Nang Talung

- Shadowplay of South Thailand

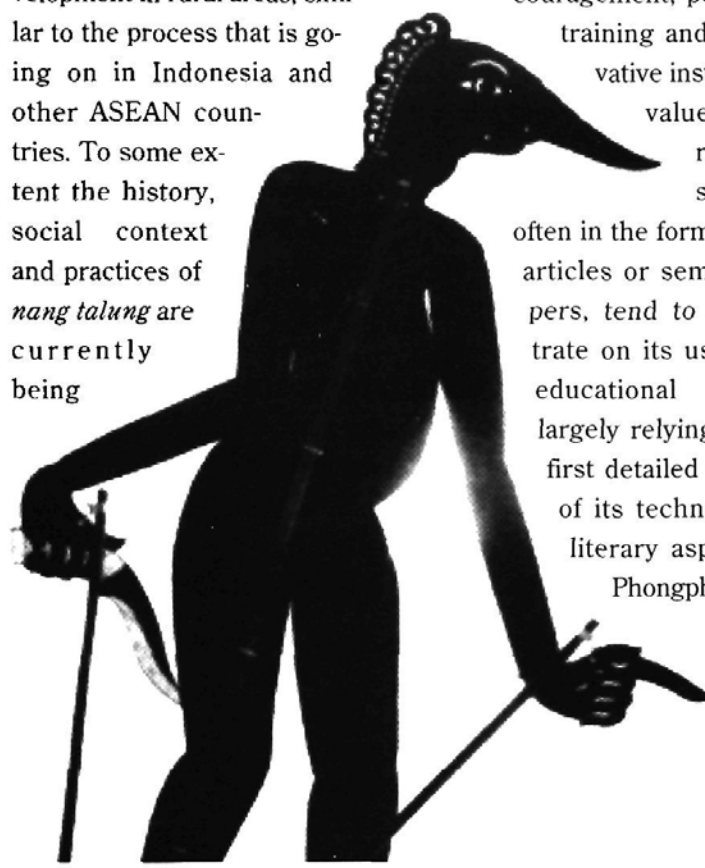
"Professional" Entertainment and Changing Performance Techniques

Paul Dowsey-Magog

A shadow puppet performing art, which provides popular entertainment for the rural/agricultural society, continues to draw the crowds despite the competition of other modern entertainment

Nang talung is the shadow pupet theatre of Southern Thailand, and one of the few shadow theatre forms existing in Southeast Asia that has not yet been intensively studied.[1] Thai scholars have generally concentrated on the classical court forms of theatre mostly found in the national capital, and it was not until the 1970s that local academic attention was paid to this form of regional theatre.

This academic interest has been associated with the national enhancement and promotion of Thai traditional art forms, and the utilisation of such genres in assisting national development in rural areas, similar to the process that is going on in Indonesia and other ASEAN countries. To some extent the history, social context and practices of *nang talung* are currently being re-invented as a result of local documentation, academic encouragement, performer training and conservative institutional values.[2] Current local studies, often in the form of brief articles or seminar papers, tend to concentrate on its use as an educational tool, largely relying on the first detailed analysis of its technical and literary aspects by Phongphaiboon.[3]



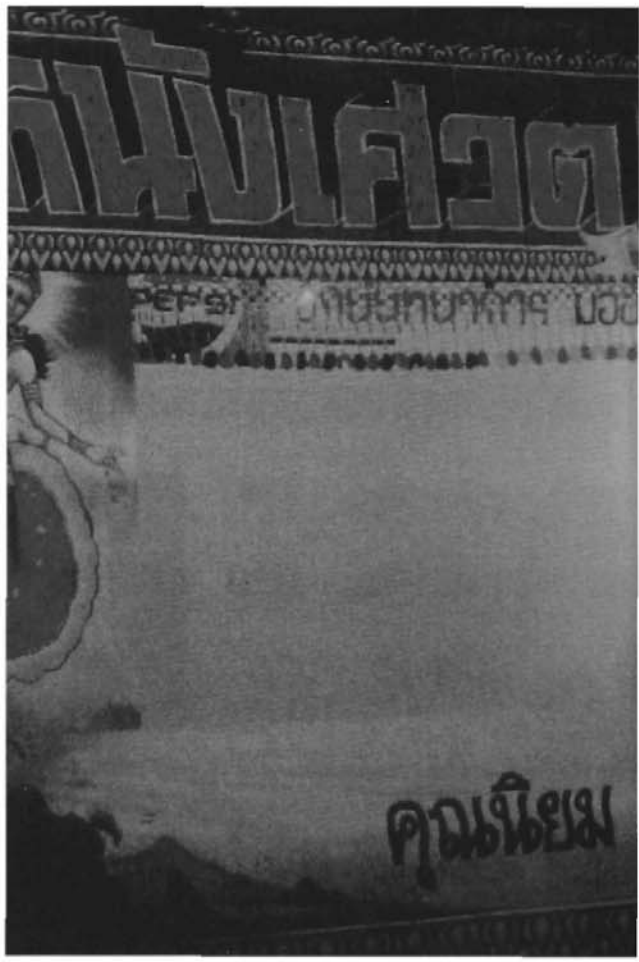
Recent development in the social and industrial infrastructure of Southern Thailand, however, has led to a much greater exposure of *nang talung* to urban audiences, and also led to the availability of a much wider choice of entertainment for all members of the Southern Thai society, both urban and rural. The increasing use of technology and the resulting current competition between entertainment forms has greatly affected both audience lifestyles and tastes, yet the traditional form of *nang talung* persists in its popularity and continues to be recognised as a major cultural symbol of Southern identity.

Other similar genres of Asian shadow puppetry, that are better documented, include the well established Javanese and Balinese forms of Wayang Kulit, and the Wayang Siam of Northern Malaya.[4] *Nang talung* is a Southern Thai genre of shadowplay that was previously considered a primitive form of agricultural entertainment for rural villagers in the provinces of Songkhla, Phattalung, Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Trang, where it has always been regarded as "an art form of and for the agricultural society"[5] but it still remains extremely popular throughout the region despite the competition with more modern forms of entertainment.

Nang was like the movies - the only ones then, but it was about our world, the two types of people, the poor and the rich - the nai and the phrai. The clowns were the village people. It's our entertainment. In the old days they would still be performing when the sun rose. A lot of older people are used to these long performances. That's the entertainment they know.[6]

In this article, I describe a performance by one of the most popular and well established *nai nangs* (puppeteers) of 1993.[7] This was performed for a very large rural audience at a temple fair, and exemplifies 'professional' techniques that have maintained or possibly even increased the popularity of *nang talung* as a regional entertainment, rather than as an instructional or ritual medium.

I have elsewhere (Dowsey-Magog 1996) suggested that this movement away from ritual and instruction to increasingly commercialised popular and humorous practice lends credence to the possible application of Victor Turner's assertion that truly ritual events, in which liminal communitas is achieved, are only found in small-scale, integrated societies, whereas in the modern world most similar performance events should be seen as merely liminoid ('ritual-like'). In Turner's view, liminoid events such as theatre and festivals may have some of the elements of ritual, but usually do not achieve the totalising, integrative force that has been seen



Nang Talung performance
View from the audience

as central to many kinds of ritual practice. As I will show, however, this distinction in *nang talung* may not be so clear-cut, and the ability to create a sense of 'communitas' within a prevailing Buddhist view of social order remains important for commercial as well as ritual reasons. I have also suggested that Handelman's distinctions between 'play' and ritual may serve as an important alternative framework in analysing contemporary *nang talung*. Bakhtin's views on the carnivalesque, particularly in regard to the use of the clowns in *nang talung*, and his concept of heteroglossia also provide important tools for assessing the current evolutionary trends in this unique performance genre, and to some extent assist in linking the views of both Handelman and Turner.[8]

I shall concentrate on the description of a contemporary performance, following which I summarise the trends in popular contemporary technique by comparing changing methods of aural and visual presentation, puppet use and story structure. While these trends parallel a movement towards a less constrained use of *nang talung* in Southern social contexts, and exhibit a tendency to imitate the social realism of global cultural forms, they also express the continuing importance of local expression and its contemporary reading of older social structure.

'Hi-Tec' Fun at the *Wat*: A Temple Fair Performance

Some temple fairs are particularly important occasions for both villagers and townspeople. Sometimes an annual temple fair in a particular locality will attract visitors from great distances. Usually these Buddhist wats (temples or monasteries) have a reputation for being very sacred or *saksit*, with a history of past miracles or particularly revered monks, or a family may believe that regular attendance at such an annual function will bestow good luck and prosperity throughout the year. The annual fair at Wat Thakura was recognised by my Thai friend Jaroon and his relatives as having helped his mother's health in the past. As a result, it was attended by many of his extended family who travelled to the fair from various parts of Songkhla province, with some from further afield.

Wat Thakura was not very close to any major population centre and some distance from Sathingphra. Situated several kilometres from the main highway and only approachable via a series of dirt roads, it was also not easily accessible by public transport. Nonetheless the crowds were enormous, and a multitude of stalls were crammed along the roads leading to the main temple grounds. In place of the major business stalls selling cars or televisions, as were common at commercial or college fairs in urban areas,

was a plethora of small family outlets similar to a large food or clothing market in the bigger towns, which were erected in a jumble of tented alleyways throughout the area. In addition there were some big carnival attractions, such as two giant Ferris wheels gaudily covered in neon lights, and other carnival rides which must have had some transport difficulties in gaining access to the site. I was extremely surprised at the huge number of people gathered in this fairly remote area, a much larger crowd than I had experienced at the annual temple fair in Sathingphra, located on the main highway.

Manora performance

Inside the temple grounds, there was a large outdoor cinema screen and several *manora* stages.[9] On the first day of our attendance, the majority of the audience were intent on making merit and performing short *kae bon* rituals in the temple grounds. Many women took turns to perform as *nora* dancers during the daytime at this fair. They briefly donned *nora* outfits and masks and performed a few seconds of dance, paying for this privilege by donating a set fee to the wat, as it was thought to be a particularly auspicious site for gaining assistance from the spirits. The atmosphere was extremely hot and noisy, with a densely packed crowd intent on gaining access onto the *nora* stage through a cacophony of music emanating from various loudspeakers at several stages and stalls, supplemented by good-natured jeering and cheering from the crowd at the antics of the amateurish dancers.

