

Parallelisms of Theatre and the Visual Arts in Thailand and Cambodia

by Jukka MIETTINEN

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the third article by the author dealing with the parallelisms between theatre and visual arts. The first article appeared in the SPAFA Digest Vol. 6, No. 1, 1985 where the author gave a general introduction on the parallelisms between theatre and visual arts. Among the parallelisms is that both share the same notion of space of which it could be seen in baroque-stage in Europe, where the same perspectives, aberrations and illusory effects which characterize European baroque painting were also used on the baroque stage. This phenomena also applies to Kabuki-stage which is a broad and low like Japanese horizontal scroll painting. Shadow puppet theatre which is performed in various forms in Southeast Asia has the elements from both visual arts and theatre. Shadow play approximates the arts of painting in two dimensions and scenic picture.

The second article was published in the SPAFA Digest Vol. 6, No. 2, 1985 where the author focused on India. The parallel between the theatre and the visual arts in India is extremely clear. Traditional art serves religion and all forms of arts are basically sacral art. Thus all forms of arts illustrate a common set of themes and the different forms of art from a uniform tradition. The *Natyasastra* (a manual on the arts of dance and theatre) defines the fundamentals of Indian aesthetic philosophy. It presents the most central aesthetic principles of Indian classical dance, basic poses and symbolic hand gestures which are also utilized in the visual arts.

Continued from page 25

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- Abbreviation : JMBRAS = Journal of the Malaysian Branch, Royal Asiatic Society

This article deals with parallelisms in the theatre and the visual arts in Thailand. An outline of the Khmer culture is also necessary, since the histories of Thailand and Cambodia are closely intertwined.

CAMBODIA

Very little is known of the theatre of the golden age of the Khmer culture. The founder of the empire, Jayawaram II, arrived from Java in the beginning of the 9th century A.D. He was the founder of the Khmer empire, which was one of the most magnificent Hindu civilizations transplanted to Indo-China¹. He brought with him from Java artists, and possibly also dancers. The early reliefs portraying dance scenes at the temples of Borobudur and Prambanan in Java show that 9th century Javanese dance had strong Indian influences². Thus it is most probable that early Khmer dances also contained Indian influences. If we could suddenly see early Khmer dance, we might join George Coedès in stating, as he writes about Khmer architecture: "But as soon as one looks behind the external forms for the motivating inspiration, one finds an Indian idea"³.

Cambodia was the first place in mainland Southeast Asia where Ramayana was known. It was known in Sanskrit⁴. Many extant reliefs depict scenes from the epic. Dance probably held a central position in Khmer court and temple ceremonies. An indication of this is the fact that the royal palace at Angkor contained a large dance hall and that the temple at Ta Prohm housed a troupe of no fewer than 615 dance girls⁵.



Bas relief at Banteay Kdei, two apsaras dancing on lotus flowers. Late 12th century.

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Let us now take a look at what the extant reliefs tell about Khmer dance and theatre. Unfortunately I have not been able to visit Cambodia, so my observations are based on available photographic materials, and my visits to Thailand and the Guimet Museum in Paris. An absolute prerequisite for a more thorough study would be an expedition to Cambodia, but unfortunately this is not possible at the moment.

Khmer art often depicts dance motifs. The most renowned are the apsaras, the dancing heavenly maidens, who are depicted bare-breasted in apparently lively dances. Their legs are markedly bent with one foot up high over the head. The hands are raised and the fingers bent elastically in different gestures. Another female type depicts the ethereally beautiful devas, whose appearance and positions are almost diametrically contradictory to the earthly nature of the apsaras. The devas wear enormous headgear. Their postures are restrained. The feminine ideal of the devas is aristocratic and noble.

It is difficult to find "noble" masculine heroes comparable to the devas. One could, however, characterize as noble the figure of Rama in the relief "Rama and the Golden Goat" at Angkor Wat, although his dance posture does not significantly differ from the energetic postures of the other masculine figures. Typical features among the masculine dancers are open feet (pile), and markedly bent knees. The



Angkor Thom Temple 12-13th C. A.D. Detail of a relief in the Royal Terrace located at the North end showing a warrior protecting two small figures at either side. His stance shows strong, male movements in Khmer dance.

reliefs create the impression that the dancers are shifting their weight from one foot to the other. The giants and demons engaged in battle often have a staff in their hands. The dance posture and staff immediately remind one of the demoniac roles in Thai Khon.

