

The History of *Nang Talung* : ‘Shadow play’ from Asia to Southern Thailand

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Abstract

Nang Talung is a traditional shadow play, which is a favorite folk entertainment for people in southern Thailand that it has become the symbol of the local life in that region. The awe-inspiring and artistic performances are normally accompanied by a combination of moral-teaching songs and chants, some of which have been adapted according to the economic, political, social and cultural changes.

There are many different theories about the origin of *Nang Talung*. From the evidence it was believe that it is one of the puppetry arts dated from the Srivijaya or Tambralinga kingdom era. Other theories believe that it is derived from the Javanese *Wayang Kulit* (Javanese shadow puppet) and some people believe that *Nang Talung* originated in the *Ayutthaya* or early *Rattanakosin* period it’s adapted from *Nang Yai* (The central Thailand shadow play).

The studies reveal that the southern *Nang Talung* features the Srivijaya and Tambralinga shadow play characteristics, which are influenced by the imported Indian and Chinese civilizations. The shadow play has a long history that can be traced back to show that it adopts *Nang Yai* (large figures shadow puppet traditionally held in open spaces) and the Javanese puppetry arts, which results in smaller *Wayang Kulit* figures being used in the performances. *Nang Talung* is usually the adaptation of folk literature. In the *Rattanakosin* period, the shadow play figures were similar to those used in the performances such as *Ramayana* in Bangkok. In the end, *Nang Talung* has a mixed combination of *Nang Yai* and Javanese puppetry arts.

The aims of this Research in historical dimensions are: to discover the origins of the southern performances, to raise the awareness of *Nang Talung*’s roles in the conveyance of the perspectives, concepts and social values to the audiences and to reflect the way of life and adjustment for living in perfect harmony in the local communities through many periods.

Background and significance of the problem

According to the entertainment that is an identity and popular in the Southern part of Thailand, *Nang Talung* is always the first priority performance that is mentioned because not only has it been a local Southern cultural performance for a long time but it has also been a cultural heritage up until now. The style of performing the *Nang Talung* is similar to *Nang Ngao* ‘Shadow play’, which spreads to every region of the world over 1,000 years in China, India, Europe, Java Islands, and Southeast Asian countries by narrating a story through local music incorporating chanting or dialogues together with movement of puppets made from animal skin such as cow hide, buffalo hide, sheep hide and presents characters to a back-lighted white screen appearing in shadow to the audiences.

Aside from *Nang Talung*, the local Southern entertainment, from 1977 to present, the study finds that there are widely-known study of *Nang Talung* in linguistics, performing arts, conservation and development of *Nang Talung*, etc. However, in the past historical report, the study of “history of *Nang Talung*” was not in depth. Mostly, they summarized the history of *Nang Talung*. They did not profoundly study about history where it could be a reliable reference. This article is to search for and presents on the basis of history and development of *Nang Talung* in the Southern part of Thailand, a part of local historical study which reflects local society, culture, and lifestyle including the connection between other cultures and development before becoming the local identity.

Objectives

1. To study the history of the entertainment *Nang* ‘animal skin’ in global contexts and how it originates in Thailand, including history and development of *Nang Talung* in Southern Thailand
2. To study social lifestyle through *Nang Talung*

Definition

‘**Shadow play**’ is an ancient form of storytelling and entertainment using opaque, often articulated figures in front of an illuminated backdrop to create the illusion of moving images. It is popular in various cultures.

‘***Nang Talung***’ is folk entertainment using perforated animal skin into a small shape of character, using a stick pinch the figure and displaying shadow figures on a back-lighted white screen playing together with *Pi* (oboe), *Klong* (drum), and *Mong* (gong). The puppeteer recites the story during the performance (The Royal Institute Dictionary B.E. 1999, 1244).

Methodology

Historical Method is used for this research, starting with specifying the problem, reading related literature reviews, researching and collecting sources by using secondary source, then following by primary source using documentary research to help analyze information and present the result in analysis description form.

