



King Rama VI's Promotion of Khon and Drama in General

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Abstract

King Rama VI of the Chakri dynasty had great interest in the Ramakien and dramas in general. He composed a few episodes of the Ramakien, many modern dramas, essays as well as translated or adapted Western and Indian plays to present to the Thai audience. His Ramakien kept closer to the original story of the Valmiki Ramayana. His promotion of Khon and dramas helped preserve the valuable Thai heritage. After his demise, the promotion was discontinued because of the government's financial problem. It was later revived. Queen Sirikit, through the SUPPORT Foundation, has carried on the Khon promotion as can be seen in the 'Khon Somdet' at Thailand Cultural Centre.

Keywords: King Rama VI, Khon, drama

Introduction

King Rama VI, also called King Vajiravudh, is the sixth king of the Chakri dynasty. His great interest in the Ramayana, known as the Ramakien in Thailand, caused him to start the tradition of posthumously calling the kings of the Chakri dynasty before him 'Rama', the first king being Rama I, and he himself Rama VI. Our present King Bhumibol is Rama IX.

King Rama VI was very interested in Thai literature as well as world literature. He composed various kinds of literary works in prose and verse. These are poems, dramas, short stories, essays, translations and adaptations of plays from abroad, including the plays of William Shakespeare from England, Molière from France and Kalidas from India. He was also interested in the performing arts and acted in many Khon and drama performances. Although he died at the age of forty-six, he composed

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well over seventy literary works. He was consequently bestowed the title “Somdet Phra Maha Dhiraraj Chao” which means “The Great Scholar King”. by the Thai people. His promotion of Khon and drama in general is still very beneficial to the Thai performing arts and the preservation of Thai heritage to this day.

The Ramakien and Khon Performance

Although Nang, or the shadow play, also performs the Ramakien, it performs other dramas as well. The scope of Nang is rather limited as it uses leather figures already drawn up in fixed positions. Performers can only show their excellence in moving around the stage and in the recitations that accompany the movement. On the other hand, Khon or masked dance drama can show limitless art forms such as dancing, singing, acting, mask-making, costume-making, stage props, accompanying music and many other special effects. Above all, Khon makes the Ramakien literature come alive, well appreciated, entertaining as well as offering deep Buddhist moral thoughts and practical guidance on how to lead a worthy life.

The Ramakien, though based on the Indian Ramayana, has become part of the Thai heritage since the Ayutthaya (Ayudhya) period 1351-1767. Some of the Ramakien Kham Phak, or Dialogues, used as recitations in Khon performances survive from the Ayutthaya period, for example, the episodes of Sammanakha up to the fall of Kumbhakarna (Sathirakoses, 1972: 250). There are also other literary works connected with the Ramakien such as the long poem *Bali Teaches His Younger Brother*, attributed to King Narai Maharaj of Ayutthaya (Plueng Na Nagara, 1974: 114-115). King Taksin of Thonburi also composed many episodes of the Ramakien in Klon verse form which were divided into four volumes. King Rama I composed, in Klon verse form, the complete story of the Ramakien, including the episodes not found in the Indian epic Ramayana, such as the Episode of the Floating Maiden (Nang Loi), and that of the Second Wedding between Rama and Sita, Presided by Lord Shiva on Mount Krailas (Kailasa), his heavenly abode. King Rama II also composed many episodes which are lauded as dramatic and suitable for Khon performances. King Rama III commissioned five poets to write Khlong verses, describing the reliefs depicting the story of the Ramakien in the Chetuphon (Jetuvana) Temple. King Rama IV composed the Episode of Rama in Exile in Klon verse form. King Rama V composed 224 of the Khlong



verses, out of the entire 4,984 verses, which describe the mural paintings of the Ramakien, which fill the wall of the gallery in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. The royal tradition of composing the Ramakien was carried on by King Rama VI, who also composed episodes of the Ramakien, as well as promoted and acted in many Khon performances himself.



