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# Khōn: masked dance drama of the Thai epic Ramakien

Amolwan Kiriwat

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**KHON: MASKED DANCE DRAMA  
OF THE THAI EPIC RAMAKIEN**

By

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B.A. Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, 1997

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in Theatre)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May, 2001

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By Amolwan Kiriwat

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Sandra E. Hardy

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
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This thesis will analyze and document khon, which is a masked dance drama, and the Ramakien, which is the Thai epic. This thesis will present the history and structure of khon and show how it is used to present the story of the Ramakien. In addition, it will discuss the training artists to participate in these dramas, and the value of these traditional theatre presentations in understanding the culture of Thailand.

Khon is a Thai classical court masked dance whose history dates back hundreds of years. It employs many aspects of the arts: drama, dance, pantomime, and music. The costumes are elaborate, including decorated headdresses or crowns and full-head masks, which is the most distinctive characteristic of this performance. Furthermore, khon is a unique performance, especially when every aspect of the arts is combined for performing the story of the *Ramakien*—the Thai epic adapted from the Ramayana, the Indian epic.

The *Ramakien* is the story of Phra Ram, an incarnation of the god Phra Narai. He is assisted by monkey warriors, who bring back his wife, Sida, kidnapped by the demon king, Tosakanth. The story presents the universal belief that virtue always

wins over evil. When this epic is presented on stage, adaptations are necessary for facilitating the ability to play *khon*. Therefore, there are many Thai stage versions of the *Ramakien*. The adapted version, also known as the script version is different from the original one and also important for the performance:

*The drama is what the writer writes; the script is the interior map of a particular production; the theater is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance; the performance is the whole event, including audience and performers.*<sup>1</sup>

In performance, actors utilize dance-pantomime along with the chanted narrative of a storyteller accompanied by singers and a *piphat* orchestra. The text consists of two literary styles: *khamphak*, which are descriptive verses; and *ceraca*, which are dialogues in rhythmic prose. Performers play one of four types: male, female, demon, or monkey. An athletic male style of movement is required for the performers who have to engage in elaborate battle pantomimes.

Since the *Ramakien* represents the heritage in Thai literature, Thai students are able to learn Thai culture, values, lifestyle, and also learn how to read, write, and understand the beautiful poetry of this epic. While practicing *khon*, students are also taught to be disciplined and to work as a group. Furthermore, through the characters in this epic, the principles of Buddhism, which is the most popular religion in Thailand, are presented. If people behave with wisdom, with discipline, with goodness, their lives will be peaceful.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 85.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Chapter 1

### AN INTRODUCTION TO KHON AND RAMAKIEN

*Khon* is court masked dance drama that has evolved for hundreds of years. At first, it was under royal direction and then under the government *Krom Silapakorn*, the Department of Fine Arts. Because a constitutional monarchy was announced in 1931 and the old system of lavish court patronage ceased, the magnificent court arts might have come to an end. The Department of Fine Arts was established in 1934 within the new government that took over the function of teaching *khon* and *lakon nai* (an inner court all-female dance drama). After that the Thai National Theatre was set up. It has presented regular public performances of *khon*, which is performed only by the Thai National Theatre, and *lakon nai*. In addition, at least once a year, there is a special *khon* performance for the general public in the open area in front of the Grand Palace.

*Khon* is associated only with the presentation of the Thai epic *Ramakien*. Although the story is based on the *Ramayana*, the Indian epic, the *Ramakien* has been adapted from the *Ramayana* to Thai culture and traditions for centuries. Some episodes and details have been expanded, reduced or removed. The differences between the Indian and Thai epics are obvious.

According to the original *Ramayana*, the Indian epic can be compared to the western epic the *Iliad* by Homer.

*On the literary level, ... scholars have found the Ramayana a rewarding study, observing that the Indian epic and Homer's Iliad share so many similarities, among them the basic theme of the ravished bride. that it is highly probable that they spring from a common source.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> J. M. Cadet, *The Ramakien: The Thai Epic* (Tokyo: Kokansha International Ltd., 1970), p.31.

In addition, the Thai epic, *Ramakien*, and the *Iliad* have verse uncommon: poetry is utilized in both adventurous epics, the battles begin because of the abductions of the women, and there are hundreds of characters including the gods. The story presents the universal thought that virtue always wins over evil.

Because *khon* is such a significant part of the culture of Thailand and because it is representative of Thai theatre today, it is the objective in this thesis to examine all aspects of the long tradition of *khon* and the story of the *Ramakien* upon which the masked dance drama is based. Included in this thesis will be an examination of the plot, the characters including costumes and masks, the performance structure, and the training of performers. Ultimately, a better understanding of Thailand's most elaborate tradition will evolve.

## Chapter 2

### THE THAI EPIC RAMAKIEN

Scholars studied and made comparisons between the great epic of Valmiki, the *Ramayana*, and versions beyond the seas to the east of India. Eventually, they concluded that the Thai version, the *Ramakien* (The glory of Rama), was not derived from that of the Valmiki's version, but from an Indonesian version which was, probably, derived from many sources or originated from the preclassical Indian version during the Buddhist period. Contrary to the standard Indian version of the *Ramayana*, there was no religious significance in the Thai version.

The Thai *Ramakien*, which was composed for the classical dance, exists in many versions. Verses are utilized to depict the story, both in narration and dialogue. Unfortunately, any early written versions of the *Ramakien* were lost when Ayutthaya—the second capital city of Thailand (1350-1767)—was destroyed in 1767. Therefore, the earliest known written rendering is that of King Taksin of the Thonburi period (1767-1782). However, the only one that is complete is the version of King Rama I of the Bangkok period (1782-present). His *Ramakien* closely follows the main lines of Valmiki's the *Ramayana*, but there are some differences in details such as incidents added or omitted, names, customs, costumes, characters, locations, etc. For example, in the *Ramayana*, it ends tragically with Sita parting from Rama, while in the *Ramakien*, it ends with a reconciliation arbitrated by the gods. Moreover, the Thai Hanuman plays a more important role than his Indian counterpart. His tricks and exploits dominate the central episode. The most suitable one for the presentation on the stage is that of King Rama II. In recent presentations, King Rama I's version has been adapted to suit the special abilities of the performers. The recitatives and the

dialogues have often had to be composed for each of the episodes performed. However, there are some versions which are not based on the ones of King Rama I and King Rama II, for example, the version of King Rama IV who adapted it from the English translation of Valmiki's the *Ramayana*.

The story begins with the rebirth and incarnations of major characters, most of whom come from the heaven. Phra Isuan, the leading god, lives on Mount Kailas where a demon gate keeper named Nontuk, mocked by everyone, is given a blessing, a diamond finger. When Nontuk points his finger at anyone, that person dies. He threatens everyone. Therefore, Phra Isuan becomes angry. The gods and goddesses ask Phra Narai, another god leader's help. Phra Narai, at the request of Phra Isuan, disguises himself as a beautiful celestial maiden. When Nontuk sees the maiden, he immediately falls in love with her and agrees to follow her. She tricks Nontuk into pointing the diamond finger at his own thigh. As a result, Nontuk is unable to move. Then he sees the celestial maiden, who was cause of his undoing, returns to the original four-armed Phra Narai. Nontuk says that Phra Narai won because he had four arms. In order to give him a further chance, Phra Narai orders Nontuk to be born again on earth as a demon king with ten faces and twenty arms, endowed with all knowledge and ability even of flying through the air, and he will, eventually, be killed by Phra Narai's incarnation as a man with two arms. Nontuk is unable to undo the curse. Before dying, he takes vengeance on Phra Narai, "Since you have disguised yourself as a woman to kill me, I shall make you suffer with a woman in your next life."<sup>3</sup> Then, Nontuk is killed with a trident.

In Phra Narai's next life on earth, he lives in the city of Ayutthaya where King Tosarot, his father, rules with his three consorts who are childless. He is concerned

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<sup>3</sup> The Department of Fine Arts, *The Khon and Lakon: Dance Dramas Presented by the Department of Fine Arts* (Bangkok: The Department of Fine Arts, 1963).

about his succession, so the court hermit visits heaven to meet Phra Isuan. Phra Isuan requests that Phra Narai incarnates as King Tosarot's son to destroy Tosakanth, the demon Nontuk. Phra Narai agrees if his serpent, his weapon, and his discus are reborn with him as well as his wife Laksami. Many celestial beings volunteer to be incarnated as monkeys to help Phra Ram, originally Phra Narai, defeat Tosakanth. Phra Isuan grants them the ability to be restored to life when the wind blows over them. The court hermit returns to Ayutthaya and offers to perform a special ritual involving the incantation that Phra Isuan taught him. King Tosarot's consorts eat magical rice; then they give birth to four boys: Phra Ram (an incarnation of Phra Narai), Phra Bhrot (the discus), Phra Lak (the serpent), and Phra Satarud (the weapon). The boys proceed to learn the skills of war.

In Longka, Tosakanth's consort, Montho gives birth to a baby girl named Sida, the incarnation of Phra Narai's consort. Sida cries out three times, "Kill the demons!" Phipek—Tosakanth's brother, an astrologer—predicts that Sida will cause the destruction of the demons *so* Tosakanth places the baby in a crystal casket and sets it adrift along a waterway, the traditional way to get rid of evil. A lotus rises and keeps it afloat. The casket passes by the hut of King Chanok, a king of Mithila who has become a hermit. He asks the forest spirits to take care of the child until he ends his asceticism, then he buries her. When King Chanok resumes his royal duties, he ploughs the land with Phra Isuan's bull and unearths the casket. When King Chanok opens it, a mature and beautiful Sida emerges.

At the palace in Mithila, Sida grows up to be a beautiful young princess and King Chanok has plans to find a man worthy of her hand. He announces to the city states and principalities far and wide that whosoever can lift the divine bow of Phra Isuan will marry his daughter. The princes of Ayutthaya hear the news while

kills him. Samanakha, Tosakanth's sister and the deprived wife of Chiuha, enters the forest to calm herself. She comes near the forest residence of Phra Ram, Phra Lak and Sida. When she sees Phra Ram, she falls in love with him and transforms herself into a beautiful woman. However, her attempts to seduce him are in vain. Samanakha tries to harm Sida, but fortunately Phra Lak comes in time to help Sida.

The wounded Samanakha journeys to request three of her brothers to take revenge on Phra Ram. She, eventually, finds that the brothers have already been killed in combat by Phra Ram so Samanakha becomes more vengeful. She describes the beauty of Sida to Tosakanth, persuades him to abduct her, and make her his consort in Longka. The demon king, unaware that Sida is his own daughter, transforms himself into a golden deer in order to attract Phra Ram and Phra Lak and clear the way for Sida's abduction.

The trick works. Phra Ram and Phra Lak follow the golden deer, while Tosakanth carries Sida off into the sky towards Longka. A bird sees them in the air, but it unsuccessfully tries to rescue her from the demon. Tosakanth removes Sida's magic ring from her finger and throws it at the bird that catches the ring with its beak and takes it to Phra Ram. The bird tells him about Sida's abduction before it dies. And now the long search for Sida begins. Phra Ram is offered help by Hanuman, the white monkey who is the son of Phra Pai (the god of wind). He cannot die because the god of wind will always revive him.

