

NOTES

THE *WAI KRU* CEREMONY OF THE *NANG YAI*

by

Michael Smithies & Euayporn Kerdchouay

The *nang yai* or giant shadow play, which we have described elsewhere¹, has all but disappeared and with it its elaborate reverence to teachers ceremonies (*wai kru*). Unusually these centre around written texts. The texts are of unknown origin and in their present form date from the beginning of the Ratanakosin period, but may well have been reconstituted then from memories of an Ayuthian form. The entertainment was well known in the Ayuthia period and the earliest reference to it is in a law dated 1458 when the *nang yai* is mentioned several times among the court entertainments.

Nicolas² compared the ceremony to the Nandi sequence in Indian drama and found it analogous to the prayer uttered by the Javanese *dalang* before presenting his figures on the screen. Prince Dhani³ admitted to finding the texts 'very difficult to understand' because of the archaisms in which they abound and translated some passages of the three *thuay* or sections into rhyming quatrains; he drew the attention of his readers to the Thai article which Nicolas had used as his source and which Prince Damrong was of the opinion came from the pen of Krom-amun Sthitya or Prince Tosini⁴.

The ceremony starts⁵ with the master of the *nang yai* troupe receiving from the sponsor of the performance the *wai kru* offerings, consisting

- 1) Euayporn Kerdchouay & Michael Smithies, 'The giant shadow play of Thailand', *Orientalism* (Vol. 4 No. 8 August, 1973), pp. 47-50.
- 2) René Nicolas 'Le théâtre d'ombres au Siam', *JSS* (July 1927, Vol. XXI part 1), pp. 37-51.
- 3) H.H. Prince Dhaninivat, Kromamum Bidyalabh Bridhyakorn, *The Nang* (Thai Culture New Series No. 5), Fine Arts Department, (Bangkok, BE 2501 (1958)), pp. 16.
- 4) ลัทธิธรรมนิยมต่างๆ ภาคที่ 6 : ตำราเล่นหนังในงานมหรสพ
- 5) The ceremony described here is that performed by the only known surviving *nang yai* troupe in 1973 directed by the aging Nai La-or Tongweesit in the temple of Wat Kanon in the village of Soi Fa, near Potaram in Rajburi province.

of a small bottle of local whisky, a pig's head, flowers, candles, josticks, water, rice, sweets and six *baht* in money. These are bought beforehand by the sponsor and offered on a tray. The master, who is seated, receives this offering, raises his hands together above his head and prays. He then turns to his assistant, who does likewise. The master turns to all the senior players and musicians in a similar manner. During the dedication ceremony, the three most important figures, of Narai, Isuan and the hermit⁶ are placed on the front of the screen, with the hermit in the middle; each figure has one lighted candle placed on it by the master. The small traditional orchestra plays; the music soon comes to a halt and the master takes the figure of the hermit and places it against the bamboo pole at one or other end of the screen. At the base of each pole he places a little of the *wai kru* offerings. The music starts up again for this distribution of the offerings and then quickly stops. The members of the troupe cry in acclaim three times and the master and his principal assistant stand to face the audience declaiming the *wai kru* text. The text is lengthy and the meaning at times obscure. It starts with an invocation to king Totisarot (Dasaratha) and the teachers of the art of the *nang* who were apparently skilled magicians. The making of the figures of Rama and Lakshana is described. The hermit and the Buddha are saluted, as are, for good measure, the animistic spirits of nature. The setting of the *nang* is next recounted—the screen, the supporting poles, the musicians, the figure. The audience is then invited to come and watch the shadow play, to listen to the tale that has been handed down through generations. After this comes a reference to opposing troupes performing simultaneously (as now happens in southern shadow play contests). The leader invites the audience to see who will win and indicates that if he loses he will learn from the victor. The master finally calls on his troupe to make the light brighter behind the screen so that the performance can start and be seen by all.

6) These three figures are cut according to particular rites (see Keirdehouay and Smithies 1973) and are made of specially prepared hide. The first two represent Vishnu and Siva, and the anchorite represents knowledge and skill, as well as, in a rather vague way, religion. The Thai *ruat* of the shadow play seems closer to the Indian *guru* than to contemporary Buddhist *pra indang*.

"I shall pay respects to the mighty king Totsarot, the almighty god of the earth. I shall pay respects to the king, to whom no one in the whole country can compare, for he stands guard over all his people, the slaves, farmers, officials, and he protects even the lords. But before going to have an audience with the king, I must according to the old tradition let my wife know of my departure. After this I shall pay respects to my teachers, from whom I learned all that I know.

