

# INVOCATIONS TO NAṬARĀJA IN THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN SHADOW-PLAYS

With Special Reference to the Kelantan

Shadow-play

by

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Invocations to some of the foremost deities of the Hindu pantheon, to the Buddha, to Nur Nabi, are an important and indeed an indispensable part of the shadow-play performances in Southeast Asia (Rentse 1936 : 285; Nicolas 1927 : 46-48; Dhani Nivat 1962 : 10; Simmonds 1961 : 544; Geertz 1960 : 268). These invocations are chanted by the chief performer (who is known as To' Dalang in Malay) as part of the rituals held at the time of the commencement as well as the end of the shadow-play.

The ritual offerings and invocations are made for the purposes of honouring the higher divinities, paying respects to the powerful spirits of good and evil, pacifying them so that they will not disturb the living, and bringing good fortune and prosperity to the performers of a show and the audience.

Since the presentation of a *wayang* together with the rituals is itself in the context of a *selamatan*, or communal feast, which is believed to protect the people against the spirits, the invocations and the rituals of a *wayang* are often considered as the most important part of the performance. As in a *selamatan* (for example, in Java), anyone attending a *wayang* is safe from all harm at least as long as it is going on and probably longer. The presentation of a *wayang* and attending of a *wayang* are, in part, the same kind of a ritual defensive act as a *selamatan* (Geertz 1960 : 268-269).

The rituals and invocations are conducted inside the shadow-play stage (*panggong*) which is raised about three to four feet above the ground, ten by twelve feet in size, and about nine feet high in front from the floor to the atap-thatched roof which slopes down at the back to about three or four feet above the floor of the raised stage. The three sides of the stage are covered with bamboo or atap walls. The front is covered with a sheet of white cloth<sup>1</sup>. At the time of the opening rituals and invocations the screen of white cloth is rolled up and the stage is revealed to the audience.

The shadow-play orchestra<sup>2</sup>, which sits to the left of To' Dalang, is quiet and perfect silence prevails during the rituals and invocations.

The chief performer (To' Dalang), wearing a yellow cloth around his shoulders, sits cross-legged, with his back turned to the audience, facing the various offerings that are placed in small plates on a large tray (Rentse 1936 : 287).

The objects used in the rituals include a plaited mat (*tikar*), a cushion or pillow (*bantal*), silk cloth (*kain sutera*), salver (*cherana*) for betel leaves (*sireh*) and areca-nut (*pinang*), a goblet of holy water (*kendi ayer*), coins (*duit*), gold (*emas*), or ornaments made of gold, incense-brazier (*bekas bara*), benzoin (*kemenyan*), and candles (*lilin*).

The offerings to the deities and spirits consists of (a) rice and turmeric boiled together to produce the yellow-rice (*nasi kunyit*), (b) cakes (*dadar*), made of flour, eggs, and brown sugar, (c) parched rice (*bereteh*), (d) consecrated water (*ayer tawar*) scented with jasmine flowers, (e) consecrated rice-flour-paste (*tepong tawar*), (f) betel-vine

1) At the time of the performance, To' Dalang sits in the middle of the front-stage, and between him and the white cloth hangs a lamp lighting up the white sheet but covered at the back. To' Dalang works the shadow-play figures between the lamp and the screen so that they are seen by the audience as shadows on the white screen.

2) The orchestra consists of the three types of drums, namely, oblong *gendang*, played with hands, *geduk* standing on the floor kept sloping by two small sticks attached to the farther side of the drummer and played with two sticks, and *gedombok*, a vase-shaped drum with a hide-head at the broad end and open at the narrow end; big and small *gongs*, and a clarinet (*serunai*).

leaves (*sireh*) and areca-nut (*pinang*), (g) tobacco, or cigarettes (*rokok*), (h) unboiled rice (*beras*), (i) raw egg (*telor*), (j) raw cotton band (*benang mentah*), (k) old Kelantan coins (*pekeras-2 dua rial dan lima keneri*) (Nik Mohamed Amin 1960 : 18).

