

Nang Yai Puppetry

A Dramatic Art Form of Thailand



Michael Meschke explores and documents an ancient theatrical art known as Nang Yai, which is a fusion of dance and puppet performance.

Background

Creativity in general and the creation of art in particular, are some of civilization's most important detectors of what lies in the future. If creativity is threatened, society is threatened, and if there were no longer creation of art, this would forebode the end of our civilization. Politicians and governments around the world are, with a few exceptions, unaware of how crucial creativity is. In many countries, government grants for culture most often remain a marginal part of state budgets. One exception is the Swedish State Development Agency (SIDA), which recognises cultural work as an accepted part of the overall goals of development. This project to focus on Nang Yai is supported by the agency.

Just as one cannot stop terrorism as long as one fights its effects rather than the reasons behind it, one cannot help people in need without paying deep attention to their cultural and creative needs and abilities.

In a country such as Thailand, with its history, hierarchical structures, and lasting social discrepancies, it is difficult to disregard the obvious connection between culture, cultural policy, and politics.

Dr. Kusuma Venzky-Stalling, a former professor at the distinguished Thammasat University in Bangkok, has done research on the relationship between the dramatic arts and politics in Thailand. According to her, the dramatic arts in the past were meant to assert “the legitimacy and authority of the absolute monarchy” – theatre for nationalistic purposes. This changed when constitutional monarchy was introduced in Thailand in 1932 (the idea of upholding the divine status of the king, however, lives on in folk tales, where he is an equal among gods).

During the 1930s, changes in Thailand were dictated by the needs for national development and the search for an identity. Luang Vichitr, author and the country’s first head of the Fine Arts Department, had the wisdom to encourage and make use of the dramatic arts. He said: “Art is a part of the national treasure. A country without its own culture is a nation without self-respect. Every country with self-esteem must develop its own culture, which distinguishes it from others and which shows distinctive, original creativity”.

Consequently, the arts were an important part of reflecting the nation’s development. But that presupposes artistic independence and freedom of expression. According to Dr. Kusuma, when art became a “tool to influence and educate the people”, the ministry became a propaganda vehicle for nationalism, education, and adjustment of social behavior. Vichitr took up his duties the same year Goebbels became Hitler’s propaganda minister. Goebbels used film, while Vichitr used theatre.¹

Starting Points

The purpose of the Nang Yai project was to try to define and map out the existence of Nang Yai in present-day Thailand, to explore its development, and how it can be promoted and supported.

Nang Yai, literally translated as large pieces of leather, is a puppetry that combines two dramatic art forms into one – shadow play and

¹ Dr Kusuma Venzky-Stalling, Drama Dept, Thammasat University, “The Use of Theatrical Performances for Political Purpose in Thailand”, 2003

choreographed dance. Those who play the parts, manipulating the shadow play figures, do so in front of the backlit screen rather than behind it, where it normally would be done. These performers are not only puppeteers, but also dancers. They make lively movements with their arms while holding “dolls” above their heads. In rhythm, they dance with their bodies, using their legs mostly in choreographed and stamping movements, etc.. I have never come across the merging of two dramatic art forms like this anywhere else.

Perhaps one should actually speak of the merging of three art forms, including visual art, if one regards the leather figures as large static pictures. Some of them depict entire scenes and other individual figures.

The figures’ heads, arms, and legs do not have joints. Their movements depend on how the entire picture is set into movement in the room.

During the course of my work, I encountered other researchers, besides Dr. Kusuma, who have observed this theatre form, and the Swedish expert on Asia, Sven Broman. Prominent authorities on the subject have not only studied Nang Yai since the 1800s, but have also repeatedly warned of its extinction. This has not helped, though; Nang Yai has fewer practitioners today than ever.