It is generally presumed that the Khmer did not perform large-scale dance drama⁶, but the large amount of dance scenes in the reliefs would indicate that dance drama may have existed—something in the line of Thai Khon. Some indication of this might be that:

1. The reliefs depict sizable scenes out of the Ramayana.
2. The reliefs contain specific basic figures, each with their own distinct dance styles (as in the Khon).
These types are:
 - a. The Apsaras, spirited female dancers.
 - b. The Devas, noble female dancers.
 - c. Heroes and divinities.
 - d. Demons, warriors, strong masculine figures.
 - e. Monkeys and other animals (which are sometimes portrayed by human beings wearing animal masks as in the Thai Khon).
3. Tantric sculpture contains a multiheaded mask type which might be a preliminary form of the mask of the figure Totsakan (Ravana).

In the 15th century, the Thais conquered part of the western territories of the weakened Khmer empire. As a result, Angkor was abandoned as a capital. The Thais had transported a part of the Khmer court and dancers to Ayutthaya and adopted Khmer dance tradition, although they developed it in their own manner during the succeeding centuries. The result is present day Thai dance, based on adaptations from Cambodia during the 18th and 19th centuries⁷.

EARLY PHASE - DANCING SCULPTURES

Before the founding of the first Thai Kingdom, the earlier art styles of the region were those found in the Indianized Kingdoms of Mon called Dvaravati and Khmer. The South on the Malay-Thai Peninsula was in contact with the Srivijaya



Dancing Khmer apsara at Phimai Museum.

Kingdom. Very little is known of early theatre, but probably dance and theatre were strongly influenced by India. This is indicated by extant visual arts, which show evidences of Indian influence. The Dvaravati school reflects the influence of the Indian Gupta and Pala art, while Srivijaya art have close parallels with the Indianized art of Java and the schools of Southern India.

Dances are depicted in early Thai sculpture (there are no extant paintings from the early eras). The most important groups of sculptures which contain dance scenes are the reliefs at the Khmer temples of Phimai, the bronze sculptures of the Lop Buri school and tantric sculptures. The Khmer influenced works provide analogous information about dance as do the above mentioned Cambodian reliefs. A reoccurring theme is that of bare-breasted spiritedly dancing maidens: the apsaras. Thus it seems possible that the Khmer dances were known in Thailand already at an early stage⁸.

Extant tantric sculptures that portray dance often depict a dancing yogi, whose dance is similar to that of the Khmer



A dancing tantric god. Bangkok National Museum.



A Nora dancer in a typical open plié pose.

apsaras, and Hevajra. The latter has multiple hands, which create an illusion of violent movement. The dances depicted by the tantric sculptures are not necessarily representative of any local Thai dance style. The way these sculptures depict movement was adopted from Cambodia, India or the Himalayas, along with the tantric iconography. The dynamic form of the tantric sculptures is well up to the standards of even the most unbridled portrayals of movement in early 20th century European Futurism.

The most archaic extant form of dance theatre in Thailand is the Lakon Jatri. This genre has gone through many changes, but the Manora (Nora) tradition of Southern Thailand may provide some kind of a picture of the form of early dance. The spirited, angular movements and classical tradition of Central Thailand⁹.

A very interesting fact is that the Manora dance has preserved ancient Indian acrobatic dance poses, which are mentioned in the *Natyasastra*¹⁰. These are also depicted in Indian temple sculptures, but they have disappeared from classical Indian dance. It is possible, that the Manora tradition reflects the ideals of the Srivijaya period, as the Srivijaya Kingdom was in contact with Southern India, which is the nuclear area of Indian dance.

The crown used by the Manora dancers closely resembles the crowns of the bodhisattvas of the Srivijaya period. One can also note that the basic position typical to the Manora dance, with the dancer's feet wide open and the knees bent at a right angle, is depicted in a small bronze sculpture of a bodhisattva, which is on display at the National Museum in Songkhla. An exact analytical study of the Manora dance might provide new information to fuel the study of Southern Thailand and the Srivijaya culture and shed new light on the



A bronze sculpture with Srivijaya influence. The bodhisattava is depicted in an untypical plié pose. The National Museum, Songkhla.

interaction of Southeast Asian and Indian theatre.

