

The Role of Shadow Puppetry in the Development of  
Phatthalung Province, Thailand

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Thailand has traditionally two styles of shadow puppetry. One is *Nang Yai* in which each puppet is held aloft by a dancer for royal performances. The other is *Nang Talung* from the Phatthalung Province in which several small puppets are manipulated by a single puppeteer. From previous research in Malaysia, it was found that Malaysian Wayang Kulit is heavily influenced by *Nang Talung*. Phatthalung is becoming increasingly developed for tourism, and a popular destination is the Shadow Play Handicrafts Village. In August 2012, the researcher participated in training at the Village, and interviewed the director, the son of a retired Nang Talung puppeteer. While the Village continues to produce puppets for performing troupes still active in Thailand, its emphasis is on crafting puppets as decorative art for collectors. Since Nang Talung is part of the cultural heritage of Phatthalung, both the experience of visiting the Village and purchasing crafted-to-order souvenirs are parts of the tourist experience of this province. The researcher later conducted additional field research at Little Angels Orphanage in Siem Reap, Cambodia, for contrast. Like the Handicrafts Village, Little Angels teaches puppet crafting and is located near a popular tourist destination. But unlike the Village, Little Angels' training is part of a total rehabilitation program for orphaned children rather than preserving a dying art. To a considerable extent, Thailand is a developed country and its southernmost provinces have become popular tourist destinations, which is augmented by one of them, Phatthalung, being the birthplace of its popular shadow puppetry.

Ongoing research on the Shadow Puppetry of Southeast Asia (SEA) has focused on how this ancient art form is surviving in contemporary SEA. This research has included field studies in Malaysia, primarily Kelantan state, and Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia. Wherever it has appeared, this ancient art form has played a major role in each region's identity and development. This study was conducted in Phatthalung Province in Southern Thailand, home of *Nang Talung*, a folk art that is most similar to the Shadow Puppetry of countries previously researched. One of Southern Thailand's primary industries is tourism, and Phatthalung is being developed for its tourism industry. The purpose of this field study was to determine *Nang Talung*'s role in this development. For contrast, additional field research was conducted in neighboring undeveloped Cambodia where a parallel Shadow Puppetry tradition is being revived after being destroyed by the Khmer Rouge regime.

Shadow Puppetry is a form of theater that involves manipulating carved leather puppets in front of a light source so that they cast shadows on a screen visible by the viewer. It has appeared in various forms in China, Southeast, South, and Central Asia, and Europe. The actual origins of Shadow Puppetry are unknown and still a subject of debate among scholars. Chen, in reviewing Shadow Puppetry in the various countries where it has appeared, concludes that the origins of Shadow Puppetry cannot be determined and that a good possibility that it originated with nomadic tribes of Central Asia, who then brought it to India from where it spread throughout Asia. Its origins are even more unclear in Thailand. Earlier forms of Shadow Puppetry from Java had already been reported in Thailand, but it was not performed under the name *Nang Talung* until the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V (September 20, 1853 – October 23, 1910) (Taweethong). In examining the origins of Thailand's Shadow Puppetry, Smithies and Kerdchouay essentially echo the conclusions of Chen that it came originally from

areas outside South, East, and Southeast Asia.

Shadow Puppetry in SEA evolved into a multimedia art with many aspects or “faces” - drama, painting, carving, literature, voice, instrumental music, and mimicry (Mulyano). Drama refers to the story being told. Painting and carving refer to the construction and design of the puppets. The literature comes from ancient Hindu myths. Voice is represented by the puppet master who gives each character a distinct voice. Instrumental music is performed by the orchestra. Mimicry refers to the actual manipulation of the puppets that makes them live and breathe. Some of these "faces" have been isolated as art forms on their own. Indonesian orchestra music (*gamelan*) is popular with fans of "world music" (Bali and Beyond). Some visual aspects of the puppets can be seen in the work of visual artists like this researcher (Lim, 2010), Aris A Yaacob (Yaacob), and Heri Dono (National Gallery of Australia).