Nang Yai has roots and traditions in several other Southeast Asian countries, sharing similar forms but different names. In Cambodia, it is called Sbek Thom. It is not clear when or from where it originated. There are different views on how widespread and popular Nang Yai...dia, it used to be. Sometimes it is characterized as folk art; sometimes as entertainment for the aristocracy.

According to one researcher, Prince Dhanivat, Nang Yai would have vanished completely if it had not survived as a part of the aristocracy’s funeral ceremonies. “It was too slow for the people’s taste”.²

Mattani Rutnin, eminent researcher at Thammasat University, says that Nang Yai traditions can be traced back to the 1300s. Accounts made by European travellers show that it has a prosperous past, not only as entertainment for the court and elite, but also for common people.³

² Prince Dhanivat, Kromamun Bidyalabh, “The shadow-play as a possible origin of the masked-play (Khon)”, Bangkok 1947

³ Professor Mattani Rutnin, Thammasat University, “The Siamese theatre”, Bangkok 1975

In 1988, Kannika Limvanich wrote: “It is a great tragedy for the world of arts that, due to our rapidly changing society and the influx of western cultural influence in this century, the Nang Yai heritage is now on the verge of extinction. The remaining manipulators and reciters are mostly in their late 60s or 70s. Without sufficient numbers of new recruits, properly trained by these ancient teachers, it will be only a matter of a few short years before our precious heritage disappears altogether”.⁴



René Nicolas, researcher at Vajiravudh College, had already written about the shadow play figures of Nang Yai back in 1926: “These leather items are now kept in temple-hangars where they are victims of rats and mildew”.⁵

I saw with my own eyes, in 2005, that this was still the case; leather figures, several hundred years old and partly broken, were kept in drawers in a very humid room, referred to as a “museum”, within the temple Ban Don in the countryside near the city, Rayong.

As part of my project, I obtained humidifiers which were installed in the “museum”, and I also advised the locals on why and how the art form should be promoted, and how technology could be of help.

Content

In the beginning, there was dance, then came shadow play; together they became Nang Yai, a theatrical presentation in an original form. Let us take a closer look at the different elements of Nang Yai.

What is the performance about? The local audience has grown up with the content and does not need an introduction. To understand and be absorbed by the content, a western spectator must first penetrate a cultural barrier which I like to call “the seductive surface of eastern aesthetics”. We are easily blinded by exotic aesthetics, which are so peculiar that they obscure the content, but if we can see through this, we will be surprised by the familiarity of the subject matter, which deals with the universal struggle of humanity between good and evil.

⁴ Kannika Limwanich, ‘The origin of Nang Yai’, at Nang Yai Festival, Bangkok 1988

⁵ Professor René Nicolas ‘Le théâtre d’ombres au Siam’, Siam Society, Bangkok 1926

We recognize it in our western cultures; in Homero's *Odyssey*; in *Dante's Divina Commedia*; in Cervante's *Don Quixote*; as well as Rune Lindström's *Himlaspelet*.

In Asia, this theme can be found in *Ramayana* (*Ramakien* in Thai) where man is torn between the gods and demons in their rivalries and conflicts, much like the stories of the gods in Greek mythology. In the midst of violent and political intrigues and wars, there is also an abundance of love, poetry, and humor. It is easy to relate to such stories.

Ramayana, which means "the journey of Rama", depicts the destiny of Rama, a divinity who descended to earth. His beautiful wife, Sita, is abducted by the ten-headed demon king Rawana (Totsakan in Thai). Rama and his brother Lakshmana go through thousands of hardships to free Sita. His greatest ally is the monkey Hanuman, who is skilled in magic and is one of the heroes of the epic. After endless adventures of supernatural events and bloody wars, Rawana is defeated for good, and Rama and Sita are reunited.

Form

The leather figures are cut out of cow or buffalo hide, and are magnificently painted on one side. Performances used to take place in daylight. This was before the introduction of shadow play at night-time (with the use of the light from oil lamps – now fluorescent lamps). Nang Yai was also the prototype for Khon, Thailand's most widespread form of dance theatre where dancers wear masks.