Development of “Shadow Play” from Asia to *Nang Talung* in the South

Shadow play is the most ancient cultural performing, which exists everywhere all over the world since prehistoric era. When human discovered fire, then light and shadow were seen. Human tried out and played with shadow light until discovered and developed by perforating animal skin into the shape and then performed with light until it became Shadow play. There was a proof that shadow play was very important and was an ancient performance in Asia. For example, Chinese shadow play, the artifact of pictures made from donkey hide age around 11 B.C. was found in the Northern part of China. In the Southern part of China, narrated pictures made from sheep hide were found, in which the skin was dried out and was scraped throughout to get translucent skin and then traced over into the shape of each character including perforated and color painted very beautifully. The translucent skin can be adjusted slightly by stick wood to control directions. Most of Shadow play in China always performs stories of Han Dynasty or recites tales of Buddhist religion (Son Srimatrang. n.p., n.d.). (Please look at Picture 1)



Picture 1 Chinese Shadow play

(Source: Chinese Shadow play(Online), 10 February 2010)

It is believed that the performance “Nang” in India was originated from Greek who brought Egyptian shadow play to display in India. Later on, the performance was integrated with local culture and the result was that shadow plays in India were presented in many styles. For example, *Orissa* region, the stories used in the performance are demon king or so-called *Rapchaya ‘Rāmāyaṇa’*. Leather puppets are small. Hands and arms cannot move. *Kerala* and *Tamil Nadu* region at the South of India called little leather puppets *Tolavapukuttu*. *Andhra Pradesh* called big puppet *Tolubomalatum* (Klin Kongmeunphet. 2007, 11). After that the shadow play of India was spread out to Southeast Asia as a result of religious and cultural expansions and international business. The most popular stories were *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* epics.

The shadow play historical studies found that the performances of shadow play of India, Java, Bali, Malaysia, and the Southern part of Thailand are related in many aspects such as custom performances, leather puppets, music, and some kinds of belief. However, details in each country’s performance are different according to its own culture, tradition, and

religion, including the development of performance in that country. *Nang Talung* in the Southern part of Thailand and that in Java are related in many ways and it is obviously seen that both shows have the blending of Indian culture in their performances (Udom Nuthong, 1990, 1). Also, an evidence from a group book's maker of *Nang Talung* to celebrate the King's 50th year on the throne (1986, 1-2) shows that *Nang Talung* has hermit recite and *Phra Isuan* (Indra) recite. Therefore, it is assumed that a group who came from India had gone to Java and the Southern Thailand. They introduced shadow play to Thailand. They might be a group people who worshipped Hinduism and *Siwa* doctrine, which matched with other archaeological evidences that came from Java and found in the Southern part of Thailand, especially in *Nakorn Srithammarat* province, *Phatthalung* province and *Surat Thani* province in Buddhist era¹³. However, the reason above did not mean that *Nang Talung* came together with *Siwa* doctrine. It might come after this doctrine, but no later than Buddhist era¹⁸.

Indian civilization disseminated Indonesia, thus resulting Brahmanism-Hinduism to have an influence on them, especially, Ramayana epic and *Mahābhārata* epic which were originated by the shadow play '*Wayang Kulit*' in Indonesia (Rani Saksitwiwattana. mpp, 20). The word *Wayang* 'is shadow playing'. It comes from Java old word in which *Wayo*, 'means to the exposure to the soul inspiration' (Saowapa Thanirat. 2004, 114) and *Kulit* 'means to animal hide or bark'. *Wayang Kulit* is an entertainment composed of arts in writing, music, literature, dramatic works, history, and religion, including symbol and philosophy. The Indonesian puppeteer and narrator *Wayang Kulit* are called *Dalang*. They work as *Nai Nang* 'the puppeteer of Thai'. *Wayang Kulit* is the most popular performance in Java. Second is Sonda and Bali, respectively. *Wayang Kulit* performance is a prototype of *Nang Talung* in Thailand, but *Wayang Kulit* is different from Thai *Nang Talung* in term of the purpose and story about ghost (Pinyo Srijamlong. 1982, 36). (Please look at Picture 2)



