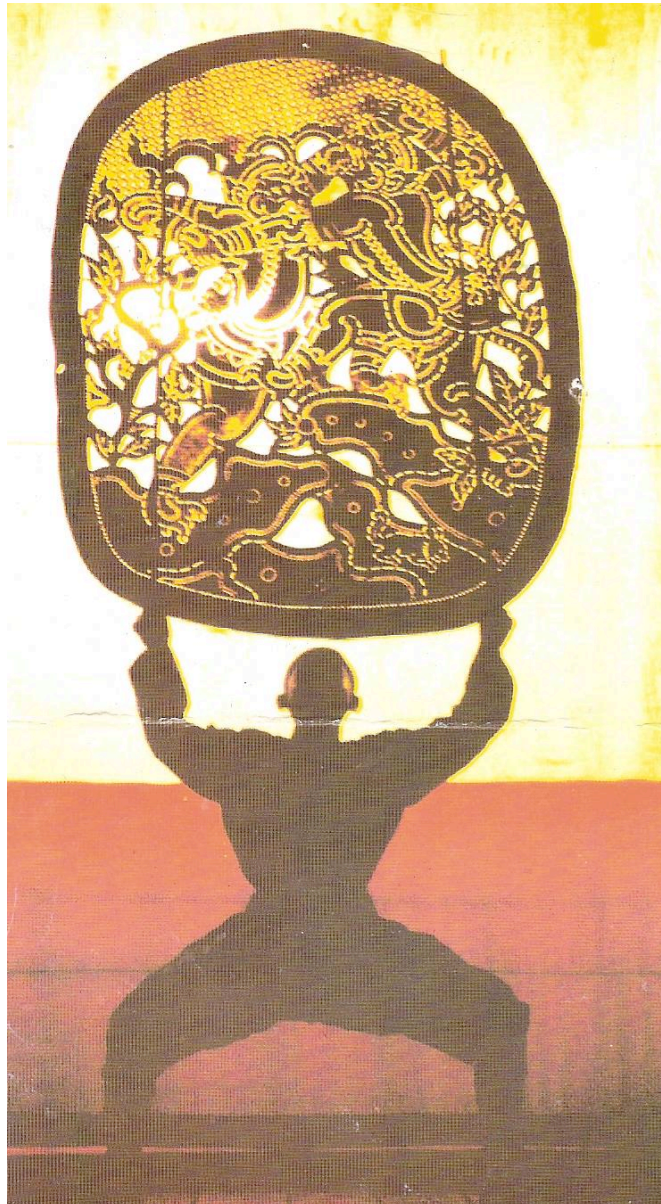


**NUMBER ONE OF THREE RESEARCH PROGRAMMES ABOUT ASIAN PUPPET THEATRE:
THAILAND 2005, BURMA 2007, INDIA, THAILAND, CAMBODIA 2010**

NANG YAI A DRAMATIC ART FORM FROM THAILAND



**Project carried out by Michael Meschke in 2005 thanks to support from SIDA,
Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.**

BACKGROUND

This is a personal report from a small but nonetheless significant area of human creativity called puppet theatre. As a part of SIDA's project in Southeast Asia, I was given the opportunity to explore and document an old and nearly extinct theatre tradition in Thailand named Nang Yai, a fusion of dance and puppet theatre.

Creativity in general and the creation of art in particular, is civilization's important predictor of the future. If creativity is threatened, society is threatened, and if the creation of art suddenly ceased, it would foreshadow the end of our civilization.

With few exceptions, politicians and governments around the world are unaware of how real and legitimate this is. In many countries, government grants for culture therefore often remain undersized and marginal parts of State budgets.

The Swedish State development agency sometimes gives room for cultural work as an accepted part of the overall goals of development. 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.

One reason that many contributions of material aid continue to be isolated measures – giving momentary rather than long-term relief – is that this knowledge is not transformed into practice. Sometimes there is just an inability to see how this might be done. In many countries, for example Thailand, with its stormy history, hierarchical structures and lasting social gaps, it is difficult to disregard the obvious connection between culture, cultural policy, and politics.