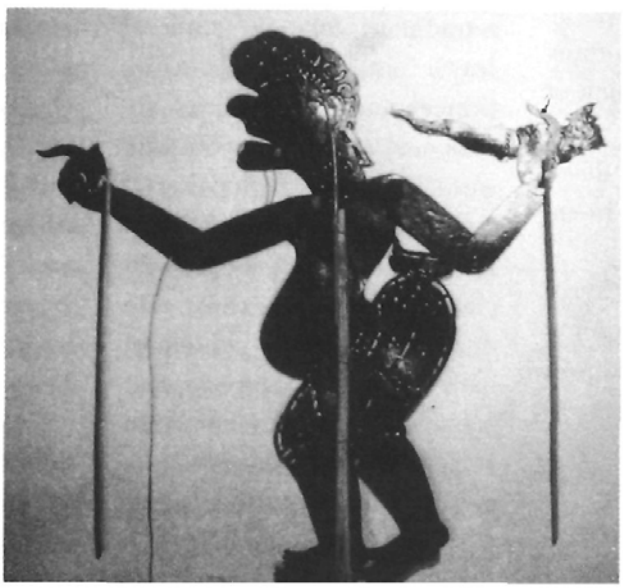
The following night, Jaroon, his neighbours and many local villagers came to attend the scheduled *nang talung*, knowing that Nang Narong would be performing the puppet show. We were amongst a seated audience of over one thousand people, while many more stood behind awaiting the start of the performance.

Nang Narong Talung-bandit from Trang, second only in local fame to Nang Nakharin, was considered a popular contemporary performer well known for his modern music and singing clowns. His troupe had two electric guitars, an electric organ and drumkit, as well as congas, *klong, thap, mong, ching,* and *pii*, the traditional instruments for accompanying a performance.[10] These were set up behind the screen on a quite large temporary stage or *rong* about two feet off the ground. The rudimentary staging, quite low, and looking rather unstable, contrasted greatly with the professional musical and amplification equipment of the troupe, who had set up a five-ton truck clustered with loudspeakers next to the rong. Colourful decorated cloths were also arranged around the screen showing a portrait of Nang Narong and detailing some of his previous accomplishments and qualifications. Due to the rain-delayed start, the introductory episodes were quickly completed in about twenty minutes, and the story, called Royal Blood, began at 10.45 p.m.

This performance was characterised by a great deal of

modern music played frequently throughout the story. Traditional *klorn* verses were often split between two or more characters, and interspersed with dialogue, narrative, music and song. Klorn verse was also recited over popular contemporary melodies, rather than accompanied by the traditional sound of mong and ching. Scenes did not follow the more traditional, sometimes somewhat plodding progression of music, verse, dialogue and then reprise verses, as I had seen elsewhere, but freely integrated all types of vocal and musical expression in various combinations. Dialogue, puppet movements and jokes were frequently emphasised by drums and cymbals, and the whole performance was much more lively and faster-moving than any I had seen before.

Nearly every scene featured clowns, who remained on the screen for a much greater proportion of the show than I had seen on other occasions. Clowns, as well as other characters, were represented in various costumes, as Nang Narong utilised a wide range of figures. Both the characters of Theng and Nunui appeared as *nora* dancers as well as in normal dress. Modern costumes and a variety of smaller stage prop figures also made their appearance in the story, though it was based in a historical setting, often following a type of plot common in classical tales. Theng also briefly appeared as a boxer. Several scenes included discussions by the clowns about methods of attracting the fairer sex, and advice on these matters was also given to a prince by the clowns.



Clown Yodthong

One fast moving episode involved the clowns Yodthong and Kaew. Yodthong constantly attempted to woo a young heroine, far above his station, by gentle hints about sex, accompanied by seductive music that was frequently interrupted by his rushing to one side of the screen to swap vulgarities and check his progress with Kaew. These 'asides' featured rollicking coarse humour accented by drums and cymbals on the many punchlines, before Yodthong's many rushed returns to attempt gentle solicitous persuasion. The repeated contrast of both speech and puppet movement, as well as music, between "boys' talk" and seductive parley, created a very lively tempo that culminated in a raucous song duet about sex by the clowns, finally ending in a brawl between them.

Many other scenes featured singing clowns, and multiple entrances and exits by many characters, often creating a screen crowded with puppets. There were several fight and chase sequences, and much impassioned movement by Yodthong who was insanely jealous every time his imagined sweetheart embraced other women or men. I did not see anyone sleeping at this performance. The play drew more and more audience from other parts of the fair, including those attending the movie show and a

Presenting the Rusi

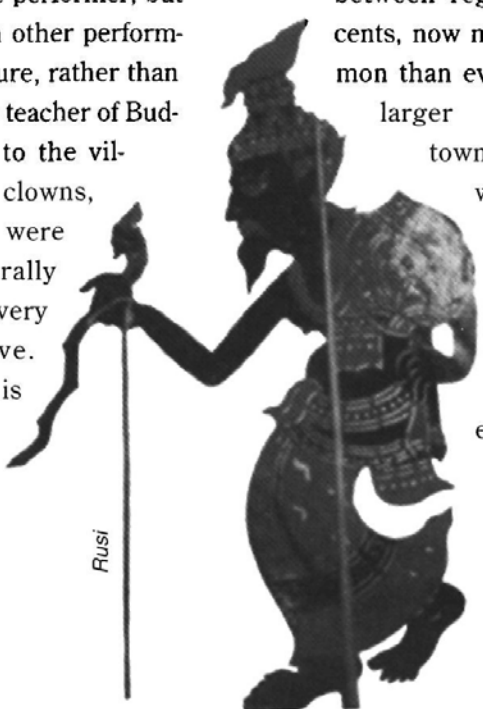
performance of a highly acclaimed *nora* troupe. As a result, Nang Narong's audience was increased to well over two thousand by the end of the show at 3.40 a.m., by which time many stall owners had closed down their activities and come to enjoy the fun.

Despite the modernity of the fast-paced presentational style, somewhat reminiscent of fast cutting techniques used in modern Asian movie thrillers, the story was set in a pseudo historical realm utilising a melodramatic background of royal murders and princely imposters, rather than a more contemporary critique of local society. Entertainment, rather than moral instruction or social comment, was to the fore.

Nang Narong wove together the stories of inhabitants in two cities and a village, linked by the everpresent forest and spanning over twenty years. He followed a traditional folk tale format of travel and adventure, using princes and princesses as heroes, and royal characters who were depicted as both powerful and honourable. The villains were solitary male palace officials and their servants. He made very little use of supernatural elements, however, and scenes that made reference to Buddhist beliefs were generally a vehicle for clownish impiety, despite the religious significance of the fair venue. The Buddhist precepts were chanted and repeated in Pali by the *rusi*, perhaps exhibiting the superior education of the performer, but notably, as with other performers, the rusi figure, rather than a monk, was the teacher of Buddhist ideals to the village clowns, who were generally not very receptive. The rusi is usually depicted as an old man, clothed in tiger skins, who combines the talents of forest dwelling animist shaman, learned Brahmanist scholar and teacher, and travelling Buddhist missionary or forest monk. The original teacher spirit of *nang talung*, and for that matter, of nearly all traditional Thai theatre forms, is the Rusi, possibly related to Bharata Muni, the writer of the Indian Natyasastra.

Other linguistic expertise was displayed in a sequence where clowns used and interpreted the Royal Thai phrases for various objects, also a source for irreverent peasant humour. Nang Narong also made much use of Liak, a newer clown with a Northeastern accent, recently invented to comment on a wave of migration to the South by poorer Northeastern workers. Much of Liak's dialogue included linguistic farce centred around the misunderstandings between regional accents, now more common than ever in the larger Southern towns, and was a feature of the many bawdy comic episodes

Rusi Kin Lao



Rusi

in this performance. The inclusion of various regional accents and dialects is of great delight to Southerners, as the amount of wordplay involving 'farmyard' humour can be increased. The Southern dialect has seven or eight tones, compared to the five tones of central Thai which is being promoted as the nationally 'correct' language, and thus many possibilities exist for double entendre between refined and local speech.[11] This can be further extended by the inclusion of Northeastern dialect on occasion. Bawdy wordplay can also make use of some Malay loan words common in local slang, as well as some English terms that have found their way into common usage. Multinational brand names are also becoming part of the language, and were introduced by Nang Narong into sequences involving clowns, showing their erudition or lack of it. This both amuses and informs audiences who may experience similar problems with new terms.

THENG: Damn, you're ignorant this time. But then last time you went to a shop and asked for a can of Round-Up. You know what that is? It could make you die.
NUI: Well what was it they were drinking?
THENG: It was 7-Up, Nui, 7-Up, not Round-Up!
NUI: It was a beverage.
THENG: Beverage? Weed killer!
PRINCE DEDSAK: He knows nothing does he?

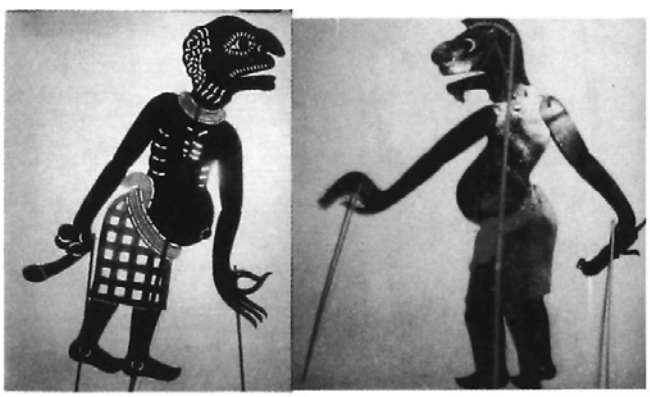
Instruction, however, did not appear to be an important feature of this story. Instead the emphasis was on creating an enjoyable and entertaining romantic historical story within a traditional framework, using many humorous songs, with the added spice of modern technology and contemporary figures of speech used by the clowns. Passing reference was made to such things as the rising price of eggs, a recent bone of contention among Southern townsfolk, and to national issues of development, though these were only mentioned briefly as part of clown dialogue between a comic pair attempting to assert their superiority over each other.

Yes, in this age we pay V.A.T. tax, Theng. Everyone must 'develop' their own character now.

Clown dialogue was liberally scattered with anachronistic modern idioms, using knowledge about driving motorbikes, a common village means of transport, to evaluate witty or knowledgable conversational repartee.

Have you stepped on your accelerator and changed gear? Ha Ha!...