Picture 2 : Wayang Kulit, Javanese shadow play
Source: Wayang Kulit, Javanese shadow play (Online), 10 February 2010

In *Ayutthaya* era at the Reign of The Great King *Narai Maharat* (1656-1688), shadow play in Thailand did not have a specific name. It was called only *Nang*. It was performed everywhere, not only in local South. The evidence message cited the performance in Thai verse book "*Samutthakoth Kumchan*" composed by the great teacher in the order of the Great King *Narai Maharat* (*Samutkorth Kumchan* 1979, 3) section that;

*“Hai Chalak Saebok Pap Anchara
Pen Bup Burana
Narain Tara Ratch Banhan
Hai Tuay Tak Kon Pu Chan
Gon Len Gonlagarn
Ya Pen Bamtung Gorani”*

(Meaning allowing shadow play to perform everywhere for entertainment)

Formerly, shadow play of Thai was in big figure. The leather puppet was heavy. To perform in other places, carts were used to carry the leather puppets. Thus it was inconvenient and not very popular. Moreover, the shadow play was performed outdoor on the ground, no raised floor and no screen like today. The performance ran from dusk to dawn. At the day light, a big torch called *Tai Na Chang* was used to provide light. When the Javanese shadow play influenced on Thailand, Thai puppets were changed into small figures and sizes. Javanese shadow play used small puppets, performed on a stage that was constructed with a raised floor, using a piece of white cloth to form a screen to manipulate the puppets. The audience watched shadow from the screen through backlight (Sathaporn Srisatjang. 2001, 4). (Please look at Picture 3)



Picture 3: Rama, Ramayana from Siam,
Permission of Professor Raymond Firth, (1959, pp. 73)

Before calling “*Nang Talung*,” it was presumed that shadow play existed in Srivichai period but there was no specific name. It was believed that shadow play began at *Tampornlinga* or *Nakorn Srithammarat*. Later, shadow play was introduced and was well-known in *Phatthalung*.

His Majesty *Somdet Krum Praya Dhumrongrachanupap* had recorded one part in that *Kuan* villagers, (*Ma*)*Prao* in *Phatthalung* province tried to imitate Javanese shadow play in Thai story. Then they published to other places. It was called in that precinct as *Nang Kuan*. *Praya Siriyawongwaiyawat (Worn Bunnag)* introduced shadow play to Bangkok and it was firstly performed at *Bang Phra-in* in 1876, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V. Due to the shadow play was by *Phatthalung* people, it was called *Phatthalung* and later was slightly changed to *Talung*. (Inaou legend book 1965: 99) Moreover, *Wiboon Lisuwan*

(1982: 180) assumed the origin of the word that *Nang Talung* was originally performed with *Sao Talung* ‘*Talung* pole’, a stake for tying an elephant. Javanese people emigrated to the Southern part of Thailand. They raised elephants and did labor work for living. At night, they set fire to protect themselves from mosquitoes and kept them warm. One of them used fingernail to perforate a leaf into the shapes. Then he held and moved the leaf in front of fire and saw decorated shadow leaf appearing. Then he chanted while moving the leaf. From this idea, the development from engraving leaf which was withered was changed to perforate animal skin. To display shadow to show on many surfaces was not clear for audiences, so they changed to use a cloth tied with *Talung* pole as their screen. With this idea, this performance was called *Nang Sao Talung*. When the time passed, the name was shortened to *Nang Talung* as local dialect. In *Pattani*, formerly, it was called *Wayang Siam*. It was still have *Wayang* as Indonesian word. The leather puppet was made from cow hide or buffalo hide. Cow hide was very popular because it was thinner, more translucent and easier to perforate (Mahorasob Thai. n.d., 53).

