



## How the Ramakian Heritage Survives in Thailand



### Rama fighting with Ravana

From *The Khon* by H.H. Prince Dhaninivat Kromamun Bidyalabh Bridhyakorn and Dhanit Yupho,  
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## How the Ramakian Heritage Survives in Thailand

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### ***Abstract***

The Ramakian, based on the main theme of the Indian Ramayana epic, is a valuable Thai heritage. How it has survived through centuries to the present is not accidental. A literary work of the Ayutthaya period, partly lost during the fall of the kingdom, the Ramakian was recollected and rewritten by several Thai kings to preserve the work for posterity. The main reasons for the survival of the Ramakian are due to King Rama I and his successors' efforts to keep alive the Ramakian as literature, a performing art as well as a fine art. The Ramakian was composed to serve the past and present needs of Thai society: Buddhist, social, and political Thai traditions were woven into the original Indian story that belongs to the Hindu tradition. The Ramakian relates the life of Rama, an ideal king. The story frowns upon treason and other bad practices. The Ramakian is kept alive through literature, performing arts and fine arts. Other countries in Southeast Asia also have their Ramayana stories; having the same tradition serves to encourage friendship and a shared culture between these countries. The present age of globalization may threaten to destroy the Ramakian-Ramayana heritage and we need to find ways to preserve it, perhaps by globalizing it so that its value may be well-accepted by all.

**Key words:** The Ramakian heritage in Thailand

### **How the Ramakian Heritage Survives in Thailand**

#### **Introduction**

The Ramakian is based on the Indian epic Ramayana. Although the Ramayana of Valmiki is its original source, the Ramakian seems to use only the main theme of Rama and Sita, the abduction of Sita and the war with Ravana (Thotsakan) to regain Sita with the help of the monkey army. Possibly Thai poets might have heard the story mainly from Indian traders, but not from Sanskrit scholars. The story-tellers might



have come from different places in India, particularly from east and south India as these people could reach Thailand (Siam) more easily than northern Indians. As a result, some details in the Ramakian are different from those found in the Valmiki's Ramayana. The Maiyarab episode, for example, seems to derive from Kamban's Ramayana written in the Tamil language in South India.

King Rama I's version of the Ramakian relates the complete story of Rama. It has become the standard text and "the most well-known, because it was published more extensively than others. King Rama I's Ramakian seems to suggest that his royal purpose is to collect all the existing stories rather than to use it for dramatic performances" (King Rama VI, 1970: 14). King Rama II's Ramakian, though covering fewer episodes, is more dramatic. As it is composed for drama performances, it is generally used for the performing arts. However, some episodes from King Rama I's Ramakian are also adapted for performances such as the episodes of the Golden Deer and the Abduction of Sita.

The Ramakian also has new episodes not found in the Valmiki's Ramayana such as the Floating Maiden episode. Unlike the Ramayana, the Ramakian has a happy ending. Rama and Sita are reconciled and remarried with the blessings of Lord Shiva, who arranges their grand wedding on Mount Krailat (Kailasa).

In the Valmiki's Ramayana, the story ends differently. Sita declares that if she truly loves Rama and no one else, let Goddess Earth take her to the bowels of the earth. Rama witnesses how Goddess Earth takes Sita in her embrace and disappears below. He grows sad after Sita is gone and eventually, Rama leaves the world and goes to heaven.