THE SUKHOThai PERIOD - THE BUDDHA IMAGE

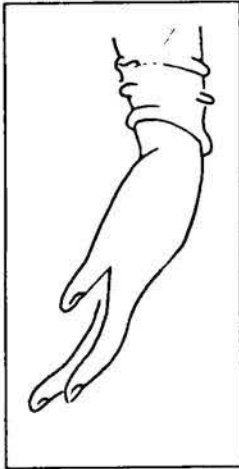
After the Thais founded the Sukhothai Kingdom in the 13th century Thai culture started to develop its own direction. The Thais embraced Theravada Buddhism as their religion and the Buddha sculpture became the central figure in Thai art. It was already during the Sukhothai period that the Buddha sculpture was vested with the flowing and refined features typical to Thai art.

Buddhism came to Thailand from India and Ceylon. Alongside the teaching came the iconography of the Buddha sculpture. In addition to this dance Thai style was influenced by previous schools of art in the region. Bronze Buddha sculptures are among the masterpieces of Sukhothai art. Despite local stylistic features the position and the symbolic gestures of the Buddha sculptures generally follow Indian models.

Seemingly the static and introverted Buddha figure would have no connection with dance and theatre, but as I pointed out in my previous article, the pacific and calm expression of the Buddha sculpture can be derived from the ninth basic emotion of the Indian bhava-rasa theory, which brings forth in the audience the rasa of tranquility. Furthermore, also

the Buddha sculptures, symbolic hand gestures originate from the gestures (mudra) of Indian theatre and dance.

An iconographic speciality of the Buddha sculpture typical to Thailand is the "walking Buddha". The "walking Buddhas" of the Sukhothai period are among the most interesting examples of Thai art. The Lord Buddha is depicted walking and leaning slightly backwards. The left hand is depicted in the symbolic gesture (vitarka mudra) typical of Buddha sculptures, and the right hand hangs freely. It is



Symbolic hand gesture from Indian dance: "move about freely". (Illustration: Päivi Lempinen).

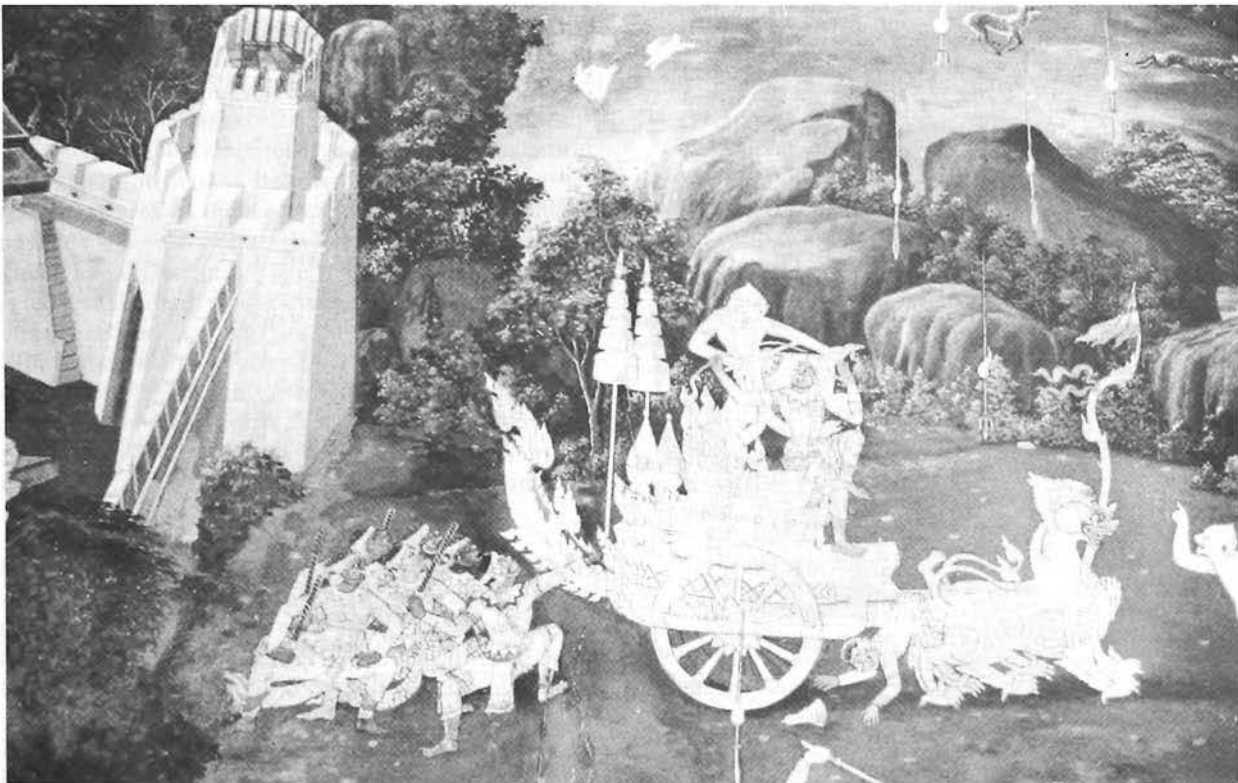
interesting to note that the way the left hand is depicted resembles the Indian dance hand gesture which signifies: "move about freely".