Figure 1: King Rama VI
By Courtesy of the National Archives

King Rama VI's Ramakien

Being a scholar of world literature, King Rama VI (1880–1925) knew the Indian Ramayana of Valmiki, and based his Ramakien episodes upon it. He named the characters after those of Valmiki, or as close to those in the Valmiki Ramayana as possible in the Thai tongue. For example, Rama's brother, whose name is Lak in the earlier Ramakien, is called Laksmana in King Rama VI's Ramakien. Ravana's sister, called Sammanakha in the earlier Ramakien, is called Surapanakha in King Rama VI's



Ramakien. The character of Ravana's younger brother, who joins Rama's side, is called Bibhesana in King Rama VI's Ramakien. This character is known as Bibhek in the earlier Ramakien. Bibhek is an astrologer and a timid character who is afraid of Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Indrajita. However, King Rama VI depicted him as a brave warrior in the same way he is depicted in the Valmiki Ramayana. Bibhesana is righteous and he is afraid of no one.

King Rama VI composed the following episodes of the Ramakien (King Rama VI, 1959)

Losing Sita, Part I : Surapanakha's Jealousy

 Part II : Catching the Golden Deer

The Burning of Longka

Bibhesana Driven out of Longka

Building the Causeway to Longka Part I and Part II

Wars with Longka (in three parts)

 Part I : Sukasaran in Disguise

 Part II : Sugriva Breaks the Royal Umbrella

 Part III: Angad Delivers Rama's Message

Nagapasa (The Arrows of Naga)

In the introduction of King Rama VI's Ramakien, the king clearly explains his purpose for composing the Ramakien; that it was meant only for performing Khon. Accordingly, each episode contains texts for singing, recitations, as well as dialogues, making it more suitable for performance rather than for pure reading. King Rama VI said that he did not wish to compete with the former royal compositions which he could never match (Rama VI, 1959: p.a).

King Rama VI's promotion of Khon

Although Khon had been performed regularly before King Rama VI's time, it was formerly a court ritual or court entertainment, not meant for the general public. Originally, Khon performance was called "Kan Len Duek Dam Ban" (Kan Len means 'performance', Duek Dam Ban means 'ancient') It was performed in the Indrabhisek Ceremony which is the re-enactment of "the churning of the ocean" to obtain the sacred drink that gives immortality. The Devas (gods) and Asuras (divine evil beings) unite their efforts to churn the cosmic ocean, using a mountain bound by a giant naga to



produce the ambrosia. During the Ayutthaya period, performers were dressed up as Devas and Asuras. There were also the gods : Shiva, Narayana, Indra and Visvakarma. Some monkey characters were also in the performance. It was not known how these characters were dressed and performed, or how different they were from the present day Khon. However, Khon has greatly developed during the Rattanakosin (Bangkok) period.

There have been many types of Khon performances: (1) open air on the ground, (2) open air on a raised platform or stage, (3) Khon in front of a screen for shadow play (Nang Yai) that precedes the Khon performance, (4) Khon Rong Nai which performs like the court drama. i.e. more refined, and (5) Khon divided into scenes as in modern plays. This last one is called Khon Chak and it began in the reign of King Rama V.

King Rama V appointed Phraya Devesvongsavivat (Mom Rajavongs Lan Kunjara) Director of Krom Mahorasob and Hun (Department of the Performing Arts). There were many artists who taught and passed on the knowledge of the performing arts and music down to the reign of King Rama VI. The Crown Prince Vajiravudh, who later became King Rama VI, was fond of all kinds of arts including Khon. At Saranrom Palace where he resided, he promoted the art of Khon.

The Crown Prince selected good Khon teachers from the Department of the Performing Arts to train Khon performers. There were outstanding teachers such as Khun Rabam Phasa (Thongbai Suvarnabharat) who trained the Yaksa characters. He was later promoted and given the title of Phraya Brahmabhibal. Another teacher was Khun Natakanuraksa (Thongdi Suvarnabharat) who was later promoted to Phraya Natakanuraksa. He trained the male and female human characters. Khun Phamnaknatnikon (Puem Sugrivaka), teacher of the monkey characters, was later promoted to Phra Phamnaknatnikon (Dhanit Yupo, 1995: 78).



Figure 2: Phraya Brahmabhibal (Thongbai Suvarnabharat)



Figure 3: Phraya Brahmabhibal (Thongbai Suvarnabharat) playing Dasakantha
By Courtesy of Vajiravudhanusorn Library



These teachers trained men to be Khon performers. The Crown Prince's troupe was known as "Amateur Khon" (Khon Samak Len). Members of this troupe were made up of princes, sons of high-ranking officials, and the Crown Prince's pages who volunteered to be trained as Khon performers. The Crown Prince himself acted in some Khon performances. He also directed the Khon performances of his Amateur Khon Troupe.