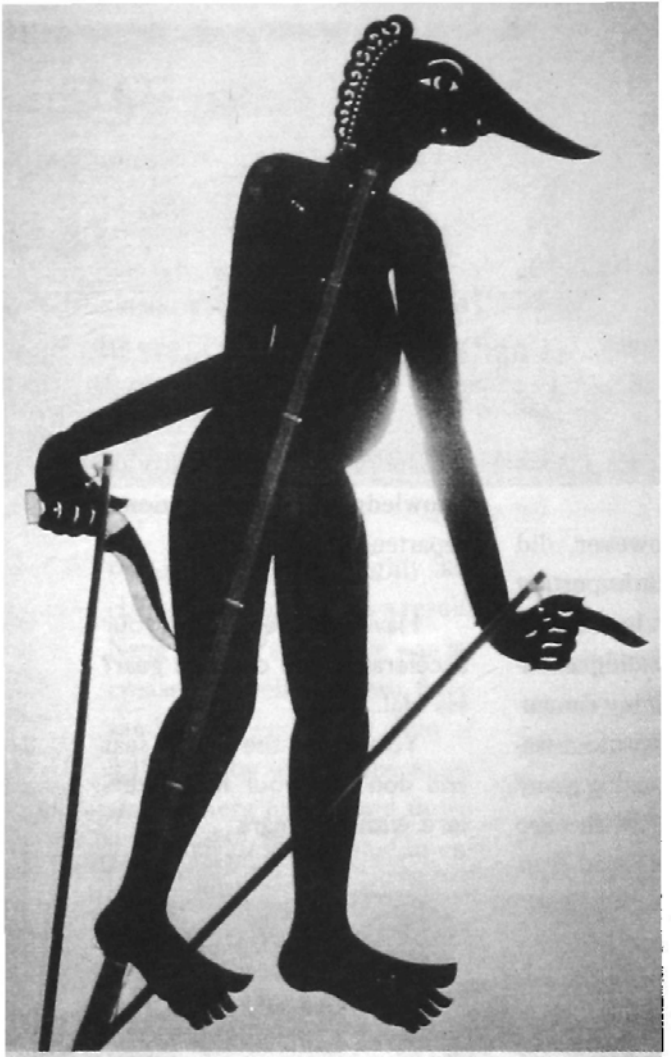
You sit on the pillion seat and don't let your foot interfere with the gears....



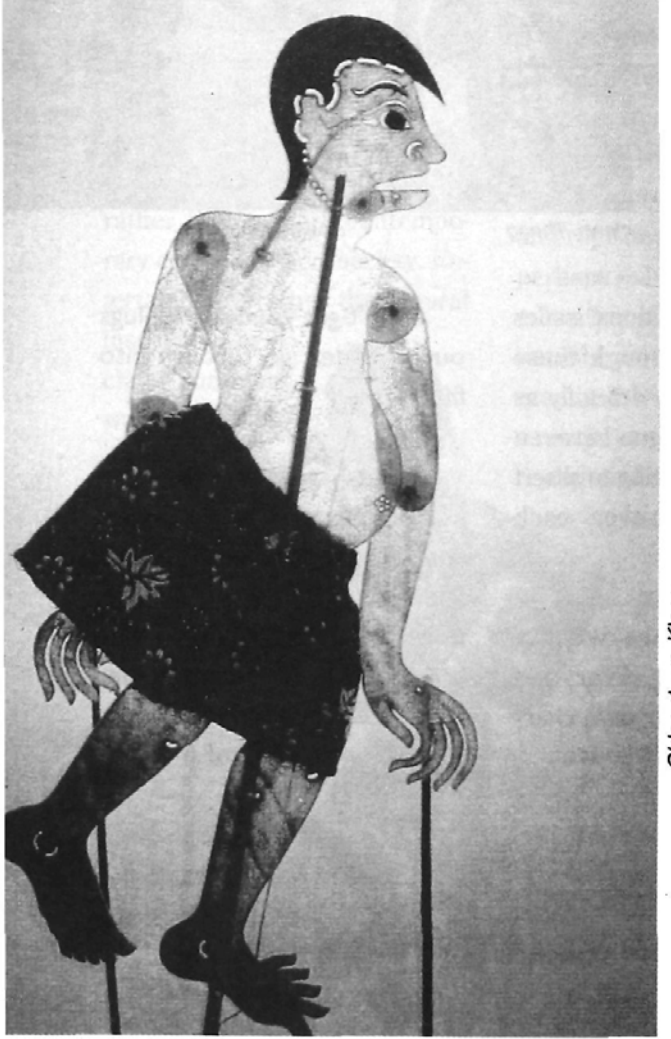
clown Theng *clown Nunui*

Don't get your spark plugs out of order, go through into fifth gear....

Nang Narong was said to be a 'Hi-Tec' type of performer by some local people, and apart from his exciting visual and musical display, this was brought out in the story by one clown's use of a mobile phone. The inconsistency of a clown



Older clown Luan



Older clown Klang

using a mobile phone whilst walking through historical forest kingdoms with a princess was greeted with great delight by the audience. This mingling of traditional characters with modern appliances is greatly enjoyed by local audiences, situated as they are in a contemporary world that utilises both ancient traditional practices and modern technology in daily life. *Nai nangs* can demonstrate an astute recognition of the contradictions between modern town life and traditional village culture, still being followed by many of the audience, and often demonstrate this in their use of the clowns, frequently the agents for breaking the historical frame of a story.

The clown character of Liak was also breaking the story frame itself in this instance, repeatedly using the mobile phone throughout the performance, communicating and jesting with members of the audience and ordering food and drink from the host for the puppeteer and musicians backstage.

Oh, Mobile One calling Mobile Two, calling the host, bring two bowls of sticky rice with durian ice-cream....I'm joking, but I really want them.

This technique of relating the fiction of the story to the reality of the performance situation was continued by another clown, Nunui, during a scene where clowns humorously imitated *nora* dancers.

Thanks to our host for bringing us three bottles of booze for the staff. The first bottle is opened, our staff are drunk. Now comes another bottle. It's Maekhong.... Before I dance I have to wai. I wai the fish curry and pineapple at Prink's house.

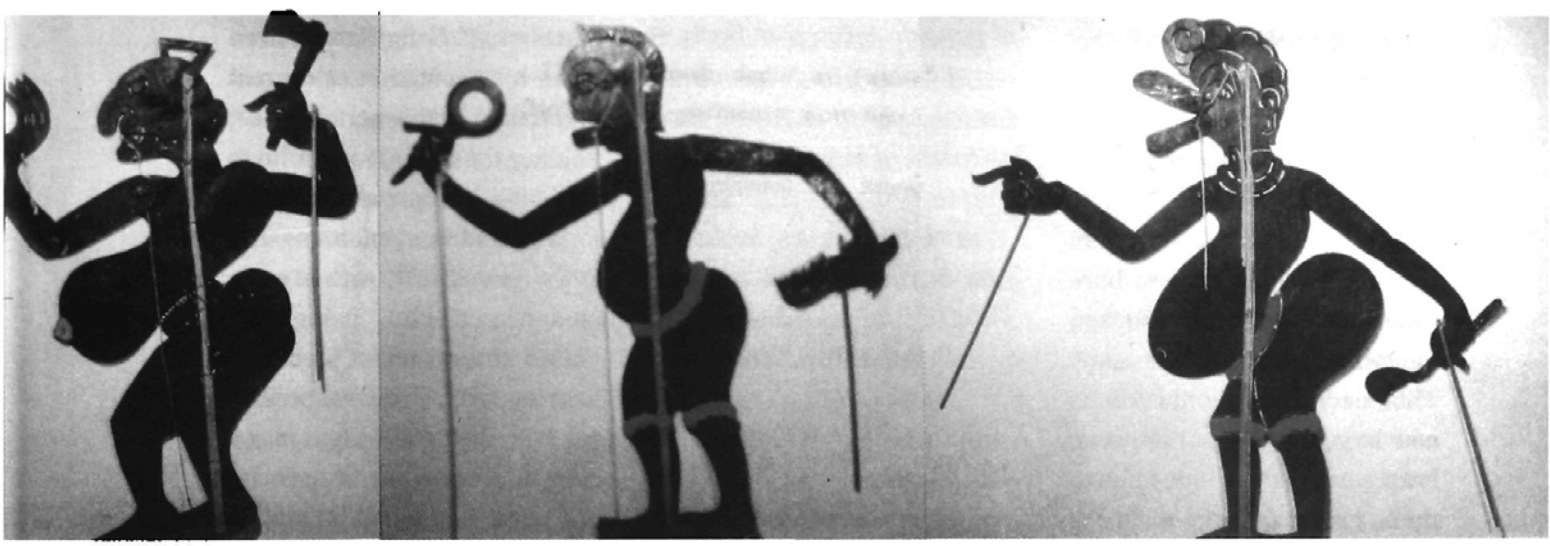
Prink was a real person well known to many of the local audience, and the *nora* costume Nunui was using was said to have been borrowed from a well known dancer (Phi Sa-ne) at the nearby *nora* stage, currently suffering some competition from Narong's performance.

It's going to rain. I'm worried about Phi Sa-ne. Where will you perform tomorrow?

This type of extremely localised reference is a feature of the outstanding improvised wit of popular performers, which greatly endears them to Southern audiences who do not find this close identification with their lives and surroundings in most other forms of dramatic presentation. It also adds to the enjoyable nature of festivity, as it can only be shared and experienced live in the special 'carnival' time of the fair, unrepeatable on television or at stylised performances of classical theatre. Such involvement in a crowded festival atmosphere with an inherent communal sharing of local identity comes close to Turner's notions of communitas, and is also recognised as a possible source of collective cosmic consciousness by Bakhtin.

The individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people's mass body...The body of the people on carnival square is first of all aware of its unity in time; it is conscious of its uninterrupted continuity in time, of its relative historic immortality. (1984:255)

Nang Narong also utilised the shared local knowledge of his audience in improvised verse competition between



clown Phun *clown Plap* *clown Dik*

clowns, and their distrust of the law, city merchants, and some nefarious and superstitious local practices, such as the 'Rak and Yam' dolls. He showed a sophisticated understanding of the relation of *nang talung* to outdoor cinema, often a competitor at many fairs. Villagers' past belief in the reality of *nang talung* stories was cited by some academics as one reason for restraining political comment in performances, and performers have told me of instances where cinema and nang were mistaken for each other in previous years. This occasional confusion is now largely a thing of the past, but *nai nangs* can still refer to these times and negotiate for meaning in subtly presenting the world of nang as more 'real' than the world of cinema.