The Buddha figure is a good example of how Indian aesthetic theory, which has to a great extent been influenced by the dramaturgical handbook *Natyasastra*, was conveyed elsewhere in Asia through the visual arts and iconographic codes.

THE BANGKOK PERIOD - THE RAMAKIEN

The Sukhothai tradition was further developed during the period when the capital was at Ayutthaya, and the Bangkok period adopted its aesthetic ideals to a great extent from the later part of the Ayutthaya period. During the Bangkok period the theatre and the visual arts have become inseparably entwined. The close union of dance, the khon mask theatre and shadow puppet theatre is a multifaceted typical example of how close the relationship between theatre and the visual arts can be in Asia.

The Indian Ramayana epic, translated into the Thai language as Ramakien, became the central theme of all the arts. The great significance of this myth to the Thai people is illustrated by the fact that the official name of the kings of the ruling Chakri dynasty is Rama. The Ramakien has also been illustrated in countless sculptures and paintings. The most famous painting depicting the Ramakien is the giant fresco at Wat Phra Keo, dating from the 19th century (although it has been repainted several times). The largest



The great Ramakien mural at Wat Phra Keo combines a background with western influences and traditional Ramakien figures. A similar contradiction styles occurs when a Khon play is performed in illusionistic stage decorations.

Ramakien inspired sculptures, the famous yakshas i.e. enormous door guardians in the form of Totsakans giant army, are also situated at Wat Phra Keo.

Even with only a superficial knowledge of Thai culture it becomes obvious how consistently both the theatre and the visual arts portray the immortal figures from the Ramakien: Rama (Phra Ram), Sita (Nang Sida), Lakshmana (Phra Lak), Hanuman with his army of monkeys, and their opponent Ravana (Totsakan) with his court and troops. All art forms have an identical way of portraying the noble nature of the heroes, the touching animal character of the monkeys and haughtiness of the giants.

The Khon actors wear colourful masks and glimmering dresses—they are like figures from the Ramakien murals that have been brought alive. Also the movements and gestures exactly match those of the figures in the murals. One could easily believe that the paintings and sculptures in fact do represent Khon actors, in other words that the theatre would have had a direct influence on the vocabulary and iconography of the visual arts. Jean Boisselier, the noted expert on Thai art, cautions against oversimplification: “The problems that concern painting in Thailand are basically the same as those that relate to the theatre. Their inspiration derives from the same sources, they are simply two ways of expressing the same reality, and painting has not been influenced by the theatre, as has so often been suggested.”¹⁰

What are these “same sources”, which Boisselier refers to in above passage? They are albums of iconographical models and manuals of design. The first one of them was