The character of puppets, especially the clown in Javanese character pattern, was disproportionate such as having long arms and legs that reach to the ground. The main characters both male and female wore long hair. Male hair was tied in a bun and the tip was up. The reason for perforating hide to be disproportionate from the figure of human was presumed to the belief in religion in which His Majesty *Somdet Krum Praya Dhumrongrachanupap* had composed in Inaou legend book (1965, 99) that ;

“Javanese shadow puppet do not look like human because Islam prohibits portrayal. Javanese have performed shadow play since they were Brahman. When they are Islam, they still play. Therefore, they have to distort leather puppets in order to comply with the regulation of Goren”.

However, there was an argument against the appearance of puppet character that it was not because of the prohibition of Islam. According to *King Prajadhipok* (Rama VII)’s opinion that;

“For not drawing like a human, they explained that because Mohammed did not allowed portraying human. But this issue is not true because old pictures and sculptures drawn to be unlike human had long been before Mohammed came to Java Islands. To date, the explanation is that *Wayang* means devil, the ancestor devil performing *Wayang*. Therefore, as ghosts, they make themselves not to look like human. I am not certain that my explanation is right, but sometimes is true”.

(S. Plainoi.1969, 235)

Aside from this, Thai verse in *Khun Chang Khun Phen*, composed in the reign of King Rama expresses the look of Javanese shadow play in the part of Wanthong’s cremation as follows;

“Fai Paneang Seang Plu Chong Raka
Puak Nang Reak Ha Ma Tang Jo
Lao Puak Nang Kaek Saek Kaoh Ma
Pit Do Na Ta Man Por Lor

Roob Rang So Mom Pom Yeek Ngo
Jamook Dong Kong Kor Muan Pread Yuen”
(Thai verse in *Khun Chang Khun Phen* 3rd Edition. 1967, 895)

When firework is lighted, shadow play screen is set,
Javanese shadow play performs. Feature looks different.
Dirty figure with curly hair, prominent nose make it looks like a demon.

From the studies, Javanese shadow play had been performed in Thailand before the reign of Rama V (1868-1910). When *Nang Kuan* in *Phatthalung* and *Nang Java* integrated, it was changed to call *Nang Talung*. This reflects the change in making the puppet character to look more like human. The study appointed that *Nang Talung* puppets in the South were exported to Europe. The ancient *Nang Talung*, aged more than 100 years, was found in Ethnography Museum, Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden Netherlands. The museum exhibited this ancient *Nang Talung* with the art works of Java and Malay. The record indicated that the ancient *Nang Talung* came from Dr. A. Muller at Ethnography Museum in Berlin, Germany. These ancient *Nang Talung* was found both Netherlands museum and Germany museum might be received from *Ligor* or *Nakorn Srithammarat* and from *Xalang* or *Phuket*. *Nang Talung* puppets were made from cow hide, in which these ancient skins were thicker than the skins at present. Most of these ancient puppets are of ‘*Rāmāyaṇa*’ characters and nowadays, *Rāmāyaṇa* story is not very popular. To summarize from the evidence is that the Southern *Nang Talung* has been developed for a long time. Moreover, Thai *Nang Talung* identifies its unique from other shadow plays. Even though the organizer in Europe presents Thai *Nang Talung* with Javanese shadow play, the differences are still noticeable. (*Parita Chalerm-pao Koanuntakul* 1993: 77)

Southern *Nang Talung* was very popular and performed every region in the South, but the ticket in the South was cheaper than in Bangkok. From the royal writings by *Somdet Phra Boromma-orasathirat Chao Fah Maha Vajiravudh* when visiting the Southern provinces R.E. 128 (1967, 13), he mentioned about *Nang Talung* performing in front of the royal pavilion at *Chumporn* province that ;

“During my visit, the governor sets up entertainments to create joyful atmosphere. In the afternoon, there is boxing. People enjoy a lot. Early in the evening, there are three stages held; a music stage, *Nang Talung* stage and *Manora* stage.