THENG: Once, at a fair, he watched an open air movie and paid 400 baht.

PRINCE DEDSAK: Who?

THENG: Nui.

PRINCE DEDSAK: Why, Nui, why?

NUI: It was not my fault. I paid the movie company 400 baht. I did nothing wrong.

THENG: What happened?

The increasing use of technology and the resulting current competition between entertainment forms has greatly affected both audience lifestyles and tastes, yet the traditional form of nang talung *persists in its popularity and continues to be recognised as a major cultural symbol of Southern identity*

NUI: A bandit was cruel to Jarunee. (A movie star) She was sick, so was her mother. She earned money by selling vegetables every day. Three policemen, four teachers and a lot of students watched the movie. Jarunee cried for help 'Don't rob me, I need the money for my mother. Help!' He dragged her out of the pond. I said, No! and went up to the screen.

THENG: You shouted at the bandit?

NUI: Yes, but he didn't care. So I picked up a piece of wood, and stabbed him in and out. It cost 100 baht per hole.

THENG: Where?

NUI: In the screen.

PRINCE DEDSAK: Why Nui?

NUI: To help the heroine.

PRINCE DEDSAK: A moral person, but....!!!

Despite having to perform after a heavy rain, Nang Narong lived up to his reputation as a great entertainer in this performance, holding the attention of a huge audience in somewhat uncomfortable and wet conditions. His story moved fast, with a quite complicated plot, using disguises and mistaken identities to great effect. Extended periods of clown dialogue were a major component of many scenes.

Royal Blood had little obvious political or social commentary, and the whole story was based in a mythical setting, despite the use of modern technology by some characters. Little instruction or didactic moralising was evident, and the main emphasis was on entertainment, often through the usage of popular song parody and clown dialogue which exaggerated trends in contemporary vernacular speech. Even though the story was based in a historical setting,

contemporary idiom, topical knowledge and current events were freely added, which closely related the puppet characters to the daily lives and identity of the audience. Different settings were incorporated into long scenes with few breaks in the action, giving the presentation a fast-moving filmic quality. The extensive use of modern music also obviously increased the enjoyment of the audience.

Judging by local accounts of his advance bookings, Nang Narong's currently successful career in performing *nang talung* has brought him into the ranks of so called 'professional' entertainers like Nang Prom Noi.

In Southern Thailand you can make a profession of *nang talung*. Only about fifteen people can perform *nang talung* as a business, but more than one hundred go to the performers' assembly in Phattalung. Before I had a big name I didn't have much, now I have a big house, a car, and many fields. Everything came from *nang talung*. [12]

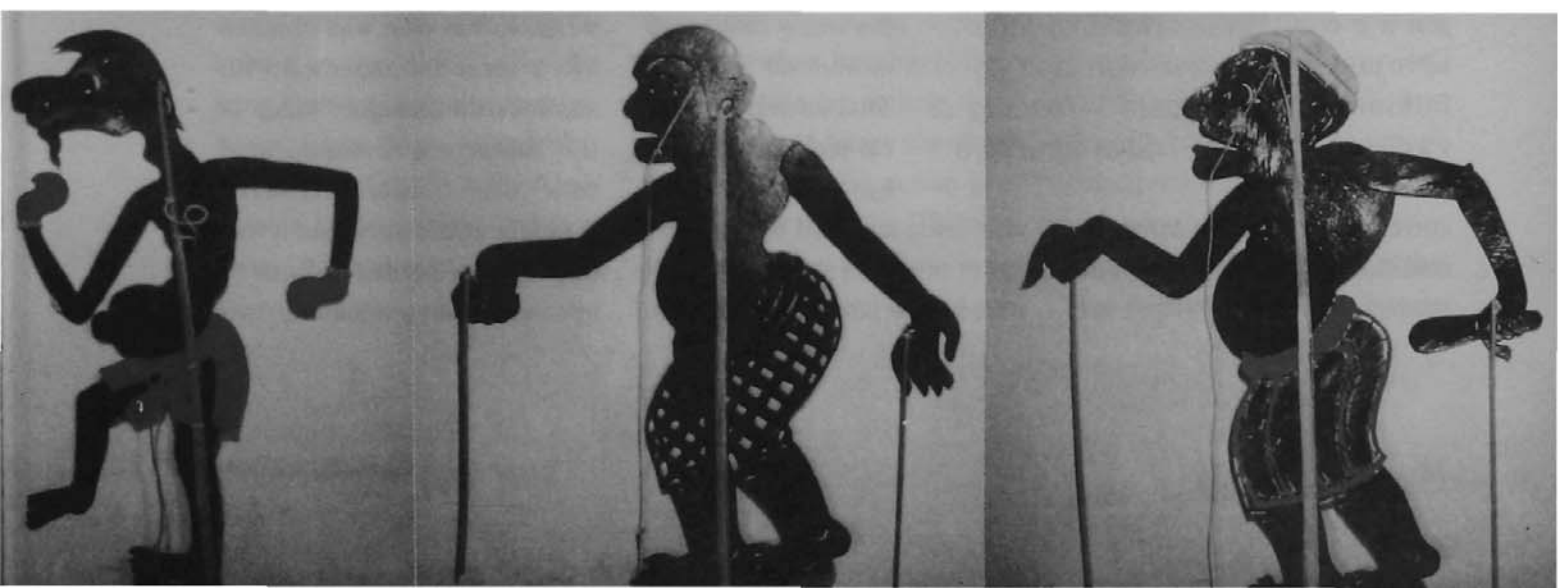
As this performance could be considered to be actively seeking popularity from younger audiences, and was presented more as an entertainment commodity than a story dealing with important social themes, Nang Narong might be considered as a 'modern' style of performer. He exhibited some of the 'modern' tendencies cited by Vandergeest and Chalermpow that are in opposition to their notions of 'potent' or 'traditional' styles (1993:319). While he was certainly thought of as a performer in the *nang samai* or 'new style' category by local audiences, his story relied on traditional rather than contemporary characters. Traditional relationships between parents and children, royalty and servants, as well as adherence to older Buddhist notions of dharma and social status characterised this performance. This story also did not rely on political criticism or social satire to any appreciable extent. These features create some difficulty in ascribing this performance to the aforementioned categories of either a 'modern' or 'traditional' style used by other commentators.

The voices of traditional art and religion in this performance were combined with the influences of modern technology and the faster moving grammar of electronic media to present an entertainment commodity suited to a modern rural audience. Nang Narong, however, did not use a critique of modern politics to further popularity, as has been common with some 'professional' performers. Such variation in stories and techniques of presentation at different venues indicates that there

clown Nuay dressed as a boxer

clown Sikaew

clown Samoh



is an extremely wide entertainment potential in *nang talung* for skilled troupes. Though the site of performance and the nature of the audience may affect the emphasis of the performer, influences on style and content are not markedly limited by the inherent norms, practicalities and equipment common to all performers of this theatrical genre.

Changing Techniques of Presentation

As suggested above, distinguishing the differences between definite categories or contemporary styles in *nang talung* is problematic. Story content, whether based in historical or contemporary settings, borrows uninhibitedly from modern life, modern language idioms, folklore, various beliefs, current affairs, local history and tradition. Both historical and modern figures and places are used and referred to, so that the world of a *nang talung* story can be either allegorical, or a contemporary critique of society, or can be taken largely as melodramatic fictional entertainment, or a combination of many of these elements. Moral themes are often important, and though often connected to a Buddhist worldview, may address either the concerns of the establishment or those of the rural people, or incorporate multiple viewpoints which may be interpreted in various ways by different individuals.

An important attempt to codify an approved style is being attempted by the educational establishment, but even this is subject to ongoing change, largely as a result of changing audience tastes in entertainment and performers' desires for popular appeal.

While these trends parallel a movement towards a less constrained use of nang talung *in Southern social contexts, and exhibit a tendency to imitate the social realism of global cultural forms, they also express the continuing importance of local expression and its contemporary reading of older social structure*

Apart from current variations in story content that reflect the many influences at work on Southern Thai society, practical techniques used by performers are also being modified by the emulation of modern forms of fast-paced entertainment and technological media. This variation in technique spans a continuum that relates closely to *nang booraan* and *nang samai,* the local conceptions of conservative and popular-modern styles, but is largely independent of 'styles' associated with story content or settings. I do not intend to give a complete semiotic analysis of performance here, but wish merely to summarise some of the current variations and tendencies in modern performance techniques that will serve to show the voice of the media and modern entertainment that is affecting practical aspects of *nang talung.*

Oral and Sound Techniques

Accounts of *nang talung* performances from the turn of the century emphasise that traditional poetry forms were of major importance, and formed a large part of the *nai nang*'s oral presentation. I listened to several private recordings of performances from the 1960s which indicated that the main form of oral communication used by *nai nangs* in the past was chanted klorn verse interspersed with some clown dialogue. Many of the characters communicated with each other in verse throughout the story, and it was often rare for normal dialogue to last more than a minute or two

between verses. Recitation of klorn verse was traditionally accompanied by simple rhythms on the mong and ching, and this is still common in contemporary performance. The most popular type of klorn has simple stanzas of four rhymed lines, but now some freer improvised forms are also used, and although the ability to recite verse is important for performers, it is no longer the dominant mode of oral expression.

Extended dialogue has become much more important in performances, following the realistic trends of dramatic presentation on radio, television and cinema.

