

NANG TALUNG : THE SHADOW THEATRE OF SOUTHERN THAILAND¹

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The origins of the shadow play, in which flat two dimensional puppets are placed against a screen illuminated from behind, are obscure. Theories have been advanced that it started in China (Goslings), India (Nicolas) and in pre-Hindu Java (Krom); distinctive forms are found from Bali (*wayang purwa*, but with different figures from those used in Java) to Turkey (*karagos*). It is in Southeast Asia that this theatrical form is most widespread and popular, and in Java achieves its greatest point of sophistication, where it can become an elaborate court entertainment with more than 400 puppets viewed on both sides of the screen and with an extremely large orchestra. This shows considerable development from the presumed religious origin of the form, in which the figures are deemed to be mediums with which to communicate with ancestor spirits.

In mainland Southeast Asia, the shadow play used to be found in Cambodia (*nang kalung*), Malaysia (*wayang kukit*, with 3 subdivisions indicative of geographical origin, *wayang jawa*, *wayang melayu*, *wayang siam*), Laos and Thailand (*nang talung*). *Nang* in Thai means leather, and *talung* is supposed to be an abbreviation of Pattalung, in which province the form reputedly originated. This theory, given the widespread existence of similar forms elsewhere with more ancient historical verification, is to be doubted; it is much more likely that Pattalung was once an important centre of the art, though Nakorn Srithammaraj, also in the south, has long since overtaken it. Southern people maintain the *nang* started in Kuan Prao Village in Pattalung and they themselves refer to the *nang* as *nang kuan*, not *nang talung*.

1) This note is a modified form of the introduction given at a performance of *nang talung* by Chan Keo at the Siam Society on 28 May 1971.

A different form of *nang*, the *nang yai*, used until recently to be found in Thailand; the figures for this were much larger and had to be held by two sticks, not one; they also usually depicted elaborate scenes rather than individual figures². With the advent and popularity of another form of *nang*, the cinema, the *nang yai* has largely passed out of the repertoire and performances now are rare curiosity pieces. The word *nang* has been taken over by the cinema because as in *nang talung* the images are projected onto a screen, not because the celluloid film strip resembles leather. The *nang talung* itself used to be found even 10-15 years ago in the central area as a form of village entertainment, but as portable generators became more widespread it gave way to the march of progress exemplified by the movies.

The recorded history of *nang talung* in Thailand is slight. There are records of a Chinese shadow play being performed in Dhonburi in Taksin's time. In the reign of Rama III the hero is referred to as being as ugly as *nang kaek mua reng maa*, perhaps indicating the Malay origin of the shadow play in Thailand. There is a record of Chao Phya Surawong Waiyawat (Worn Bunnag) bringing *nang talung* from Pattalung to Bang Pa-In to show to Rama V. But this is certainly not the first time *nang talung* was shown in the central area. The chronicles are embarrassingly empty of details concerning the daily life of village people, and popular entertainment forms are more likely to have been ignored, by royal scribes. Even in well-recorded Java, where the form is considered to have existed before the seventh century, the first written record places the origins of *wang purwa* in East Java about 1147 as the invention of King Prabu Jayabhaya of Mamenang.

In Thailand the form is almost exclusively confined to the south now, where it maintains a popularity far greater than more modern entertainment. No village festival would be complete without a *nang talung* performance and the competitions organised are followed with great avidity. The fifth military circle in Nakorn Srithammaraj runs a radio station that at noon puts out taped performances of *nang talung*; people rush home from the fields to their houses and eat listening to the radio. Work resumes when the programme is over; this daily ritual is perhaps more assiduously followed than religious or sanitary obligations.

2) See Prince Dhani Nivat, *JSS*, LIII/1, 1965.