The unboiled rice is placed in a small plate on a brass tray with the raw egg erect in the middle and surrounded by the cotton band. The coins are put on the rice; this offering, known as *pengaran guru*, is intended for the divinity Dewa Batara Guru, the supreme teacher and the king of dancers and actors (Rentse 1936 : 288). The candles are placed on the other offerings.

The rituals are started by the burning of the benzoin in the brazier which stands between the offerings and To' Dalang. From the brazier incense emits its smoke which goes up in a straight line to the roof and descends on the stage to produce an atmosphere of solemnity.

To' Dalang now leans forward preparing himself for the invocations by bathing his body in the smoke of the incense. Then he lifts the large brass tray of offerings, and waving it several times through the smoke, he begins invoking the deities and spirits to partake of the feast prepared for them and praying that they keep away all evil. He begins his invocations by uttering the Hindu magic syllable of power, ŌM, and he invokes first the deities and spirits of the eastern quarter, followed by those of the western, northern, and southern quarters. The spirits of the earth are then invoked, and they are followed by the village or local spirits. Then, To' Dalang recites briefly the story of the creation of the Universe. This is followed by his prayers to the deity of Semar (in the form of Pa' Dogah), Shiva and Vishnu.

At the conclusion of the prayers, To' Dalang suddenly lifts his head and swiftly throws a handful of rice on the floor with all his force. At the same time the orchestra breaks into a thunderous rhythm. To' Dalang throws rice all over the stage, the shadow-play-figures, the orchestra, and even the audience. Then the orchestra ceases, and the rituals and invocations are finished, and the white

screen is rolled down the front of the stage; the shadow-play begins immediately afterwards.

When the last performance has been concluded, the white screen is rolled up. The drums and gongs are smeared with rice-paste (*lepong larwar*). To' Dalang now faces the audience. Incense smokes from the brazier. To' Dalang salutes the troupe of spirits, and bids them farewell in the name of the First of the Teachers and the First of the Actors, namely, *Batara Guru*.

### BATARA GURU AND HIS MANIFESTATIONS

The term, *Batara*, from Sanskrit word *bhātara* meaning 'noble lord', is a title given in Indonesia to the major Hindu divinities<sup>3</sup>, and sometimes it is also known to have been assumed as a title by certain rulers.

However, the term *Batara Guru* is associated specifically with the Hindu divinity of *Shiva* in his aspects as the King of gods, Teacher (Guru), and Ascetic (Rishi). Of the greater deities of Malay folklore, *Batara Guru* is regarded as the greatest. The Malay magician declares *To' Batara Guru* to be the "all-powerful spirit who held the place of Allah before the advent of Islam, a spirit, so powerful that he could restore the dead to life; and to him all prayers were addressed" (Skeat 1967 : 86-87).

*Batara Guru* (Shiva) is associated with numerous manifestations and titles. Some of the most significant ones are mentioned in the invocations of the Kelantan shadow-play. For example, the following are some of the expressions concerning *Batara Guru* which occur in the invocations chanted by To' Dalang : *Sang Kala, Bentara* (or *Batara*) *Kala, To' Maha Risi Kala*, and *To' Maha Risi Kala Yang Bermatakan Api*. There is also reference to a divinity known as *To, Perang Hutan* ('Lord of the Jungle War') as well as to a deity who is standing on a solitary foot (*Yang Berdiri Kaki Tunggal*) (Rentse 1936:

3) J. Crawfurd (*History of the Indian Archipelago*, Vol. 2, p. 219) believed that the term *Batara* was a corruption of *Avatara*, a term used to express the incarnation of a divinity.

291-298). In the closing invocations there is a reference to *Sang Kaki Bentara Kala* descending from his heavenly abode down to the earth to expel all evil powers (Rentse 1936: 299).

The expressions such as *Sang Kala*, *Batara Kala*, *To' Maha Risi Kala Yang Bermatakan Api* ('the great sage having fiery eye') are no doubt connected with the Hindu conception of Shiva as *TIME*, *THE ALL-DESTROYER*.