Nang Talung displays the story of a royal family just like Thai traditional dramatic performance theme. The dialogue is in Bangkokian accent. Mr. *Nok Kaew*, the owner of *Nang Talung* play used to stay in Bangkok for a long time and traveled to many provinces such as *Nakorn Chaisri*, *Ratchaburi*, and *Thanyaburi*. Then, he went to the South to Pattani. The ticket in Bangkok is Baht 20, but in these provinces, the ticket is not over Baht 6. Price is really cheap” (King Vajiravudh. 1967: 15).

From the royal writings, it is obviously seen that *Nang Talung* performance has been modernized adapting the favor of Bangkok to the play. It is a blending of local culture and other areas’ cultures to make a new *Nang Talung* form. This is why *Nang Talung* is still a popular entertainment and remains till today.

***Nang Talung* in Movie Period**

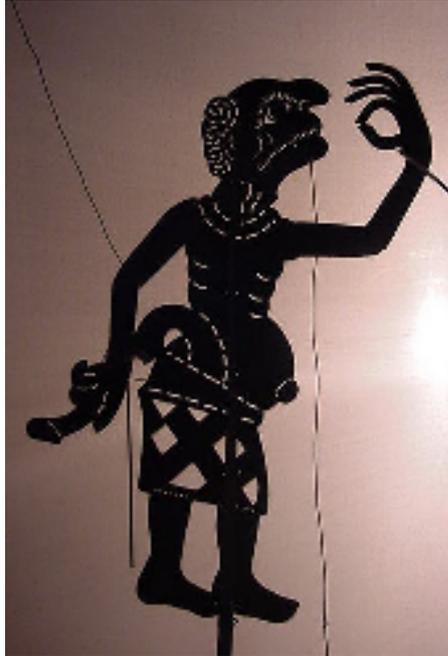
Shadow play originates from playing light and shadow and it exists in many nations. Later, film and cine-camera have been invented. Therefore, motion picture is a new entertainment disseminated all over the world. In Thailand, motion picture appeared in the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V in 1910 and was continuing developed until the reign of King Vajiravudh, Rama VI. The cinema production was established at State Railways Organization to promote and produce films in 1922. Foreigners also came to shoot films in Thailand.(Thipvaree(Pseudonym) n.d.,90) This “New entertainment” was quite fresh to Thai people at that time because it was a mixture of shadow play with arts play performing by real human. The pictures and scenes were brought to the screen. At the beginning, people called it “*Nang*”, the same way they called shadow play. The movies were called differently as per the film producers such as *Nang Farang* ‘movies made by Western producers’, *Nang Yipun* ‘movies made Japanese producers’ and etc. Firstly, the film business expanded in many regions and was known as *Nang Klangplaeng*, which projected the film outdoor as the local people got used to the entertainment set up in the temples or in open fields. *Nang Klangplaeng* business became a success after World War II because the government had a policy to develop rural areas. Consumer products and medicines were sold in remote areas by carrying films on a boat or a car to draw audience’s attentions and in order to sell the products or so-called “*Nang Kaiya*.”

Even though film plays an important role in Thai society, in the South, the popularity in *Nang Talung* is not fade out because *Nang Talung* can reach local people more than films. *Nang Talung* is an oral expression, narrating a story with Thai verse in local dialect or called “*Wa Bot*”. The story is always about local lifestyle reflecting the distinctive point of the society. Lively dialogues exchange between characters provides the audiences the pleasure. These is charm in *Nang Talung* that even motion picture or other entertainments don’t have. In the remote areas where “*Nang Kaiya*” cannot reach the audiences, *Nang Talung* can easily set its performance as it requires only few staffs to work on. Only a puppeteer to perform, control, and recite the story is enough for a *Nang Talung* performance. Music is simple created. Local villagers can make their own using *Tap* (small drum), *Mong* (gong), *Klong* (drum), *Ching* (cymbals) and etc. The most importance in the charm of *Nang Talung* is the Clown character. This character is very unique to Southern shadow play and it is a very lively character that attracts the audiences to talk about the play over and over.