Shadow Puppetry has been described as the original form of cinema (Jermadi), and Thais use the word *nang* for cinema since they see movie images as essentially shadows projected from film onto a screen (Brown). A common theme that has arisen from research on variations in Shadow Puppetry is the survival of this traditional art in the face of competition from modern forms of entertainment - cinema, television, technology, and popular music - spread through the process of globalization. One response has been preservation of the traditional styles of shadow puppetry. Two puppetmasters interviewed for previous research in Malaysia follow this approach: Pak Dain (Dain Muhammad Usman) of Galeri *Wayang Kulit* Melayu Tradisional Kelantan and Pak Soh (Yusoff Bin Mamat) of Kelantan *Wayang Kulit* Sri Cahaya, Kampong Laut, Kelantan (Lim, 2012).

The other response has been to adopt aspects of modern entertainment by using modern characters, stories from popular culture, technology, and modern popular music and instruments

in performances. This has been the case in Indonesia where their *Wayang Kulit* is broadcast on television with guest performers and figures based on contemporary popular characters (Lim, 2010). Two Malaysian *Wayang Kulit* dalang who were interviewed also use this approach which was influenced by and borrowed from the popular Shadow Puppetry of Thailand, *Nang Talung*: Eyo Hock Seng, of Sri Campuran Dikir Barat, Pasir Mas, Kelantan, who uses it in combination to traditional Kelantanese *Wayang Kulit* and Pak Majid (Abdul Majid Mohamed Noh) - *Wayang Kulit* Seri Asun, Kedah (Lim, 2012). Pak Majid was, in fact, trained by his father who was himself trained in Thailand by a *Nang Talung* puppetmaster (*nai nang*).

### **Phatthalung, Thailand**

*Nang Talung* is popular Thai shadow theater consisting of several small puppets of individual characters all manipulated by the *nai nang*, who is considered the mastermind of the *Nang Talung* performance and functions as a teacher of the performers and the audience (Brown, Koanantakool). Thus, the role of the *nai nang* is much like that of the Malaysian and Indonesian *Wayang Kulit dalang*. The puppets are similar to the *Wayang Kulit* of Java, but the iconography varies considerably. *Wayang Kulit* puppets are not naturalistic with exaggerated eyes, head, neck, and arms (Irvine). Only one arm of the *Wayang Kulit* puppet is articulated and can move. *Nang Talung* puppets, on the other hand, also have articulated mouths and hands that can move in tune with the narration and music (Koanantakool, DNQ Travel). Members of the royalty typically wear a Siamese peaked crown with a halo. While having much more naturally proportioned faces and bodies than Javanese figures, they are highly decorated with stylized stances, like standing on one foot.

*Nang Talung* is performed in a hut, *rong nang*, constructed temporarily for the performance site with a thatched palm leaf roof, three walls and a white cloth screen. The entire

troupe of eight musicians and puppeteers perform from inside the hut behind the screen. The stories are from either literature, mainly *The Ramakien*, the Thai version of Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*, the Jataka tales about the Buddha's previous incarnations, traditional stories from folklore, or newly written and improvised stories based on local village life and contemporary culture with characters imported from popular movies, novels, and TV shows like cowboys, bargirls, terrorists, and gangsters (Brown).

Like the *Wayang Kulit* of Indonesia and Malaysia, much of *Nang Talung*'s improvisation is through the use of clown puppets, who tell jokes, many with sexual content, and give a running commentary on the story as well as local social and political events (Koanantakool). This adaptation from modern media and use of humor has been cited by both Koanantakool and Brown as a major factor in *Nang Talung*'s continued popularity. Indeed, Koanantakool sees *Nang Talung*'s ability to adapt to changing cultural contexts within Thailand as a key to its ongoing survival.

