

A STUDY ON THAI FOLK TALE.

by

Phya Anuman Rajadhon

Ayudhya the former capital of Thailand preceding Bangkok, was founded by King Ramadhibodi I in 1349 A.D. Before he became the first king of Ayudhya, Ramadhibodi was a ruler of the city of U-tôṅ, succeeding his father-in-law the then ruler. U-tôṅ is now an *amphoe* (district) of the same name in the Province of Supanburi some 130 kilometres by road north-west of Bangkok. Who was the father of Ramadhibodi and where did he come from? History does not tell.

King Ramadhibodi is known popularly in folk tales as *Tao* U-tôṅ; a designation commonly bestowed on all rulers of U-tôṅ by storytellers. *Tao* means in one sense "king" in romantic tales, and *ū-tôṅ* means a cradle made of gold which Ramadhibodi had in tradition as his cot when he was a child. A well-known legendary tale gives the following account.

Once upon a time there was a miserable man in an abject state coming from nowhere. He lived in a hovel in the city of Traitrūṅs. Where Traitrūṅs was no one knows for sure except it must be one of the ruined cities somewhere in Central Thailand, of which there are many. *Traitrūṅs* means the thirty-three chief Vedic gods which Buddhism had adopted in its mythology; it therefore also meant the "city of gods" or heaven.

Now, this man had fleshy knobs all over his face and body. He was therefore, nick-named *Sên-pom* meaning a hundred thousand knobs. To eke his scanty living the man grew vegetables for the market. In one place nearest his hut he planted *makhūa*.¹ He planted and watered it with his urine as fertilizer. The plants thrived and bore abnormally large fruits. The king of the City of Traitrūṅs had a beautiful daughter. One night she dreamt through the inspiration of Indra, the chief god of the Buddhist pantheon, that she had eaten a wonderful and delicious "makhūa" fruit. To fulfil her dream the princess' maid went to market but found no such wonderful thing.

1. Name for a species of eggplants or brinjals, of which there are many varieties. Its fruits are often dipped in certain kinds of Thai sauce called *nam-prik*, etc.

At last Sên-pom came to hear of it; he presented the princess through her maid with one fruit from his abnormal *makhüa* plant.

Many months passed by and the princess became pregnant after partaking of the *makhüa* fruit and a male child was subsequently born. The king on hearing the news was very angry, for the princess could not explain who the father of her child was. Indeed, no one could enlighten the king about this mystery. At last the king commanded that a proclamation be publicly made to find out the identity of the child's father. "Let all the men in the city each bring a piece of sweetmeat and hand it to the child," so the proclamation ran. If the child accepts readily anyone's sweets, he will be recognized as the child's father and become a royal son-in-law." Everyone failed for the child never accepted any of the sweets handed to him. The last person to come was Sên-pom who had no sweets to present to the child. The only thing he had with him was a piece of cold cooked rice (*khao yen*)¹ which he handed to the child who readily accepted it. The child's acting in such an undreamed of manner made the king very furious, but he could not do otherwise than what he had promised as a king, so he gave the hand of the princess to Sên-pom and at the same time banished Sên-pom and his newly won bride with her child from his city.

Sên-pom with the princess and child had to leave the city immediately. After wandering for sometime, the three came to a forest and settled there. Now, as is usual for the hero and heroine in Thai folk tales, Indra, the chief of the gods, felt uneasy, or in the Thai idiom *felt hot* when any unusual thing was happening and demanding the god's attention. He looked down on the earth with his divine eyes and saw the plight of Sên-pom who was destined to become a king later on. Transforming himself into a monkey after descending to earth he presented a magic drum to Sên-pom and told him that whoever beat the drum would have his wishes instantly realized. But the drum would have effect thrice only and no more. After having given the drum and the instructions to Sên-pom the divine monkey disappeared.

Sên-pom beat the drum wishing firstly that all the fleshy knobs on his face and body would disappear; and lo! all the blemishes

1. *Khao Yen* is the remainder of cooked rice in a pot after one has eaten one's meal; hence it is a left-over fit only as beggar's food.

on his face and body were gone instantly. He became a handsome young man. He beat the drum again for the second and the third time wishing for a city and gold and they came true even as he wished them. He named the city Thep Nakhorn or "the god's city" and ruled it as its first king with the royal name of Siri Jai of Chiengsên.¹ As for the gold, he built a cot for his child who subsequently succeeded him as King U-tôn (= gold cradle or cot), and who also was, historically, the founder of the old capital of Thailand, Ayudhya.