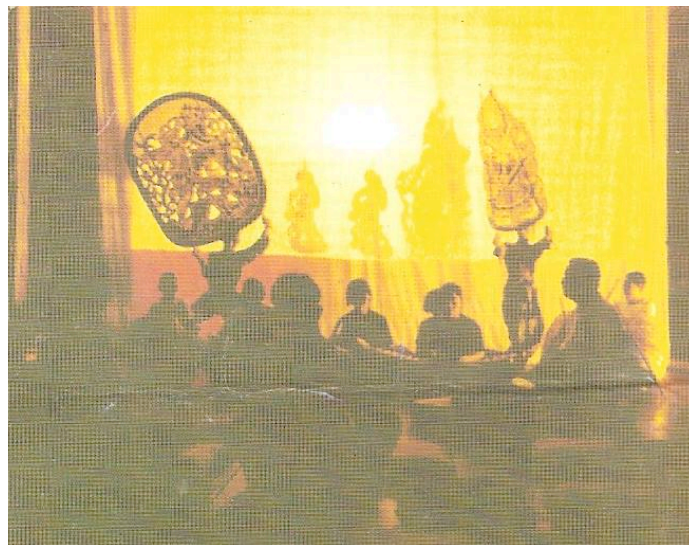
Dr. Kusuma Venzky-Stalling, professor at the distinguished Thammasat University in Bangkok (the site for the military's massacre of students in 1974), has researched the relationship between dramatic art and politics in Thailand.

According to Dr. Kusuma, dramatic art in previous times was meant to assert "the legitimacy and authority of the absolute monarchy" – theatre for nationalistic purposes. This stopped when a constitutional monarchy was introduced in Thailand in 1932, but the idea of upholding the divine status of the king has lived on in folk tales, where he is placed on an equal level with heroes and gods.

During the 1930s, Thailand was characterized by national development and search for identity. Luang Vichitr, author and the country's first head of the Fine Arts Department, encouraged and made use of dramatic art: "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, art was an important part of reflecting the nation's development. But that presupposes artistic independence and freedom of expression. But when art became a "tool to influence and educate the people," its use could easily be perverted: "The ministry is to be a propaganda vehicle for nationalism, education, and to alter the behavior of the people." Does this sound familiar? Vichitr took up his duties the same year Goebbels became Hitler's propaganda minister. Goebbels used film, while Vichitr used theatre. (1)



STARTING POINTS

My purpose in the Nang Yai-project was to try to define and map out the existence of Nang Yai in present day Thailand, to explore its chances of living on, and how one might assist in this. One starting point was to understand more about Nang Yai as a dramatic stage form, another was the shadow figures while still another consisted of several personal encounters that had peaked my curiosity.

Nang Yai originally meant "large pieces of leather."

Two dramatic art forms are combined into one – shadow play and choreographed dance. Those who played the parts, i.e. manipulated the shadow figures, did so in front of the backlit screen rather than behind it, where it normally would be done. These performers were not only puppeteers, but also dancers. They made lively movements while holding shadow figures above their heads. They danced with their bodies, especially the legs, doing choreographed moves, rhythms, and stamping. I have not 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, also including pictorial art, if one regards the leather figures as large static pictures depicting entire scenes or individual figures.

The figures' heads, arms and legs do not have joints, therefore, their movement depends 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 studied this theatre form, including the Swedish expert on Asia, Sven Broman.

Prominent authorities on Nang Yai have existed since the 1800s, and have repeatedly warned of its extinction. But their warnings have not helped; today, 2005, Nang Yai has fewer practitioners than ever. Yet, Nang Yai has roots and traditions in several other Southeast Asian countries, with similar forms but different names. In Cambodia it is called Sbek Thom. It is not clear when or where it came to be. There are also different views on how widespread and popular Nang Yai used to be. Sometimes it is characterized as folk art, sometimes as entertainment for the aristocracy. According to one researcher, Prince Dhaninivat, 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)

Professor Mattani Rutnin, eminent researcher at Thammasat University, says that Nang Yai traditions can be traced back to the 14th century. 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)

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 sixties or seventies. Without sufficient numbers of new recruits, properly trained by these ancient teachers, it will only be 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 that this was still the case with my own eyes in 2005; leather figures, several hundred years old and partly broken, were kept in drawers in a very hot room, referred to as a “museum”, within the temple Ban Don in the countryside near Rayong city.