Brown and, particularly Koanantakool, emphasize the *Nang Talung* performance as a commercial enterprise. It is financed almost entirely by organizations and individuals who contract with troupes for performance, much like other performing artists. Some troupes can become entirely self-supporting based on this income, while smaller less known troupes have had to limit their performances to the dry season and supplement their incomes with other work like agriculture. Koanantakool notes that some *nai nang* became wealthy, purchased homes and cars, and sent their children to college from income earned from performance. The flexibility to improvise and modernize is seen by both Brown and Koanantakool as a key to *Nang Talung*'s survival. It faces the same competition from modern entertainment as *Wayang Kulit* in Malaysia and Indonesia, particularly at one of *Nang Talung*'s primary venues, fairs and festivals, which

also feature movies and concerts. To compete with modern entertainment Brown notes that, while traditional *Nang Talung* rarely had more than three or four puppets on the screen at one time, modern performers have eight or more puppets in one scene with a more rapid flow of action similar to movies and television shows. Brown notes that the trend towards modernization has had critics and quotes one traditionalist, Nang Liam, as observing, "In times before, nang talung was more correct. Kings were kings, nai were nai, phrai were phrai, women were women, and men were men."

*Nang Talung* derives its name from the Thai province of its origin, Phatthalung, in the southern region of Thailand on the Malay Peninsula, a relatively undeveloped province in contrast to its neighbors. ("Phatthalung Travel Information"). Because Southern Thailand is mostly surrounded by oceans with beaches and resort areas, a major industry in the region is tourism. But, until recently, Phatthalung is an exception to this trend. Unlike other southern provinces, Phatthalung is essentially landlocked except for the large shallow Songkhla Lake on the east. The west is covered by mountains of the Nakhon Si Thammarat chain. Many of the tourist attractions in the province are nature preserves, historical sites, and mountains for backpackers, particularly Ok Thalu Mountain that overlooks Phatthalung City. The city is small in comparison to Hat Yai and is not developed as a tourist attraction except for a few hotel resorts. The main festivals are Khaeng Phon Lak Phra or Chak Phra Tradition which marks the end of Buddhist lent and Thale Noi Bird-watching Festival, which is seen to be one of the most important attractions in Phatthalung.

Field research was conducted in Phatthalung Province at the Shadow Play Handicrafts Village located in the countryside, about 22 miles from Phatthalung City ("Phatthalung Travel Information"). This site, where visitors can observe members of the Handicrafts Village craft

shadow play figures from leather and purchase them as souvenirs, is listed as an essential stop in tourist literature for Phatthalung Province. At the Handicrafts Village, the researcher observed and participated in the crafting process and conducted an interview with the current director, Im Chanchum. The Handicrafts Village was founded in by Im Chanchum's father, a popular *nai nang* whose Nang Talung troupe performed throughout Thailand before he retired to set up the Village. Originally the Village created puppets for other performing troupes, already a break from the tradition of each *nai nang* crafting his or her own puppets.



**Im Chanchum, Handicrafts Village Director (left); Im Chanchum's father and Village Founder (right)  
All photos by S Lim**





**Traditional *Nang Talung* clown puppets**

The Village continues to craft popular *Nang Talung* puppets for performing troupes. However, they also produce life sized *Nang Yai* puppets that depict whole scenes from *The Ramakien*. They are so large that a puppeteer can handle only one piece, and each piece is held aloft by dancers behind and in front of the screen for performances. These pieces are frequently sold by the Village as decorative art, which represents a diversification of function of the leather shadow puppets, and creating decorative art for sale has become a main focus of the Village. While some are traditional *Nang Yai* scenes from *The Ramakien*, others are of objects and images that resonate with Thai and other visitors. They include images of the Thai King and Queen, meditating monks, and, particularly, elephants that are viewed as symbols of kindness and wisdom in Buddhism and Hinduism. Furthermore, the Village also produces small leather objects like key chains as souvenirs.