Performances of *nang talung* can take place by day or by night but those at night are more popular. The daytime performances are done without a screen and different sets of figures are used, the daytime figures being much thicker and coloured. It is fairly rare to see a performance of *nang talung* during the day now. At night performances are held on the occasion of a *tamboon*, a house warming, an ordination (*tam kwan nag*), a wedding or a funeral. On these occasions there is normally only one theatre, but on holidays in the larger districts *nang talung* contests are held. These can have as many as 15 or 20 troupes performing. In Nakorn Srithammaraj, for Songkraan 1970, there were 27 troupes performing simultaneously; the winners received a Mazda car and the competition was organized by the person who rents time for *nang talung* from the local radio; he also rents the ground from the provincial authorities. People come from various *amphurs* and stay overnight; not only people who are interested in watching the *nang talung* come but also merchants who profit by the occasion to sell goodies like *kao laam*, *kao tom mad* or sleeping mats for those who want to watch the performances all night. Contests can be held in any empty space but they are usually held in the temple grounds. In recent times the organisers have been required to give a donation to the temple; occasionally the temple itself organises these contests on the occasion of the raising of the roof *naga* or some similar event. Often there are contests between *nang talung* and *manora* at night. Most performances start between 8 and 9 o'clock after the cattle have been brought home and the people have had time to wash. They go on until midnight when there is a break of one hour. The temple drum is used to signal the break, never the temple bell. They start up again at one o'clock and continue until dawn. In competitions the *nang* which has the largest audience is judged to be the winner; the different *nang* therefore often resort to bribing spectators to come and watch. The *nang* which sells the most tickets is the winner and so performers often buy their own tickets at the official booths and sell them at a cut rate in order to receive the prize. Fifteen or twenty years ago these practices did not occur. Nowadays quite severe impediments are placed in the path of the successful *nang talung*. The *nang* which appears to be losing sometimes sends people to throw stones at the spectators watching the most popular show, trying to break

up the audience before the judgement is given. The worst thing that can happen is for a cat to be thrown at the screen, which, being very taut, tears with the cat's claws and the show is ruined until another screen can be fixed. In parts where security is bad the *nai nang* has to sit on corrugated iron in order not to have knives stuck into him through the floor.

The most popular months for *nang talung* performances are April to July before the Buddhist Lent, *kaw pansaa*. During *kaw pansaa* and the southern rainy season performances are less frequently held. When playing at a house, the *nai nang*, his assistant and the musicians are given full pension. Sometimes a *nai nang* has his own generator which adds to the cost of a performance. The average cost of a performance is 600 to 1,500 baht a night, depending on how famous the *nai nang* is.

The theatre itself is built about $2\frac{1}{2}$ metres above the ground on four posts. It is high enough for people to walk underneath and there is no staircase so children cannot easily climb up and interrupt. The size of the room is about 4 square metres, sometimes smaller. The roof is higher in the front and slopes down to the back. There are two side walls and the back is only half a wall; a space is left for people to climb in and out and bring drinks, cigarettes, betel, etc. to the *nai nang*. The walls and roof are made of atap (though sometimes the walls are of coconut leaves). The theatre is now occasionally made of corrugated iron and built on 200 litre oil tanks, with a canvas roof. The screen is about 2 metres high, and 4 metres long. It is made of white linen so that the light comes through: the thinnest possible cloth is used and it is stretched tight by ropes. The name of the *nai nang* appears above the screen, and sometimes the name of the person who gave the screen, like the district head, the owner of the town jewelery shop or some other local notability. The most popular are the screens given by organisers of the big contests, showing that the *nai nang* has taken part in such a contest. As much as one-third of the screen these days is taken up with advertisements. At the bottom of the screen on the inside is a fresh banana trunk for holding the sticks of shadow figures in position during a performance, or in reserve. There is only one kerosene lamp and the master, the *nai nang*, sits behind it; because of this, tin foil is used to protect his eyes

from the light. In these modern days one lamp run from a portable generator is used, and sometimes tape recorders play the dialogue, songs and music, with apprentices just manipulating the figures. On the right of the *nai nang* is the folder made of plaited bamboo in which the figures are kept. An average number would be between 150-200, but on the night of a performance only 40-50 figures are used. When each figure is off the stage, or its role is over, it is stuck in the banana leaf at an angle, not touching the screen. In this way it does not come between the light and the screen; even though it is in the middle of the playing area, it cannot be seen by the audience. Some five or six musicians sit behind the *nai nang*. The *ching* and *gong* are played by different people. The *gong* is used to signal the arrival of the *nang* in the village and villagers know from the sound which *nai nang* is about to perform. The *pee* (flute) is another instrument used (formerly this was the *pee Java*); the younger *nai nang* now use the fiddles *saw oo* and *saw duang*; then there is a *klong*, a drummer. Sometimes there is an additional *klong*. There is also one boy helper, usually a student of the master.

