

THE SHADOW-PLAY
AS A POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF
THE MASKED-PLAY¹

by

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Siamese dramatic art, with its sister art of music, has many features in common with those of the other Hinduized cultures of South-east Asia — to wit Cambodia, Java, Bali and of course the Lao people. It is obviously Indian in origin but has been greatly developed by Siamese national ideals.

This Indian origin is evident from the nature of its early inspiration — the story of Rama. Contrary to the standard Indian version of that story, the *Ramayana*, our versions have lost every religious significance, if they ever had one. Although our shadow-play is prefaced by a preliminary invocation to members of the Hindu Pantheon and also to the ancient Indian Master of Drama, Bharata the seer, thereby recalling the analogy of the *nandi* of classical Sanskrit drama, the invocation is taken in this country merely as a salutation to the Master of Drama and other masters, thus relegating the deities to a somewhat minor role. Even a human being is included in this invocation in the person of the Sovereign ruling the country. The reason for its lack of religious element is easy to detect.

To begin with, the earliest story of Rama in ancient India itself was just a folk-tale and was included in the collection of the Buddhist birth-stories. The inclusion, rather than indicating any connection with religion, meant that it was looked upon as a folk-tale. It was based no doubt upon historical facts, for Rama was in all probability a historical figure and a great national hero. That original

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version might have come over to this side of the Bay of Bengal at about the same time as primitive Buddhism as early as the IIIrd century of the Christian era. Mediaeval Indian versions such as the Tamil and the Bengali based upon the classical *Ramayana* came later to Java (cf. Baphuon, Angkor Wat etc.). These and the primitive folk-tale combined to produce what we have now in Siam.

While discussing the story of Rama, I would like now to take the opportunity to correct a notion that generally prevails about the provenance of the Siamese versions. They do not come from the *Ramayana*, for reasons already stated above. The only Siamese version based upon the *Ramayana* is that of His late Majesty King Rama VI adapted from its English translations.

To turn back to the story of Rama in Siam as an inspiration to our art, one meets with it everywhere. Traces of it abound in what is left of the art and culture of Ayudhya to say nothing of the Bangkok period. It is the theme of decoration in our architecture, sculpture, woodwork, furniture and of course murals. It is the main theme in literature or rather was. Above all it dominated the theatre. Let us now consider this last phase.

Siamese dramatic art probably existed from an early period of our history. Although epigraphical records exist of musical performances as far back as the XIIIth century (Rama Kamhaeng inscriptions), no direct mention of dramatic art has been found as yet that dates beyond the Palatine Law of King Boroma Trailokanath in the XVth century. In this particular instance mention is made of a ceremony called the Anointment of Indra (Indrabhisek) in which a sort of a pageant was celebrated depicting the Hindu myth of Vishnu churning the ocean to obtain ambrosia. The wording of this law is so obsolete that one does not quite know whether the pageant was meant to be an integral part of the ceremony or just one of those celebrations that accompany a great event. It seems more likely to have been a part of the ceremony. At any rate it is one of the earliest instances of anything approaching a dramatic

display in which men took the parts of celestial beings — gods, demons and characters out of the story of Rama. Some 300 years later, King Mongkut had a screen of gold lacquer made, on which was painted this very ceremony. The screen is, however, the handiwork of a comparatively modern artist who had at his disposal nothing more to rely upon than the interpretation of the King himself, who though a great scholar had merely that obsolete Law as his sole authority. The screen still exists and may be seen any day in the Audience Hall of Dusit in the Grand Palace flanking the central throne.

The Palatine Law mentions also many kinds of entertainments in vogue in the days of Ayudhya, including the Nang, or shadow-play. In a poetical romance called *Samudakos*, commenced by King Narai's jurisconsult, Phra Maha Rajagru who however died before finishing it so that the King himself continued the work but also left it unfinished, both parts therefore dating from the later XVIIth century, there are definite mentions of the shadow-plays. Its repertoire then was not limited as now to the story of Rama. Within a century of that time in the reign of "His Majesty of the Sublime Urn", otherwise King Boromakos (1732-1758), when Ayudhya culture shone out for the last time in a particularly brilliant evening bloom before the night set in to put an end to the capital's existence, dramatic art seemed to have reached its zenith. Besides shadow-plays, there were marionettes and ballets of all sorts. The *lakon* and the *khon* (dance-drama and masked-play) were known to have existed for certain in this period. New texts for the dance-dramas sprang into existence which became sources of inspiration for the revival of art and culture in the reign of King Rama I of the Bangkok dynasty.

To sum up then, Siamese dramatic art in the Ayudhya period is known to have existed first in the form of a Court pageant — greatly resembling the modern masked-play — in the XVth century, but did not seem to have been considered as a regular entertainment. The shadow-play, was in existence at least from about the same time, and was certainly a regular entertainment at the time of King

Narai in the late XVIIIth century. The dance-drama and the masked-play are not mentioned earlier than the later XVIIIth though they might have existed prior to that. It must be always borne in mind in this connection that Ayudhya literature existed only in MSS, and most of that was lost in the sack of the Capital in 1767.

