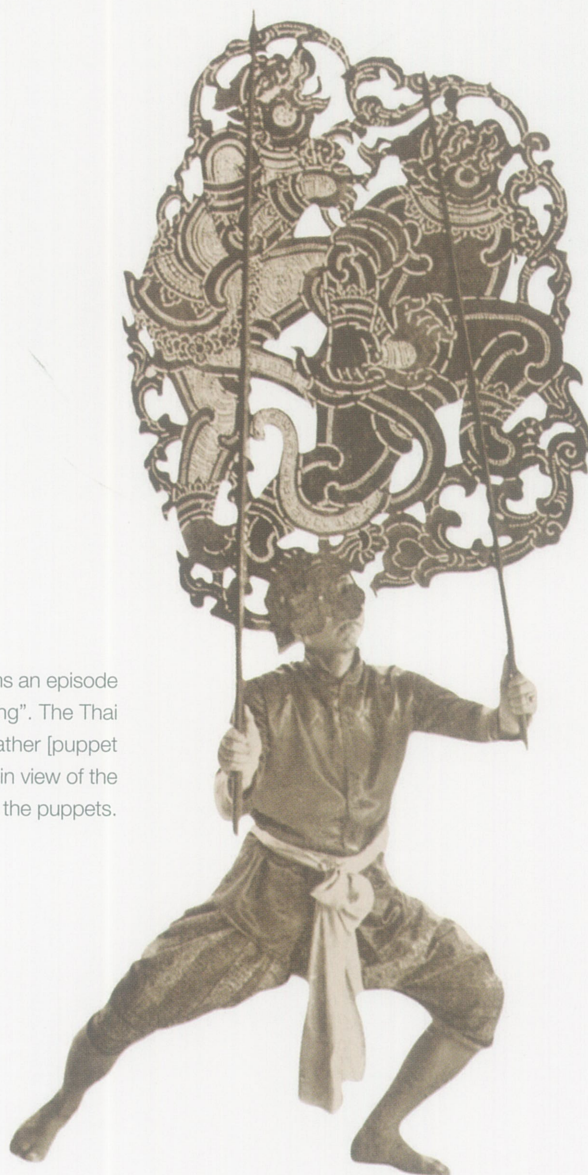
On the basis of records found in royal annals we know that three types of war dances evolved: *Mong Kroom*, *Gula Tee Mai* and *Rabeng*. These were probably performed at the festival called *Chak Nāga Deuk Dumban* ("Pulling the Giant Serpent") before both the Siamese and Khmer courts. In this rite, monks make sacred water (Sanskrit: अमृत; *amrit*) and dancers stand in a long row to perform the dance of the *nāga* or giant serpent. In any event, much of the *Khôn* choreography was derived from these war dances performed in connection with the three martial arts just mentioned. This explains why the Thai vocabulary used to describe *Khôn* dance movements and steps is extremely different from that used to describe the corresponding movements in the Indian *Rāmāyaṇa*.

However, more directly, in the view of Dhani Yupho, former director of the Fine Arts Department, as stated in his book entitled *Khôn*:

The choreographers of the *Khôn* dances must have developed their techniques of choreography and dance steps on the basis of the *Nāng* shadow play. In the *Nāng*, dancers used enormous pieces of flat leather crafted in the form of characters to perform the *Rāmākien*. The *Nāng* can be traced back to the Ayudhyā period between the fourteenth and eighteenth century. The dance steps of the *Khôn* derived from the dance steps executed by the *Nāng* puppeteers who held the enormous puppets with both hands while dancing to the tunes of the oboe (the Thai: ปี่ pèe, a type of fife or flute) while miming the narrative line. The leather *Nāng* puppetry is said to have originated in Java or Malaya.

The difference between the Thai and Javanese *Nāng* performances is that the steps of the Thai puppeteers are similar to the steps of the Thai *Krabee-Krabong* dances. In fact, many of the musical numbers in the *Khôn* have names that are similar to the musical numbers in the *Krabee-Krabong* dances. In turn, the *Krabee-Krabong* dances adopted dance steps from previous war dances. Thus, we can assume that the origin of the *Khôn* performances stems from multifarious and dispersed sources.

A *Nāng Yai* (Thai shadow play) puppeteer performs an episode known as "Catching the Monkey in the Early Evening". The Thai term *nāng yai* (หนังใหญ่) literally means "grand leather [puppet shadow play]" with the term *nāng* meaning "leather" in view of the water buffalo hide used to make the puppets.





MOCA BANGKOK

499 Kamphaengphet 6 Rd.,
Ladyao, Chatuchak, Bangkok 10900 Thailand
Tel (+66) 2 953 1005-7 | Fax (+66) 2 953 1008
E-Mail : publishing@mocabangkok.com
www.mocabangkok.com | facebook : MOCA.BKK

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