> Before there was not a lot of dialogue but lots of klorn used for everything. Then everybody liked fast-moving shows but not talking a lot. Now there's a lot of talking, the shows are not the same, they're as different as the palm and the back of the hand.[13]

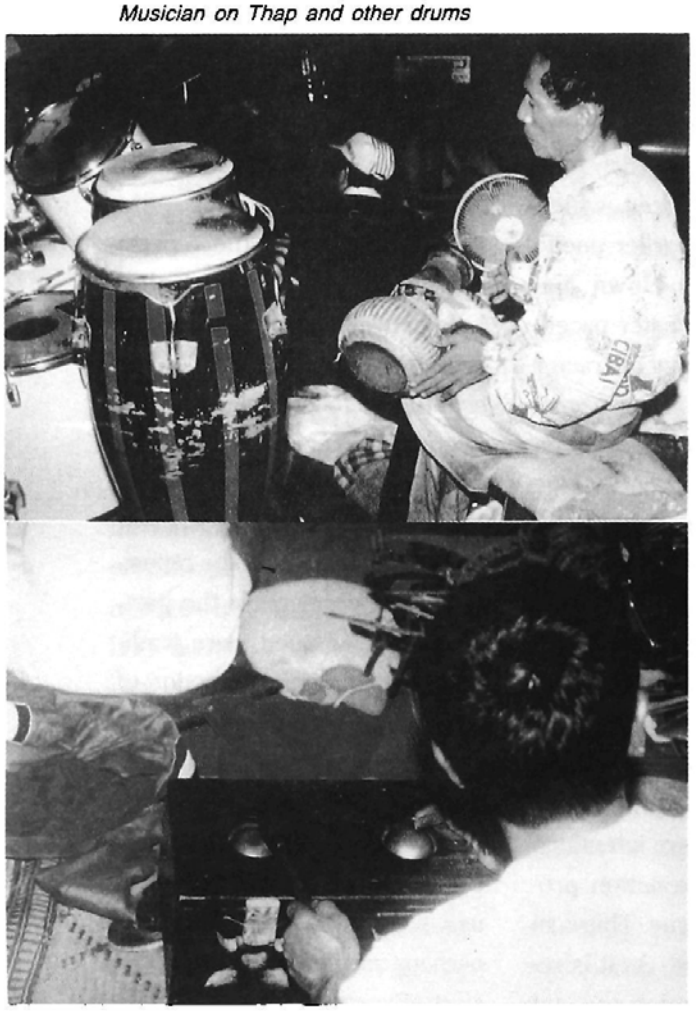
Contemporary performers considered by local audiences to belong to the 'older' style, or *nang booraan* category, such as Nang Chin from Songkhla, generally maintain a fairly fixed division between verse and dialogue. A scene may begin with a few minutes of chanted klorn verse by the main protagonist, which generally explains the preceding events, and what this person is now attempting to do as a result. Other characters then enter and engage in dialogue which may last for twenty minutes or more. Often the dialogue between major protagonists may involve fairly long and graceful speeches, which appears to follow earlier poetic traditions, though clown dialogue is generally faster paced. Occasionally, if a new character enters midway through a scene, he or she may announce themselves with a short klorn verse. At the end of such a particular sequence of events in a single setting, or *muang*, which I have generally referred to as a 'scene', one of the major protagonists frequently uses klorn verse to evaluate what has happened. They do this by stating their sentiments and future intentions resulting from the action presented in the dialogue. This acts as a form of reprise. As it is repeated at the beginning and end of each 'scene', it is quite easy for latecomers or those who have slept through some parts of the performance to pick up the threads of the plot quite quickly. Following the reprise klorn, music covers a brief interlude between scenes before the process repeats in the following scene. The music links the final verse of one scene to the commencing verse in the next, allowing time for a brief vocal rest by the performer and the repositioning of puppets. In the past, the melodies used were traditional, often signifying action of some sort, as was the case in the now almost defunct *nang yai*, the Thai court genre of shadow theatre, but now even the more conservative performers tend to use popular tunes. They may perhaps use gentler music at the start of scenes featuring female

Musician on Saw oo and Pii

heroines and a more vigorous tempo before the entrance of a *yak* (demon) or group of robbers, for example.

In Nang Chin's performances the sequence of music, klorn, dialogue and reprise klorn was a common pattern in each scene, occasionally modified by spoken or chanted narrative over the music during a scene change to aid in describing the next setting. The introductory verse, however, usually enlarged on the narration, so there was often a great deal of repetition of narrative detail during the performance. Often the screen would be blank during the verse at the beginning and end of each section, and sometimes the music would last two or three minutes, allowing the *nai nang* a drink of water or a longer rest. As a result, the story usually progressed sedately in a regular pattern of verse, dialogue and music over several hours, with a sometimes soporific effect on the audience.

Musician on Thap and other drums



Musician on Mong instruments

More popular contemporary performers associated with the *nang samai* style, such as Nang Narong, use frequent narrative and popular song as well as verse and dialogue. Verse may be accompanied by several modern instruments, as well as by the mong and ching. Dialogue is also often accompanied by music, particularly by drums and cymbals to emphasise commands, anger, or the punchline of jokes, or to act as sound effects in fights and chases. "Mood" music is also used as a background to dialogue in some scenes. Songs are of a wide variety. In addition to the borrowing of popular tunes, they can use *nora* melodies and musical themes from television programs, or emulate music used in Muay Thai boxing. Many of the most popular troupes utilise a wide array of modern instruments, frequently using keyboards and saxophones to replace the pii, for example. I have even heard electric organs used to create 'ghost-like' sounds in *nora rong khruu* rituals, and similar sound effects are sometimes used in *nang talung*.

The most popular performers do not separate these elements into regular sequences, but combine the whole gamut of aural effects in various ways. Snatches of klorn verse lasting only a few seconds may be split between different characters and interspersed with music, song, narrative and dialogue in various combinations at any time in a scene, or throughout the story. It is rare that the

Old villager

Princess/Heroine

Bandit

Merchant

Lord/General

Villager

Policeman


Phra Isuan/Shiva
Deity
Prince (Traditional)
King

Ruup Na Bot

Yak

Princess/Heroine

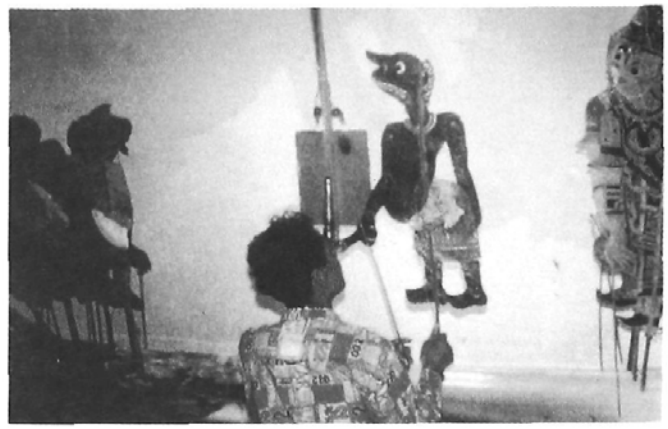
Queen

Prince (Modern)

screen is left blank for any appreciable time, and the vigorous continuation of action sometimes makes it difficult to divide the story into separate 'scenes' or sections, as I had originally begun to do with slower moving performances.

The ability to skip frequently between different types of sound, in a format that cannot be foreseen by the audience, creates a fast pace in performance that enhances the enjoyment of the watching crowd, now often familiar with the sophisticated grammar of fast cutting techniques used in rapid paced electronic media entertainment. The lack of repetition and the accompaniment by loud modern music also tends to keep all the audience awake and eagerly anticipating the continuation of the story. Modern music is seen by many *nai nangs* as important in attracting the younger generation.

To be a good *nai nang*, besides good colleagues and good music, you should have self-confidence and make others trust and believe in you first. Sound is the most important, then jokes, story, and verse. We use modern instruments like the guitar, but we still keep the old ones, pii, saw uu, and thap. In the old days if you had a good pii this was the best show, but now you must have a guitar and electric organ. When you begin to play the music it rouses the young.[14]



Khwanmuang announcing the story

The dialogue of the more popular performers is also different from that used by older style *nai nangs*. Rather than each character taking his turn to speak, often in relatively lengthy speeches, lots of characters seem to speak at once and speak much faster, 'just like the movies' as one villager suggested. Conversations are portrayed more realistically than the more sedate styles of exchange common in classical drama. The most popular or 'professional' performers also travel frequently between various provinces and do not use as much of the very localised dialects and idioms common to more static performers in the past. Some clown expressions in Nakhon Si Thammarat, for example, were idioms unfamiliar to Songkhla villagers, but now performers are more likely to use English expressions or play word games between Southern and *Isaan* (northeastern Thailand) dialects, as well as employing the frequent double entendres between Southern and Central Thai. Modern or 'hi-tec' vernacular expressions are also frequently used by clowns, such as the traffic jargon idioms used by clowns in Royal Blood. Central Thai, used by the upper class puppets, is also now much more likely to be pronounced correctly by performers than in the past, as the majority of the most popular *nai nangs* are now well educated. As shown by Nang Narong, royal Thai and Pali may also be used in performance. Nang Nakharin from Hat Yai has also introduced

some words from other languages as a source of humour.

The most obvious change in types of oral expression is the use of songs. Contemporary music is often played by a loud jazzy band while a clown, dancing in time with the music, sings parodies of favourite tunes. Whole songs or snatches of song may be employed, and the more skilled performers can sing duets between two clowns, maintaining the clown's individual vocal characteristics. In a 1993 performance of Opposite Tastes, for example, Nang Nakharin sang five different songs of various musical styles, using the singing voice of four different puppets within a fifteen minute period. Such skill is greatly appreciated by the audience, particularly as the songs are not only original and humorous, but also often sung by clowns in the local vernacular.

The more complex weave of all types of sound and oral expression in popular contemporary *nang talung* is indicative not only of the influence of new performance 'grammar' espoused by the electronic media, but also mirrors a more complex interaction of influences in the daily existence of the Southern Thai people.

Visual Techniques

In addition to the modification of oral techniques, proponents of the *nang samai* style are also using newer techniques of visual representation. Close comparison of puppet movement and groupings in various performances emphasises the differences in pace between the most popular performers and their more conservative counterparts. When fast movement of puppets is added to the rapid changes between various kinds of oral techniques, and enhanced by sound effects and modern uptempo music, the whole presentation displays a filmic quality almost comparable to modern Thai cinema in its pace, contrasting greatly with the slower-moving performances by '*nang booraan*' performers such as Nang Chin.

When fast movement of puppets is added to the rapid changes between various kinds of oral techniques, and enhanced by sound effects and modern uptempo music, the whole presentation displays a filmic quality almost comparable to modern Thai cinema in its pace

Usually, when a puppet is planted in the supporting banana log, it is seen to speak by minor hand movement, or if a clown, by mouth movement also. If dead or unconscious, it is planted at a backward angle with arms dangling across the body. If a puppet is lifted and held by the *nai nang*, it is at that moment the most active or vocal character in the scene, and it may also swivel to face or avoid others, or bend lower, bowing and waving a hand towards them. This action is also used to show respect to other puppet characters, and as dictated by traditional Thai manners, a proper *wai* gesture (palms put together vertically in front of one's chest) is often made to a superior when a puppet makes its first entrance in a story. Generally the upper class or *nai* characters are relatively static, using graceful arm movements when speaking, and the clowns engage in more vigorous and jerky behaviour with constantly moving arms and jaws.

