

SECTION V

ROYAL OPERETTA



# THE KINGS' MIKADO

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At the height of the hot season of 1890, the great King Chulalongkorn of Siam (r. 1868–1910) loaded numerous members of his family and entourage on the royal yacht for a vacation trip around the Malay Peninsula. The royal party travelled by sea south to the Isthmus of Kra, crossed the isthmus by land, and then continued their journey by ship down the west coast all the way to Singapore, stopping in numerous places to tour the new accomplishments of British colonial rule in Malaya, before returning home up the east coast. Their longest single stop was at Singapore, in the first week of June, and it was in Singapore that Thai culture made its first acquaintance with that quintessential fixture of Victorian civilization, the comic operas of W. S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan. From that encounter was to come at least three versions of one of the Savoy operettas. For all the impression *The Mikado* seems to have made at the time, it seems virtually to have been forgotten subsequently, and it is the purpose of this note to revive the faded memories.

Chulalongkorn's party reached Singapore on 30 May, the fortieth day of a sixty-day trip, and they remained there until 9 June. In addition to doing things like riding the trams, visiting a hospital, a bank, government buildings, and the famous Raffles Hotel, on the evening of 2 June the royal party took in an evening's entertainment at the Town Hall. The King's diary records that

At 8:45 in the evening, went to see an opera at the Town Hall, called the Opera Buffi of Harry Stanley (Harry Stanley's Opra [*sic*] Bouffe and Pantomime company). This Stanley, the proprietor, once had played in Bangkok a long time ago, and by now he is quite old and infirm. The opera that they played had already finished its run, but *Phraya Anukun* [the Thai Consul in Singapore] had had them put it on especially for us, at a cost of 500 dollars to hold the company back two days from their scheduled departure for Hong Kong.... Quite a crowd of European ladies and gentlemen came to receive us in front of the Town Hall, and there was such a crowd that it was a long time before a way through them could be cleared for us. [The Company] had been playing various other plays in repertory,

but in the end they were asked to perform *The Mikado*, as they figured it was about Orientals like us Thai and we might understand it better—just as *Caophraya Mahinthara* had played *Phra Aphai[mani]* for Europeans.

The place was a single room which we had seen them perform in before, when we came [to Singapore] the first time [in 1872?]. In front were rows of ordinary chairs, successive rows rising in tiers and levels. The entire audience, men and women, who came to see [the show] included an additional 200 from the ship. The setting was quite lovely.

In the story which they performed, a Crown Prince was being forced to marry an old lady, and so fled from his father and fell in love with Yum-Yum. This Yum-Yum lived with Ko-Ko, who was going to take her as his wife; and so Nankipu (the Crown Prince) was disconsolate. When he learned that Ko-Ko had been sentenced to death for smiling at a woman, he returned; but on returning discovered that Ko-Ko had become the Lord High Executioner. The Mikado sent a letter ordering that, as no one had been executed in a year, the position [of Lord High Executioner] would be abolished, and the town of Titipu would be reduced to the status of a village. Ko-Ko consulted with Pooh-Bah, who was Lord High Everything, and Pooh-Bah decided that Ko-Ko would have to be executed. Ko-Ko thus was agitated when Nanki-Poo found him. Nanki-Poo came in with a hangman's noose. When Ko-Ko asked him why he would hang himself, he replied that it was because he would not get Lady Yum-Yum. Ko-Ko urged him to desist, and offered to execute him. Nanki-Poo replied that his price for doing so was to be given Yum-Yum as his wife. Because Ko-Ko had never killed anyone, he would have to practice first for a month, while Nanki-Poo would have Yum-Yum as his wife. Ko-Ko consented. Lady Katisha, the woman who formerly