From eight or nine to midnight, the audience consists mostly of children sitting at the front; after midnight, the adults take more interest in the performance and form the bulk of the audience. So the risqué jokes come after midnight and the verbal play at the beginning is for children. In the early part of the night, the story is not very complicated; but from midnight until dawn the *nai nang* has to exert all his powers to hold his audience, particularly if he is in a contest. In the village the audience prefers the *nang talung* to films, partly because the southern dialect is used and because the jokes are local and topical, the story being flexible enough to incorporate local elements. The villagers feel affinity for a performer who uses their dialect rather than central Thai with all its formality. Men and women in the audience are represented equally; it is a good occasion for girls to dress up, *pai tiao*, and meet potential boy friends. They are not to talk to them, but may be seen by them; girls are strictly chaperoned in the south. People use any excuse for going to see the show; grandmothers find they are needed to accompany granddaughters (or even grown-up grandsons).

The figures are made from calf skin in order to get thin, soft leather. It is put in water and *poon kao* (chalk) is put all over it. It is kept for a

few nights in the water when the leather expands and becomes soft. It is then taken out and scratched with the hairy side of coconut shells and rubbed with powdered chalk; the hair on the skin is thus removed. It is then stretched and dried. The best leather is the thinnest and most transparent; transparent figures are used for night performances and daytime shows use thick figures. The rough outline of the figure is drawn in pencil or with a nail; then specially-made local chisels with different heads are used to cut out the design, in the form of dots or lines of various shapes. If two or three copies of the same figure are wanted, several pieces of leather are put on top of each other so that the same work cuts several figures. When finished, the daytime figures are brightly painted with powder paint fixed with glue (as on temple walls, using earth pigments). The night figures, being more transparent, use rust mixed with lime, which is rubbed on the calf skin. The rust colour stays on the leather and looks natural against the screen at night. Nowadays modern paint is often used.

Normally only individual figures are used, not a scene or two figures together as in *nang yai*. Kings, princes, heroes, etc. are well decorated, with jewels and dressy clothes. Ordinary people often have no shirts, only a loin-cloth, a *pakaomaa*. Sometimes *yaksa* (giants) or thieves, who have major roles in the story, are also well made because of their importance.

Usually only one arm of each figure moves. It does so in three parts, with joints at the shoulder, elbow and wrist. The fixed hand often has a *kris* or carries another weapon. Sometimes other parts move, e.g. the jaw. At least one character is a joker; he has several names³ and often has two moveable hands, and a moveable chin and genitals. He is invincible and can fly; he is a student of a hermit and knows special (magic) arts. He is poor, and usually a servant of the hero (the same as Hanuman in relation to Rama). He acts as a foil and a point of identification (as well as aspiration) for the audience. He always speaks the local dialect. The heroes and princes speak in the central language; the jokes are always given in dialect. These jokes are not just salacious; they also

3) The best known being *ai muang*, *ai tong*, *ai noo nooi*, *ai teng*, *ai klang*. In Java, Semar, Petruk, and Gareng are three different characters, all servants with the roles of joker, as well as objects of audience identification.

make fun of or criticise well-known local characters (e.g. a local policeman) which no one would normally dare to jest about. Sometimes the joker teaches the Dhamma to the people. The joker is on stage more often than any other figure and also comes on when the assistant of the *nai nang* cannot find the right figure in the folder. He keeps the story going, holds the people's interest, and acts as a draw from other performances. Usually the jokes made have nothing to do with the story, but this is accepted by the audience.

Before the performance proper starts, three figures appear on stage in succession. First comes the *rusee*, the hermit, who prays that the *nai nang*, the audience, etc. will be protected. This is a kind of *wai kru*. Then appears Pra Isuan, or Siva, and next a young prince (*roop naa bot*), but without a crown, who pays respects to the gods, the protecting angels, the *pee baan* (house ghosts), the owner of the house where the performance is taking place, the *nai amphur*, the local policeman, etc. He offers his thanks to the audience and hopes it will be protected. He wishes everyone present health, wealth and happiness. Then a fourth person comes on, either the *toa talok* (joker) or a hermit (a different one). He announces "Tonight the story will be". Then the story starts.

The story may be an episode from the Ramayana or any famous tale (Suwannasang, or Phra Apai Manee). There are several hundred. A well-known *nai nang* will perform his own story, or a tale by Paw Intapalit, a novelist of fame after the last war. There are also very modern stories, with Communists and bandits. USIS made a *nang talung* film including these bad characters, and showed it in Nakorn Srithammaraj: this proved to be the most popular film when USIS information teams went around showing films in sensitive areas in the south. Traditional stories are full of angels and giants and magic happenings, all of which are accepted without question. The shadow play master also uses parts of his story to instruct village people as well as to entertain them; for example, he might teach them how to make a will or divide property.