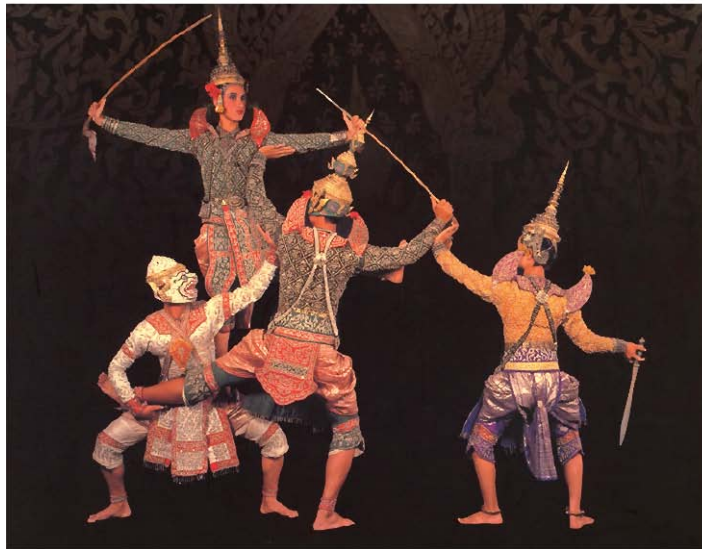
It is a tradition in Thai performing arts not to play one particular episode on stage, the Death of Thotsakan, as it is considered inauspicious. The performance ends when Thotsakan, facing his doom, is kindly told by Rama to go to bid 'farewell' to his loved ones and return to the battlefield the next day. Another episode, the Floating Maiden, is forbidden to be performed for celebrations as it involves the floating corpse of Sita who is in fact a demoness in disguise. However, this episode can be performed as a pure entertainment or at a funeral.

### **A Brief History of the Ramakian**

The Rama story has been known among the Thais since the Sukhothai kingdom (A.D. 1249-1438). The frequent mentions of Rama, Sita, Ravana and other characters



during the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya periods imply that these characters were well-known then. We do not know when exactly the Ramakian started as a performing art in Ayutthaya. From existing evidence, the Nang Yai (shadow play) preceded the Khon (masked dance drama). Nang Yai was known before the reign of King Narai the Great (A.D. 1656-1688) as it was mentioned as a common entertainment during his reign. The Khon performance was also described by M. de L   Loubere, French envoy during King Narai’s reign. Khon at that time must have been “Khon Phak” in which reciters chant a form of poetry. There are also dialogues in the form of “rhythmic prose” or “rai”. (H.H. Prince Dhaninivat and Dhanit Yupho, 2001 : 5). Both recitations and dialogues are called Kham Phak which have survived in fragments. The fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 not only caused a lot of physical destruction but also destroyed a lot of intellectual property. After the establishment of Thonburi as capital, King Taksin composed some episodes of the Ramakian in spite of his preoccupation with warfare. This indicates how important a Thai ruler regarded the Ramakian. It poses the question why this was the case.



**A Khon performance: the fight between Rama and Ravana, with the help of Lakshman and Hanuman.**

From *The Khon* by H.H. Prince Dhaninivat Kromamun Bidyalabh Bridhyakorn and Dhanit Yupho



When Bangkok was established as the capital in 1782, rulers from King Rama I to Rama VI either composed the Ramakian themselves or had the work commissioned by poets. Counting the Ramakian compositions from the Ayutthaya, Thonburi and Bangkok periods, there are more than nine significant compositions of the Ramakian. All are in verse form of various kinds. As already mentioned, the most well-known Ramakian is that of King Rama I. It should be observed also that all the compositions do not entirely follow the Valmiki's Ramayana, except the version of King Rama VI (born 1881, reigned 1910-1925). He knew the Valmiki's Ramayana and tried to keep his Ramakian closer to the original. For example, Phiphek (Vibhishana) in the Ramakian is an astrologer who is not skilled in fighting whereas in the Ramayana, Vibhishana is portrayed as a brave warrior. King Rama VI therefore depicts him in the same way as Valmiki's Ramayana.

Today stage artists at the Fine Arts Department, which looks after the performing arts, usually adapt the text to suit the interest of the audience or rewrite a shorter version to fit within a two-hour performance. Thus the Ramakian has been continually rewritten and adapted.

### **Main Reasons for the Survival of the Ramakian**

As the Ramayana depicts ideals and presents Rama as God Vishnu (Narayana) incarnate, Thai rulers, thinkers and poets value the Ramayana story as it can inspire virtues and loyalty, as well as entertain the people.