In Longka, Tosakanth takes Sida to his garden to woo her, but she tries to commit suicide. Hanuman arrives in time to help her, and presents her ring and *sabai* (decorative cloth) to Sida. However, Hanuman is caught and punished cruelly by Intarachit—Tosakanth' son. Hanuman cunningly devises Tosakanth to set him on

fire. After that, he runs into every building until the whole city is aflame and then he escapes. Finally, the wind revives Hanuman back to life again.

After that, Tosakanth banishes his brother Phipek who prophesied that Tosakanth will eventually be killed by Phra Ram. Consequently, Phipek joins Phra Ram's army. Then Tosakanth sends a spy who disguises himself as a monkey to spy on Phra Ram. However, the spy is discovered and beaten. Furthermore, Tosakanth disguises himself as a priest and goes to Phra Ram. He casts a spell over Phipek to make him lose his voice. Phra Ram receives the false holy man but rejects his advice, for he is determined to rescue Sida. Tosakanth leaves in frustration. After that Tosakanth orders Benchakai, his niece, to transform herself into Sida. She memorizes every detail of Sida's body so her transformation is very convincing, and even Tosakanth believes that she is Sida and embraces her. Benchakai struggles free and reveals her identity. Tosakanth is convinced that his deception will succeed; Phra Ram will think that Sida died and then he will retreat. Tosakanth carries the transformed Benchakai, a lifeless Sida, into a boat where it floats along a waterway towards Phra Ram. The next day, when Phra Ram goes down to the shore, he discovers Sida's corpse and is in sorrow. Hanuman suspects a trick and asks, "How could the corpse float against the current? Why are there no signs or odour of the decay?"<sup>4</sup> The monkeys build a fire to cremate the body, but Benchakai screams and leaps out of the flames in her real identity. Hanuman brings her to Phipek, who pronounces a death sentence on his own daughter. Phra Ram feels sorry for her that she was forced to carry out the deception and says to Hanuman, "Take her back to Longka so that she can report on this latest failure."

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<sup>4</sup> Garrett Kam, *Ramayana in the Arts of Asia* (Bangkok: Asia Books Co., Ltd., 2000), p.168.

<sup>5</sup> Kam, p. 168.

Then Hanuman's soldiers build a causeway to Longka. A demon transforms a deserted area into a forest, hides below, and waits to overturn the earth and destroy Phra Ram and the monkeys. Hanuman discovers the hidden demon and kills him. The forest becomes barren again. Phra Ram sends Ongkot, a monkey warrior, to Tosakanth with the message to release Sida or prepare for battle. Finally, he destroys the guardian image of Longka before returning to Phra Ram. Tosakanth opens a huge umbrella of many tiers on top of his palace to obscure the sun. The monkeys are unable to see the city. Sukhrip, a monkey warrior, flies over and breaks the royal umbrella. Sunlight shines through again; the city is revealed. He enters, snatches the crown off Tosakanth's head, and returns with the royal trophy to Phra Ram.

While they are besieging Longka, there are many battles between the armies of Phra Ram and Tosakanth. After a long series of battles with the demons of Longka and their allies, Phra Ram's armies with Hanuman as the commander have won. Tosakanth, having exhausted the sources of all help from relatives and allies, determines to go out himself. Eventually, Phra Ram engages in a single combat with Tosakanth. He successfully kills the demon king. After Tosakanth's death, Phipek ascends the Longka throne.

At the end of Phra Ram's fourteen-year exile, Phra Ram ascends the throne of Ayutthaya which becomes greater than ever before with newly-conquered territory. After that Phra Ram and Sida relax in the forest. While she bathes in the pond, a demoness, Tosakanth's cousin, is jealous of Sida's beauty and transforms herself into a maid. The demoness tricks Sida into drawing the portrait of Tosakanth and then possesses it so the portrait cannot be erased. When Phra Ram finds the portrait, he thinks that Sida was unfaithful to him during her abduction by Tosakanth. In anger, he orders Phra Lak to take her deep into the forest, kill her, slit her chest and bring her

heart back to him. **As** Phra Lak is about to cut Sida's throat, a garland appears around her neck to protect her. **So** he lets her go. On the way back, he finds a dead deer, which Phra In (the god of storms) left on the path. He cuts it open and takes its heart to Phra Ram. Phra In then transforms himself into a buffalo and leads Sida to a hermitage. The hermit builds her a cottage. Then she gives birth to Phra Ram's son, Phra Mongkut. The hermit magically creates Phra Lop to be Phra Mongkut's adopted brother. One day, Phra Mongkut and Phra Lop fight with Hanuman by accident. Hanuman is caught and tied **up** by two brothers. Phra Ram, who at this time is not aware that Phra Mongkut is his own son, goes after the two boys and forces them to fight against each other. Since their celestial weapons cannot harm one another, Phra Ram realizes that Phra Mongkut is his own son.

To prove that she did not betray Phra Ram, Sida decides to walk on fire. **As** she steps onto the burning flames, a lotus rises to hold and protect her. After he is assured that Sida never betrayed him, Phra Ram thinks of a way to lure her back to Ayutthaya. He pretends to be dead and then orders Hanuman to inform Sida. When Sida comes to pay homage to his body, Phra Ram opens his eyes to see her in her grief. Sida realizes the trick and prays to mother earth to make way for her to descend into the underworld.

When Phipek sees the grief-stricken Phra Ram, he tells him to roam the forests in penitence for one year, and he is accompanied by Phra Lak, Hanuman, and a monkey army led by Sukhrip. In the forest the royal brothers and their attendants have many victorious battles over the demons. On their return to Ayutthaya, Phra Isuan reunites Phra Ram and Sida on Mount Sumeru. They return together to Ayutthaya.

## Chapter 3

### THE CHARACTERS

When the story of the *Ramakien* is presented, only *khon* is used to perform this epic. *Khon* consists of four categories of people: the performers, the chorus who also do the dialogue, the singers, and the orchestra. Performers play one of four characters: male, female, demon, or monkey. There are three hundred and eleven characters in the *Ramakien*.

Some of the main characters in the *Ramakien* are following:

*Phra Ram* is the incarnation of the god Phra Narai. On earth, he is the king of Ayutthaya who has much power and strong intention to eradicate evil, especially Tosakanth (the demon king).

*Phra Lak* is Phra Ram's loyal brother who is the incarnation of the serpent so he has power as well. He helps his brother to rule the city and to exterminate the enemies.

*Sida* is Phra Ram's beautiful loyal consort who is the incarnation of the goddess Laksami. Actually, she is the daughter of Tosakanth and Montho.

*Tosakanth* is the ten-face, twenty-arm demon king of Longka who is the incarnation of the demon gate keeper Nontuk. He has much power, but he uses his power to destroy everybody who displeases him. He is the foil for Phra Ram's life.

*Hanuman* is the god of the wind's son who is smart, loyal, funny, and amorous. He is Phra Ram's monkey general who has much power. He is also an important person who defeats Tosakanth.

*Phipek* is Tosakanth's brother and a prophet who is smart and straightforward. He is expelled from his city because of the prophecy that Tosakanth will be killed by

Phra Ram. Finally, he joins Phra Ram's army and becomes the king of Longka after Tosakanth's death.

### Costumes and Ornaments

The costumes and the manner of the *khon* dance have their origins in the ceremonial game of *chak nag* (to pull the multi-headed serpent). These performances, which celebrated coronations, usually involved parades, in which a seven-headed serpent was pulled by hundreds of performers dressed as celestials, demons, and monkeys from the *Ramakien*.<sup>6</sup> The costumes and ornaments are very elaborate and are made as historically accurately as possible. The costumes are made to resemble those worn in Thailand in the past and have not changed during successive generations, because they have been found most beautiful and suitable. The costume for a male royal character consists of a pair of embroidered breeches, a loincloth, a broad sash, a jeweled belt, a tight-fitting jacket embroidered with gold, large embroidered epaulets, a jeweled collar, bracelets, armlets, rings, and a crown or a coronet. Certain ornaments are worn across the breast. Sometimes embroidered breast-pieces are worn to represent armor. The costumes of other male characters are similar but less elaborate. The costume of a female character consists of a cloth worn like a skirt, an embroidered scarf draped over the shoulder, a jeweled collar, a necklet, bracelets, armlets, anklets, and rings. Female royal characters wear crowns or coronets. Others have various kinds of headdresses suitable to their rank. There is no attempt at making up the face, which is only thickly powdered. Demons and monkeys wear distinctive masks of different colors and designs. The treatment of these masks is conventional. Each mask is a good example of Thai decorative art, and

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<sup>6</sup> Natthapatra Chandavij and Promporn Pramualratana, *Thai Puppets & Khon Masks* (Bangkok: River Book Ltd., 1998).

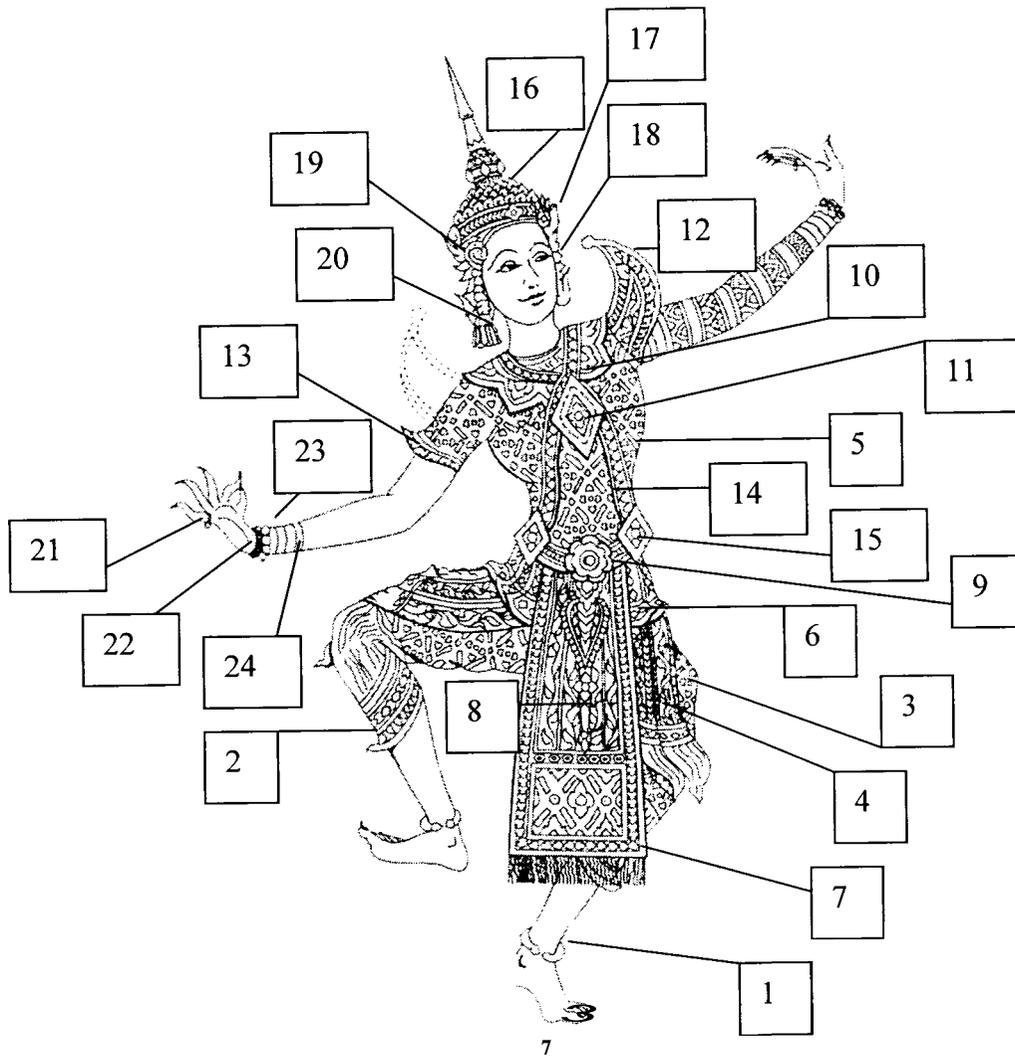
is distinctive and characteristic, so that each character may be recognized by the mask worn by the performer. Moreover, weapons and chariots are very elaborately made.