Preparing work for display and sale (left) King and Queen of Thailand (Right)

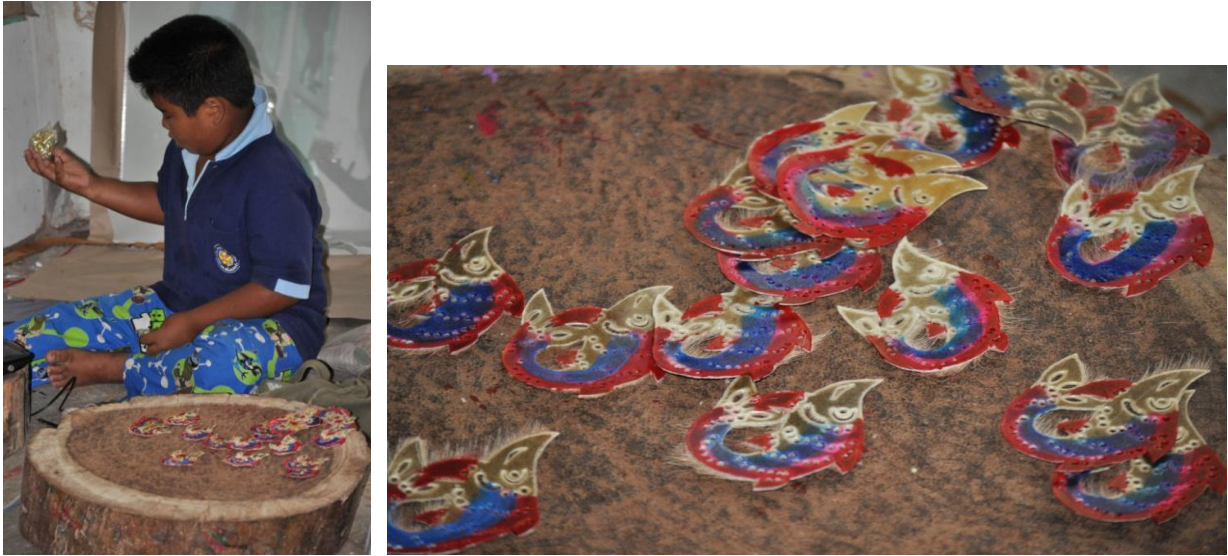


Sitting monk (in progress, left; completed right)



Im Chanchum crafting an elephant





Crafting small leather key chains for souvenirs

According to Im Chanchum, *Nang Talung* remains widely popular throughout Thailand as a performing art. "Thai people love the puppet plays and love the puppets." According to the University of Missouri Anthropology Museum, Southern Thailand had over 300 practicing nai nang as of 1980. *Nang Talung* troupes are contracted to perform for individual households during special occasions or at fairs. The fee is paid to the *nai nang* who then pays his or her performers. On the traditional versus modern spectrum the Shadow Play Handicrafts Village produces puppets in both traditional and modern styles, *Nang Yai* as well as *Nang Talung* styles despite its being situated in the birthplace of *Nang Talung*, and a variety of other subjects. The work of the Village represents a diversification in the function and role of *Nang* to decorative art for collectors, a further expansion of the original function of the puppets as tools for performance, and development of an additional audience for work related to *Nang Talung*, along with additional revenue. Thus, the Village has developed a new *Nang Talung* function in line with Phatthalung's development of a tourist industry.

### **Phenom Penh, Cambodia**

Neighboring Cambodia has a tradition of Shadow Puppetry that parallels that of Thailand

- classical large puppets, *Sbaek Thom*, and popular small puppets, *Sbaek Touch*. Frequently *Nang* and *Sbaek* Theater are discussed together as is the case in previous work of this researcher on the contemporary status of SEA Shadow Puppetry (Lim, 2011). However, Cambodia's history is unique. During the time period in the late 1970s when Koanantakool was conducting his research on a thriving *Nang Talung* in Thailand, Cambodia was ruled by Pol Pot's brutal Democratic Kampuchea or Khmer Rouge government. The mass murders and acts of genocide by Khmer Rouge are well-documented by historians like Ben Kiernan. This genocide included cultural genocide in which all religions and cultural traditions were destroyed. As a result, *Sbaek* Theater was destroyed, and Cambodia has been in a process of recovering its *Sbaek* Theater.