The Reflection of Southern lifestyle on *Nang Talung*

From the study through history of “*Nang Talung*,” it summarizes that “*Nang Talung*” is a local entertainment that influences on Southern local people. It is a part of their lifestyles. The narration using shadow play reflects every character in the story not only master characters, but also commoner characters. It shows the difference of people in a society where the class of people still exists. There is also commentary inserted with values of life in the story lines ignoring class, nation, or status of people in order to inspire audiences to live happily in the society. The clown characters represent local villagers in their simple lives, but they play an essential role in being consultants to their royalty or king. The other outstanding identity of *Nang Talung* is bringing the local personality to take role in the story lines. For example “*Teng*” the personality character of *Kudku* villager, *Satingpra* district, *Songkla* province (Klin Kongmeunpetch 2007, 30). Character “*Teng*” lived during the period of King Rama III and was brought to be a clown character forever.(Please look at Picture 4) Or “*Sa Mor*” the character of “*Bang Sa Mor*” from *Sakom* village, *Jana* district, *Songkla* province (Klin Kongmeunpetch 2007, 53) represents the relationship between Thai Buddhist

and Thai Muslim. And “*Jean Jong*” is a Thai of Chinese lineage. *Nang Talung*, aside from providing entertainment and fun, it is noticed that characters are in many races—Thai, Thai-Muslim, Thai-Chinese, which presents that people in different religions live well together in the Southern local community.



Picture 4: “*Teng*” is a character from Southern local personality which is similar to *Wayang Kulit* of Javanese character. (“*Teng*”(Online), 10 February 2010)

The important factor making *Nang Talung* still exists in the current society is that it is a real local developing entertainment for a certain society and culture. The story is easy to understand and suitable for all walks of life and it is also an easily understandable local media. It does not need many people or equipments to set the play. Only light, screen, and leather puppets with the wit and rhetorical skill of the performers are required. The narration of *Nang Talung* commentary inserts knowledge, idea, and mores of Thai society into the story lines to encourage moral discipline. *Nang Talung* also is used as a link to communicate between people and government. Sometimes, the puppeteer is asked to take daily life situation to *Nang Talung* story to present news or announce important information to local villagers. On the other hand, the puppeteer is also a representative of villagers to make a complaint to the local government. The puppeteer is considered as a local philosopher that influences on the way of thinking in the Southern rural area in every era (Thai Entertainment n.p., n.d., 56).

Conclusions

Nang Talung, a kind Shadow play, originates in Southern Thailand; it was developed for long time ago. It is derived from Asian Shadow plays, from India to Javanese and also spread to Southern Thailand. It seems to *Nang Yai* in The central Thailand too. At the beginning, The Southern Shadow play has not had specific name until the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, it was called *Nang Talung*. All of componential *Nang Talung* such as local music, chanting and dialogues was developed for a Long Period of Time. In addition,

The characters of *Nang Talung* adapt from Southern Lifestyle so it's always popular in Southern Thailand.

Nowadays, Thai society has been modernized and changed to *Yuk Nang Tu* 'Television Era'. Every house owns televisions. Therefore, *Nang Talung* is decreasing and hardly invited to show anywhere like previously. However, the traditional identity of *Nang Talung* still exists. *Nang Talung*, nowadays, changes its role from entertaining people to succeeding local culture and intellect. It becomes a high class performance art that local people can be a mutual owner. People also can very well understand the theme of this local play themselves.

Suggestion

The article *Nang Talung 'Shadow play': reflections of the Southern Lifestyle* is a sample of a historical study through a local traditional performance. Formerly, not too many researchers were interesting in this study. They were more interesting in studying the history of the "main course" which was about a nation or a group of people. In fact, *Nang Talung* is a good live evidence reflecting local people ways of living, society and personality of local people. Although there is a restriction in doing field trips for researching the details in dept, the writer hopes that this article, which all evidences are collected from history, linguistics, and writings from local philosophy will extend knowledge to people who are interested in this issue and "inspire" them to expand this issue in some aspects that the researcher has already exposed in this article.

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