Animal roles are easily known by their masks. These animal masks are well made and sometimes true to nature. The performers who play the roles of animals simply wear a pair of loose trousers and a jacket of a color near the natural color of the animals they represent, but it does not need to be a faithful copy. In addition, there are some miscellaneous characters that are costumed in a manner suitable to each. In these cases it is permitted to each individual performer to dress up his own part as he wishes.

The most distinctive item in the *khon* costume is the full head mask that is painted according to specific patterns. The colors are gilt, red, green, and black. In the case of the demons and monkeys, features agree with definite shapes and colors. Other items agree with certain characteristics. The costume of a demon is designed to create a sense of ferocity and strength, while that of a male human expresses grandeur and grace; a female human emphasizes beauty and gentility, and a monkey role presents a restless characteristic of its original counterpart. Besides costumes, there are other accessories such as movable platforms, war chariots, bows, arrows, batons, tridents, etc.

The following drawings illustrate the costumes of the four principal roles—the male human roles, the female human roles, the male demon roles, and the male monkey roles.

Figure1. The Male Human Roles



The male human roles of non-royal ranks wear almost the same costume. They are different in terms of the headdresses, which they have either fewer ornaments or no ornaments.

<sup>7</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

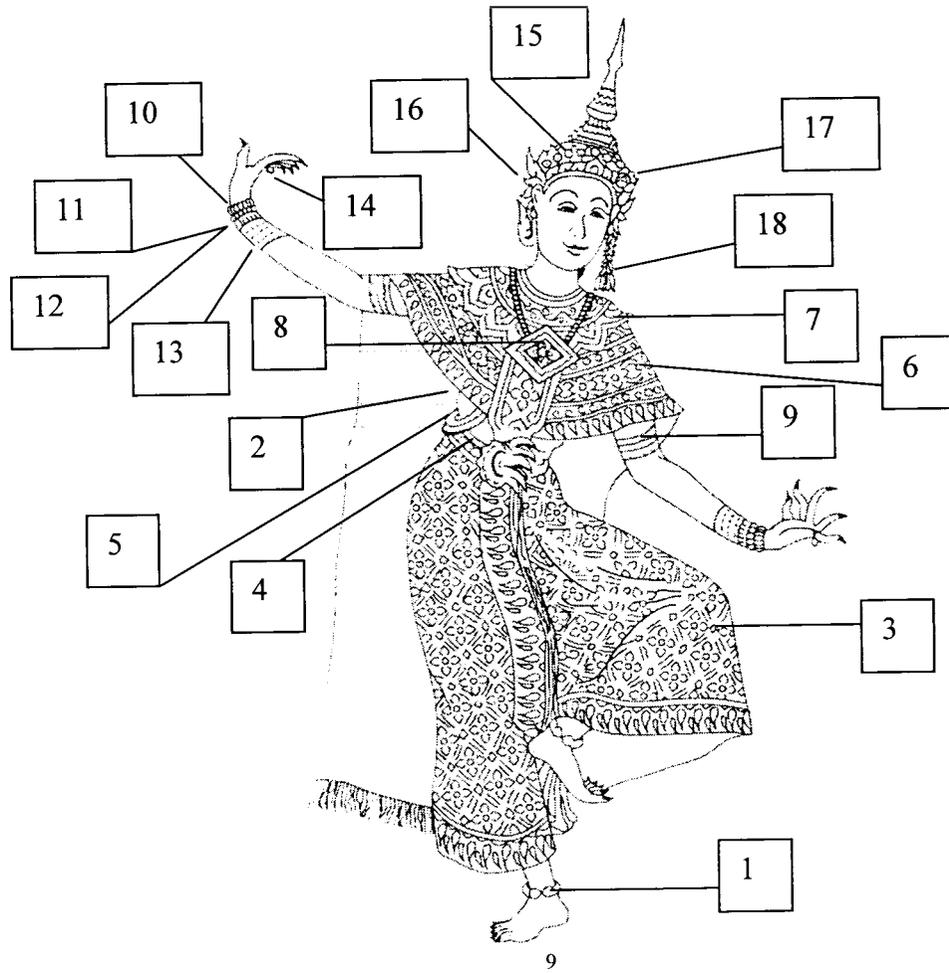
1. *Kam lai thao* (anklet).
2. *Sa nap phlao* (tight-fitting drawers).
3. *Pha nung* (nether garment).
4. **Hoi** *khang* or *chia ra bat* (embroidered cloth used like a belt, but with its ends hanging down to the knees, one at the front of each leg).
5. *Sua* or *cha lawng ong* (upper garment).
6. *Rat sa ew* (waistband).
7. **Hoi** *na* (cloth hanging down from the waist between the ends of *hoi kang*).
8. *Su wan kra thop* (gold plate, with trceries in openwork, hung from the waist so it partly covers *hoi na*).
9. *Khem khat* (belt).
10. *Khrong saw* or *nuam khaw* (ornament worn around the body on a level with the shoulders).
11. *Thap suang* (pendant).
12. *In tha nu* (epaulette, worn only with the upper garment which has long sleeves).
13. *Pha hu rat* (armlet).
14. *Sang wan* (golden chain worn from the shoulder to the opposite hip).
15. *Tab thit* (plate attached to *sang wan* where the latter touches the hip).
16. *Cha da* (crown).
17. *Dawk mui phet* (diamond flower).
18. *Kan chiak* or *chorn hu* (ornamental piece extending down, behind the ear, from the lower part of the crown).
19. *Dawk mai that* (flower worn above the right ear).
20. *U ba* (string of flowers hanging down from the lower part of the crown in front of the right ear).

21. *Tham ma rong* (finger ring).
22. *Waen rawp* (bracelet, which is a coil spring bent into a circle.).
23. *Pa wa lam* (bracelet of beads).
24. *Thong korn* (ornament for the forearm which looks like a row of bangles fused together).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> M. Rutnin, ed., *The Siamese Theatre* (Bangkok: Thai Government, 1975).

Figure 2. The Female Human Roles



The non-royal roles dress differently from this generalization in that they wear fewer ornaments and fewer headdresses.

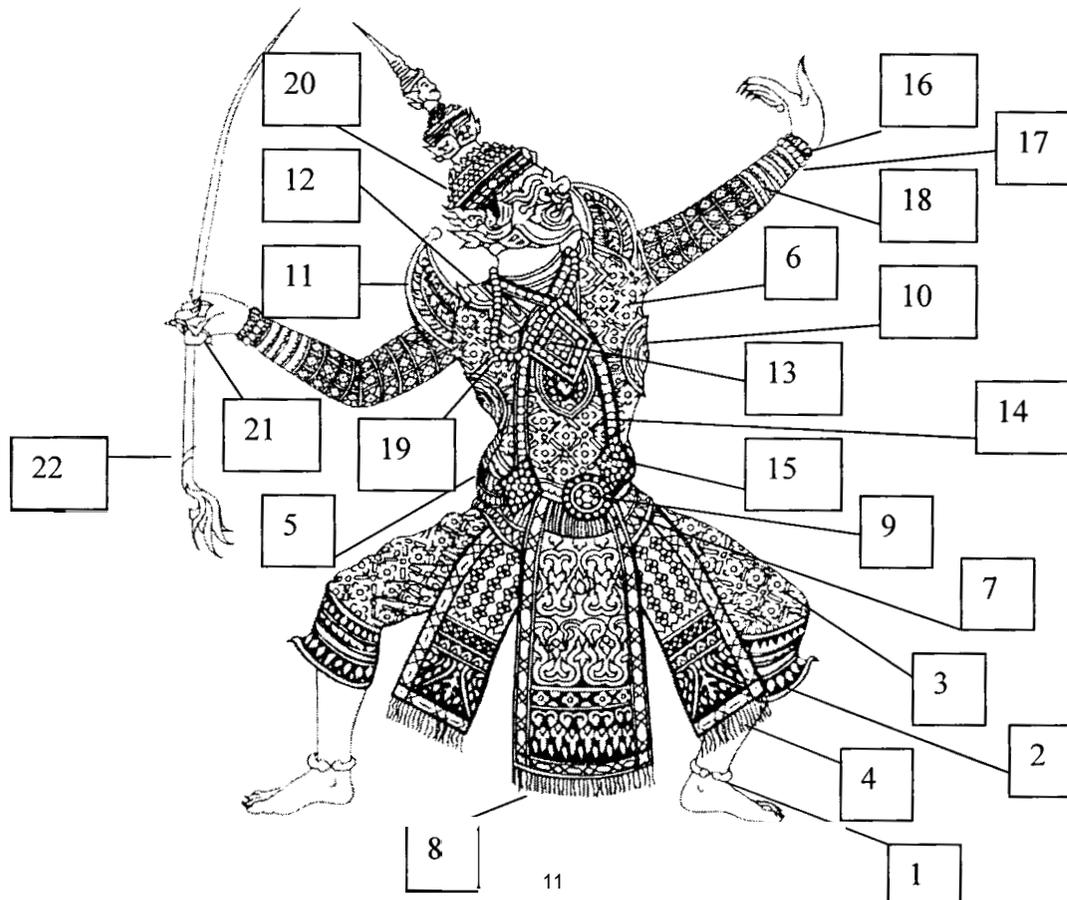
<sup>9</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

1. *Kam lai thao* (anklet).
2. *Sua nai nang* (bodice).
3. *Pha nung nang* (nether garment).
4. *Khem khat* (belt or girdle).
5. *Sa ing* (set of chains worn from the left shoulder to the opposite hip).
6. *Pha hom nang* (upper garment).
7. *Nuam nang* (ornament worn around the body on a level with the shoulders).
8. *Chi nang* (pendant).
9. *Pha hu rat* (armlet).
10. *Waen rawp* (bracelet which is a coil spring bent into a circle).
11. *Pa wa lam* (bracelet of beads).
12. *Kam lai ta khap* (bracelet shaped like a centipede).
13. *Kam lai suam* (bracelet).
14. *Tham ma rong* (finger ring).
15. *Mong kut* (crown).
16. *Kan chiak* or *chorn hu* (ornamental piece extending down behind the ear from the lower part of the crown).
17. *Dawk mai that* (flower worn above the left ear).
18. *U ba orphuang dawk mai* (part of the crown, in front of the left ear).''