**Mann Kosal, Artistic Director  
Sovanna Phum, Phnom Penh**



**Mann Kosal showing researcher  
Sovanna Phum, Phnom Penh, Sbaek Thom puppets**

Additional field research was conducted with two organizations in Cambodia. One was Sovanna Phum Art Association in founded in 1994 by a group of artists, mostly graduates of The Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, to revive traditional Khmer Arts. Puppeteer Mann Kosal, is the Director of Sovanna Phum and has been actively committed to the revival and preservation of traditional repertory and authentic Khmer production and technical performance since he was at the Royal University of Fine Arts. He was interviewed and showed samples of his work. While the mission of Sovanna Phum is the revival and preservation of traditional Khmer arts, particularly *Sbaek Touch*, Kosai is not locked into one form. The live

performance at the time of the field research was "New Contemporary Dance and Mixed shadow Puppets Theater (*Sbaek Thom*), Mask Theatre" (the Khmer version of the Ramayana), a dance by the masked dance troupe in combination with a *Sbaek Thom* performance.



*Sbaek Thom* puppets in shadow at Sovanna Phum



*Sbaek Thom* performance at Sovanna Phum







Mask dancers at Sovanna Phum - characters from *The Reamker* (Khmer version of *Ramayana*)

### Siem Reap, Cambodia



Little Angels Orphanage, Siem Reap, Cambodia  
Rery Ratthana, Founder and Director, right rear



Crafting puppets at Little Angels Orphanage



**Little Angels students make and prepare their tools from scrap metal**



**Shellacking and painting**

The mission of the other organization, Little Angels Orphanage in Siem Reap, is not artistic but humanitarian, providing a safe home and education to 70 children between the ages 4 and 18 years who lost parents during the social upheaval and civil wars of the Khmer Rouge era. It was founded by Sery Rathana, Khmer Rouge survivor and former orphan. The children receive four hours a day of formal education, and the rest of their time is spent making traditional *Sbaek* leather puppets for sale as souvenirs to support the orphanage. The puppet making

activities of the youngsters cover all aspects, not just leather carving and painting. The students make all of their own tools from scrap metal, select, dry, and prepare the leather for carving, shellac and frame the final pieces. While performance is not a formal aspect of their *sbaek* work, the children will sometimes put on impromptu performances as they did at the time of the field research. During our interview, Rathana emphasized that his mission is not to help revive *Sbaek* puppetry but providing an opportunity for the children. Only one of his students has shown an interest in pursuing puppetry as a career.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of the overall study of the Shadow Puppetry of SEA has been to determine its contemporary status. While they are traditionally parallel, the status of Shadow Puppetry in Phatthalung, Thailand and Cambodia are in stark contrast. *Nang Talung* in Thailand has faced the same threats as Shadow Puppetry elsewhere in SEA - competition from modern forms of entertainment which have been largely imported from the West through globalization. During the Khmer Rouge this was clearly not an issue since virtually all arts, indigenous and imported, were effectively eliminated as Cambodia went through a period of virtual isolation.

Overall, Cambodia, an undeveloped country in the process of recovery, is in contrast to Thailand, a developing country where the response to outside cultural influences has been the same as other SEA countries - to actively preserve traditional forms or to adapt modern entertainment to their traditions and, often, a combination of both. Phatthalung, situated in a region where tourism is a primary industry, is in the process of developing its own tourism industry. *Nang Talung* plays a role in that by adding a new dimension - diversification of its function and market by including the production of decorative art and souvenirs for collectors. The Shadow Play Handicrafts Village is advertised in much of the tourist literature for the region



(Phatthalung Travel Information, DNQ Travel), which is indicative of *Nang Talung*'s and the Village's diversification, which plays significant role in the development of the province.

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