Academics are interested in 'reviving' types of movement specific to certain classes of puppet. As a result, some performers such as Nang Nakharin have developed continuous graceful flowing movement and sedate flips used by royal characters

Puppet carver

whilst speaking. The most popular performers, however, tend to use a greater number of puppets in many scenes, and there is thus more movement by all figures as the screen 'picture' is constantly adjusted as new characters enter or exit.

Puppets are generally stationed towards the centre of the screen with the most important characters of any scene in the centre. If only two are conversing they usually face each other across a blank central gap. If there are two opposing groups, or three or more puppets conversing, they also face each other, with the group leader or more important speaker in the more central position. For dialogue from those at the rear, arm or mouth movement is enough to signify they are speaking, or in longer speeches, they are lifted and lean down, speaking across the central gap. Leaning puppets often create bigger shadows than others, but this is accepted convention, as are shadows of arms crossing other characters. To speak to someone behind him in his own group, a puppet usually swivels in place or is lifted and uses the central gap, or the whole arrangement is shifted about for convenience. Once this simple convention is absorbed, it flows unnoticeably and naturally. In many stories performed by more conservative '*nang booraan*' puppeteers, there are rarely more than three or four puppets conversing at any one time, and as a result there is limited visual movement apparent. Many of the audience concentrate on listening, rather than watching most of the performance.

Some of the most popular *nai nangs*, however, are wont to use eight or more puppets in some scenes, many of them clowns, and this necessitates a great deal more puppet movement and rapid changes between character voices to distinguish the speakers. Similarly, entrances and exits are more frequent and scenes are much less static with constant movement attracting the eye, demanding both visual and aural attention from the audience. More skill is required in moving many puppets quickly, and I noticed that the more famous and skilful performers frequently held two or more puppets in one hand. The use of fast changes between puppets is, however, not a modern innovation, as I was told that Nang Prom Yai made extremely fast exchanges between clothed puppets and their nude figures in his somewhat obscene performances thirty years ago. He was said to have held the replacement puppets between his toes, swapping them instantaneously for those in his hands, so that characters were seen to be stripped of clothes as if by magic.

Older performers often simply place puppets by bringing them to a central position from the side of the screen some time before they commence speaking. A newer trend is to quickly position puppets in the centre with a sudden flourish, often emphasised by a drumbeat on the first line of their speech. This makes for sudden arrivals and departures of various characters and creates a sense of faster-flowing action. Fighting or making love is often done with sound effects as puppets move out of sight below the screen. Simple hits are easily done in fight sequences, but chases are often carried out by frequent crossing of the screen by many puppets, accompanied by vigor-

ous music and frequent angry or comic interjections from several characters. The visual enactment of *nang talung* appears to be developing towards a more realistic depiction of action, imitating the conventions of drama in the modern media, rather than maintaining the simpler conventions of the past, when it was one of the few fictional narrative forms available to its audience.

Juxtaposition of Puppet Characters

I have given details of the variety of puppet figures elsewhere[15], together with some information on the invention or modernisation of some stock character types. Yet, it is impossible to make a definitive distinction between types used by more conservative performers, and those used by the more innovative. Though the most popular performers at large fairs, such as Nang Narong, Nang Prom and Nang Nakharin, do tend to introduce more figures depicting modern technology, such as motorbikes, microphones, telephones, guns and newspapers, they also use puppets in traditional or classical costume, as well as those in more modern dress. Several popular performers now prefer using characters in traditional costumes as major protagonists, as they believe the audiences like them better than those in modern clothing. The substitution of human villains for yaks, for example, is an arbitrary decision in many stories, and there is in fact still some controversy over whether yaks should or should not be used in the *nang samai* popular style, or in college venues. Many performers, for example, will often almost apologise or remark on their reasons for using yaks in the narrative preceding their initial appearance in a story. The variety of figures used in a performance depends on the collection of puppets any *nai nang* may have available, and obviously the more successful performer will have better funds to create new figures if he so desires.

The way in which characters are used together, however, is of significance in assessing the changing conventions of performance. Some older performers often said that clown scenes were previously kept separate from the main course of the story, and clowns usually conversed together in pairs making most of their lewd comments when their masters were elsewhere. Older performers, such as Nang Chin, tend to use lengthy conversations between clowns towards the end of a scene when the nai class of characters have departed, and discussions by clowns do not tend to be important parts of the story's action. Conventions of performance grouping used by many popular performers tend to mix up the different strata of society in a way that

reflects the current interaction between various social classes in contemporary town life, with clown characters present for large sections of the story.

While some performances group many classes of puppets together in a single lengthy scene where all types join equally in the dialogue, many older people prefer the representation of a more structured hierarchical society.

Nang talung shows were not the same then. They were all Southern Thai, things from the village. Now we have lots of things from everywhere. In the times before *nang talung* was more correct. Kings were kings, nai were nai, phrai were phrai, women were women, men were men. Clowns didn't make jokes when the king and queen were present. Today they're all mixed up. Today its *Nang talung* Khao Yam (Southern Rice Salad) ....Now the kamnan's kids marry the district officer's kids, his kids marry the province official's kids, and his kids marry the village headman's kids.[16]

Although many puppet figures are depicted in modern dress and modern issues are commonly discussed in performance, the older social hierarchy is still shown by the various classes of puppet types and by the division between the dialects used by the nai and phrai characters. Many *nang samai* performers prefer to use royal characters in their stories, though the historical kings and princes of city states no longer exist. They now also frequently present royalty together with the village clown characters, currently adept at modern music and in sharing the stage with their previous masters.

I haven't invented any new clothes for clowns because it's not right, it's not the old way. I don't like it. Now people like clowns to sing, they like puppets dressed in modern clothes, they like them dancing to the music or singing mohlam (northeast popular folk opera) style now. *Nang talung* has already changed, now it has town people and clowns all mixed up. Now the clown sings in front of the king, before they didn't have this.[17]

clown decor at Festival Yodthong and Theng

By both separating and grouping together different social classes in these somewhat contradictory ways, popular performers have tended neither to strictly maintain the traditional social rankings, nor to fully appropriate the democratic notion that all individuals are equal in depictions of either contemporary or historically based fictions. They have rather shown the presence of current social behaviour in the past and the influence of historical social ranking still existent in the present. *Nang talung* performance thus appears closely in step with a society in transition, not fully grasping the modern world, whilst not completely relinquishing the old order, despite attempts to tailor its use to show new notions of development and nationhood. The importance of the clown characters, closely identified with the concerns of the lower rural classes, has perhaps even increased in festive imagery. The clowns have now almost appropriated the modern status of local pop stars by utilising the techniques of more global popular entertainment, yet still maintain their symbolic rural identities.

Story Structures and Themes - An Overview

It is generally believed that *nang talung* stories in the past were taken from The Ramakien, the Thai version of the Ramayana epic and from traditional folktales that were often included in the collections of Jataka tales, or rewritten in verse by the poet Sunthorn Phu. These tales originally developed from a widespread oral tradition of story telling, often in verse, that allowed flexibility, invention, and variation by a performer. *Nai nangs* were generally better educated than their audience in the past and more likely to be familiar with Thai literary works, and this generally still remains true today.

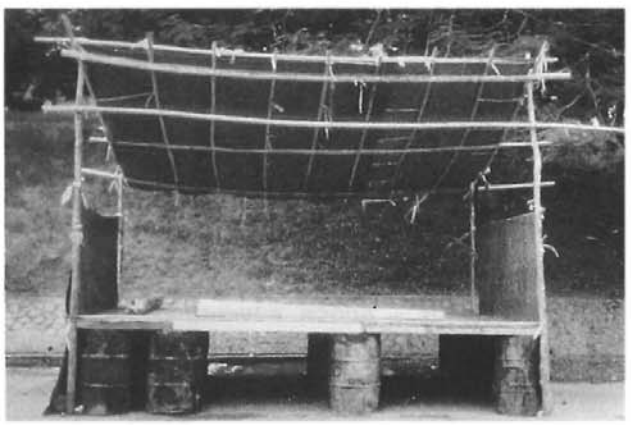
Contemporary stories include elements from both the classical and folktale traditions and from various other accessible sources, and are mostly invented by the performers themselves, but they are seldom written down in full. The flexibility of the oral tradition and the knowledge of older tales is reflected in both the structure and content of stories currently used in performance. *Nai nangs* may adapt episodes from novels, comic books, contemporary films, television, and the newspapers, and intertwine these with episodes derived from classical literature. Nang Prom Noi, for example, was wont to carry a selection of comic books which he would flick through in idle moments at a *rong* while waiting for a crowd to gather. He said these sometimes gave him good ideas that he could incorporate into his performances. He had found Indian movies a great source of inspiration in the past, especially as some of them had included characters similar to the *rusi* and legendary Thai heroes. Now modern movie thrillers and pop music videos are also a source for the stories and for conversations between the clowns. Many *nai nangs* said they had made use of real events witnessed in the villages or read about in newspapers, though they would also modify tales performed by their teachers or combine elements of various existing tales in new ways.

Now modern movie thrillers and pop music videos are also a source for the stories and for conversations between the clowns

The flexibility of plot structure in traditional folk tales increases the possibilities for incorporation of old and new elements in the composition of a story. Performances may contain a classical type of plot in a pseudo-historical setting, or a realist approach by portraying dilemmas faced in everyday life by the modern Thai, or even a combination of both (within a single performance). Multiple heroes are common, and the multiple settings usually feature a number of different kingdoms that may or may not be inter-related in the story. A series of sub-plots can thus portray the simultaneous adventures of various protagonists in different mythical kingdoms, who may or may not be finally reunited. Alternatively, separate plots with parallel themes may coexist without any narrative linkage in some performances. It is accepted that *nang talung* stories never really end, and the long and often complicated plots are rarely finalised as performances usually end at an interesting point in the story, often at a crisis point, rather like an ongoing television serial. A story is very rarely continued from one performance to another; and as the various threads or sub-plots of a tale often remain unjoined, this allows a great deal of freedom in incorporating both mythical kingdoms and contemporary realism into a single performance.