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ดอนพระรามดินดง

Figure 4: King Rama VI and His Royal Consort, Queen Indrasaktisachi,

Performing the Khon episode: Phra Ram roaming the forest

By Courtesy of Vajiravudhanusorn Library

Important Points of Khon Promotion by King Rama VI

King Rama VI introduced the Thai people to the idea of the universality of the Indian epic Ramayana and that the Ramakien derived its origin from the Ramayana. However, Thai poets added a Thai flavour to the story and did not keep strictly to the original Valmiki Ramayana. To prove his point, he presented Bibhek, whom he called Bibhesana, as a courageous Yaksa who fought for righteousness in his Ramakien



Episode of Bibhesana Driven out of Longka (Rama VI, 1959: 53-74).

In the Episode of Building the Causeway to Longka Part I and II, the story is closer to that of Valmiki. There is no quarrel between Nilabad and Hanuman, and the scene of Dasakantha's (Ravana's) mermaid daughter being sent to order her followers to carry away the stones, does not occur.

King Rama VI's Ramakien is written like a play script ready for performance. There are dialogues, songs, and recitations with detailed instructions. There is also an instruction when to add a comic relief to make the performance more fun and give the main performers time to rest. The king was a playwright-cum-director. The following translation can illustrate his method of composition.

From the Episode 'Nagapasa' (Rama VI, 1959: 150-151)

- ◎ Then the she-demon Trijata
Consoled Sita, the beauteous princess,
"Be not so sorrowful, Dear Princess.
Rama, your beloved husband,
Is not dead and gone as you presume.
Pitying you, I shall tell you the truth.
Any woman whose husband is dead,
The poor hapless widow filled with grief,
Sitting in this magic golden carriage,
Can never make it fly up in the sky.
Please study Lord Rama carefully.
His fine complexion looks like that
Of a sleeper, his mouth appears to smile.
Do look closely at him."
- ◎ When graceful Princess Sita
Heard Trijata's words, she understood,
Became less sad, and ceased sobbing.
She paid respect to Lord Rama,
And wished him victory in the war:
"May you beat enemies in all directions."



Then she returned in the golden carriage,
Flying over the city battlements.

Cheud (Action Song)

Dialogues

◎ Bibhesana the Chief went searching. He brought back all the monkey troopers who went hiding because they were afraid of the power of the Nagapasa Arrow. The chief demon looked for them, calmed them down, and persuaded them to leave the forest. The monkeys returned and reorganized into divisions. After a careful inspection, the royal demon led them back to form the army.

Cheud

◎ The monkeys that guarded the two princes, Rama and Laksmana, were frightened when they saw Bibhesana, mistaking him for Indrajita returning to capture their royal masters to be taken to Longka City. They ran to inform Sugriva, the Vanara Chief, saying,

“The foe is back, we shall be doomed today”

◎ The Vanara Chief Sugriva became angry. He shouted, “How can you be so terrified! That’s Bibhesana returning. Stop being frantic.”

(Comic relief as seems suitable)

As can be seen from the above excerpt, King Rama VI’s Ramakien composition is ready for performance. He wrote it like a modern playwright, yet kept to the necessary tradition of Khon. Besides the Ramakien, he wrote many other plays and had them performed regularly during his lifetime.

Other Dramas by King Rama VI

King Rama VI was fond of drama. He wrote many types of drama and his effort has popularized drama, especially the modern type like that of the West, in Thailand. When he returned from studying abroad early in 1902, he set up the Taweepanya club. He was then the Crown Prince, residing in Saranrom palace. He wrote his first play “Som Po Som Luk” and staged it at Taweepanya theatre in the palace grounds on March 20, 1904. This makeshift theatre of one hundred seats was fully built in 1906.



Another theatre established by King Rama VI was Suan Misakawan Theatre, a standard theatre where operas and all types of drama could be staged (Poonpit Amatyakul, 2011: 3). King Rama VI continued writing plays after he became king in 1910 and continued right to the end of his reign.