The actual shadow play figures are unique. The hair of the hide remains on their unpainted backs, which makes them just as beautiful when seen from behind. I was able to bring a lovely collection to the Marionette Museum in Stockholm in the 1970s. They are now unobtainable.

The Nang Yai figures are completely different from those of other shadow play theatre in the region, such as the Indonesian Wayang Kulit and the giant figures from Andra Pradesh in India. Nang Yai puppets do not have movable limbs. The figures are often more than a square metre in size, and show frozen dramatic actions with heroes or demons, loving couples like Rama and Sita, or several characters engaged in violent battle. Almost always, the action is framed by stylized scenery.

The hide of the Nang Yai is perforated with tiny holes and decorative patterns. After sunset, rays of flickering light shine through these holes, which give the design the quality of elegant filigree-work. It is only then that the figures' artistic formation fully appears. The women are supposed to be light-skinned and their faces, therefore, mostly consist of holes for the light from behind.

The Nang Yai figures include several archetypes/gestures: Nang Fow, for example, is one-metre tall and portrayed in semi-profile, with hands in prayer and feet in a walking position, while Nang Jub are battle monkeys, one black and one white, whose struggle against each other opens every performance.

The Performers

Traditionally, the performers, musicians and "singers" who narrate the story are local villagers. They have no special education, learning from the previous generation through practice, usually. The amateurish nature of the performances appeals to those who appreciate genuine emotion and authenticity.

Despite featuring an overwhelming abundance of gods and demons, the Nang Yai stories primarily reflect the daily life of ordinary people. Regrettably, while Nang Yai represents the aspirations of society, it is unfortunate that new performers are hard to find among modern, impatient youngsters. One of the factors is the low status of the art form in the eyes of Bangkok's sophisticated audience who are used to skilled actors and the polished aesthetics of theatre performances.

The performers move their figures in a way that triggers questions in the minds of those who are used to European aesthetics. Europeans tend to want everything explained to them. For instance, why are the shadow play figures seldom held close to the screen, so that their contours and patterns are seen clearly, with sharpness? A Thai performer told me that it was probably coincidental. I remembered a counter question I once received in a different time and culture; priest and shadow player Krishnankutty Pulavar from Kerala, India asked me: "Have you ever seen a human with sharp contours?"

Another question I posed in Thailand was why the figures are sometimes held in front of the screen and sometimes behind it. They are shown



behind the screen when they are supposed to be far away, and in front when they are supposed to be close by – it was as simple as that!

On the stage in front of the screen, the performers can fight, chase and step on each other. The flat, two-dimensional performance suddenly becomes three-dimensional. It is important to master the choreography that goes with each character. The Hanuman performer, for example, has one specific movement pattern; as do the gods and demons, etc..

The Stage

What we would call “the stage” is a shadow play screen which can be set up anywhere, outdoors or indoors, in a temple hall, a home, etc.. There may be small side stages in front of or next to the main stage. The oil lamp or electrical light source is behind the screen, which is made of white cotton fabric, and can be as high as 6 metres and as wide as 16 metres. It is either held up by sturdy poles of bamboo, or suspended with ropes between trees or walls.

In outdoor performances, there is sometimes a low podium between the main “stage” and the audience to enhance the dancers’ stomping. Music comes from an orchestra which, like the narrator, sits directly on the ground between the “stage” and the audience.