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<sup>10</sup> Rutnin, ed.

Figure 3. The Male Demon Roles



The non-royal roles as a rule do not wear crowns, even though some of the generals do. However, the high crowns, worn by characters such as Phra Ram and his brother or by Tosakanth and his heir, Intarachit, are strictly reserved for the royal roles. The crown of Tosakanth consists of a royal crown on top of the head of his human face, while his other heads below are not parts of the crown. The important demon roles dress in the same way. They are different from one another only by the colors and shapes of the masks, of which there are more than one hundred. However, on some occasions the less important roles do not need to dress like this.

<sup>11</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

1. *Kam lai thao* (anklet).
2. *Sa naphlao* (tight-fitting drawers).
3. *Pha nung* (nether garment).
4. *Hoi khang* or *chia ra bat* (embroidered cloth used like a belt, but with its ends hanging down to the knees, one at the front of each leg).
5. *Pha pit kon* or *hoi kon* (loincloth).
6. *Sua* or *kroh* (upper garment or armor).
7. *Rat sa ew* (waistband).
8. *Hoi na* (cloth hanging down from the waist between the ends of *hoi khang*).
9. *Khem khat* (belt).
10. *Rat ok* (chest band).
11. *In tha nu* (epaulette).
12. *Khrongsaw* or *nuam khaw* (ornament worn around the body on a level with the shoulders).
13. *Thapsuang* (pendant).
14. *Sang wan* (golden chain worn from the shoulder to the opposite hip).
15. *Tap thit* (plate attached to sang wan where the latter touches the hip).
16. *Waen rawp* (bracelet, which is a coil spring bent into a circle).
17. *Pa wa lam* (bracelet of beads).
18. *Shong korn* (ornament for the forearm which looks like a row of bangles fused together).
19. *Phuangpra kam* (necklace of beads).
20. *Hua khon* (mask, in the picture that of Tosakanth).

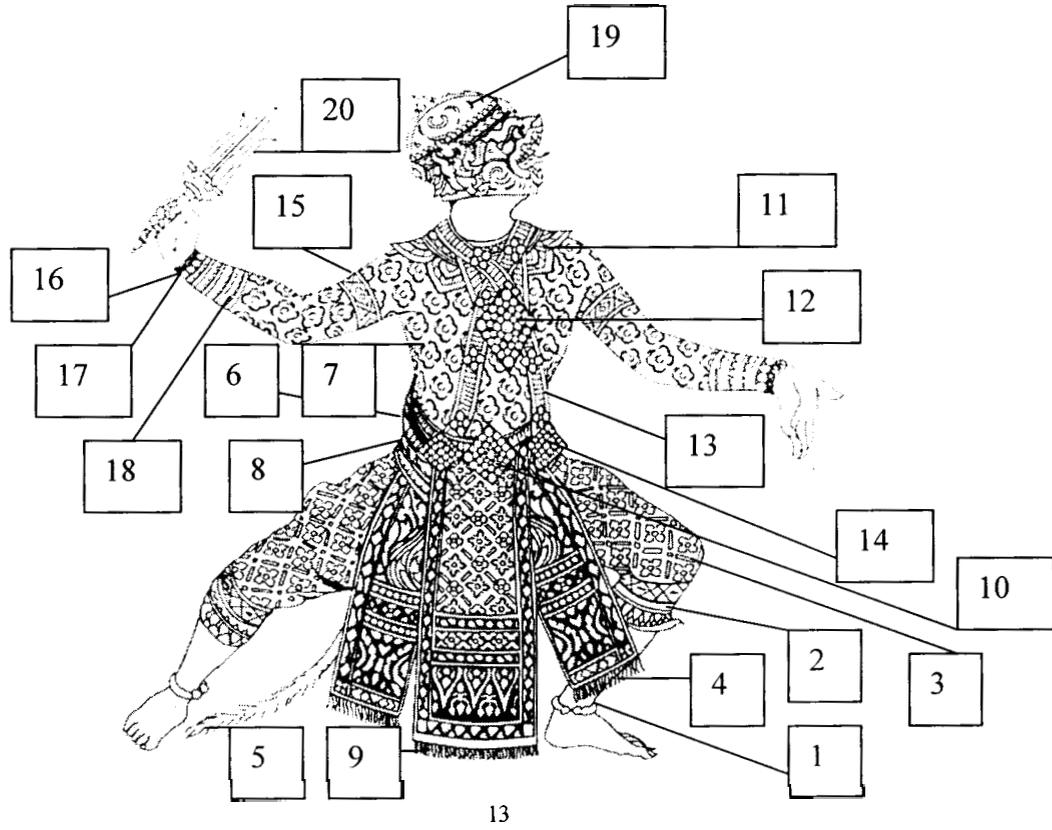
21. *Tham ma rong* (finger **ring**).

22. *Sawn* or *khan sawn* (**bow**).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Rutnin, ed.

Figure 4. The Male Monkey Roles



The important monkey roles dress in the same way. They are different from one another only by the colors and shapes of the masks, of which there are about forty kinds. However, some characters do not need to dress like this on every occasion.

<sup>13</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

1. *Kam lai thuo* (anklet).
2. *Sa napphlao* (tight-fitting drawers).
3. *Pha nung* (nether garment).
4. *Hoi khang* or *chia ra bat* (embroidered cloth used like a belt, but with its ends hanging down to the knees, one at the front of each leg).
5. *Hung Zing* (monkey's tail).
6. *Pha pit kon* or *hoi kon* (loincloth).
7. *Sua* (upper garment representing the fur of the monkey).
8. *Rat as ew* (waistband).
9. *Hoi na* (cloth hanging down from the waist between the ends of *hoi khang*).
10. *Khem khat* (belt).
11. *Khrong khaw* or *nuam khaw* (ornament worn around the body on a level with the shoulders).
12. *Thup suang* (pendant).
13. *Sang wan* (golden chain worn from the shoulder to the opposite hip).
14. *Tap thit* (plat attached to sang wan where the latter touches the hip).
15. *Pha hu rat* (armband. Usually fixed on the arm of the upper garment by stitching.  
The upper garment represents the fur of the monkey.
16. *Waen rawp* (bracelet, which is a coil spring bent into a circle).
17. *Pa wa lam* (bracelet of beads).
18. *Kam lai phaeng* or *thong korn* (ornament for the forearm which looks like a row of bangles fused together).
19. *Hua khon* (mask, in the picture that of Hanuman).
20. *Tri* (trident).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Rutnin, ed.

The *khon* characters are elaborately dressed with each piece of ornament and headdress specifically named and assigned to a particular character. Weapons are also used to differentiate the characters as well. For example, royal characters wear special types of crowns and costumes, although there may be some deviations from the traditional practice. Some changes have been effected in the costumes of monkey armies. Changes which are in accordance with traditional principles are permitted. There are some changes that are due to ignorance and misunderstanding.



Figure 5. Phra Ram (right) and Phra Lak (left)<sup>5</sup>

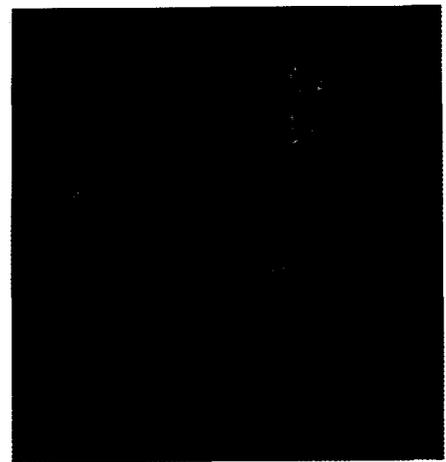


Figure 6. Tosakanth<sup>16</sup>



Figure 7. Sida<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

<sup>16</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

<sup>17</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

## The Masks

The masks are the most important characteristic of the *khon*. In the past, all the characters wore masks indicating their specific titles and rank. However, portrayals of gods and men have discarded the masks in recent periods. The female demons are now portrayed without masks, and the facial characteristics of female demons are painted on. Therefore, unmasked performers are women, *apsaras* (celestial maiden), and wives and daughters of demons. Celestial and human performers no longer wear masks; they wear headdresses to indicate their rank and are represented in natural colors. Only male demons, monkeys, and animals wear masks at the present time. However, in pictorial art, Phra Ram still has a green complexion, while the brothers Phra Bhrot, Phra Lak, and Phra Satarud have red, yellow, and purple complexions, respectively as the masks used to be in the past.

*Khon* masks for demons and monkeys are divided by the teachers of dramatic arts into two types: the peaked mask and the bald mask. Therefore, there are four kinds of *khon* masks for demons and monkeys:

1. *Yaksha yod* (demon peaked mask)
2. *Yaksha lon* (demon bald mask)
3. *Ling yod* (monkey peaked mask)
4. *Ling lon* (monkey bald mask)<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, there are individual characteristics in each mask in terms of shapes, colors, decorations, and facial expressions.

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<sup>18</sup> Dhanit Yupho. *Khon Musks*. Trans. L. Lauhabandhu. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bangkok: The Fine Arts Department, 1962).