The moral code in the Ramayana suits Thai society very well due to its inclusion of such values as respect for ascetics, parents and elders in addition to integrity and gratitude. Rama and his younger brothers strictly keep to this moral code.

Buddhist philosophy fits in very well with the story, for example, when Rama, the eldest son, is to be crowned king, Kaiyakesi, the second queen, intervenes and has him banished for fourteen years. This sudden change of fortune illustrates the Buddhist law of transiency (non-permanence). The downfall of the evil Ravana demonstrates the law of karma (cause and effect).

The constant wars at the beginning of the Bangkok period mirror the constant wars between Rama and Ravana. Thai poets even add more war episodes into the Ramakian to teach caution, daring and war strategies. The victory over the evil enemy serves to encourage soldiers to fight and show bravery.



The cult of the god-king suggested in the Ramayana is stressed in the Ramakian. The king is god incarnate in the same way as Rama is Narayana incarnate in the Ramakian. Although Hanuman is depicted as a very powerful warrior, he is loyal and submissive to Rama. After the end of the war with Thotsakan, Rama rewards Hanuman half the kingdom. However, when Hanuman sits on the throne next to Rama, Hanuman feels feverish and has a headache while his eyes hurt as if they have been pierced by arrows. He then realizes his lowly position and returns the throne to Rama (King Rama I, Book VIII, 1982 : 282).

While his people must be loyal to him, King Rama must be an ideal king. He must rule righteously; be firm and act with caution; ask advice from ministers and show appreciation to those who serve him well. The Ramakian teaches kings as well as warriors and ministers.

The striking feature in the Ramayana as well as the Ramakian is how Rama's younger brothers behave. In history as well as in fiction, brothers often fight each other for the throne. A moving scene in the Ramayana and the Ramakian is when Phrot (Bharata) tries to return the throne to Rama who declines it and insists on going into exile. Lak (Lakshman) loyally goes into battle and fights bravely for Rama, just like King Rama I's younger brother who helped his elder brother fight against the enemy.



**A carved leather figure of Nang Yai: Rama shooting an arrow, riding on a pair of garudas.**

Shadow Play by H.H. Prince Dhanivat Kromamun

Bidyabhb Bridhyakorn



Other equally important virtues are stressed in the Ramakian such as being on the side of righteousness (dharma) like Phiphek; being loyal even though tempted by Thotsakan with wealth and a high position like Hanuman; or like King Malivaraj, listening to both sides and verifying the truth before making a judgement.

However, in the age of capitalism, the greed for gain often blinds people to righteousness, they take the wrong side and think nothing of accepting bribery. Like Thotsakan or Ravana, the powerful believe that ‘might is right’, therefore, the Ramakian is often considered out of date, to be ignored or even jeered at as useless. The work is no longer considered important to read because it is considered of no value or relevance compared to modern technology. Fortunately, various performing arts still perform the Ramakian and also by its depiction through the fine arts, this visual epic can still be appreciated.

If the Ramakian is not read, it can be kept alive through the performing arts such as the ‘shadow play’ which has two kinds, Nang Yai and Nang Talung. The carved leather figures of Nang Yai are bigger and more elaborate than those of Nang Talung.

Khon or masked dance drama is still often performed. In the early period, all the dancers wore masks, but today, only the demons and monkeys do so, while the human characters, such as Rama and Sita, do not. As earlier performers wore masks, they did not speak but gesticulated in dance movements to the songs and recitations. Khon dancers still keep this tradition of not speaking, except for the clowns who also wear masks perched on their foreheads.

Hun Yai which used large puppets, was performed in the Ayutthaya and early Bangkok periods. The puppets are one metre tall and have sixteen strings to make them move. The puppeteer holds the strings while also holding a pole inside the body under the costume, which can be changed. The mask and head-dress can also be removed and replaced to transform the puppet into another character. Hun Yai figures are real works of art and are very costly to make. As the puppets are expensive to build and their movements are not as graceful as the Khon performers which the Hun Yai figures try to imitate, Hun Yai is therefore performed only at royal functions. Hence it is also known as Hun Luang which means “royal puppet.” Now the Hun Yai or Hun Luang figures are displayed in the National Museum of Thailand. Hun Yai is no longer performed but it is the forerunner of Lakhon Lek or Hun Lakhon Lek.