Now, There are two motifs relevant to my study of this folk tale, i.e. *the person with a hundred thousand fleshy knobs* and *the three wishes*. In a Mon story there was a person with warts all over his body who afterwards became a Mon king. I heard the story orally from a Mon priest and scholar² some twenty years ago but unfortunately I have forgotten the story, for at that time I was not interested and did not take notes of it. It is a historical fact that the central part of Thailand, the Menam Basin, a thousand or more years ago were peopled by a Mon-speaking race who later mixed freely, racially and culturally, with the Thai, late comers from North Thailand and beyond. Historians tell us that the Mons at those times were a relatively civilized race as compared to the Thai and other neighboring races. Probably the Thais got the story of Sên-pom from the Mon; and no doubt the Mon, chronologically in turn, got their story of a person with numerous warts from India, for the Mons were the first bearers of Indian civilization, especially Buddhism, to this part of the world. Only this year, 1963 A.D. I met a noted Indian folklorist,³ who had made a suggestion in reply to my enquiry for some traces of the story of Sên-pom. He said that it might originate from a certain episode concerning the god Indra as depicted in Hindu mythology. The story runs thus :

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1. Traditionally Thep Nakhorn City was built by King Siri Jai of Chiengsên in 1319 A.D. and King U-tôn, his son, succeeded him in 1344 A.D. Undoubtedly the legendary tale of King U-tôn bears some traces of historical fact, but it is so mixed up with fiction that it is hard to unravel. It is still a moot point among Thai historians. King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) had in 1913 A.D. written a theatrical play entitled *Tao Sên-pom* in which he offered certain historical suggestions. Thai history is outside the theme I am writing on and my aim is a comparative study of Thai folk tales only.
 2. Īra Sumedh Muni, late abbot of Wat Jana Songkrām, Bangkok.
 3. The late Dr. Kali Prasad,

“According to the Mahabharata he (Indra) seduced, or endeavoured to seduce, Ahalya, the wife of the sage Gautama, and that sage’s curses impressed upon him a thousand marks resembling the female organ, so he was called Sa-yoni; but these marks were afterwards changed to eyes, and he is hence called . . . “the thousand eyed” – John Dowson, Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, etc.).

The noted Indian folklorist further informed me in reply to my question that in the story of Indra as told by the folk, the thousand-eyed marks on Indra were changed into a thousand fleshy protuberances.

The resemblance between the idea of a hero having a hundred thousand fleshy knobs (which simply means “very numerous” in the Thai idiom), and the story of the Indian god Indra having, incidentally, a thousand eyes on his body through a curse is very obvious. Presumably such a motif in the story is of Indian origin, and perhaps the story of Sên-pom is a development of the former one. Naturally the story adopted has its modifications; names are sometimes altered, scenes are changed, and certain circumstances are added or omitted to suit local surrounding and tradition.

The next motif, the three wishes, is to be found also in one of the Thai droll stories orally narrated among young men in their social company. The story is humorous but borders on vulgarity and offends propriety. It is therefore not to be found in print. However, the gist of the story can be told here at the sacrifice of certain humour. Naturally, a story with such crude humour found ready hearers among the young people if left exclusively to themselves. The story runs thus :

A man of a humble class received a magical object as a present from a supernatural being in return for the man’s goodwill. This magical object had a certain potency for the owner by which he could make successively only three wishes for things he desired. After the three wishes had been fulfilled, the magical object would lose its potency. Like many other tales of the type portraying a low estimation of the weaker sex, the man divulged the secret of the three wishes to his wife. She like her kind, wanted him to wish for too

many things pertaining to the adornment of the fair sex. There was, of course, a disagreement and high words passed between the two. In a fit of anger the man invidiously wished for numerous male generative organs to adorn his body. Instantly his body became studded with the objects he had wished for. He was very frightened by the consequence and so was his wife. Both of them were now in a sober mood and thought of a way to get rid of the obnoxious objects. The wife proposed that the man make a second wish for the disappearance of these unpleasant things. He agreed and at once all the unpleasant things on his body were gone, together with his own natural one too. He was compelled to make the third and the last wish recalling by right his own identical characteristic to be re-instated as a man. The magical object then lost its potency and the man was no richer than before.

*In the Book of Sindibad*¹ there is a story of a "holy man who spent all his time in devotion, and had a peri for his constant and familiar companion for many years. At length the peri was obliged to leave him, word having been brought her of the illness of her children. On parting, she taught him the 'Three Great Names' (of God), on pronouncement of one of which, on any great emergency, his wish would be immediately granted. One night the sheikh communicates the circumstance to his wife, who dictated to him what he is to wish for. The result shows the folly of consulting with women; but is unfit to be repeated. It is sufficient to say that the tale is similar to that of the "Three Wishes", by La Fontaine, to Prior's 'Ladle', and to that given in Syntipas (Greek version of the Book of Sindibad).

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1. The Book of Sindibad or, the Story of the King, his sons, the damsel, and the seven vizirs, by W.A. Clouston, pp. 71-37, privately printed 1884. There is an old version of this Book in Thai which bears the name of Paduma Jataka.

In appendix XV of the Book of Sindibad, W.A. Clouston says:

It may possibly interest some students of comparative folk lore to know that the Persian version of this story (the Peri and the Devotee) the First Wish of the devotee is similar to that in the old Castilian version, *Libro de los Engannos et los Asayamientos de los Mugerres*, appended to Professor D. Comparetti's most valuable *Ricerche intorno al Libro di Sindibad*. And it is perhaps worthy of note that the Turkish rendering of the story agrees, in this respect, with the Persian and old Castilian versions: which seems to show that the Ottoman translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* was made from a different text from the Calcutta or the Bulaq.