The Shadow-play.

The Nang or shadow-play was of course revived in Bangkok. As it exists in our times, it is invariably based upon the story of Rama, the ancient Indian hero. Its book is mostly written in a metre (Chanda) called the *chabang* and is known as the *Kampak*, that is recitatives. The existing recitatives do not form a whole entity. They survive in fragments of different ages, the oldest dating from days of Ayudhya. In this type of entertainment the story is told by a chorus to the accompaniment of an exhibition of hide-figures on the screen of thin white cloth. The screen is erected in the open. Starting in the late afternoon, it was invariably prefaced by a series of long invocations. It is said that in the old days coloured figures, cut also out of buffalo-hide, were often exhibited at this juncture before dusk in short "curtain-raisers" portraying such episodes as the Pursuit of Mekhala, a dance of the seasons. Another preliminary that always accompanied or rather preceded the regular show was a fight between the white and the black monkey in which a seer would intervene. This is known as the "*Early evening episode of the Monkeys*", thus indicating the time of day in which it is performed. Darkness has therefore fallen and fires would now be lit on heaps of torches on the yonder side of the screen and the main story begun. We now see the exhibitors entering heart and soul into the performance by dancing with the figures and keeping up the regular movements with their bodies and legs, the hands being unavailable on account of their holding the figures. (Thus in the following performance we shall see the exhibitors of simian figures assuming the traditional restless movements, such as jumping and scratching their bodies. In the latter role the hand being unavailable they shake the figures as if being itched all of a sudden).

The shadow-play has almost gone out of existence. Fifty years ago it already ceased to be a popular entertainment, being retained merely as a part of the formal cremation-celebrations of the aristocracy. It was too slow for the popular taste. Even its resuscitation on a small scale as the present one meant considerable trouble for the organisers and I have no hesitation in saying that these deserve our profound gratitude.

The Masked-Play.

What, then, was the reason for the decline of its one-time popularity? In my opinion it was because of the fact that the dramatic appeal of the shadow-play was superseded by the development from it of other forms of entertainment, such as the masked-play or *khon*. The masked-play exists in various forms, such as the *khon before the screen*, the *khon with seating on a pole*, the *standard khon with a painted curtain* at the back of the stage which by the way is not separated from the audience by another curtain, and finally the *khon on a modern stage* of the western type, only introduced some 30 years ago by His late Majesty King Rama VI.

The first variety, the *khon before a screen*, was of course the immediate stage of transition from the shadow-play retaining as it does the screen of the *nang*. Although this fact has not been generally accepted, it seems to me obviously so for the following reasons. The presence of the screen is an indication of the transition; the side-long movements of the masked-players is also an indication of a former attempt to represent the hide-figures by means of human beings who thus try to show their profile rather than their full faces; the book of the *khon before the screen* was just the identical *Kampak* of the shadow-play in use before the composition of the *Ramakien* of 1798 by King Rama I.

This speculation has now been confirmed by the analogy of Java which I have only recently come across. According to an authority on the Javanese dance (R.M. Soeripno in *Javanese Classical Dances*, London Geographical Magazine, Vol. XIX, Sept. 1946),

the dance dramas are derived from plays with puppets silhouetted against the screen, called Wayang purwa or Wayang kulit. Wayang means shadows, and the fact that the play with human beings is called wayang, namely Wayang Wong, indicates clearly that the play with silhouettes is the original form. This is further shown not only by the mask-like lack of expression in the dancers' faces but also by their poses, since they always try to imitate the carved leather puppets of the shadow-play and to move in two dimensional directions." This Javanese analogy fits in to the letter with what I have been trying to prove.

The *masked-play before the screen* was performed in old days without any other stage accessory than is used in the shadow-play. Its book was identical, that is to say the Kampak. The action is quicker and more virile than the later types which are partly based on the elaborate dance-drama. The exhibition tonight is made up in the first part of the older type of the *screen-lakon*, but the modern type danced to the accompaniment of singing will be introduced later to show both of these developments.

The art of the Dance of our Bangkok period owes its modern improvements to King Rama II an all-round artist and author, and to Chao fa Krom Luang Pitaks Montri, his cousin and brother-in-law.

In order to be able to appreciate Siamese classical dancing, one must bear in mind that its principal aim is to tell its story by gestures accompanied by music. Every movement has a meaning and a combination of them, just as a combination of the *leitmotive* in the modern music of the West, make up the telling.

Now as to the plot.