Hun Lek uses small figures which are only 23–44 centimetres tall, and which are manipulated by one person, using sixteen strings. Hun Lek figures were originally made during the period 1877-1885 to perform the Ramakian. They were inspired by Hun Chin from China. Today, Hun Lek is no longer performed and the puppets are preserved and displayed in the National Museum of Thailand .

Hun Krabok is another kind of puppet which uses a small bamboo trunk, called “krabok” in Thai, to hold the body. According to H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the first Hun Krabok troupe originated in Sukhothai province about 1892. Hun Krabok is a half-sized puppet showing the head, hands and costume, but it does not have feet. The puppeteer can use his hands to control the puppet’s movement much more easily than for Hun Yai and Hun Lek. Hun Krabok has performed the Ramakian as well as other dramas right up to the present day.



**Hun Krabok: The Golden Deer and Ravana,  
created by Chakrabhand Posayakrit.**

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Hun Lakhon Lek was inspired by Hun Yai or Hun Luang. Pho Khru Krae Saphthawanich (Guru Krae) was the originator of Hun Lakhon Lek in A.D. 1901. The Hun figure is of the same size (1 metre) as that of Hun Yai. This kind of puppet was at first called Lakhon Lek. The puppeteers formerly hid their hands and bodies behind a screen. Later, when Khru Sakhon Yang Kheo Sot or “Jo Louis” carried on the art, he called it Hun Lakhon Lek which is its name today. Different from Lakhon Lek, the