loved Nanki-Poo, discovered Nanki-Poo, and went to tell the Mikado. The Mikado came to Titipu. Ko-Ko assumed that he had come because of the lack of executions, and came to learn that, according to the law, if a husband must be executed, his wife must be buried also. Nanki-Poo could not receive Lady Yum-Yum because he feared that his beloved must die if he himself were executed; and Ko-Ko feared that if he did not execute someone else, he would have to kill himself, and then his beloved Yum-Yum would die as well. So he concocted a scheme with Pooh-Bah that Pooh-Bah would swear that the execution had occurred, while Nanki-Poo and Yum-Yum would be allowed to escape. The Mikado believed them, but said he had come in search of his son, whom he believed had taken the name of Nanki-Poo. Believing the story that Nanki-Poo had been executed, he decided that Ko-Ko would be killed, and the witness [Pooh-Bah] boiled in oil. But first he would have lunch. In the interim, Ko-Ko called in Nanki-Poo and asked him if he were the Crown Prince. He asked him to plead with his father, but Nanki-Poo would not consent to do so, because he feared that he would have to marry Lady Katisha. If Ko-Ko would woo Katisha and get her to agree to be his wife, then Nanki-Poo would go [to his father]. Ko-Ko wooed Katisha as agreed. The Mikado returned, and Katisha begged for the pardon of Ko-Ko. The son and daughter-in-law paid homage as the play concluded.

The music was pretty, and not excessive like the Italian opera in Calcutta. It was very comical. The orchestra used 12 players, both men and women. They began with the [Thai] Royal Anthem, and when it was concluded they as usual played "God Save the Queen." ... It finished at 11.45 (Chulalongkorn 1932, 279–281).

Many of the royal party attending the operetta that evening knew English well, and some purchased copies of the printed libretto, which they brought home with them. The following year, 1891, when the King and his family took their holidays on Si Chang Island in the Gulf of Siam, they brought along the two men who were the Thai and English tutors of the royal children, *Phraya* Itsaraphansophon (M. R. W. Nu Itsarangkun na Ayudhya) and Robert Morant; and Morant asked his pupils to translate *The Mikado* libretto into Thai. *Phraya* Itsaraphan then revised the Thai version. As Prince Damrong later explained,

His Majesty King Chulalongkorn looked at the translation ... and observed, "The English original was a drama; the revised translation is almost like a sermon." His Majesty was amused, and

reproachfully re-wrote it as a *real* sermon. This is how the "Sermon Concerning the Mikathura (Mikado) from the Sacred Text 'Harisatanli Obara (Harry Stanley Opera)'" came to be.

I have heard that when His Majesty had written the "Sermon Concerning the Mikathura" he presented it to the Royal Supreme Patriarch Prince Vajirañanavarorasa ... to read. The Prince-Patriarch [read it] and then observed to His Majesty that, "In the opinion of a [Buddhist] monk, I think that monastery-people when writing in a secular fashion still come out with the style of the monastery, no matter how they write; and laymen writing in the style of the monastery, no matter how they disguise their style, still employ phraseology strange to the monastery." His Majesty King Chulalongkorn heard this and laughed! (Rajanubhab 1922, pp. b–d).

The best way of explaining the style of this first Thai *Mikado* might be to ask readers to imagine the story of *The Mikado* told in the style of the King James Version of the Old Testament. The Thai version is like ancient old tales so often met with in tellings of the stories of the previous existences of the Buddha, the *Jātaka* tales, and with which all educated Thai of Chulalongkorn's generation would have been familiar.

The text begins, like so many religious texts, with a long verse in the Pāli language, the language of Theravada Buddhist scriptures:

Atīte kira jīpanadīpesu mikāduronāma rājātokiye nagare  
rajam kārāpesi putto panassa ekūnavīsativasso abhirūpo  
pāsādiko bayatto medhāvī ahoṣiti.