*TIME* (*Kāla*), associated with the divinity of Shiva, is understood to mean the TRANSCENDENT-TIME (*Mahā-Kala*), that is absolute, eternal, measureless, and ever present, and as such, it is distinct from the relative time that we normally perceive. The divisions of relative time as we perceive them are merely an apparent division of continuous time (Danielou 1963:200-201).

The universal power of destruction, in which all existence ends and from which it rises again, is known as Shiva. *Maha Kāla* is the power of death. First among the forms of destruction comes Fire. The frontal eye of the image of Shiva is the third eye of fire; it burns all that appears before it, and hence the Malay expression, *To' Maha Risi Kala Yang Bermatakan Api*.

From destruction, creation again rises. As the origin of all creation, Shiva is also the fount of life and regeneration. Therefore, he is represented not only as a fearful divinity who destroys, but also as one who gives birth to all the forms of life, creating new worlds and new beings (Danielou 1963:192). That is probably why the Malay magician declares *Batara Guru* (Shiva) to be the "all-powerful spirit, a spirit so powerful that he could restore the dead to life" (Skeat 1967: 86-87).

The expressions, *To' Perang Hutan, Yang Berdiri Kaki Tunggal*, and *Sang Kaki Bentara Kala*, occurring in the Kelantan shadow-play invocations, also seem to be connected with another important aspect of Shiva, namely, that of NAṬRĀJA ("King of Dancers" or "King of Actors").

Naṭarāja is one of the greatest names of Shiva as the Lord of Dancers or King of Actors, who executes the cosmic dances that

typify the ordered movement of the Universe. He is said to have performed one of his most wonderful dances, namely, the *Nādānta* dance, in the forest of Tāragam. The legend of the Nadanta dance of Naṭarāja is related in the second chapter (Patañjali-carukkam) of the Tamil puranic work, *Kōyil-Purāṇam*, by Umāpati Sivācāriyar (14th century A.D.): "In the forest of Tāragam lived multitudes of heretical sages. Shiva proceeded there to refute their heretical beliefs. The sages' anger was directed against Shiva, and they tried to destroy him by means of incantations. A fierce *tiger* was created in sacrificial fires and rushed upon him. But smiling gently, Shiva seized the tiger, and with the *nail* of his finger, stripped off its skin and wrapped it about himself like a silken cloth. Undiscouraged by failure, the sages renewed their offerings, and produced a monstrous *serpent* which however Shiva seized and wreathed about his neck like a garland. Then he began to dance; but there rushed upon him a last monster in the shape of a malignant dwarf, *Muyalaka*. Upon him Shiva pressed the tip of his foot, and broke the creature's back; and so, his last foe prostrate, Shiva resumed the dance, witnessed by gods and sages (Coomaraswamy 1948 : 85-86).

The expression, *To' Perang Hutan* ('Lord of the Jungle War'), occurring in the Kelantan shadow-play invocations, probably refers to the legend of Shiva's conquest of the forces of evil (tiger, serpent, and *Muyalaka*) that were rushed upon him by the heretical sages of the forest of Tāragam. In this connexion, mention may also be made of another deity of the Malay folklore, namely, *To' Panjang Kuku* ("Grandsire Long-Claws"), who, according to Skeat (1967 : 90-91), signifies a special manifestation of Shiva. The name, *To' Panjang Kuku* is probably connected with the legend of Shiva stripping off the tiger's skin with his own nail in the forest of Tāragam.

The *Nādānta* dance of Shiva provided the motif for the South Indian bronze images of Shiva as Naṭarāja. The image represents Shiva with his upper right hand holding the hour-glass-shaped drum which signifies creation, and his upper left hand bearing a tongue of flame signifying destruction. His lower left hand points to his raised left foot signifying release or salvation, and his lower right hand

signifies protection for the conscious and unconscious order of his creation. While his left foot is raised, his right foot is firmly planted on the back of *Muyalaka* (signifying 'arrogant ignorance') whom Shiva conquered. The Malay expression, *Yang Berdiri Kaki Tunggal* (One who is standing on a solitary foot), which occurs in the invocations of the Kelantan shadow-play, probably refers to the *Nādānta* dancing form of Shiva as Naṭarāja.