## Demon Masks

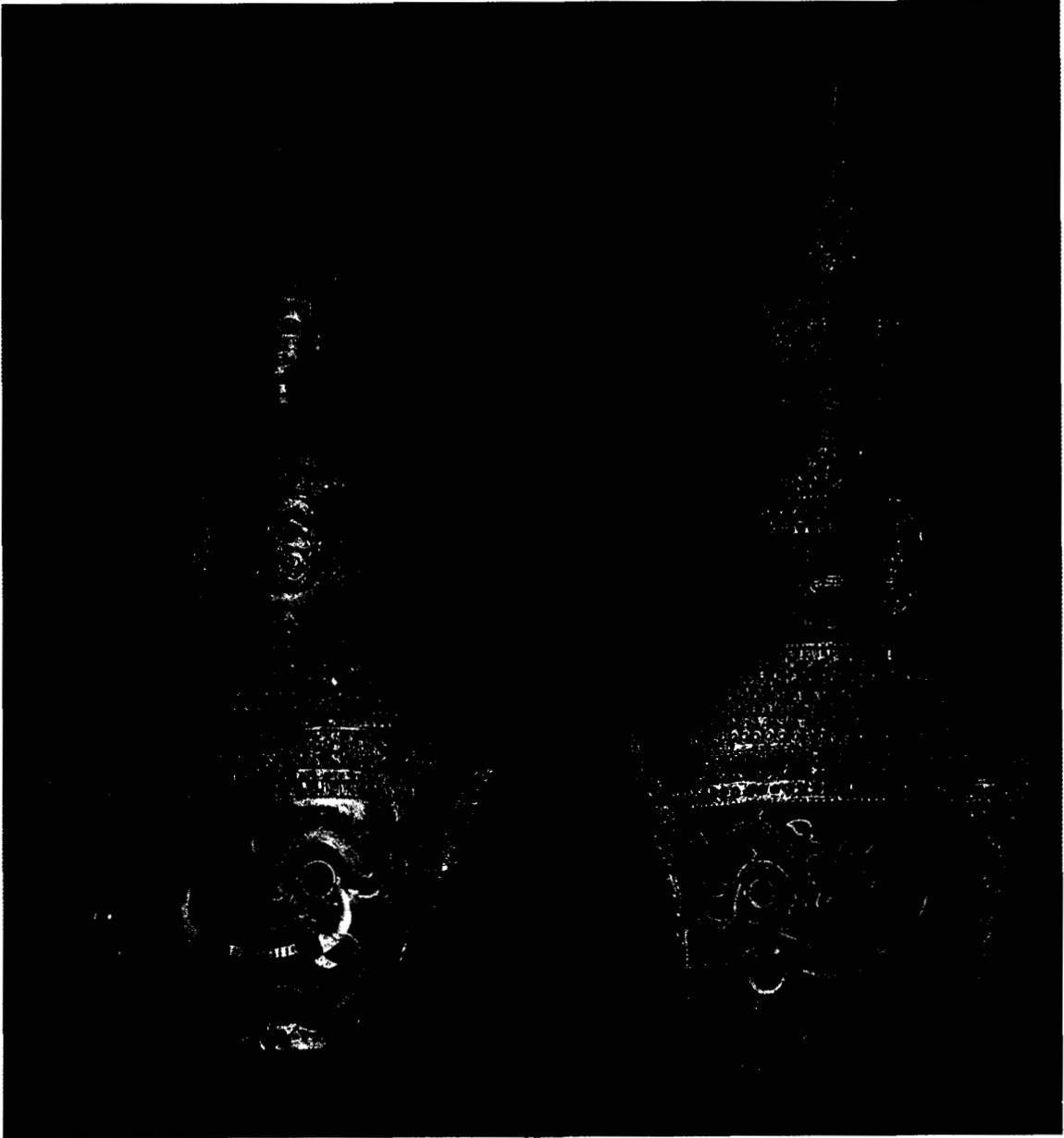
Demons still wear masks with the exception in more modern presentations where female demons have demon features painted onto their natural faces. As for the individual features, Tosakanth, the King of Longka, generally has a green complexion with a crown of victory which is differentiated by two tiers of faces within the crown: one presents the demon characteristic, his ten faces, although there is inaccuracy in numbers, and another one presents a celestial face. In peacetime episodes, Tosakanth wears a golden complexion with the same crown. Intarachit, his son and heir, wears a green complexion with a peaked crown. According to *khon* tradition, this role is not usually associated with demons. He is attributed with some human characteristics such as the human ear lobes and his dance movements. Phipek, Tosakanth's brother, wears a green complexion with a gourd crown. The other demon relatives and allies in the Longka are given a variety of crowns and complexions, some of which are highly artistic.

There is no clear evidence by what principles the various roles are assigned their individual masks. Most of the principal demon roles have green complexions and wear crowns of victory. Furthermore, there are additional features for distinguishing the demon characters. There are two types of eyes: bulging and crocodile eyes, and there are two types of mouths: open and closed mouths. For example, Tosakanth wears a crown of victory with his ten faces, has bulging eyes and open mouth.

The more than one hundred different demon masks in the *khon* may be differentiated in many ways. They can be distinguished by the shapes of crowns such as crown or multiple heads of Tosakanth, crown with gourd-shaped top of Phipek, bald masks of junior officers. Furthermore, the types of the eyes and the mouths are used to distinguish: bulging eyes with open mouth such as Tosakanth, bulging eyes

with closed mouth such as Intarachit, crocodile's eyes with open mouth such as Phipek, crocodile's eyes with closed mouth. In addition, colors are employed to identify each character. A slight error in coloring will easily lead to confusion.

Figure 8. The **Masks** of Tosakanth



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<sup>19</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

### Monkey Masks

On the whole, the monkey masks are simpler than those of the demons. The monkey kings, Phali, Sukhrip, and the King of Chompu wear the *yodbat* crowns—peaked masks—which indicate high royal rank. Although Hanuman is a leading monkey character, he does not wear a crown. He wears a coronet. There are other monkey officers who wear coronets and can only be distinguished by the colors of their complexions. Furthermore, if they have similar colors, they are differentiated by their open or closed mouths.

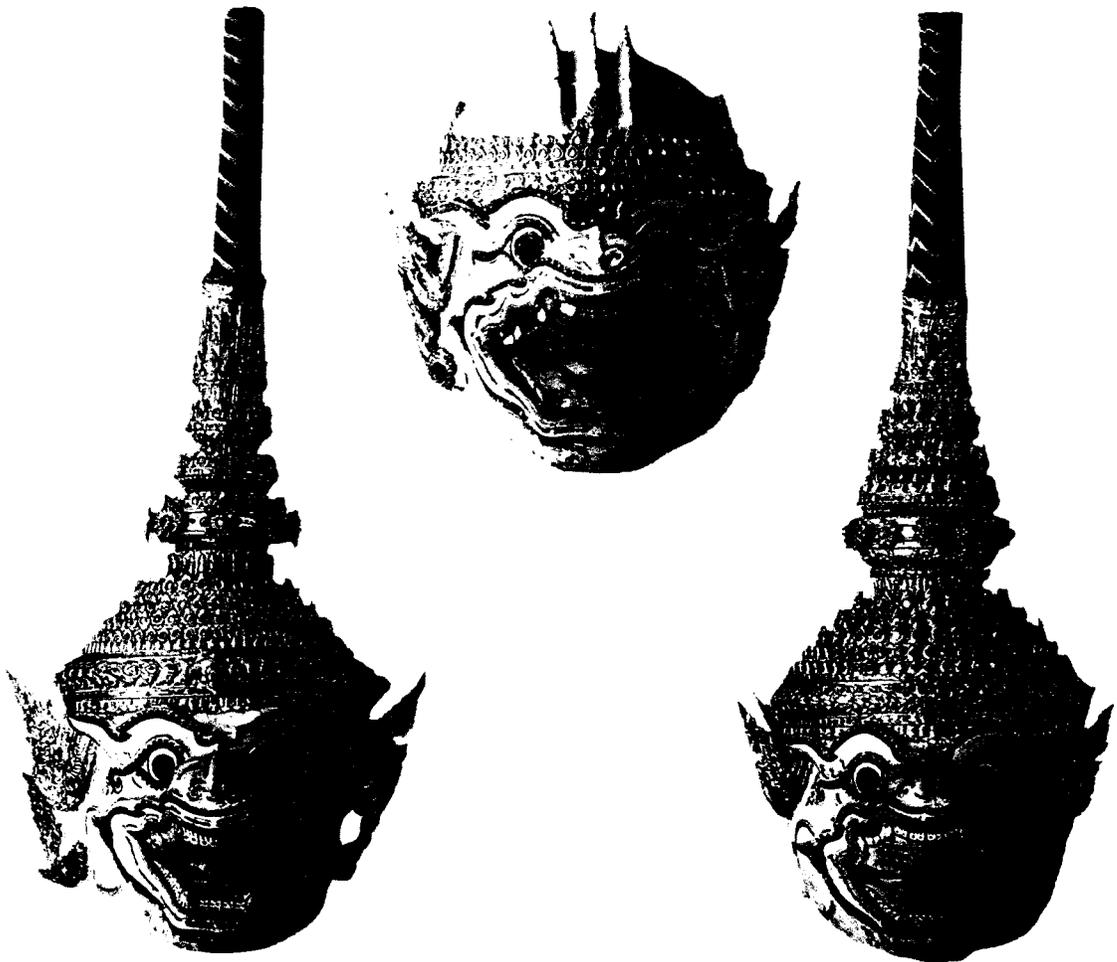
Monkey masks may be classified according to shapes as follows:

1. *Yodbat* crown (peaked mask) such as Phali, Sukhrip.
2. *Yodchai* crown (sharply-pointed mask).
3. *Yodsamkleep* crown worn by Ongkot only.
4. Bald masks worn by uncrowned monkey kings such as Hanuman.
5. Bald masks worn by the "eighteen coronets" monkeys.
6. Bald masks of Tiew Pet and Chang Kiang as worn by junior officers.
7. Masks of privates and clowns.

If the masks are similar in terms of shapes, the colors of masks, the colors of costumes, weapons, and other facial characteristics are used to distinguish the characters. For example, the white monkey with open mouth and trident is Hanuman, while another white monkey with closed mouth and dagger is Sataplee. Identification applies to the peaked masks as well. Phali wears a green peaked mask, while Sukhrip wears red. At the present time, monkeys of the Tiew Pet and Chang Kiang group are rarely presented on the stage so a description of their masks is not necessary. Even though in practice many *khon* characters are barely distinguished,

the *khon* audience has no trouble because *khon* characters with similar masks and costumes never appear in the same episode and on the stage at the same time.

Figure 9. The Masks of Hanuman

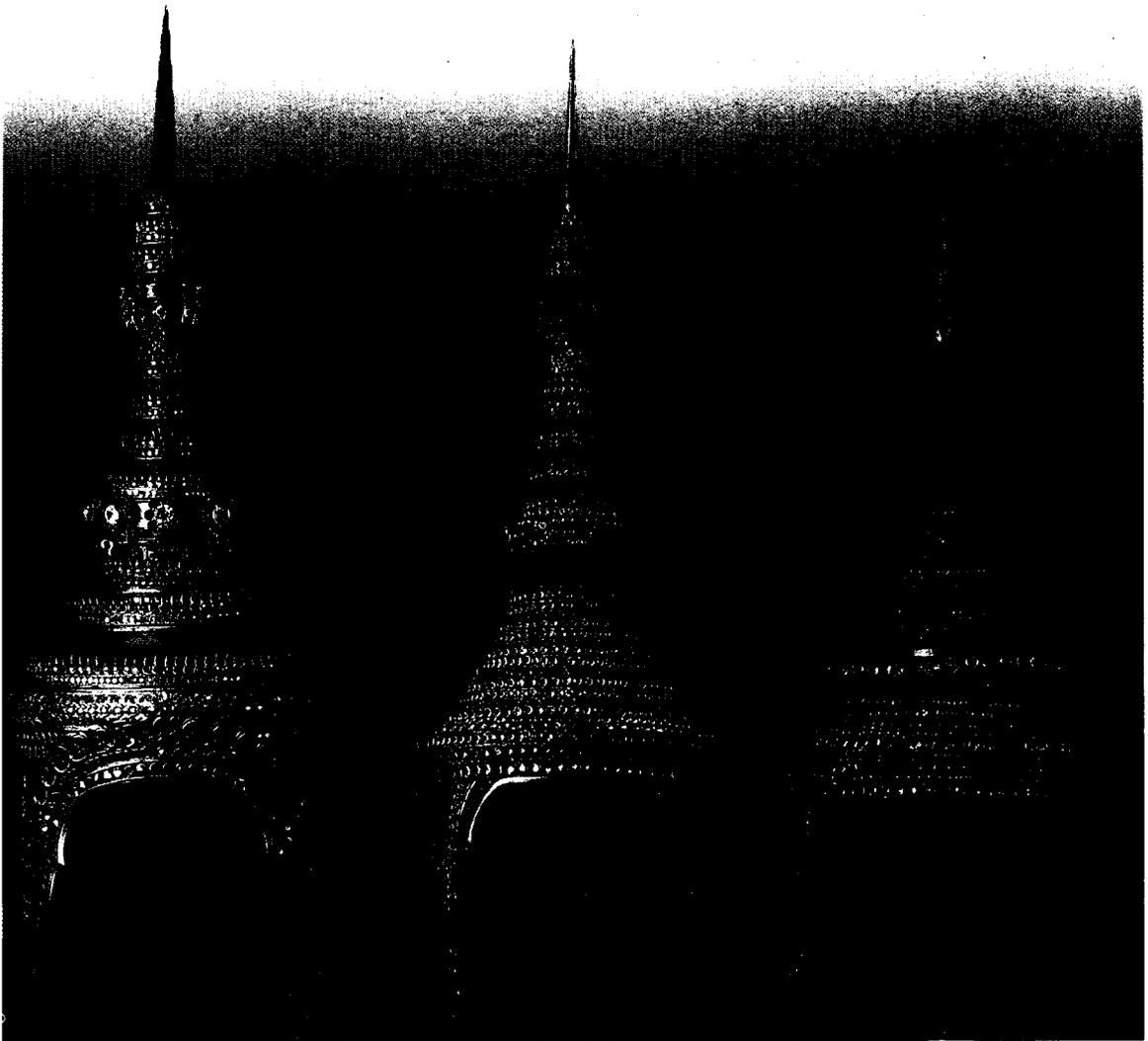


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<sup>20</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