The master, the *nai nang* (the Javanese *dalang*) is usually a literate person who was interested in *nang talung* from an early age. He needs to have the gift of the gab. He usually learns his art by being a master's

assistant, an apprentice. He hears the stories, and poetry which the upper class characters sometimes speak, in this way. Normally students live with their masters. In the off season they work in the fields for the master and the master gives written notes as homework for the apprentice to learn; the notes tell the main story and describe the leading characters. The following are synopses of two stories adapted from previous models by Nai Chan Keo, the most famous *nai nang* in the south. Chan Keo was born in 1889 and lives in Nakorn Srithammaraj: at the age of 13 he performed before King Rama V in Ko Samui and in his long life estimates he has taught the art of the shadow play to more than 400 students.

Adventures in a world war

Act 1. In the town of Nakorn Sataa, King Praya Ayuttitam and Queen Kangsangwaet reign; the queen is pregnant and the king very religious. A *wiengtieng* or procession for Wisaka Buja is announced by the king, who orders the whole population to join in the event. The procession wends its way to the hermit Golatanya.

Act 2. In the town of the giant, or Yaksa, called Gochanaa; the king is called Kotabong and he is a descendent of Tosakan (Rawana); this is a new city built after the fall of Tosakan. The Yaksa is leaving the city and looking for game in the jungle; he sees the hermit's home and asks for water. The hermit says he should not be a Yaksa any more. The Yaksa has a magic staff (*krabong*); if he points it with the blunt end, people die, and if with the pointed end, people revive. The act ends with the king on the way to the temple to receive the rules for laymen.

Act 3. A lion is taking her offspring to look for food in the jungle. One cub has died and the lion is carrying around the bones; she is going to another hermit to seek to revive the remains of the dead cub.

Act 4. An old couple Ta Kok and Hong are shown in Chantakaan village; they have a daughter, Kulaab Chaonaa. Burmese and Cambodian thieves have come and attacked the house and killed the father, and taken everything away. Before leaving they have said they want another 20,000 baht from the house. The mother and daughter do not know what to do and cry.

Act 5. Wong Chinda, the son of the rich man of Tan Sala village, whose father and mother are Brahmins, was born ugly but his inner soul is beautiful. He has three brothers, Suwanwichai, Apaisuwan and Pannarai (whose names incidentally are similar to those in Sunthorn Poo). The father and mother do not like the youngest son and ask him to leave the house. In the jungle he sees the Boddhi (Bo) tree and stays under it for five years observing Buddhist rules strictly. Then an angel comes to give him knowledge, marks his tongue so that each time he yawns gems, arrows and knives come out; he stays in the jungle until he is 20 when he will lose his ugly exterior and go back home. He says goodbye to the angel (*tewadaa*) and starts out for home. On the way he meets the two thieves who have come to collect 20,000 baht from the mother and daughter.

Act 6. The three older brothers want to divide up the parents' property; the father has now died and not left a will. Two of the brothers say the property should be divided into three, but one says it should be divided into four because the youngest brother is not home. They argue, but finally the property is divided into four (this is done to teach the audience how to divide property correctly). They ask the *Nai Amphur* or District Head to divide the property and everyone is happy.

Act 7. The scene shifts to a Malay city called Nakorn Paipak. The ruler and his wife are dead, leaving one daughter, Nang Kreesalai. The Regent is Nai Samor. The daughter wants a husband as she is getting old and asks a ghost to help her. She is shown leaving the city to find a husband. On the way she meets Praya Ayuttitam (Act 1), and steals him away to be her husband and ruler of her city. The soldiers of Ayuttitam cannot find their king and go back to tell his queen. The queen accompanied by soldiers goes out of the city in search of her lost husband and asks an angel to help her. The angel tells her to go to Paipak where Kreesalai lives. But Kreesalai uses magic words so that the new husband dislikes his first wife (*mia luang*); she however is pregnant and gives birth to a shell (*hoy*), indicating bad luck, in Paipak. The king orders the shell to be thrown away after having put his wife in jail, but soldiers pick up the shell and look after it.

Act 8. The giant Ramasoon is looking for Keo Maw Klai (symbol of lightning) and is wielding an axe. He happens to break the shell to which Kangsangwaet gave birth. It breaks and three children are born, a boy and two girls. The giant Kotabong (Act 2) is shown going to see a hermit, and finds the boy. The lioness whose offspring has died (Act 3) finds one of the girls, and another hermit discovers the other girl.

Act 9. The two thieves are going to Baan Yai Hom to collect 20,000 baht. They find there is no money, so they take the mother and lock her up in the house, and steal away the daughter.