The Tamil puranic work, *Kōyil Purāṇam*, in its third chapter, has an account of also the legend concerning the repeat-performance of the *Nādānta* dance by Shiva in the golden hall at the temple of Naṭarāja in the famous Shaivite centre of pilgrimage, namely, *Citambaram*,<sup>4</sup> which has been regarded as the centre of the Universe. Shiva is said to have performed his *Nādānta* dance for the second time at the request of two of his sage-devotees, *Patañjali* (who was in fact *Ādi-Sesha*, the primeval serpent who had taken the form of the sage) and *Vyaghrapāda* ('tiger-footed sage').

The sacred dance-halls (*sabhā*) that are associated with the performance of the *Nādānta* dance by Shiva at the temple of Naṭarāja in Citambaram are known as *Cit Sabhā* and *Kanaka Sabhā*. The *Cit Sabhā* and *Kanaka Sabhā*, where Shiva in the form of the invisible *Ākāśa* ("ether") *liṅga* and Naṭarāja are enshrined, are the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple. It is from the *Ākāśa liṅga* that Shiva is said to have appeared to perform the *Nādānta* dance for the sages. There is a screen of cloth hanging between the invisible *Ākāśa liṅga* in the *Cit Sabhā* facing south and the image of Naṭarāja. This screen is said to be pushed aside (or rolled up) only on very special occasions of religious significance. The interiors of the *Cit Sabhā* are of such sanctity that only the officiating priestly *Dikshitar*s have access to them. The *Dikshitar*s perform their rituals according to the canons of the Shaivite Āgamic Sāstras.

4) Citambaram (or Chidambaram) is situated about 150 miles south-west of Madras in South India. The name, *Cit-ambaram*, 'clothed in *cit* (consciousness), is said to be a Sanskritized derivation from Tamil *cirrambalam* 'little hall or temple'. The holy place of Citambaram is also known as *Tillai*, named after a tree (*Excoecaria agallocha*), and *Puliyūr* (Tiger's town or settlement).

Architecturally too, the Cit Sabhā and the Kanaka Sabhā are of considerable interest to us. The Cit Sabhā is a rectangular building, its longer sides running east and west, and opening on the south into the Kanaka Sabhā, which is a kind of *mandapa* of almost identical dimensions and plan. The roofs of the buildings are modelled upon the style of a thatched-roof. The Cit Sabhā has wooden walls on three sides, while on the south are wooden doors, windows, and pillars (Harle 1963 : 37).

The above features of the Cit Sabhā, its architectural style, the screen, and the rituals conducted by the officiating priests according to Agamic canons, and some of the corresponding features of the shadow-play stage (*panggung*) would seem to suggest the possibility that they both were related in some way, which could have provided a reason for the importance of the invocations to Natarāja in the shadow-play performances.

Finally, mention may also be made of another striking feature of the invocations of the Kelantan shadow-play, namely, the lively syncretism that has been achieved between the higher divinities and various other spirits. This syncretism has been possible probably because Shiva himself has been regarded as the Lord of the Elements, or the Lord of the Ghosts (*Bhūtesvara*). The spirits of darkness, the antigods, the demons, the genii, evil spirits, ghosts, evil elves, magicians, serpents, tigers etc., are said to be serving him. Thus Shiva rules over both the spirits of light and darkness (Danielou 1964 : 196, 213), and this made the divinity of Shiva the deity par excellence for To' Dalang of the shadow-play to make his offerings for the protection he sought.

The religious and artistic motif of Shiva as Natarāja is believed to be of very ancient Indian (probably Dravidian) and pre-Aryan origin. The religion and philosophy of Shaivism belonged to another and earlier stratum of Indian civilization than the Vedism of the Aryans. Shaivism has also been the religion of the common people for whom there was little place in the aristocratic Aryan fold. Though the symbol and significance of Shiva as Natarāja has been of an ancient and humble origin, it has proved to be a great motif in religion and art, and a great symbol which becomes all things to all men; age after age it yields to men such treasure and value as they find in their own hearts and minds.

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