"When my teachers were instructing me or were with me, I seized the reins of knowledge, for they were all truly skilled. Sometimes they would gather in a circle and teach the art of dancing. Some of them to do this would put mortars and pestles in the centre, bend the bows with their feet, and carry at the same time live charcoals in their mouths. Some of them would tread on the edges of swords, and carry swinging lanterns from their mouths. Some would tie their bodies in three places and stab themselves with swords, and show their magic arts by scattering their guts over the ground. Then they would quickly start to shoot their arrows, but these would be transformed into soldiers.

"With the very best musicians, I pay respects to the great king. Then I pay respects to our lord. When he ordered it, then I commanded that the search be started for the cow's skin to be brought in and I made it into a shadow figure. I fashioned the skin into the figures of Rama, and also Sita his wife along with him; and also a strong Lakshana was made. Before the play starts today, there must be special offerings. On my left, I shall pay respects to Rawana and on my right I shall pay respects to Rama.

"I wish the powerful almighty hermit, whose skills are so famous, to bless me with bountiful grace. May success, prosperity, happiness, please come to me in victory.

"I pay respects to the Buddha, who through his compassion for all living creatures attained Nirvana. And also before starting, I pay respects to the legendary king Aniruth. I pay respects to the spirits living in the remote jungles, the spirits of the forests, streams, and of every valley in the mountains. I pay respects to the gods of the river, of all the caves and the woods. I pay respects to the teachers who instructed me and the old masters who are still alive.

"I am going to play the story of Rama. I asked my teachers to help me to draw cleverly and guide the art of cutting. I beg my teachers to help me to sing superbly, and also the help the dancers to give a marvellous performance. I want to play the shadow play and to receive the admiration of the audience.

"Cut down four wooden posts and set them up to raise the screen on them; the screen will have a red border on its four edges and white cloth will be at the centre. Bring on the figure of Siva, surrounded by stars, on a chariot riding through the sky, where the sun seems to shine so brightly. And show the pictures of Lanka, the city of the demons, and also the large powerful city Ayuthia : all this I shall show for you to see.

"Now is the time to begin and hear the gongs, drums and long drum which will play for you and make you happy. Our shadow play is not bad, and has been played for quite a long time, and no one has ever been discontented with it.

"I beg the good spirits to protect me from any evil powers and aid me from any one who criticises my shadow play for being bad, or for not being beautifully performed. I beg the goodness of Rama and Lakshana to enter into every figure of the shadow-play.

"After finishing this introduction, I shall mark, check and add the finishing touches to the figures, in honour of Rama. I shall bring on the cutout figures, so that all of you can see with your own eyes. I invite you all to come to see only the shadow of these figures of this eternal story on the screen.

"My old master taught me the art, my teachers instructed me and I ask for the protection of our lord to help me not to be defeated and shamed. If anybody tells me I am beaten by the others, I shall not despair or be frightened, for if someone else wins, I shall take lessons from him. Now, make haste my friends, make up the fire behind the screen and do not obstruct the light. Now I shall perform the shadow play for you all to see."⁷

7) This translation is interpretative in the sense that it tries to make the English version coherent.

The incantation over, however, the play does not start at once. There are still some rituals to be gone through. The music stops once more, the master takes a candle to the two figures remaining, of Narai and Isuan, and wafts the flame of the candle with his hand towards the ankles, arrows and other weapons of the figures, inviting them to conquer (*chaiya*) over evil and be protected from the harm which the black powers from the other troupes could cause. After this he places the two figures against the bamboo poles, one at either end, and then the performance proper starts.

These ceremonies are far more elaborate than those preceding a *nang talung* performance or for that matter any other theatrical *wai kru*, where a simple prayer, said before the shrine to the teachers if the theatre is in a fixed location, suffices. With the *nang yai* there is a good deal of mumbo jumbo which one must assume derives from the period when performers were also in some respects magicians, as the text indicates. The written text with all its obscurities (and, as Prince Dhani has mentioned, its occasionally humorous passages) makes the ceremony unusual as well as lengthy. Modern audiences are restless during this *wai kru*, but performances of the spectacle are now so rare that the initial tedium is forgiven. Nearly half a century ago Nicolas pointed out that the medium was too slow for contemporary Siamese and noted that the *nang yai* was about to disappear forever. That it has survived at all is something for which we must be thankful, but its *wai kru* ceremony, howsoever unusual, has not helped it gain popularity with more sophisticated, less gullible audiences than those of fifteenth century Ayuthia.