My spontaneous instant reaction was to purchase humidifiers. They were accepted with gratitude, barely hiding some scepticism. But even a simple gift like this can be a lasting contribution – provided that the above-mentioned connection between material aid and cultural follow-up is applied. This can be achieved through encouragement and knowledge about *why* and *how* the art form should subsist and how machines can be of help. It is, in other words, not enough to press the machine's start button – one cannot leave until making sure that the recipients understand and follow the instruction manual, and that new generations have been made aware of why this is important.

Let us take a closer look at the different elements of Nang Yai.

“In the beginning there was dance”, then came the shadow play, together they became Nang Yai, a theatrical form became the prototype for Khon, Thailand's most widespread form of dance theatre, where the dancers wear masks.

CONTENT

First question: what is the performance about? The local audience has grown up with the content and does not need an introduction. But a Western spectator, in order to understand and be absorbed by the content, must first penetrate a cultural barrier that I like to call "*the barrier of the seductive surface of Eastern aesthetics*". We are easily blinded by exotic aesthetics, 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, because it all deals with the struggle between good and evil, a theme that is universal and mutual for all of humanity, including our Western cultures; in Homer's *Odyssey*, in Dante's *Divina Commedia*, in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Goethe's *Faust*...

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

Ramayana means "The journey of Rama" and tells the destiny of Rama, a divinity who descends to Earth in the shape of a human with a mission to defeat evil. His beautiful wife Sita is abducted by the ten-headed demon king Rawana (Totsakan in Thai). Rama and his brother Lakhs go through thousands of hardships to free Sita. Their greatest ally is the monkey people's white general, Hanuman – the epic's true hero, skilled in magic. After endless adventures, pain, supernatural obstacles and bloody wars, Rawana is finally defeated for good and Rama and Sita are reunited.



Princess Sita

FORM

To understand the leather “actors” we first look at them as forms. They are cut out of cow or buffalo hide, and magnificently painted on one side because the performances used to be done in daylight – before the discovery of the magic that the introduction of oil lamps provide at night-time. Unfortunately, today ordinary neon-lamps are often used.

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 techniques in the region, such as the Indonesian Wayang Kulit and the giant figures from Andhra Pradesh in India. They do not have movable limbs. They are often more than a square meter in size, and show frozen dramatic actions with individual heroes or demons, with loving couples like Rama and Sita, or with several characters engaged in violent battle. The action is always framed by stylized scenery.

The hide 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, for example Nang Fow, who is one meter tall and portrayed in semi-profile, with hands in prayer and feet in a walking position, and Nang Jub who shows battling monkeys, one black and one white. The struggle between these two characters opens each performance.

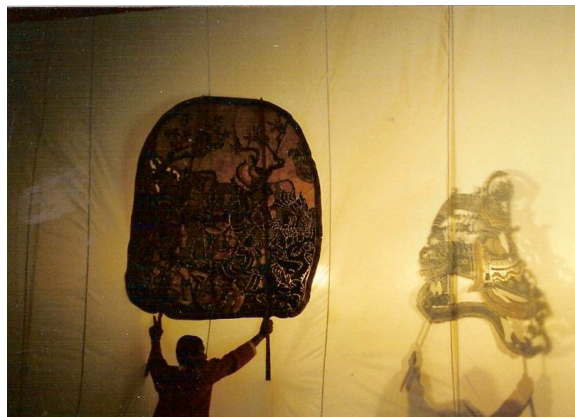
THE PERFORMERS

Traditionally, the performers are local villagers, and so are the musicians and “singers” who narrate the story. They have no special education, but learn from generation to generation. A risk lies in this; new performers may be hard to find among modern, impatient youngsters, and it explains the art form's low status in the eyes of the sophisticated Bangkok-audience, used to the skilfully trained dancers and polished aesthetics of the National Theatre.