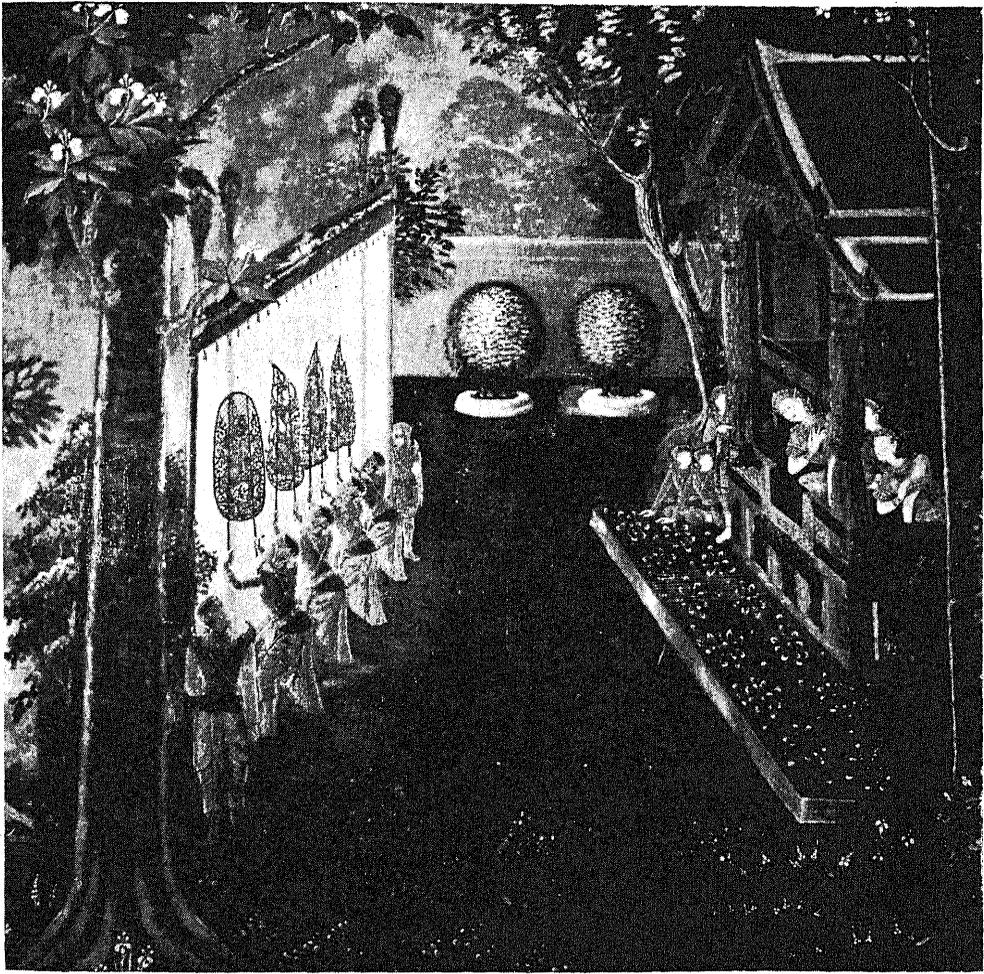
It was my original intention to give the audience an opportunity to compare the differences between the shadow-play by presenting an identical episode for both types. Such a process has proved to be too long. I shall therefore start with a scene for the shadow-play and then repeat that scene with the masked-play before the screen, going on later to exhibit the later type of the masked-play which is danced to the singing of recitatives in the lakon method.

We start therefore with Rama holding court and giving order to Sukrib, his generalissimo, to march the army out to the field of battle. Sukrib reviews his troops preceded by his generals, Hanuman and Ongkot. Rama, followed by his brother Lakshman and the demon Pipek, his ally, then reviews the troops and gives the order to march. The story thus far will be enacted on the screen as well as in dancing.

Now Rama meets his enemy, Virun Chambang mounted on a horse. The demon is distinguishable by his purple complexion and the diadem of fire over his crown. Fighting ensues and Virun Chambang resorts to a ruse of invisibility at the same time making inroads upon the monkey ranks. Rama, much perplexed, consults Pipek behind him, shot his magic arrow to dispel the charm killing the enemy's army and even his favourite mount, over whom he mourns. Virun Chambang now recognises the hopelessness of his cause; and, creating a magic dummy of his own likeness, flees to the end of the world, where he hides himself in a foam of the ocean.

Pipek in answer to Rama's questioning makes known that the enemy had fled. Rama therefore sends Hanuman after him. Arrived at a cave on the confines of the world, and learning from the monkeys of the forest that a lonely lady lived within it, Hanuman assumes the form of a handsome young prince with the intention of winning her good graces and possibly getting some information as to the enemy's hiding-place. From here we switch to the modern type of the masked-play in which the player dances to the strains of singing and music.

The disguised Hanuman enters the cave in a dance of leisurely elegance and coquetry, called the *chui-chai*. The lady turns out to be a celestial nymph under a curse from Siva to spend a lonely life until delivered by Hanuman the soldier of Rama. In order to prove his identity the latter assumes his simian form, and getting the required information throws her aloft to release her from the curse. He then proceeds into the ocean to the strain of a surging music suggesting the rolling of waves, finds his adversary with whom he engages in a realistic combat and kills him.



Shadow Play

Siamese painting

Collection Prince Rangsit of Chainath