Figure 10. The Headdresses of the Male Human Roles



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<sup>21</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

Figure 11. The Headdresses of the Female Human Roles



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<sup>22</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

Figure 12. The Headdresses of the High-ranking Female Demon Roles



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<sup>23</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

## Chapter 4

### THE PERFORMANCE STRUCTURE OF KHON

The *Ramakien* is a long and involved story and has been written by various authors in several versions. For the performance, adaptations into episodes are necessary. “Drama does not depend on written texts, but on carefully scripted actions.”<sup>24</sup> Some of the *khon* popular episodes presented by the Department of Fine Arts since the conclusion of the Southeast Asian War are The Conquest of the Demon-crow, Phra Ram in the Forest, The Floating Lady, Maiyarab the Magician, The Snake-noose, The Weapon of Brahma, Hanuman the Volunteer, and The Fire-Ordeal of Sida, etc. When these episodes are presented on stage, they are arranged in particular order. For example, the episode Phra Ram in the Forest is especially arranged in five acts by the Department of Fine Arts. It consists of a prelude: The Conquest of Nontuk (scene: in the heaven), Act I: The Abduction of Sida (scene: in the forest near the Godeveri), Act II: Sida’s Attempt at Suicide (scene: the Asoka Park, Longka), Act III: Construction of the Causeway (scene: in the ocean), Act IV: War (scene: battle-field), Act V: The Return to Ayutthaya (scene: in the forest-hermitage and in the heavens). This particular episode was first performed at Silpakorn Theatre on Friday, November 29, 1957.<sup>25</sup> The *Ramakien* is often produced in a fragmented fashion. Thai people point out that since the audience knows how the *Ramakien* concludes it is not necessary to show the end on the stage. Besides, it is considered a taboo to present the final defeat and the death of Tosakanth on a public stage.

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<sup>24</sup> Schechner, p. 103

<sup>25</sup> The Department of Fine Arts.

Thai theatre or performance dates back to the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767). Although it was known to have existed first in the form of a court performance in the fifteenth century, it did not seem to be considered as a regular entertainment. The masked drama was not mentioned earlier than the late seventeenth century even though it might have existed prior to that. However, records of the *Ramakien* in Thai literary works date back to the reign of King Ramkamhaeng of the Sukhothai period as people found stone inscriptions relating to Rama and Sita. A bas-relief of the Sukhothai period described that fast-paced dance of the demons, a form of *khon*, which existed at that time. A later inscription, dated 1458, related that performances of slow and fast dances were accompanied by an orchestra comprising the lyre, oboe, gongs, and drums. In addition, episodes from the *Ramayana* appeared on lintels at various Khmer temples. “Foreign sources such as the writings of the sixteenth century French diplomat La Loubbre also described *khon* performances and it seemed that the Thai version of the *Ramayana* was already a well-established literature during the Ayutthaya period.”<sup>26</sup> However, most of the Ayutthaya literature was lost in the sack of the capital in 1767.

King Taksin of the Thonburi period (1767-1782) composed a *lakon* (dance drama) version dealing with the adventures of the white monkey Hanuman and the story of Phra Ram’s son, Mongkut. Then the first monarch of the Bangkok period (1782-present), King Rama I initiated the **task of** collecting all available materials from the surviving sources, and in 1798, with chosen court poets, composed the most comprehensive literary version of the *Ramakien*. While the *Ramakien* has become a major Thai literary work, there are various opinions about the sources **of** the *Ramakien*. King Rama VI has the opinion that King Rama I’s version was mostly

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<sup>26</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana, p. 106.

based on Valmiki's Sanskrit version, while Prince Subhadradis Diskul, an art historian, has written that it was probably derived from the southern Indian version.

King Rama I added forty episodes that made it the longest Thai composition in verse. Significant details and characters were also altered. For example, Hanuman of the *Ramakien* is quite different from Hanuman of the *Ramayana*. The courageous, loyal, playful and shrewd Hanuman is a great lover of women and much loved by Thai people. Many other characters and scenes in the *Ramakien* depict Thai society and court life. The murals of scenes from King Rama I's *Ramakien* are portrayed around the cloisters of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok.

In 1815, King Rama II rearranged certain scenes for a dramatic version suitable for *khon* and *Zakon* performances. It is reported that a performance of *khon* was given in which performers copied the movements made by *nang yai* puppeteers. The movements of the performers were highlighted against a white screen. They wore heavy makeup that has become formalized into the masks used in *khon* today. Some Thai scholars suggest that it probably has been modeled on stylized Indian *kathakali* dance makeup.<sup>27</sup> The art of the dance of the Bangkok period owes its modern improvements to King Rama II, an all-round artist and author, and Chao Fa Krom Luang Pitaks Montri, his cousin and brother-in-law.

King Rama IV also composed some verses of the *Ramakien* for *khon* performances. The public was allowed to establish their own *khon* groups and performers included commoners and slaves. By this time women were also allowed to perform for the general public. After the reign of King Rama IV, male performers

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<sup>27</sup> James R. Brandon, *Theatre in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967).

were allowed to dance with the royal ladies, and female dancers were allowed to perform and teach outside the court.<sup>28</sup>

Toward the end of King Rama V's reign, the young crown prince organized and trained a group of royal guards, who were mostly the sons of noblemen and high-ranking civil servants, for *khon* performances. The prince revised some of the verses and directed the performances for several important state functions. When he became King Rama VI, he made a great contribution by rewriting many episodes specifically for *khon* Performances. He was an artist and a writer who paid particular interest to *khon* and other classical dramas. Early in his reign, he established the Department of Dramatic Arts and he continued to raise the standard of the performing arts. However, in 1925, the expenses of the Department were very high so King Rama VII had to cut back drastically and keep only the most capable performers for state performances.

*Khon*, the actual performance of the *Ramakien*, has evolved from *nang yai*—a shadow play. *Nangyai* consists of large unmovable figures cut from thick cattle skin. Some figures are individual characters, while some are action scenes. Some figures are painted black, while some are translucent and polychrome. Each puppet is held over the head of one puppeteer who dances in the front and back of a large cloth screen illuminated from behind. More colorful puppets, manipulated by costumed puppeteers, are used for *nang ram* or *nang rabam* and *nang klang wen* (day performance) and for *nang klang kuen* (night performance). The music is played by *piphat*, a Thai orchestra, with narrators.<sup>29</sup> The first stage of *khon* was performed before a screen without any other stage accessory than what was used in the shadow

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<sup>28</sup> James R. Brandon, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* (Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Kam.

play. The *khon* performers move sideways and keep in profile as much as possible, like the puppets of *nang yai*. Furthermore, *khon* plays are called *chud* (a set of puppets) instead of being called *ton* (episode) as are most plays.

At the present time, there are five variations of *khon* performances:

1. *Khon klang pleng*, the outdoor masked dance drama that emphasizes processions and battles. The accompanying music is an appropriate march while the rest consists of recitatives and dialogue without singing.

2. *Khon rong nok* or *khon nang rao* is the informal indoor masked dance drama without singing. Performers play on the stage with a pole. The pole is set toward the back of the stage. It is placed by a simple curtain on which is painted a scene of a mountain or forest. There are two *piphat* bands (the Thai orchestras), one at either end of the stage, recitatives, and dialogue without singing.

A development of this form is often presented when a preliminary performance takes place on the first day; the main performance is on the second day. The troupe stays the night on or near the stage. The preliminary performance consists of *homrong*, inaugurative music, an overture that is repeated in every set and episode of a performance. Then there is dance which is followed by the short episode.

3. *Khon na co*, the masked dance drama before the screen. This form is like a shadow play in that the performance takes place in front of a white cloth screen which is like the back of the stage.

4. *Khon rong nai*, the court masked dance drama. This form is similar to the court dance drama. The stage is more elaborate. It consists of recitatives, dialogue, and singing.

In the above four forms, the story presented on the stage is not divided into acts or scenes. Moreover, there is no dramatic setting.

5. *Khon chak*, the masked dance drama with scenery on a modern stage. This form is utilized in the performances which have been staged regularly since 1946 by the Department of Fine Arts. Two to four male narrators recite stories and provide dialogue for masked and unmasked male characters. For female characters, the female singers sing the verses, while the performers dance and make gestures according to the songs.<sup>30</sup>

Each version of *khon* consists of three elements: dances, *khamphak*—the recitations of the Ramakien text—written in *chabang* and *yani* verses, examples of which are the recitations written by King Rama II for many episodes of the Ramakien, and *ceraca*—the dialogue, which may include descriptions of actions on the stage, spoken by an offstage chorus—written in *raiyao*, alliterative and rhyming prose of unequal length. This kind of prose is identical with the prose used in the more formal official announcements and often legal preambles of the present day.

In terms of recitations and dialogue, the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya (the first and the second capital cities of Thailand, respectively) Ramakien verses were written mainly for reciting during the shadow play and other dramatic performances. The verses were mainly derived from oral sources and these were later used as the basis for today's versions. When certain features of *lakon nai*, an inner court all-female dance drama, were introduced into the masked dance drama, a kind of literary composition used with dance drama came to be used with the masked plays, too. It makes the texts beautiful pieces of art composed in many literary forms.

Since it is obviously impossible for the *khon* performers to sing or speak their own lines because the masks they wear prevent them, there is a separate chorus. Although at the present time, performers who play celestial and human roles do not

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<sup>30</sup> H. H. Prince Dhanivat Kromamun Bidyalabh Bridhyakorn and Dhanit Yupho, *The Khon* (Bangkok: The Fine Arts Department, 1962).

wear masks, these performers do not speak. The performers have to present their dance steps and poses according to the recitations and songs of the chorus. Sometimes, the performers only pantomime, which is as expressive as words when performed by the talented performers.