On the other hand, the amateurish nature of the performances is an asset in the eyes of those who appreciate genuine feeling and authenticity. Despite the content's overwhelming abundance of gods and demons, the stories reflect the daily life of ordinary people, familiar to the performing amateurs.

The performers move their figures in a way that triggers questions in the minds of those who are used to European aesthetics. We must always have everything explained to us. For instance, why are the shadow figures seldom held close to the screen, to show their pattern and contours with sharpness? A Thai performer told me, with a thoughtful look on his face, that it was probably coincidental. I then remembered that I had asked the same question before, in a different time and culture, namely talking with the priest and shadow player Krishnankutty Pulavar from Kerala, India. He simply answered by a counter-question: "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! When in front of the screen, the performers can chase each other, climb on each other, even fight, using the shadow figures as weapons. The flat, two-dimensional performance suddenly becomes three-dimensional. I also learned that each character has its own choreography, in order to distinguish one personality from another. The Hanuman performer has one specific movement pattern, so do the gods and demons, etc.



THE STAGE

What we would call "the stage", is a screen, which can be set up anywhere - outdoors or indoors, in a temple hall, or in the home of a rich private person. The screen is made of white cotton fabric and can be as high as 6 meters and as wide as 14-16 meters. It is either held up by sturdy poles of bamboo, or suspended with ropes between trees or walls. There may be small side stages in front of or next to the main stage. The oil lamp or electrical light source is placed behind the screen, high up, with an angle to avoid shadows from the players on the screen.

In outdoor performances, there is sometimes a low podium between the main "stage" and the audience to enhance the dancers' stomping.

Musicians, forming a small orchestra, sit directly on the ground between the "stage" and the audience, as does the narrator, who tells the story.

PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH NANG YAI

My interest in Nang Yai began in the 1970s, in a handicraft shop in Bangkok. They sold these pictures cut out of hide with thousands of holes in them, in other words shadow play figures. I saw photos of people holding these leather figures above their heads. The photos puzzled me because the performers were in front of the shadow screen, while the audience should see the figures as black and white shadows, which had in fact given name to this kind of theatre. But here they were in plain view and painted in strong colors.

As a tourist in Thailand in the 1970s, I saw large paintings from the 18th century on a wall surrounding the Prah Keow temple in Bangkok. They depict the national epic Ramakien. I was spellbound by one of the last paintings. It illustrated the funeral of demon king Totsakan. In spite of being the worst evil, Totsakan seemed worthy a great celebration, with lots of entertainment. In the left hand corner of the painting, you can see a Nang Yai theatre with performers in full action. This painting also shows different other kinds of puppet theatres. I like to interpret this as proof that puppet theatre must have been a wide spread phenomenon in Thailand three hundred years ago when this painting was made.

They actually gave birth to my idea of creating the performance "Ramayana" in Sweden in 1984. The magnificent epic, depicted as fascinating as here, simply couldn't be withheld from the Western theatre audience. After a year of studies and preparations, the finished performance became a faithful, two-dimensional interpretation of the paintings – the difference being that everything was in motion; hundreds of lively, flat parts, persons, seemed to be jumping in and out of the paintings. A few characters were also three-dimensional.

That is how Thailand's visual arts and national epic were introduced to generations of Swedish adults and children.

In 1974/75 the Marionette Theatre, on tour in Asia, reached Bangkok. I immediately started to ask for Nang Yai, but no one knew what I meant. At the Ministry of Culture they told us that Nang yai was extinct. It was first during another journey in 1982 that Eha Arg at the Swedish Embassy managed to find out that a troupe would give a single performance on the outskirts of the city Rayong. She generously drove us there in her car. We ended up next to a noisy 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. One lonely, Western-style armchair stood at the back.

Men and women moved about behind the screen, waiting for a prominent dignitary who had requested a private performance. I was later told that they survived thanks to wealthy private persons requesting performances on special occasions.

When the dignitary, a lanky, white haired Westerner with the posture of one of "Her Majesty's" governors, had taken his seat in the armchair, and the performance began, my patience was rewarded by several realizations.