My Personal Encounters with Nang Yai

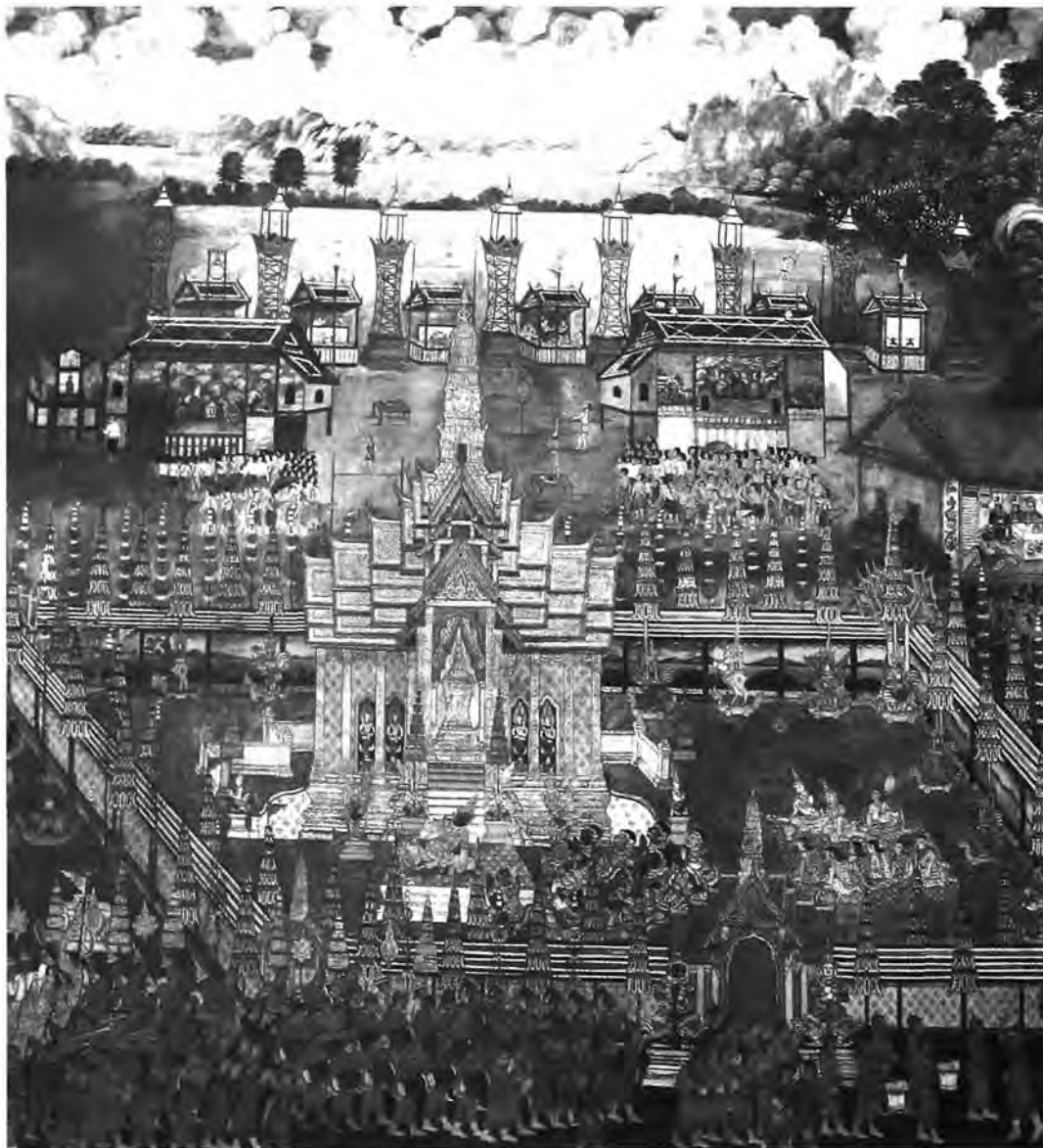
My interest in Nang Yai began in the 1970s, in a handicraft shop in Bangkok. They sold these picture cut-out photographs of hide (shadow play figures) with thousands of holes in them. I also saw photographs of people holding these leather figures above their heads. The photographs puzzled me because the performers were in front of the shadow play screen. I had learned that the audience of a shadow play should see the figures as black and white shadows, which had in fact given the theatre form its name. I was surprised to see that they were painted in strong colours.