The *kon phak* or chorus has to be familiar with the lines and know the rhythms of the performers' movements. They may be able to adjust the recitations and pauses in consonance with the requirements of the technique of the dance. It is mostly through the chorus that the performers know when to suit their actions to the words. The dialogue is interpolated by the reciters. Therefore, *khon* has to rely on the coordination of many people with various functions.<sup>31</sup>

In terms of music, the music is strictly bound by tradition. Although singing tunes may be altered and arranged to suit each individual theatrical manager's taste to a certain extent, the action tunes are not altered. Each action tune is a conventional sign and connected with certain dances or actions. For example, there are walking, marching, laughing, weeping, anger tunes, etc. When the orchestra plays one of these tunes, the performers know immediately what they are supposed to do and they dance or act accordingly. The orchestra musicians must be proficient not only with the stock melodies, but also with the movements of the classical dance. The responsibility of the orchestra is passed to the *ranad* (the xylophone) players who lead on most occasions and the tom-tom and drum players who control the pace of the movements.

*Khon* performances were traditionally reserved for state functions and the size of the orchestra depended on the particular occasion. In the past, *khon* performances were more often presented in the open air so two or more sets of orchestras were

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<sup>31</sup> Bridhyakorn and Yupho.

required. One was near the demon characters and the other was near the celestial and human characters. Indoor performances required only one orchestra. “Formerly the essentials of a *khon* orchestra consisted merely of five pieces, known as *The Five*. With the later developments of orchestral organization, the number has grown in accordance with the nature and setting of the piece to be performed.”<sup>32</sup>

For theatrical purposes, the orchestra consists of the following instruments:

1. *Ranad ek* (the alto xylophone).
2. *Ranad thum* (the basso xylophone).
3. *Ghongyai* (the large basso gongs).
4. *Ghong lek* (the small alto gongs).
5. *Pi nai* (the alto flageolet, a kind of harsh oboe).
6. *Pi nawk* (the basso flageolet, a kind of harsh oboe).
7. *Taphon* (a kind of tom-tom).
8. *Klong thad* (a set of three drums).<sup>33</sup>

They are the most important component parts of the orchestra, but other minor instruments may be added if required.

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<sup>32</sup> Bridhyakorn and Yupho, pp. 4-5.

<sup>33</sup> Rutnin, ed.

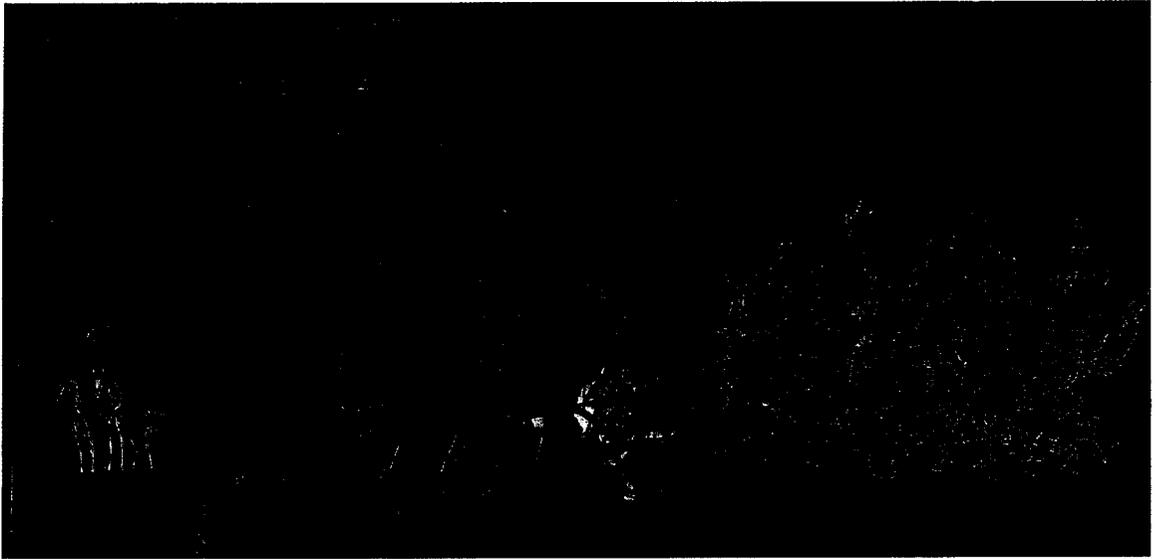


Figure 13.  
The Battle Scene between the Armies of Phra **Ram** (left) and Tosakanth (right).\* <sup>34</sup>

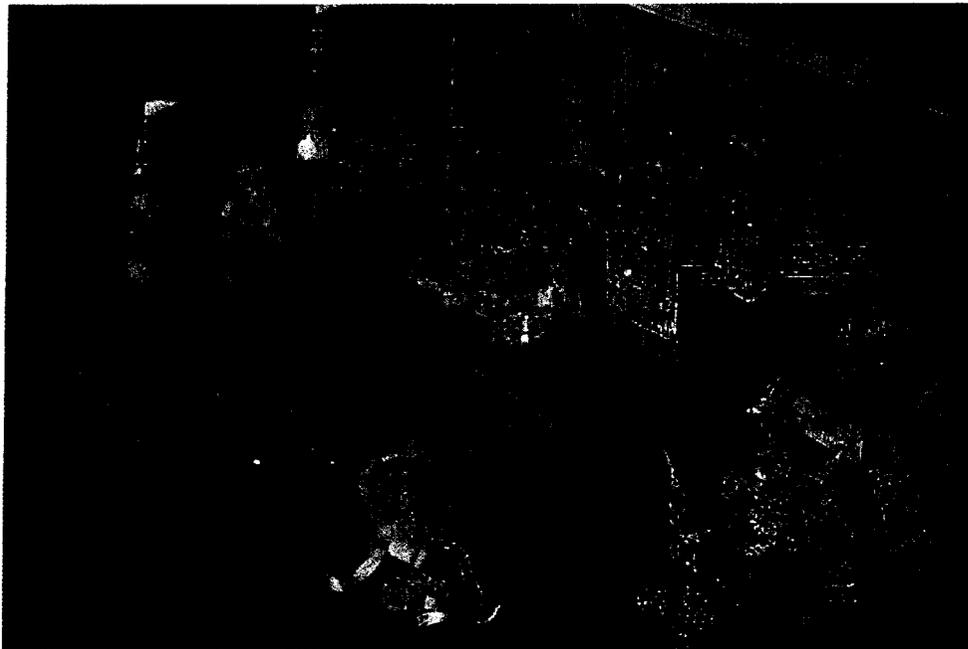


Figure 14. The Fire-Ordeal of Sida Scene.\* <sup>35</sup>

\* The figures are the murals from the cloisters of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok, Thailand.

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<sup>34</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

<sup>35</sup> Kam.



Figure 15.  
The Floating Lady Scene from the Bas-relief of the Temple of Phra Jetubon in Bangkok,  
Thailand.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Cadet.

## Chapter 5

### THE TRAINING OF PERFORMERS

The Department of Fine Arts, founded by the Thai government in **1934** after a constitutional monarchy was proclaimed, teaches students to perform *khon* and *lakon nai* (an inner court all-female dance drama). At the present time, women often take male human and female human roles. As they do not play demon or monkey roles, therefore, they do not wear masks. Men customarily perform male human, demon, and monkey roles. The animal roles are reserved only for men.

*Khon*, masked dance drama, is considered to be the classical form of histrionic art which is unique to Thai people and symbolizes their original and highly developed civilization. The artists who can perform them well have not only to be intelligent but must also be well trained. Today *khon* is learned and performed not only in the court. There is a drama school opened by the Department of Fine Arts for training students in *khon*, other types of classical dances, and traditional music. The Department of Fine Arts prescribes an advanced course of studies and takes in students who have completed primary education. The students received a general education and training in theatrical art. However, the school emphasizes more importance on the latter. There are both boys and girls among the students. Boys who wish to learn the art of acting in masked dance drama are trained to play male human, female human, demon or monkey roles according to their suitability. Training can be divided into fundamental and advanced convention in the dance.

*Khon* dances are graceful and expressive. The whole body is used in performance. Each gesture that every performer presents expresses many feelings: love, anger, shyness, etc. The training of *khon* performers is both long and tedious,

especially for demon and monkey roles. They have to present the images of demons—imaginative creatures—and impersonate the gestures of monkeys. There are battle scenes that require the performers to be very skillful at acrobatics. They have to be trained like gymnasts. It takes the best part of a year, sometimes longer, before performers are proficient. The acrobatic dances of the khon have been influenced to a large degree by the krabi *krabong*, the traditional sword and baton fight.<sup>37</sup> It was also put to music and developed into a dance. It became the practice for young princes and noblemen to learn this martial art. King Ramkamhaeng of Sukhothai (the first capital city of Thailand), King Naresuan of Ayutthaya (the second capital city), and King Taksin of Thonburi (the third capital city) were particularly skillful in krabi krabong. Thepleng darb (dagger song) andpleng krabi (sword song) that involved dancing with weapons were performed during royal celebrations. The khon has blended some aspects of these war dances, particularly in the battle scenes.

In the first phase, boys who are selected to take male human roles such as Phra Ram, Phra Lak or female human roles such as Sida and Montho begin learning ram phleng, dancing to music. Their training is like the training of girls in all-female dance drama. At first, the students are asked to kneel down, keep their bodies erect, open their hands, and lay them, palms down, on their thighs. Then they are taught to resume the posture distinguished by five features: to keep the head, the shoulders, the trunk and the waist erect and the hands fully stretched. In other words, they are trained to sit erect with expanded chests. The students have to practice dancing and singing for not less than one term before they can dance all figures performed to

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<sup>37</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

*phleng cha* (slow tune) and keep to the correct rhythm. Then the students are trained to dance to *phleng reo* (quick tune).<sup>38</sup>

During the period that the students are trained for many months to dance slow tune and quick tune, the teacher sometimes demonstrates the movements and postures in order that the students may remember and imitate them. If their hands and feet do not look graceful, the teacher bends them to the required shapes. The students are also trained to tap the knees, knock the waists with their elbows and move their necks in order to learn to move rhythmically until the teacher considers that they can dance to both tunes correctly to the rhythm indicated by their singing. After that, they practice dancing to the music of the xylophone. Students have to practice for about a year to be able to dance slow tune and quick tune readily and correctly, and even longer to dance very well.

*Phleng cha* (slow tune) and *phleng reo* (quick tune) are known together as *phleng na phat* (instrumental music). In the past, while teachers trained students to dance, vocal music was not used at the preliminary stage. The method was merely to teach the basic figures of Thai dancing. Therefore, students who could dance slow and quick tunes well can also perform well on the stage. However, when students gain proficiency in dancing both tunes, they are taught to dance to other instrumental music of the elementary grade as well. When the students are able to dance to instrumental music of the elementary grade, they are taught to interpret words in the composition known as *mae bot*, the alphabet of dancing, which is sung to the tune of *phleng chom talat*, the song describing the market. The alphabet of dancing are evolved from Indian dance. Many basic movements are similar to movements described in the *natya sastra*, Doctrine of Dramatic Art. However, while there are

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<sup>38</sup> Dhanit Yupho, *The Preliminary Course of Training in Thai Theatrical Art* (Bangkok: The National Culture Institute, 1956).

one hundred and eight movements in the *natya sastra*, there are only nineteen or sixty-four movements in Thailand.<sup>39</sup> Thai performers have kept the Indian meaning, but have completely altered the over-all movement pattern.