It then continues on in Thai, but with Pāli and fake-Pāli phrases regularly inserted and explained:

Now I will explicate the fabulous tale which appears in the Sacred Text *Harisatanli Obara*. It runs as follows. Atīte, "Once upon a time," there was a great monarch whose name was Mikaduraraja, who enjoyed the royal domains of Tokiyanagara, in all its continental extent. He had one royal son, ekūnavīsativasso, whose royal age numbered nineteen rainy seasons, whose beauty was so heavenly as to give pleasure to all who beheld it, and who was exceedingly talented and clever (Chulalongkorn 1922, 1)

The tale is told entirely in prose, with none of the music or the dramatic quality that makes *The Mikado* so memorable in English. There is no dialogue, and the piece was intended to be read or recited, not to be performed. It amounts to a detailed synopsis of and elaboration upon Gilbert's play. The characters' names all are given Pāli form—Kokokamat ("the minister Ko-Ko"), Pittisihinga ("the lioness Pitti")—as are the place-

names (Titipura, “the town of Titi”). But whatever comedic elements may have been carried over from the basic Gilbertian plot were overwhelmed by the way in which the king managed to poke fun at the pretentiousness and moral aloofness of the most serious of Buddhist monks of his day. It would hardly have been “politically correct” for Chulalongkorn’s *Mikado* to have been given wide currency in the king’s own day—or, for that matter, for some decades thereafter! Chulalongkorn’s version was printed only in 1922, thirty years later.<sup>1</sup>

We cannot be sure if Prince Vajiravudh accompanied his father on the 1890 trip to Singapore, but it is likely that he did so.<sup>2</sup> He was then only nine years old, and perhaps this early experience of “live” Western theatre whetted his theatrical instincts which are so well-known from his period on the throne after his father’s death in 1910. Vajiravudh is remembered as a prolific and often talented dramatist and all-around man of letters, who frequently translated stage plays from Western languages (English and French) for production in his household. Many Thai today still are familiar with his translations of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice* (Vella 1978, 235–242, 248–251). Over his relatively short lifetime (he died at the age of forty-four in 1925) his literary output is prodigious, including countless poems, essays, and plays.

Vajiravudh’s two translations from the work of W. S. Gilbert, however, are little known. Only one of the two was published during his lifetime, probably for limited circulation within the Court, and the two together only in 1966—forty-one years after his death. Both are in the form of fully-developed musical plays, with the scenery specified, the costumes indicated, and minimal stage directions.

The earlier of the two—which survives in a manuscript copy in the Department of Fine Arts in Bangkok—is directly titled *The Mikado: Bot lakhòn sangkhít rüang “Mikâdô”* (*Musical Play of “The Mikado”*). The next line on the first page reads, “(adapted from the English of Mr. Gilbert)” (Vajiravudh 1966, 1). The list of “Dramatis Personæ” follows closely Gilbert’s original version (fig. 1).

While Gilbert stages the play on separate settings for the first and second acts, King Vajiravudh adopts a single set, “a Japanese garden, assumed to be the garden of Koko.”

There is simply no way in which Vajiravudh’s lyrics might be sung to Sir Arthur Sullivan’s memorable music, for the Thai language does not easily lend itself to the rapid-fire cadence that Gilbert provides (see fig. 2 overleaf). Gilbert continues with a second verse (“If you think we are worked by strings ...”), while Vajiravudh has only one.

Vajiravudh goes on to follow Gilbert fairly closely, with verbal changes to allow for Thai sensibilities on such matters as the politesse due to such men of high rank as that opening chorus might be:

NANGKI	Your Lordships! Please favor me. I would like to know where I might find Yamyam, the ward of Koko.
SUYEMATSU	And whom might you be?
NANGKI	At your service. I am a singer of songs. My songs are various, of different kinds and flavors....

In the famous ballad (“A Wand’ring Minstrel, I”) that follows, Vajiravudh alternates singing and speaking to introduce the three different kinds of songs he offers; there is a martial passage, but no “song of the sea.”