The stories regularly begin with a problem of some kind or the start of a journey. The jour-

ney may never be completed, and the problem never completely solved, though the major part of any story concerns the ongoing adventures of the heroes or heroines that have been set in motion by the opening scenes. These commonly involve crises that are solved by help from friends or the supernatural, encounters with villains and officials, abduction and seduction, battles, oppression, rewards, and the re-unification and parting of lovers or family members. The stories will usually end at a point that allows continuous extension, often at the beginning of a possible future course of events that have already been set in motion, but the time at which the performance ends is usually determined by the *nai nang* in the light of practicalities affecting himself, the audience, or the venue. Neat endings to story plots are extremely rare as the *nai nangs* prefer to leave the audiences wanting more, or imagining the various possible outcomes for themselves.



The bare stage

It is also common for comments or objects or language associated with modern life to appear in pseudo-historical settings, though it would not be strictly accurate to label these as anachronisms. These fictional stories are best seen as reflections of a Southern worldview which often bases its sense of social order within a traditional cosmic hierarchy, most distinctly defined in an historical era. This ordering of society is allied both to the historical *sakdi na* social system and to an ongoing, though slightly altered belief in the cycle of karma and reincarnation.[18] Reflection of modern society must still accommodate these ideas, whilst also including the current social changes, trials and tribulations, and the everyday interests of the here and now.

The stories may offer both instruction and entertainment. Instruction may include the dissemination of cultural or literary knowledge or practical information relevant to the audience, which might include a commentary on current affairs, methods of dealing with social problems and a modern lifestyle, and attitudes or regulations considered important by the state. The efficacy of moral Buddhist behaviour is also frequently promoted, but allusions to the spirit world and supernatural powers are also included. Many stories refer to the Buddhist doctrine of karma, though this is now perhaps not as greatly emphasised by some of the most popular performers. Another important concern for many of the audience who may often consider a hero's misfortunes in terms of karmic destiny is for the status and family relations, which are an integral part of all stories, as is the existence of both good and evil forces. Both more traditional and modern approaches employed by performers usually include some reflection on the prevailing power structure of society, showing how this is used and abused by kings, officials and family members, masters and servants, and how the resultant actions affect the social

relations and destiny of the protagonists.

Performers also inform audiences about local geography, history and legends through their stories. Whether using modern or traditional settings, didactic messages may be promoted either by the reference to moral Buddhist teachings or by pragmatic demonstrations of the consequences of villagers' actions in a changing contemporary society. Increasingly, hegemonic values associated with the development of a national consciousness among the rural population are frequently being inserted into some stories, in order to increase audience awareness about the environment, birth control and current affairs. This is particularly noticeable at performances where performers are being sponsored or highly influenced by academic institutions.

We have to combine the old time and the modern time together. To show the modern story is easy when we want to warn people instead of putting everything in the government's hands. Parents should try to follow their children's behaviour for they may become drug addicts. This is the modern time. When there is an election we should make the people go to elect their representatives.....fifty or sixty years ago there were no elections. If we know where there is a place to sell drugs or know who is a drug dealer we should inform the police. We act as a reporter for the government, we tell the Buddhists to go to the temple on the fifteenth of the lunar month.....[19]

These forms of instruction or education may be interwoven with simple entertainment to a higher or lesser degree, or largely separated into specific instructional scenes, or merely suggested in passing, serving only as an adjunct to recreational fun, apparently the main purpose of some performances. To a large extent, the various approaches are determined by the expectations and requirements of the audiences, as well as by the social status of the performer relative to the audience, and the skill with which these approaches can be manipulated by the ingenuity of the performer.

Entertainment value for the audience may be derived not only from the drama of the story, which may incorporate such instruction, but from the way in which this is accomplished by the performers, through their inventiveness in the story, the quality of their verse and music, and through the use of vernacular dialogue. Vernacular witticisms and repartee are particularly the province of the clowns, who speak with the voices and mannerisms of the audience, thus reflecting their identity with an ingenious comic awareness of daily life and human frailties.

It appears to be a common characteristic of the most popular and successful performers that they can manage to tread a line between various imposed definitions of style at some venues, or weave in the sometimes conflicting requirements of their audiences and sponsors in a fashion that placates and appeals to all members of any given audience, no matter what their supposed preferences. As many popular performers have realised that historical settings are still popular with audiences, even on television, they continue to use them with modern additions.

Nowadays it's better to perform an old story about yaks, gods or men walking in the air. People like them. For example between a play about real life and a royal story on TV, people prefer the royal story. I don't know who likes the old style or new style sto-

ries, but I think *nang* should be combined. First we should have a guitar, organ or other electrical instrument to attract the young, to make them praise this modern *nang*. If we don't have a pii and saw uu, the old people who come will complain that we are neglecting the old instruments, so we have them too. So even if there are *yaks* in a story, the clever *nai nang* will make it modern by adding a clown in the *yak's* town with a telephone because the world is developed now.[20]

Summary

In describing and commenting on Nang Narong's performance I have suggested that *nang talung* may be moving away from a more traditional and instructional format to a densely woven, popular contemporary type of entertainment. This progression may also be reflected in the nature and size of its audiences, as larger audiences are now often found in urban festivals or at annual fairs, rather than at the previously more frequent village ritual performances. It is impossible, however, to categorise various types of performance event, such as ritual *kae bon* presentations, instructional college fair shows, and highly entertaining festive occasions as examples of separate styles or steps in the developmental progression of *nang talung*. There is a considerable overlap of themes, content, technique and intent. This has also been made apparent by the difficulty in ascribing the above performance to categories suggested by other commentators. Semiotic differences in sound and visual techniques are perhaps more distinct, and the local categorisation of *nang booraan* and *nang samai* appears fairly useful in this regard.

It is perhaps also important to note here that the increasingly complex diversity of cultural information disseminated in the stories is still encapsulated within a distinctly Southern form of cultural presentation. All the stories are set in a background of Southern Thai culture and continually refer to the Southern lifestyle and Southern values, particularly through the modern idiomatic and colloquial dialogue of the clowns, even when performers are involved in promoting national values. Regular references to other forms of local popular culture are made through the integration of *nora* and Thai boxing episodes and through both comical and respectful allusions to performance sponsors or other competing entertainment often presented simultaneously at performance venues. 'Modern' or more globalized values of the younger generation that may conflict with more conservative family views are now a common feature in stories depicting family relationships. Changes in lifestyle caused by these influences are also reflected in the stories. Also, the changing facets of daily life in local customs and occupational chores are commonly referred to, bringing ready recognition and a close rapport with both villagers and townspeople.

In addition, the changing nature of local culture and language is exemplified by the increasing influence of film, television, technology, current affairs, foreign vocabulary, and literacy in story development and dialogue. As increasing globalization is affecting views on the moral and social structure of the community, some performances may seek to redefine these structures or resurrect older concepts, whilst many comment either directly or indirectly on these 'ongoing fragments of social reality' (Handelman 1977:190). Globalization is thus obviously a factor in accelerating heteroglossic interaction, and is perhaps influential in the disintegration of the ritual framing of *nang talung* and its movement towards 'play'.

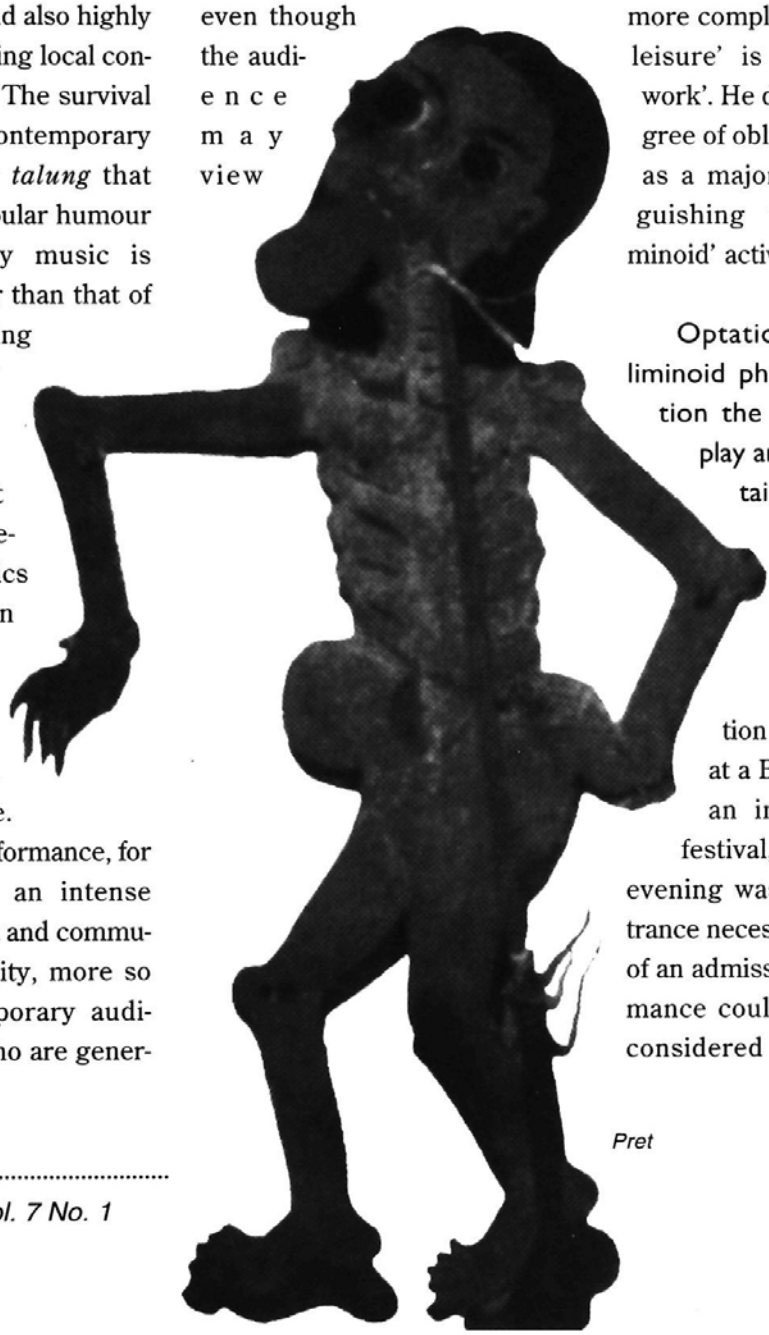
To some extent, the local categories of *nang booraan* and *nang samai* also parallel the frames of ritual and 'play'.