There are two versions of the alphabet. The first one is a short list found in the episode of the destruction of *Nontuk* (the demon gate keeper) by *Phra Narai* (the god) in King Rama I's the *Ramakien*. The second version is a comprehensive list of the evolutions which H.R.H. Prince Damrong wrote in *tamra fon ram*, treatise on dramaturgy. The alphabet of dancing of either version is a model of Thai theatrical art that has been preserved for Thai people from generation to generation, at least from the time when Ayutthaya was the capital of Thailand.

In fact, most parts of the alphabet of dancing were adopted from the evolutions which were presented with slow and quick tunes, which the students learn to dance first. However, while words were interpreted, some more postures and gestures were found necessary to make the spectators understand the words better. **So** they were either invented outright or adapted from those already in slow tune, quick tune, and other items of instrumental music of the elementary grade. According to **Mr.** Dhanit Yopho, the former director of the Division of Music and Drama in the Department of Fine Arts,

*I understand that formerly the names were used for giving the students a general idea of the evolutions. **For** instance, the teacher would tell them that "Sot Soi Mala" referred to the movements of stringing a garland and how the students should execute them to make them appear beautiful ... Then the students would be able to use their imagination and understand what was required **of** them.<sup>40</sup>*

However, some people say that the evolutions named from the alphabet of dancing are correct only when they are performed according to the rules. When their

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<sup>39</sup> Brandon.

<sup>40</sup> Yupho, pp. 23-24.

names have come to be interpreted in a stereotyped manner, to perform them differently has been considered incorrect. Therefore, teaching theatrical art means training the students to remember the evolutions and training their memory more than their imagination.

For students who have been selected to act demon or monkey roles, advanced training is necessary. They begin learning the *mae tha*, mother of postures. The preliminary training for these roles is identical and consists of tapping the knees for training students to realize a sense of rhythm and music, knocking the waist for accustoming the upper part of the body to flexibility, stepping **at** a pole for accustoming the legs to correct angular poses and strengthening them for angular movements, pressing into angles for bending and retaining the body, legs, arms, and breast into fixed angles so there could be no undignified stooping at any moment during the dance.<sup>41</sup>

For the monkey roles, there are other specific acrobatic movements to be trained for. Additional training for the monkey roles consists of squaring the thighs for strengthening them and enabling the legs to stretch out to their full length, turning somersaults including a special somersault for the monkey roles. At first, students place their hands and feet on the ground, keep their faces upward and then raise their legs up. In that pose, they are trained to walk with their hands in that position and then bring their legs down to complete the circle. All of these and a few other movements are done to give the body flexibility and quickness.<sup>42</sup> After these students are taught either singly or in groups of two or three in the monkey movements, teachers not only set examples but always are ready to help in balancing

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<sup>41</sup> Bridhyakorn and Yupho.

<sup>42</sup> Bridhyakorn and Yupho.

or setting the limbs in correct positions. After these preliminary exercises, students who take demon and monkey roles are trained very often individually or in groups of two or three in movements of the classic dance in general.

Although *khon* was originally presented by an all-male cast, when *lakon nai* (an inner court all-female dance drama) became increasingly popular at court, many elements of female dance drama were included into *khon*. Therefore, *lakon nai* singing was added. *Lakon nai* performers began taking roles in *khon*. At the present time, it is not uncommon to see a girl dancing the part of Phra Lak—Phra Ram's brother. *Khon* has become a blending of the original rough, masculine *khon* with soft, feminine *lakon nai*, thus becoming more refined in its dance style. The two forms are intermingled and the combined genre is called *khon* if masks are involved and *lakon ram* if masks are not used. As *khon* has undergone an evolution of changes and in fact, has developed professionals who dance the *khon* on regular occasions in Thailand, the training has become much more complex. Nevertheless, the basic myths have remained in tact left to preserve an important part of Thailand's culture.

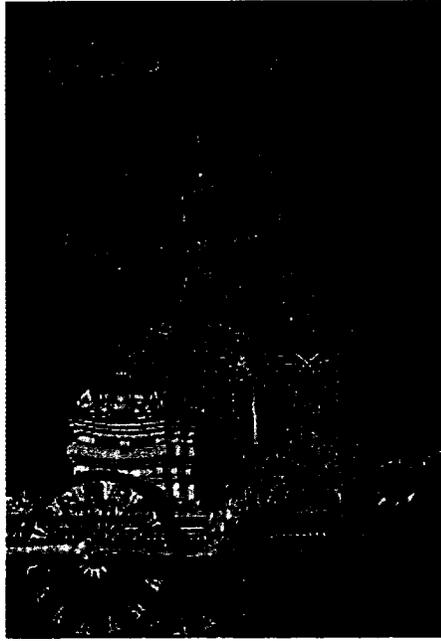


Figure 16. Phra Ram (left) and Phra Lak (right) on the Chariot.<sup>43</sup>



Figure 17. The Battle between the Armies of Phra Ram and Tosakanth.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, *Amazing Bangkok* (Bangkok: Conform Publishing Co., Ltd., 1998).

<sup>44</sup> Chandavij and Pramualratana.

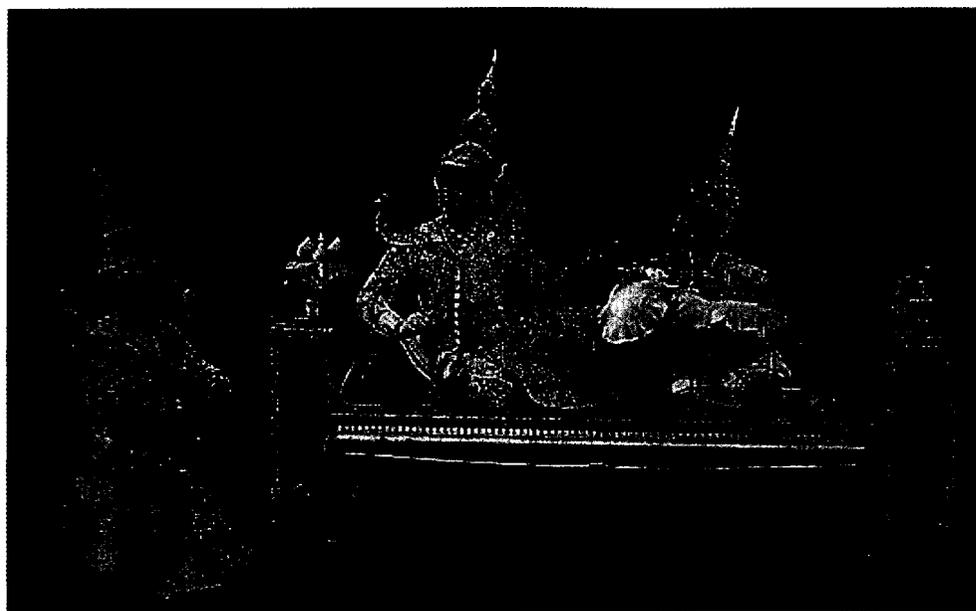


Figure 18.  
Phipek (left) Prophecies that Sida (the baby) will Cause the Destruction of the Demons.<sup>45</sup>



Figure 19. The Monkeys Practice Fighting.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Kam.

<sup>46</sup> Kam.

## Chapter 6

### THE CONCLUSION

Thai children know the story of *Ramakien*, even though their knowledge is superficial. They know that the story is about the battle between Phra Ram and Tosakanth, the demon king, and are able to distinguish between protagonists and antagonists; Phra Ram, Phra Lak, and Hanuman are good people, while Tosakanth is evil. Although the story is about Phra Ram, children prefer Hanuman, the monkey general, because he is funny, smart, powerful, and can transform himself into other people. In some elementary schools, students are trained to perform *khon* annually, in addition to their Thai classical dance and music classes. In secondary schools, students, especially arts students, learn the *Ramakien* in greater detail. Because *Ramakien* is representative of the heritage in Thai literature, students are able to learn Thai culture, values, lifestyle, and also learn how to read, write, and understand the beautiful poetry of this epic.

Even though *khon* and the *Ramakien* may be seen by students and tourists as entertainment pieces, beneath them is an illustrious history of Asian mythology. Although Buddhism is the most popular religion in Thailand, Hinduism which is the most popular religion in India, has influenced the *Ramakien* story and lifestyles in Thailand. Hindu rituals are included in both royal and common ceremonies such as weddings. Since Hinduism is related to divinity, the gods who built and protected the world as well as the natural phenomenon are mentioned in the *Ramakien*. In addition, most of the Thai people respect both Buddha and the important Hindu gods (Phra Isuan, Phra Prom, and Phra Narai). Because *khon* and the *Ramakien* have such a wide-ranging history, other religious and cultures can be introduced to students.

The characters in the Ramakien represent the kinds of virtues Thailand wishes to instill in its children. Phra Ram, the king of Ayutthaya, demonstrates courage and honor and protects his people from evil. Hanuman, the monkey general, is loyal to the king and will sacrifice himself for his kingdom. Both characters are honest and represent the kind of leadership encouraged in the young people of Thailand. Conversely, Tosakanth, who is possessed of great power, only uses that power to destroy his own healthy spirit. He is self-centered and power hungry, qualities discouraged in young people. Intarachit, Tosakanth' son, carries on the tradition of corruption thus suggesting parents' obligation to instill positive virtues in their children. Therefore, the epic Ramakien serves to teach its readers and viewers to do goodness, not evil, to strive for a pure mind which are the principles of Buddhism. If people behave with wisdom, with discipline, with goodness, their lives will be peaceful.

Systematic training that has begun even in elementary school gives both a presentation of the Ramakien and a part of Thai culture as well as the teaching of beautiful poetry and literature. Thai students have been taught to be disciplined and to work as a group while they are practicing khon. Furthermore, they experience a story that is as exciting and entertaining as contemporary adventure stories. Through the most beautiful poetry in Thai literature, character is taught.

Not only is it important to train students to perform but to educate audiences. Khon is a unique Thai performance created through the collaborative skills of many people: artists, sculptors, painters, singers, narrators, musicians and dancers. The Rantakien is not only the literature that depicts the adventurous story, but beneath this epic, it also portrays the morality and the national heritage. The *Ramakien* describes universal thought about vice and virtue which audiences can learn as well.

*To the Westerner, to whom the magic in the works of Shakespeare and the miracles in the Bible are impediments not only to belief but also to appreciation, the influence and popularity of the Ramakien will doubtless be unaccountable. How can a work in which magic and the supernatural play so large a part, and which is therefore divorced from and at variance with the world at large, maintain its hold on the Thai, he will wonder ...<sup>47</sup>*

Hopefully, this research can be another way to preserve Thai classical arts. To let people perceive the value of the classical arts is crucial, since these arts not only reflect the history of the country, but also reveal the values of various cultures. People should try to preserve the arts in many forms. If they neglect the arts, they will ignore their history and their culture.

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<sup>47</sup> Cadet, p. 24.

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Amolwan Kiriwat was born in Bangkok, Thailand on March 30, **1976**. She was raised in Nonthaburi, Thailand and graduated from Chitralada School, Bangkok in **1993**. She attended Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok and graduated in **1997** with a Bachelor of **Arts** in Dramatic **Arts**. She entered the Theatre graduate program at The University of Maine in the fall of **1999**. Amolwan is a candidate for the Master of **Arts** degree in Theatre from The University of Maine in May, **2001**