On the whole, the play follows closely the plot of the original *Mikado*, even to the placement of music. (The “Tit-Willow” song is particularly fine, with evocative and alliterative poetry [Vajiravudh 1966, 69–70].) Some of the jokes are even the same. For example, when the Mikado informs Koko, Pûbâ, and Pitising that Koko has executed the royal son, and the unindicted co-conspirators explain that they had no way of knowing that Nangkipu was the “heir to the throne of Japan,” Koko remarks that, if Nangkipu had indicated his rank on his handkerchief, they would have noticed. But in Vajiravudh’s version Koko does not continue to point out that “Japanese

Figure 1

## Gilbert’s 1885 Version (Allen 1975, 244)

The Mikado of Japan  
 Nanki-Poo, *His Son, Disguised as a Wandering Minstrel, and in Love with Yum-Yum*  
 Ko-Ko, *Lord High Executioner of Titipu*  
 Pooh-Bah, *Lord High Everything Else*  
 Pish-Tush, *A Noble Lord*  
 Yum-Yum  
 Pitti-Sing *Three Sisters—Wards of Ko-Ko*  
 Peep-Bo  
 Katisha, *An Elderly Lady, in Love with Nanki-Poo*  
 Chorus of School-Girls, Nobles, Guards, and Coolies

King Vajiravudh’s *Mikado*

The Mikado of Japan  
 Nangkipu, *Royal Son, Disguised as a Musician who begs for alms*  
 Koko, *Lord Executioner of the Town of Titipu*  
 Pûbâ, *Lord of All Other Positions*  
 Sûyematsu, *A Noble*  
 Yamyam  
 Pitising Sisters, *Under the Governance of Koko*  
 Pîpbô  
 Katicha, *Elderly Lady, in Love with Nangkipu*  
 In addition, there are other nobles, plus soldiers and common people

Figure 2

## Gilbert's 1885 Version (Allen 1975, 244)

If you want to know who we are,  
 We are gentlemen of Japan:  
 On many a vase and jar—  
 On many a screen and fan,  
 We figure in lively paint:  
 Our attitude's queer and quaint—  
 You're wrong if you think it ain't.

King Vajiravudh's *Mikado*

Of course we're nobles of Japan,  
 By ranks from khun and mün to phra.  
 We're all resplendent to the eye  
 Standing, hair slick, serried ranks,  
 As if adorning some fine jar.  
 But if you carefully inspect our view  
 We're, none of us, just like the other.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 3

## Gilbert's 1885 Version (Allen 1975, 268)

KO-KO. ...(*To MIKADO.*) It's like this: When your Majesty says, "Let a thing be done," it's as good as done—practically, it *is* done—because your Majesty's will is law. Your Majesty says, "Kill a gentleman," and a gentleman is told off to be killed. Consequently, that gentleman is as good as dead—practically, he *is* dead—and if he is dead, why not say so?

MIKADO. I see. Nothing could possibly be more satisfactory!

King Vajiravudh's *Mikado* (1966, 75-76)

KOKO. It's like this. When Your Majesty orders that something be done, it's as good as done, because Your Majesty's will is law. Therefore, when Your Majesty orders that a man be killed, it's like him being dead. Consequently that man surely *is* dead; and if he can be said to be dead, he is. If he had been executed, where could he ever come back again? So Nankipu is the equivalent of dead, and can't be re-born. However, Your Majesty did *not* order the execution of the heir to the throne, and therefore the heir to the throne is *not* dead, and he can pay attendance upon you now, as he is doing. May it please Your Majesty.

Mikado. Ha-ha! Our Lord Executioner explains himself well! Take her [Katicha]. We revoke your punishment.

don't use pocket-handkerchiefs!" (Vajiravudh 1966, 61; Allen 1975, 264).

Performers have often complained that the resolution of the plot of *The Mikado* is extremely weak. Here it is interesting to compare the English and Thai versions (see fig. 3). Vajiravudh here has made the ending much clearer by introducing a fine verbal distinction between Nankipu and the heir to the throne of Japan, between the individual and his position. Here, there is still a sort of Gilbertian humor to this ending of the play.