Handelman suggests that the messages of both 'play' and ritual are complementary forms of commentary on the social order, particularly in traditional societies. He has also suggested that 'play' can survive the "disintegration of the ritual domain", being both a resilient frame that is easier to enter and also highly adaptable to changing local conditions (1977:191). The survival value of a more contemporary approach in *nang talung* that uses increased popular humour and contemporary music is likely to be greater than that of performers following either a '*nang booraan*' or the newly invented 'traditional' format that is often preferred by academics at college fairs or on television. This is recognised by performers primarily intent on gaining income. Nang Narong's performance, for example, created an intense sense of enjoyment and communally shared identity, more so among a contemporary audience than those who are generally attracted to more 'potent' or ritualised *nang talung* events, or to college performances. The emphasis on entertainment rather than ritual or instruction, however, need not necessarily detract from the efficacy of performance reflections on society.

Although the emphases in expression may vary, *nang talung* consistently creates a feeling or shared attitude of Southern peasant solidarity, even though the audience may view performances from within varying social contexts. This solidarity, or shared sense of regional identity, may or may not be considered synonymous with the 'communitas' of ritual events, but is still efficacious in engendering a sense of being Southern Thai. Ritual events are considered by Turner as obligatory forms of behaviour in contrast to more optional events sharing similar characteristics in more complex societies where 'leisure' is separated from 'work'. He distinguishes the degree of obligatory involvement as a major feature in distinguishing 'liminal' from 'liminoid' activities.

> Optation pervades the liminoid phenomenon, obligation the liminal. One is all play and choice, an entertainment, the other is a matter of deep seriousness. (1982:43)

Despite the location of this performance at a Buddhist wat during an important religious festival, attendance in the evening was optional, and entrance necessitated the payment of an admission fee. The performance could thus perhaps be considered a "ludic offering



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placed for sale on the *free market*" and more like a "commodity" (Turner 1982:54-5), characteristics which could mark it as a liminoid or 'ritual-like' event.

It is common, however, for such performances at large venues to also include liminal activities. Elsewhere I have pointed out the liminal behaviour of performers in ritual preparation prologues before the main story (Dowsey-Magog 1996). Many performers believe that their ritual initiation into the craft and their repetition of the preliminary episodes before each performance are a source of spiritual assistance which aids in producing successful entertainment as well as efficacious ritual. In addition, *nai nangs* may be approached by villagers wishing to make offerings to spirits even at large fairs where performances are ostensibly presented for entertainment. Poorer villagers often provide a 'vow bundle' and a few hundred baht to *a nai nang* on such occasions in order that a truncated version of a *kae bon* ritual be included as part of such entertainments. Even in performances that might be considered as types of liminoid entertainment activity on superficial initial analysis, there is often a concurrent liminal aspect for some participants, as the *nai nang* is primarily regarded as a ritual practitioner, rather than a mere entertainer, by many audience members. The ritual power of *nai nangs* is also considered by many people to be important in providing enjoyable and thought-provoking entertainment. Audiences also view such entertainment from a Buddhist perspective that relates an individual's place in society to fundamental concepts of moral order. Even when Buddhist morality is not a major feature of a story, and may only be referred to in an oblique or humorous manner, many depictions of social action are still understood within a framework of inescapable karmic destiny. Enjoyable performances like the example above may not induce the same level of liminal experience as important family ritual performances. Many members of the audience, however, may experience a stronger engagement with fundamental social and moral issues than a Western audience enjoying a mere entertainment 'commodity'. The individual's point of view is therefore important when distinguishing performances into categories of liminal ritual or liminoid entertainment, as it may be common that various attitudes are present in the minds of participants.

Highly popular entertainers are also often asked to perform *kae bon* votive dedications to spirits in village ritual events. Popularity and entertainment value is therefore not necessarily indicative of a lower degree of ritual efficacy. All performers who have passed through their initiation are qualified ritual practitioners, no matter what their approach in performance.

Crucially, a major factor in methods and content chosen by a contemporary *nai nang* is a commercial one. As townspeople are increasingly a more important audience than villagers, a performer has to adapt to suit changing audience tastes. He has to perform what is popular with the local audience in order to get paid.

> Lots of young people now like drums, modern music, dancing, and movies, that is why *nang talung* uses new music. Now it's business for *rongs* of all types, investors and business for shows. You have adverts on your screen to pay for it, and sell cassettes as well. You don't do conservative style now, you do business style.[21]

■

All photographs by
Paul Dowsey-Magog

Glossary

kae bon	- performance of rewarding the spirits for granting of favour
manora/nora	- Southern Thai dance and poetry performance
phrai	- serfs/slaves
nai	- lords
nang booraan	- Traditional style performance
nang samai	- contemporary style performance
rong	- stage
rusi	- hermit/sage character, usually with magical powers
sak di na	- ancient Thai feudalism/style of rule in the past in Thailand
yaks	- demons

Notes

[1] Perhaps the most accessible lengthy article on Nang Talung is Peter Vandergeest and Paritta Chalermpow-Koanantakool, "The Southern Thai Shadowplay Tradition in Historical Context" Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, (Vol 24/2, September 1993, pp.307-329). See also my "Demons with Mobile Phones: Evolutionary Discourse in Thai Shadow Puppetry" Australasian Drama Studies Focus Issue: Theatre In Southeast Asia, (October 1994, pp.130-145); and my Khao Yam-A Southern Rice Salad: Heteroglossia and Carnival in Nang Talung, The Shadow Theatre of Southern Thailand, (Ph.D. diss., University of Sydney 1996); and Paritta Chalermpow,. A Popular Drama in its Social Context: Nang Talung, The Shadow Theatre of South Thailand, (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University 1980).

[2] For an understanding of 'invented tradition' see for example Hobsbawm, E., and T. Ranger. The Invention of Tradition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983); Hough, B. Working Paper 74. Contemporary Balinese Dance Spectacles as National Ritual. (Melbourne: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University 1992).

[3] Phongphaiboon, S. 1975. Nang Talung. Songkhla, Thailand: Mongkhon Press.

[4] Any representative bibliography on Wayang would be extremely lengthy. Perhaps most well known are James Brandon's On Thrones Of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970); Ward Keeler's Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); and Mary Sabina Zurbuchen, The Language of the Balinese Shadow Theatre (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). Useful studies of other Asian Shadow Play forms include: Amin Sweeney, The Ramayana and the Malay Shadow Play (Kuala Lumpur: National University of Malaya Press, 1972); Theatres D' Ombres: Tradition et Modernit, eds. Stathis Damianakos, and Christine Hemmet (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986)..

[5] Somjetana Muneemonai - a Trang teacher and an expert on Southern Thai culture, quoted in "The Men Of Nang Talung" by Malee Traisawachdichai, The Nation, October 29, 1990.

[6] Interview (in English) with Wira Chuthithong, local villager, now academic, at Nakhon Si Thammarat Teachers' College, 21 May 1993.

[7] Royal Blood, performed by Nang Narong Talungbandit, 15 May 1993, at Wat Thakura, Songkhla Province.

[8] For an extensive discussion of these theorists and the relation of their views to contemporary nang talung, not possible within the scope of this article, readers are directed to my Ph.D dissertation 1996 op cit. For greater elucidation of these theoretical frameworks, also see Bakhtin, M. 1984. Rabelais and His World. (Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University); Handelman, D. 1977. Play and Ritual: Complementary Frames of Meta-Communication. In It's A Funny Thing, Humour. (Edited by A. J. Chapman and A. C. Foot. Oxford: Pergamon); Turner V,1969. The Ritual Process. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul); Turner, 1982. From Ritual To Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play. (New York: PAJ Publications); Turner, 1984. Liminality and the Performative Genres. In Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle. (Edited by J. MacAloon. Philadelphia: ISHI).

[9] Manora, or nora, is a popular Southern Thai form of dance drama based on an ancient story of a bird maiden. There are various performance styles, some of which almost approach a type of 'rap' music, as well as the ancient and extremely ritualised form of nora rong khruu.

[10] Traditional musical instruments include the pii, a double reed, oboe-like flute; the thap, a pair of pear shaped drums; the ching, a pair of small hand cymbals; the mong, a pair of small brass gongs in a wooden box; the krap, a wooden clapper; the klong, a two faced drum; and the saw uu, a double-stringed Chinese-style violin.

[11] For further information on the attempts at standardisation of the Thai language see Anthony Diller's, "Thai Syntax and 'National Grammar'" in Language Sciences: Special Issue- Language Use In Thailand Vol 10/2 (Oxford: Pergamon, 1988) eds. W. Smalley and A.Prasithrathsint; and his "What Makes Central Thai a National Language?" In National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand 1939-1989.(Monash Papers on Southeast Asia No. 25. Clayton, Vic: 1991) ed. C.J. Reynolds.

[12] Interview with Nang Prom Noi at Phattalung, 25 August 1993.

[13] Interview with Nang Liam Chootchuang, Ban Thaa Kem, Amphoe Ranot, Songkhla province, Oct 15 1993.

[14] Interview with Nang Preecha Sawongsin 12 July 1993 at Ron Phibun, Nakhon Si Thammarat province.

[15] Dowsey-Magog, 1994, 1996 op. cit.

[16] Interview with Nang Liam.

[17] Interview with Nang Sunthorn Satringwayarun, at Nakhon Si Thammarat 9 October 1993.

[18] The Sakdi na system, sometimes translated as 'power over fields', ranked all members of the population according to the amount of territorial control allocated to them by the monarch, who retained ultimate ownership of all land in the kingdom. Control of land also implied control of the serfs or slaves, but individual rank and status was, (and in many cases still is) also associated with accumulation of religious merit. For an overview of this type of authoritarian rule see Charles F. Keyes, Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State (London: Westview Press, 1987), pp.27

[19] Interview with Nang Preecha.

[20] Interview with Nang Preecha.

[21] Interview with Nang Sunthorn.

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Previous Publications include:

Review: **Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales.** By Laurie J.Sears.
London: Duke University Press, 1996, in RIMA -Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs March 1997

About Performance 96-Performances East/West Journal of The Centre for Performance Studies, University of Sydney. Editor and Contributor. December 1996.

Khao Yam-A Southern Rice Salad: Heteroglossia and Carnival in *Nang talung* , The Shadow Theatre of Southern Thailand, (Ph.D. diss., University of Sydney 1996)

"Demons with Mobile Phones: Evolutionary Discourse in Thai Puppetry" Australasian Drama Studies Journal October 1994.

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Overland Through Asia, Glide Publications, San Francisco. 1973.