First of all, this was obviously a fascinating dramatic art form and would probably have been even more fascinating had I understood the language and content. Also – surprise – there was a local audience, apparently attracted by and familiar with the story. Because little by little people showed up out of nowhere and discretely sneaked in on the lawn in front of the foreign guest until the grass was packed with children, women and men of all ages.

THE THREAT

Another, more negative realization also occurred to me. The performance exemplified the conflict between original authenticity and present day decadence. This art form was threatened, not only because of exterior lack of encouragement, but also from within itself, 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 figures. The younger performers danced in Nike-sneakers, wore plastic headbands and t-shirts with bright red Coca-Cola emblems on their backs. Their eyes wandered and their jaws were busy chewing gum.

Young and old however had one thing in common; now and then they disappeared behind the screen and returned looking dizzier each time. I snuck behind the screen to take a look. There were women back there serving the sweaty men quick sips from bottles - that certainly didn't contain water!

Time passed and my interest in Nang Yai didn't grow any weaker. How could such a unique art form nearly disappear from a culture as abundant 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 knowing whether the dance routines are superficial, shortened versions or not. Even I resigned, despite my suspicions. 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 doesn't 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, Dr. Kusuma came to my rescue. She could tell that the remaining practice of Nang Yai today could be found in three temples: one in Ratchaburi, one in Singiburi, hosting the well established school of the Wat Khanon and finally the one near Rayong, called Wat Ban Don.



Together, we went to Wat Ban Don to have a look and document our findings. One of my Thai students, director Chertsak Patumseesakhon, helped me find a film team.

We were received by Mr. Amnat, the temple's alderman and Nang Yai specialist. He had a troubled look on his face as he showed us the temple's museum with its many 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, copies of the old ones. A small orchestra practiced in one corner, monks and boys ran back and forth. The boys were very young, many of them merely children. We were 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 footsteps.

As it turned out, the boys didn't belong to the temple, but came from ordinary schools in the surrounding villages. They had not shown enough "intellectual capacity " for regular schooling. Instead of being expelled, they were given the opportunity to study Nang Yai. Here, they excelled beyond all measure, with a natural feel for rhythm and drama, thus winning the acknowledgement of the adults.

A figure depicting the monkey general Hanuman stood against a pillar. For a few seconds, little Pittaya, ten years old, stood in front of the figure, with his hands in prayer and his head respectfully bowed. Then he grabbed Hanuman and rushed to practice in midst the other boys, with total concentration, living his part.

A nearly extinct dramatic art form, with roots in religious myths and rites, was being revived where it once originated, in a temple. 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 elsewhere in the world.

CONCLUSIONS

The simple 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 in the long run possibly even the villagers, some unexpected encouragement.

If they were to receive international recognition on a large scale, their own government might realize what a resource Nang Yai could be, if it were given the chance to evolve. Recognition in one's own country often comes through appreciation abroad. The funds to finance and organize tours are small and disappearing.

The problem is to reach those in power. Rightfully, an old tendency is still present: to keep one's guard up towards foreign "know it alls". Yet, Dr Kusuma managed to have an article of mine published in The Nation, in which I, carefully, presented some views on Nang Yai possibilities.

In order to gain a new audience, Nang Yai needs to appeal to youngsters, both nationally and internationally. In the old days, stories would go on for hours on end, accompanied by monotonous recitation. When old traditions are stiffly repeated, they stagnate.

My Indian friend, philosopher S.C. Malik, perfectly expresses what tradition is: "Tradition is continuous creation in the Now"!

Creation means renewal, renewal is inevitable. It 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. Renewal does not mean to meddling in this.

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

This presentation is available in Swedish and English at several schools with artistic training, such as Dramatiska Institutet in Stockholm, institutions abroad such as Institut International de la marionette in Charleville-Mézières, France, specialized museums and study centers.

Stockholm, November 2005

Michael Meschke

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I also refer to "På jakt efter Nang Yai", a documentary film from my visit to Wat Ban Don in January 2005. It is 15 minutes long and is available in Swedish and English on CD-ROM. © Michael Meschke
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