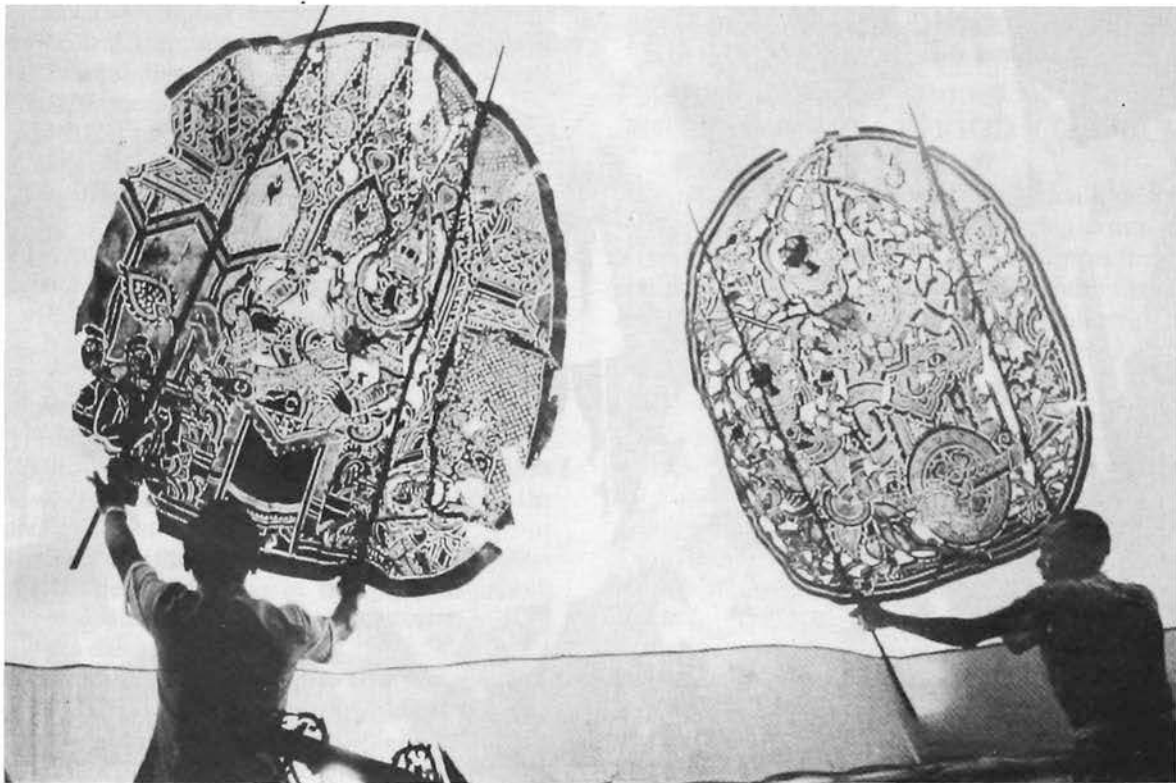
published during the reign of Rama III (1824-1851). Another was published during the reign of Rama V (1868-1910) and the contemporary manuals are based on it. Particularly the most recent of the manuals contain instructions that concern the theatre. Boisselier writes: “... the manuals draw directly, and for the first time, on the theatre—both the dance theatre (Lakon Jatri) and the masked theatre (Khon). Needing to identify the various characters and to describe their behaviour, the new iconography adopts the theatre’s extremely elaborate vocabulary of gestures, as well as its collection of masks.”¹¹

The uniform idiom of the khon-mask theatre, the shadow theatre, and the visual arts of the Bangkok period thus finds an explanation in the albums of iconographical models and manuals of design. They describe the outward appearance, gestures and costumes of the mythical figures. The manuals are the best documents of the basis of the aesthetical ideals of the early Bangkok period.

In India the situation was similar. There the Natyasastra layed the ground to all forms of art. The difference is that in India the Natyasastra was originally a manual for the theatre. In Thailand the idiom of the theatre is governed by manuals which were primarily intended for the visual arts.

SOME PROBLEMS

Although the existence of these manuals does explain many of the uniform features in the art of the Bangkok period, several problems concerning details in the interrelation of the arts are yet to be solved.



The Nang Yai shadow puppets brought the iconography of the visual arts to the theatre.