As a tourist in Thailand then, I saw a large number of paintings from the 1700s on a wall of the Emerald Buddha Temple in Bangkok. They depict the entire Ramakien national epic. I was mesmerized by one of the last paintings. It illustrated the funeral of demon king Totsakan, apparently celebrated as a great national festival with lots of entertainment. In the left hand corner of the painting, there is a Nang

Yai theatre with performers in full action. The painting also included acrobats and different puppet theatres; my preferred interpretation of this is that puppet theatre must have been a widespread phenomenon in Thailand when these paintings were made in the 1700s.

These paintings inspired the idea of creating the “Ramayana” performance in Sweden in 1984. The magnificent epic, so fascinatingly depicted, enthralled the Swedish and western theatre audience.

After a year of studies and preparations, the finished performance by the Marionette Theatre, Sweden became a two-dimensional interpretation of the paintings; the difference being that everything was in motion (hundreds of lively, flat figures seemed to be jumping in



Mural painting along the gallery of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Scene of Totsakan's funeral.

and out of the paintings). In this manner, visual arts and national epic of Thailand were both introduced to generations of Swedish adults and children.

During 1974-75, the Marionette Theatre brought the performance on tour in Asia for the first time. When I arrived in Bangkok, I enquired about Nang Yai, but received scant information. At the Ministry of Culture, they told us that it was extinct. However, during another trip in 1980, Eha Arg at the Swedish Embassy managed to find out that a troupe was giving a performance on the outskirts of the city, Rayong. She generously drove us there in her car. We ended up next to a carnival with loud rock music, shrieking dodgem cars, and hysterically spinning Ferris wheels. On a small grassy space nearby, there was a white screen suspended on a large bamboo frame. A group of musicians were sitting in front of it, tuning their instruments. The “auditorium” was the lawn, a lonely, western style armchair stood at the back.

The crowd moved about behind the screen. They were waiting for a prominent dignitary who had requested a private performance. I was later told that this art form survived, thanks to wealthy patrons requesting performances on special occasions.

When the dignitary, a lanky, white-haired westerner with the posture of a very important person, had taken his seat in the armchair, and the performance began, my patience was rewarded by several realizations: this was obviously a fascinating dramatic art form; secondly, it would probably have been even more fascinating had I understood the language and content; thirdly, the local audience was apparently very familiar with the story. People showed up out of nowhere and discretely sat down in front of the foreign guest until the lawn was packed.

The Threats

Another realization – a negative one – related to how the performance also exemplified the conflict between authenticity and present-day decadence. It was easy to observe how the art form was being threatened, not only because of a lack of support, but also from within, through the performers’ varying attitudes.

The old men in the ensemble danced barefoot, wearing beautiful costumes and bands of Thai silk around their heads and waists. Their eyes were constantly fixed on their shadow play figures. The younger

performers danced in Nike-sneakers, wore plastic head bands and t-shirts with bright red Coca-Cola emblems on their backs. Their eyes wandered and their jaws were busy chewing gum.

One thing the young and old had in common was that now and then they disappeared behind the screen and returned looking dizzier each time. I sneaked behind the screen to take a look. There were women back there serving the sweaty men bottles of 'refreshment' that certainly did not contain just water!

Time passed and my interest in Nang Yai did not grow any weaker. How could such a unique art form nearly disappear from a dramatic art culture as vibrant as Thailand's? There are in fact government grants from the Fine Arts Department to support certain dramatic art forms, especially the country's classic Khon dance.

Khon dance is regularly performed in sparkling shows at tea time in Bangkok's largest hotels. The tourists are hardly capable of distinguishing whether the dance routines are superficial, shortened versions or not. Even I admit to ignorance in this regard. Sophisticated, western demands of authenticity seemed slightly out of place here where tourism is, like in many other parts of Asia, the prerequisite for the survival of artistic traditions, though perhaps in a watered-down form.