It is not very difficult to discern that Vajiravudh's other *Mikado*, the *Musical Play of "Wang Ti,"* is a later draft of the same

piece. As with *The Mikado*, below the title there appears the phrase "Adapted from the English [play] of Mr. W. S. Gilbert called '*Mikado*'" (Vajiravudh 1966, 77).<sup>4</sup> The most obvious difference between the two versions is that *Wang Ti* is re-titled, all its characters are renamed, and the setting of the play is changed from Japan to a fictional kingdom with an obviously Chinese name. The very title of the play is a version of the Chinese term for emperor (*huang ti*).

Compare the Dramatis Personæ of Vajiravudh's two versions (see fig. 4). Later, a single line states that the setting of the play is "in a royal garden at Pæ-ping-fu, the old capital of the country of Tong." (Vajiravudh 1966, 78).

Figure 4

**King Vajiravudh's *Mikado***

The Mikado of Japan

Nangkipu, *Royal Son, Disguised as a Musician who begs for alms*

Koko, *Lord Executioner of the Town of Titipu*

Pûbâ, *Lord of All Other Positions*

Sûyematsu, *A Noble*

Yamyam

Pitising Sisters, *Under the Governance of Koko*

Pîpbô

Katicha, *Elderly Lady, in Love with Nangkipu*

In addition, there are other nobles, plus soldiers and common people

**King Vajiravudh's *Wang Ti***

Pa Chông Ko, Wang Ti, *Ruler of the Kingdom of Tong Hua Tai Chiang Kok*

Kiam Sûng Ti, *Royal Son of the Wang Ti. Disguised as a musician.*

Hæ Küng, *Lord Executioner and tao-t'ai of Pæ-ping-fu*

Ta-lao-pao, *Deputy and Adviser of Hæ Küng*

Hü Sæ, *A Noble of Pæ-ping-fu*

*The Bearer of a Royal Letter*

Yamyam

Cap Kim Sisters, *Foster Children of Hæ Küng*

Tao Huai

Lao Amuai, *Elderly Lady, in Love with Kiam Sûng Ti*

Just before the text of the play, Vajiravudh has inserted an explanation for the change in the venue:

Note: Originally, this was set in Japan, but the matter of procuring Japanese costumes proved difficult, and I thought that if it were moved to some other place, nothing would be lost, so I decided to move it to the country of "Tong Hua Tai Chiang Kok," for which the costumes would be more convenient, as they could be done in any way, and if anyone didn't like them, they could be changed. The country of Tong is on no ordinary world map, and consequently the costumes of the country of Tong would be familiar to no one. Also, the music in this play differs somewhat from that in the original. For the most part, it will have to be written anew so as to be suitable to Thai tastes and talents (Vajiravudh 1966, 78).

But were costuming and "Thai tastes and talents" really the cause for the relocalization of *The Mikado* in Vajiravudh's *Wang Ti*? One is inclined to take the King at his word; but it is worth remembering that the Lord Chamberlain of England prohibited the performance of *The Mikado* in 1907, when the Japanese Prince Fushimi was visiting Britain (for a full account, see Fitz-Gerald 1925, 210-212). It did not return to the stage until a year later, in 1908. Although Vajiravudh had been schooled in England (from which he returned at the beginning of 1903), and he continued to subscribe to British newspapers, magazines, and journals, it would be hard to imagine that he would have taken British political sensitivities any more seriously than the Japanese at the time did.

And if one examines seriously the text of *Wang Ti*, the general impression that emerges is that Vajiravudh "Asian-ized" *The Mikado*—and his own *Mikado*—in more than just names and places. Compared with the earlier version (which it must be regarded), *Wang Ti* is more an adaptation than a translation, while *Mikado* is much more translation than adaptation.