One of the most central questions is the inception of the Khon. What was its relation to the shadow theatre, and what was the shadow theatre's relation to the visual arts? This problem has been given much thought-the Khon happens to be a flourishing form of classical theatre in Thailand. Prince Dhaninivat has presented a theory that the Khon developed from the Nang Yai shadow theatre. In the Nang Yai dancing manipulators move large leather puppets in front of a screen. According to this theory an early form of the Khon: "Khon before the screen", where the Khon dancers perform as silhouette figures in front of a screen, would be the missing link between the shadow puppet theatre and the Khon-mask theatre. Boisselier is even inclined to believe that the Khon masks "imitate the iconographical features established by the nang"¹².

At this stage it is, however, necessary to refer to some of the points made earlier on in this article, in the hope they may shed more light on the study of this history of Khon:

1. The Khmer reliefs depict sizable scenes from the Ramayana, and they contain several gestures and positions which resemble those of the Thai Khon-mask theatre.
2. Sometimes the relief depict masked figures, whose masks resemble Khon masks.
3. The faces resembling the ten-headed mask of Totsakan have a connection with the early tantric sculptures of Thailand and Cambodia.

These facts raise questions: What relation does Khon have to the Cambodian tradition? Could it be possible that Khon would, after all, have earlier original forms, which have remained unknown, because no written proof is extant?

And what about masks? It can hardly be a coincidence that the masks in the Khmer relief and the tantric sculptures resemble the Khon masks. It is also interesting to note that in the nuclear area of the tantric culture, in the Himalaya region, the masks are manufactured according to the same principles as in Thailand. The material is papier-mache with gold lacquer decorations. Moreover the masks are also stylistically related.

With regard to the history of the development of the Khon it would be of utmost importance to analyze the Khmer reliefs and the tantric sculptures of the area from the point of view of theatre history. Such a study would naturally call for close co-operation with Thai scholars.

CONCLUSION

The Khmer reliefs contain several scenes that portray dance. Some of the reliefs depict movements and positions that resemble the Khon theatre of Thailand. Also faces or masked faces in the reliefs and on tantric sculptures resemble the Khon masks. A study of Khmer art could shed light on the study of the history of the Khon.

The Manora dance of Southern Thailand has preserved ancient Indian dance poses, which would indicate that the tradition might have connections with the Indian-influenced Srivijaya Kingdom. The bodhisattva sculpture at the

museum in Songkhla is portrayed in an exceptional pose which resembles a dance pose typical to the Manora dance.

The most central form of sculpture in Buddhist Thailand is the Buddha sculpture. Its iconography was adopted to a great extent from India and Ceylon. Although the Buddha figure seemingly has no connection with the theatre, its position and expression was derived from the Indian theory of bhava and rasa, which originated from the theatre. In the "walking Buddha" sculpture which is typical to Thailand the position of the free hand resembles the hand gestures of Indian dance theatre.

During the Bangkok period the visual arts, theatre and dance became intertwined in many ways, and the different forms of art portray the figures from the Ramakien in a similar manner. This may tempt one to draw oversimplified conclusions of the interaction of the arts. Jean Boisselier warns against drawing false conclusions and stresses the point that theatre and the visual arts derive their inspiration from the same sources, from the manuals of design and the albums of iconographical models. Although the existence of these manuals does account for a great deal of the similarities of expression in the different arts, my opinion is that comparative study of the theatre and the visual arts should not be neglected; because, as I have been trying to prove in this article, the visual arts of the past may contain important information from the point of view of the history of the theatre.

FOOTNOTES

1. Hall, pp. 112-113.
2. Holt, p. 120.
3. Coedes, p. 7.
4. Brandon, pp. 89-90.
5. Groslier, pp. 162-165.
6. Brandon, p. 59.
7. Brandon, pp. 26-27.
8. Brandon, p. 63.
9. Lakon Jatri and Central Thailand style have influenced one another. See Brandon, pp. 61-62; Sjan, pp. 41-61 and pp. 64-73 for further information on the Lakon Jatri.
10. Boisselier, p. 216.
11. Boisselier, p. 236.
12. Prince Dhaninivat, pp. 15-16.

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