Act 10. Wongchindaa, the ugly-looking hero, passes Yai Hom's house. Knowing about the thieves, he spews up weapons, opens the door and volunteers to find the old woman's daughter.

Act 11. Praya Ayuttitam and his new wife are using the first wife as a slave.

Act 12. The boy, who was born from the shell, is referred to as a prince and is raised by the giant Kotabong, dreams that in three days if he does not find three medicines he will die. He tells his adopted father this, and his father gives him the magic staff. The boy then runs away from the giant with the staff since he knows the Yaksa is not his real father.

Act 13. The younger sister living with the lioness gets bored with ordinary flowers and wants to have a lotus from Nirvana. The lioness agrees to try and procure one and gives a magic diamond to the girl.

Act 14. The youngest girl, whose secret weapon is a knowledge of magic, knowing the hermit is not her real father, runs away from him and meets two soldiers who ask the girl her name but she does not tell them.

Act 15. The young prince raised by the Yaksa and the two daughters meet and argue with each other because they do not know each other; each has a magic charm. The boy points his staff to kill his younger sister, but the angels realise that things are going wrong and change the staff into a stick of candy which is given to the two girls. The girl with the magic diamond throws it to her brother but the angel changes this into a flower.

Act 16. Praya Ayuttitam is shown with his new wife and two children, a boy and a girl. The boy is mentally deranged. Pra Indra (Siva) teaches the girl at night in secret; she is given a nail which kills anyone she scratches with it. She does not take anything given her by her mother, who asks her husband to approach their daughter to find out what is wrong. She says to Praya Ayuttitam that she was born to the second wife by mistake, and should have been born to the first wife. Praya Ayuttitam tells his new wife this and the latter wants to kill her daughter as well as the first wife.

Act 17. The daughter takes her father and real mother away, back to the city of Nakorn Sataa. On the way, in the jungle, they meet the children from the shell, the boy and his two sisters. There is an argument and they start fighting, but they cannot kill each other because each has a magic weapon. Then Phra Indra (Siva) descends and tells them they are all brothers and sisters. They are reconciled, return home, and live happily ever after.

Paradise is in the chest and hell is in the heart

In the city of Nakorn Natanaa, King Prom Prasit and Queen Chitrampeni reign. They have two sons, Hennarai and Sai Faa. The first is rather stupid and the second ugly. The parents ask their sons to leave.

In another city, Haemaraa, King Intat and Queen Ratanamalee have reigned. The king is dead, killed by a giant. The daughter, Soi Mayuree, is very angry with the giant and goes off to study black arts with a hermit.

In yet another city, Kittitprasin, we are shown the widowed Queen Grinchampaa and her daughter Seepanyaa. A giant wants to marry the daughter, who is not agreeable to the match. War breaks out and the city is lost to the Yaksa; one person has to be sacrificed to the Yaksa, who eats him or her, every ten days.

A Yaksa rules in another city, Chongkwaa. He has two wives and one daughter, La-ongkeo. A negrito wants to marry her, but cannot, as her father has recently died and the daughter has to wait a while,

One of the wives is looking for a new husband and on the way through the jungle meets the banished sons of King Prom Prasit and Queen Chitrampeni. She decides to take the elder, Hennarai, to be her husband. (A giant at this point has to teach the stupid Hennarai how to make love, and what to do with his wife; this leads to some licence, since only a madman and a giant are involved). Soldiers look through the keyhole to watch the lovemaking, and one goes on the roof, says he is an angel, and orders the couple to make love. They duly marry, but the king is mad. The younger brother, Sai Faa, who all this time has been sleeping, wakes up to find his brother in the meantime has become a king. The younger brother wants to make his elder study so that he appears less stupid. But his wife objects to the idea of losing her husband, and tells him that his younger brother keeps raping her. The king orders his soldiers to kill his younger brother. They try to do so but Phra Indra (Siva) comes in to help. His skin is too tough to be pierced, he is thrown in the water, the sea god picks him up and Phra Indra then takes him to paradise along with a couple of soldiers as assistants to stay there three years.

After endless complications, the story ends by Phra Indra giving the sensible but ugly brother profound knowledge and anyone in trouble only has to think of him to receive his assistance. His elder brother gets in trouble because his wife falls in love with a negrito (in Thai = mangosteen) and wants to kill her husband. The younger brother comes to help his elder and the God of Hell finally takes both the elder brother and his wife.

The moral of this story is clearly drawn: silly people should not have power thrust upon them and evil needs result in an evil end.