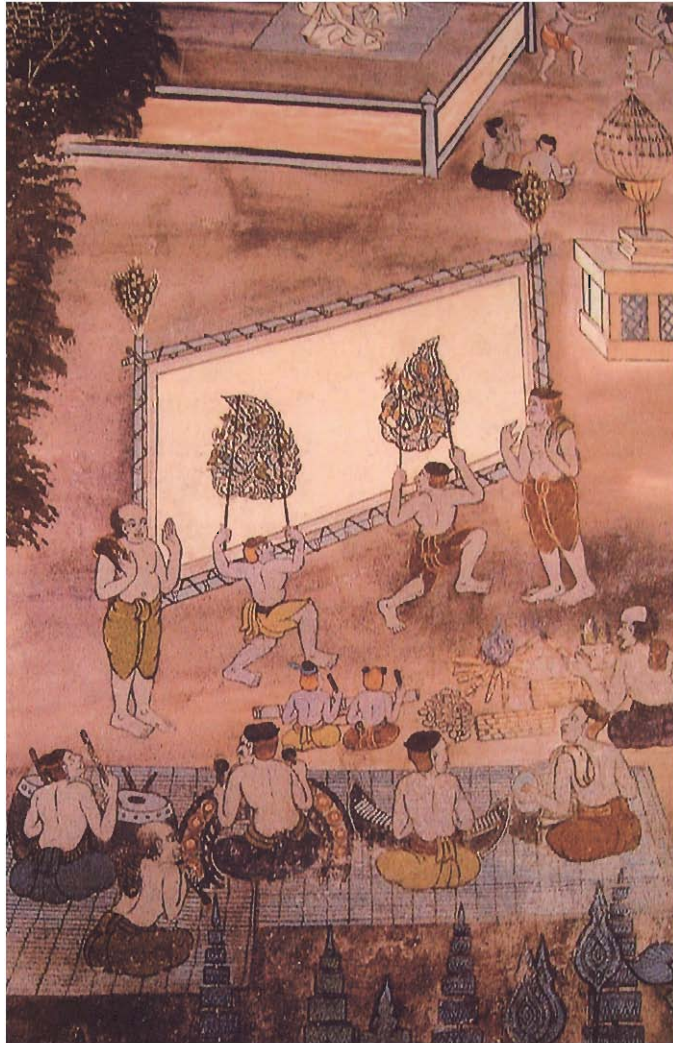


puppeteers dress in black or a dark colour and show themselves to the audience while manipulating the puppets, with their feet also dancing the Khon steps. The audience can see both the puppets and the puppeteers on stage. To make the puppet's movements smooth and lifelike, three puppeteers usually manipulate one Hun Lakhon Lek character; the first puppeteer controls the head and one hand of the puppet; the second puppeteer controls the legs and feet; the third controls the other hand and makes sure both hands synchronize into the correct positions (Funeral Book of Sakhon Yang Kheo Sot, 2007 : 122). The story, the beauty of the Hun figures and the mastery of the puppeteers all contribute to the success of Hun Lakhon Lek, which is now well-known in Asia, Europe and North America. The troupe, organized by Sakhon and later by his sons and students, have won many prestigious international prizes and great recognition.



**Hun Lakhon Lek, performed by “Jo Louis” troupe.**

We should not forget that behind every success from Nang Yai, Khon, Hun Krabok to Hun Lakhon Lek, there must be royal patronage and support as well as dedicated artists. H.M. Queen Sirikit has graciously organised the repair and preservation of Nang Yai figures; the late H.R.H. Princess Galyani Vadhana gave great support to the Hun Lakhon Lek troupe. H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn has also done much in reviving the Thai performing arts as well as the fine arts. Apart from Sakhon already mentioned, the late Seri Wangnaidharm contributed a lot to the tradition of the Khon and Chakrabhand Posayakrit is also endeavouring to promote Hun Krabok, to name just a few artists.



**Mural painting at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, showing a shadow play performance.**

It is essential to support and maintain interest in the Ramakian heritage as a work of art and craft. For example, there are mural paintings of the Ramakian in the galleries of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha; the bas-reliefs depicting episodes from the Ramakian in Wat Pho (Wat Phra Chetuphon); demon statues of the Ramakian characters in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha and Wat Arun (the Temple of Dawn) which all help to keep up the curiosity and fascination for the Ramakian. Some royal barges used in the royal procession for the Kathin and other ceremonies also depict the monkey chiefs such as Hanuman, Nilaphat, Phali (Vali) and Sukhrip (Sugriva) as bow-figures.



**The figurehead of the royal barge depicting Hanuman.**

Calendar 2004, The Post Public Company Limited.

It should be observed that many nations in Southeast Asia: Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Malaysia, apart from Thailand, also have their Ramayana heritage. Thailand occasionally invites these countries to send their troupes to perform in Thailand, for example, on the auspicious occasion of His Majesty the King's 60th Birthday. Sharing the same tradition and culture serves as a bridge of friendship. It helps create good understanding and fraternity that can go above and beyond politics. The preservation of the Ramayana-Ramakian heritage could be even more successful if all Asian nations combined their efforts to preserve this precious art form.

The present age of globalization may bring in novelties that make the Thais forget their own valuable heritage and replace it with a foreign one. However, globalization can also help spread the Ramakian heritage into the world. For example, globalization brings tourists from all over the world into Thailand. It is the responsibility of the Tourist Authority of Thailand to help promote and highlight the Ramakian heritage. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs can also help to globalize the Ramakian heritage. For example, the Khon performance on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations between Thailand and India in New Delhi in 2007 showed the similarities and differences between the Ramayana and the Ramakian and promoted the culture of both nations.

Young generations who are encouraged to learn how to perform Khon, Nang Yai, Hun Krabok and Hun Lakhon Lek should also receive funds to go to perform abroad. A wonderful example of the Thais carrying on their Ramakian tradition was during the royal cremation of Her Royal Highness Princess Galyani Vadhana in November 2008,



when Khon performances took place at Sanam Luang. However the Ramakian can be performed for all occasions. The important message of this special story is that the fight between good and evil always results in the victory of the good, a message which should be known worldwide.

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