The fact that Nang Yai does not receive any grants might have to do with its status as entertainment for common people rather than as highbrow culture. It supposedly lacks the power to attract audiences, but as a unique form of folk art, that is precisely what Nang Yai should be able to do, if it had the chance.

Social Contributions through Art

Thirty years after my first encounter with Nang Yai, the above-mentioned Dr. Kusuma came to my assistance. She informed me that the practice of Nang Yai today could be found in three temples in the province of Ratchaburi, with a well established school in the Wat Khanon temple.

We went to the Wat Ban Don temple in Rayong to have a look and document our findings, and were received by Mr. Amnat, a chief member of the temple and a Nang Yai specialist. He had a troubled look on his face as he showed us the temple's museum with its many



*Illustration by
Pattanapong Varanyanon*

dry and brittle Nang Yai figures (this was where the humidifiers came of use).

He then invited us into the large temple hall. We crossed a yard where a small army of young men were practicing with figures. There were new leather figures lined up along the wall in the temple hall; they were copies of the old ones. A small orchestra practised in one corner; monks and boys ran back and forth. The boys were very young, many of them merely children.

I was in a school for Nang Yai!

Elderly teachers taught the boys how to move the leather figures, some of which were larger than the boys, and also how to move their own bodies with emphasis on precise dance moves.

As it turned out, the boys did not belong to the temple, but were from schools in the surrounding villages. They were given the opportunity to study Nang Yai at the temple as they did not possess the aptitude for regular schooling. There, they excelled beyond expectations, and displayed a natural feel for rhythm and drama, thus winning the endorsement of the adults.

A figure depicting the monkey general, Hanuman, stood against a pillar. I saw little Pitaya, ten years old, stand in front of the figure, with his hands in prayer and head bowed respectfully before he took Hanuman in his hands and started to practise with total concentration, really living the part.

A nearly extinct dramatic art form, with roots in religious myths and rites, was being revived in a temple, a place where it originated from. At the same time, young outcasts were given new challenges and fresh motivation in life.

A social contribution was being combined with an artistic venture into a synthesis worthy of imitation.

Conclusions

Just the fact that someone from the other side of the planet came and showed some interest gave the boys in Wat Ban Don, their teachers, and possibly even the villagers in the long run, unexpected encouragement.

If they were to receive international recognition as well, perhaps the Thai government might realize what a resource Nang Yai can be as it evolves in Thailand. Recognition in one's own country often comes through appreciation from abroad.

In addition, there is a need for relatively small funds to finance and organize tours. It is also important to reach those in power. There is still a tendency to keep one's guard up towards foreign "know it alls", more or less rightfully so.

To gain a new audience, Nang Yai needs to appeal to youngsters, both nationally and internationally. In the old days, lengthy stories would go on for hours on end, accompanied by monotonous recitation. When old traditions get stuck in nothing but repetition, stagnation occurs. My Indian friend, philosopher S.C. Malik, perfectly expresses what tradition is: "Tradition is continuous creation in the now"!

Renewal is inevitable. This could include a respectful adjustment to our times in terms of "action", "timing", and concentration. Theatrical aspects, primarily dramaturgic concentration, can be conveyed without interfering with the depths of content or religious anchorage.

While westerners tend to try to break down moralisms and moralizing, eastern fosterage and traditions include a natural familiarity with real morals – we must be careful not to meddle in this.

Another conclusion is that theatre goers around the world would gain valuable knowledge about this dramatic art form by seeing it performed.

Professor Michael Meschke is an eminent practitioner of puppet theatre, and has devoted a lifetime to the practice and research of puppetry. Based in Sweden (Stockholm), he travels widely outside it, presenting performances and participating in international seminars and workshops. Meschke has published a book, 'In Search of Aesthetics for the Puppet Theatre', and is also providing assistance in establishing small puppet theatres.