Again, a good example is provided by the dialogue immediately preceding the second act finale. It begins in much the same words as the previous version, but it then goes off in a new direction:

HÆ KÜNG When Your Majesty orders that something be done, it has to be done as Your Majesty has ordered, because Your Majesty's will is like law. Therefore, when Your Majesty orders that a man in the country be killed, it's like him being dead: he has to die, to be sure, because Your Majesty has ordered it done. Even if he doesn't really die, he has to be considered dead. However, if someone is to die according to the Royal Will, it is necessary that that person have a name. I, Your Majesty's Servant, therefore chose the name of Kiam Sûng Ti to write down [on the death certificate]; and I thereby caused grief to the Royal Heart just because I am such a stupid, miserable Servant of Your Majesty. I therefore abjectly apologize. May it please Your Majesty!

LAO-A He should be boiled in oil!

WANG-TI Hey! If that's the case, wouldn't it amount to punishing him twice in the same day?

LAO-A Buddho! My former *phua* is still alive!<sup>5</sup>  
 WANG-TI Hey! Nevertheless, our son is not lost: he is here, and with his new wife....  
 LAO-A Nevertheless, Hæ Küng should be boiled in oil, because he presented falsehood to His Majesty, causing Him untold fright.  
 WANG-TI The law provides that he who executes the Royal Son should be boiled in oil, but he has *not* killed him. Moreover, We are delighted to find Our son—*both* our son *and* our daughter-in-law [elected]! And she has pleaded for the remission of the sins of all those who have offended on this occasion. Therefore, I am happy to pardon the crimes of Hæ Küng, Talaopao, and Capkim, and give them over to our son and daughter-in-law.

That is a very interesting ending to the play, and not only because clarifies what had been somewhat muddy and quick in

Gilbert's version. It also has something, perhaps, to contribute to our understanding of the "role" (in both a dramatic sense and a political sense) of the absolute monarch—for Vajiravudh was definitely still an absolute monarch!

King Chulalongkorn's "sermon" version of *The Mikado* was not written in such a form that it would allow of performance. King Vajiravudh's versions, on the other hand, were written to be performed. According to the only author to have considered the subject, *Wang Ti* was rehearsed for production shortly after it was composed, but it was never produced (Gesmankit 1966, 166). On a later occasion it was again rehearsed for production during the reign of King Prajadhipok (r. 1925–1932), but "for some reason" the king ordered the production cancelled. And still later it was prepared for radio broadcast, but again was cancelled. Perhaps the closest Bangkok audiences have come to seeing *The Mikado* was when an amateur group staged the show (in English) about fifteen years ago. It thus remains known only to a few, from the printed page rather than from the staged versions seen more than a century ago in Singapore by King Chulalongkorn and his young son Vajiravudh.

## NOTES

1. To my knowledge there has been just one subsequent edition (Anonymous 1966 [Cremation of Surarit Lekhayanon]) which combines the first and third of the Thai *Mikado* discussed here.
2. The diary of the Malayan trip lists a family party in the inner quarters on shipboard, but they are referred to only by their nicknames and not their full names and titles. Of the sixteen people (plus 21 servants) in this group, the titles of two children suggest references to Crown Prince Vajirunhis (who died in 1895 at the age of 17, referred to as "eldest son (*luk chai yai*)" and Prince Vajiravudh (b. 1881), referred to perhaps as "*luk chai lek* (younger son)" (Chulalongkorn 1932, 8).
3. My translation is too free by half; and though I have maintained the eight-syllable line, Vajiravudh's first line has in fact ten syllables, and he has one extra line, ending with the stock poetic exclamation, "Æi!"
4. The prefix "Mister" before Gilbert's name might suggest a date before Gilbert was knighted in 1907. However, the libretti of the Savoy operas are never (well, hardly ever!) published with "Sir" prefixing Gilbert's name, and the lack of such a designation here is not conclusive.
5. The only meaning the dictionary gives for *phua* is "husband". Could this refer to the previous occupant of the office of Lord High Executioner? Gilbert's libretto implies that the office was newly-created for Ko-Ko, and Vajiravudh's libretto seems to say the same.



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