As a result, his dramatic contribution to Thai performing arts has helped establish the love for theatre, both traditional and modern among the Thai people. He wrote operas, plays in verse and prose. He also selected some Western plays to translate into Thai. These are Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *As You Like It*. He adapted *Othello* into an opera in Thai, under a new title "Phraya Rajbangsan." Besides Shakespeare's plays, he also adapted some other English and French plays. His adaptation of Molière's *Le médecin malgré lui* into a Thai play has retained the craftiness, wit and comedy of the French original, although the characters have acquired a Thai quality as well as being given Thai names. King Rama VI also looked east. He translated Kalidas' *Shakuntala* into Thai. This Indian classical drama has become quite well-known internationally and it has been translated into so many languages, including English, French and German. King Rama VI's adaptation and translation of foreign plays show his intention of bringing some world literature to the attention of the Thai people.

King Rama VI also composed dramas of many kinds himself. His creativity is amazing, considering he did not have much free time. He had to oversee government affairs and closely watch world political situation. The First World War (1914-1918) occurred during his reign. Nationalism was the universal sentiment of the time. Indeed many of his works, both dramas and essays, reflected nationalism. For example, *Phra Ruang*, *Mahatma*, *Hua Chai Nak Rop* (The Warrior's Heart) are his most patriotic plays. *Phra Boromrajowat Sua Pa* (A Collection of His Royal Addresses to the Wild Tigers Corps) reflects his attempt to teach the Thai people to love and to sacrifice for the sake of their country. Some of his patriotic poems are still recited and quoted to the present day. They are very moving as well as lyrical.



Figure 5: Phra Rung: a patriotic drama

By Courtesy of the National Archives

As clearly seen, King Rama VI contributed greatly to both Thai literature and the performing arts from the time he was the Crown Prince of Siam and during his reign as King of Siam. His setting up of the Taweepanya club and later on the Wannakhadi Samoson (Literature Club) helped promote both the performing arts and literature in Thailand. The art of Khon, drama and music flourished during his time as never before. It was the first time that artists, especially of Khon, were granted nobility and were highly respected in society. They were given lodgings built especially for them in or near the palace. Musicians of traditional music and modern music also enjoyed support. A special school was set up for the teaching of the performing arts. Offspring of officials could be sent to this school where they learned to become artistes as well as well-educated persons. For they also studied knowledge as taught in normal schools. It was King Rama VI's opinion to have them trained in formal education as well as in the performing arts, so that both kinds of knowledge would enrich each other and make the students more outstanding as individuals (Dhanit Yupo, 1995: 91). It is a pity, however, that after King Rama VI passed away, this kind of support for performing arts stopped abruptly. It was considered too costly for the country when it suffered financial troubles during the reign of King Rama VII. The Department of the Performing Arts was dissolved. Artistes had to leave their



lodgings formerly provided by the Palace. Some of the performing arts objects, such as Khon masks, were left unattended and lost. The property of the Department of the Performing Arts, for example, masks, headdresses, and costumes for Khon and Lakhon, were turned over to the National Museum, and it was subsequently left to the curator to keep or sell them as seemed fit.

However, the Minister of the Palace Affairs at that time tried to find means to preserve the performing arts for posterity. A year after King Rama VI's demise, the minister kept the cost down by keeping fewer artistes and lowering their salaries, or placing some in other departments, so that they could earn their living and keep alive the knowledge of the performing arts. By the end of 1926, a Division of the Performing Arts was established. In 1935 this division moved from the Ministry of Palace Affairs to become part of the Department of Fine Arts (Krom Silpakorn) in the Ministry of Education. The School of Nataduriyangasastra (School of Drama and Music) which was set up in 1934 welcomed the artistes from the Division of the Performing Arts to teach in the school. In this way the performing arts, including Khon and Lakhon, have been carried on and flourished up to now.

During the present reign of King Rama IX, thanks to royal patronage, especially that of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit and that of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the traditional performing arts of Thailand have been well supported and cherished as one branch of the precious Thai national heritage. Her Majesty the Queen has paid much attention to Nang Yai and Khon, while Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn has extended her interest into Thai traditional music. The Princess plays the Ranat (Thai xylophone), the So (Thai violin) and sings Thai traditional songs. Her performances for the public encourage young Thais to learn and perform Thai traditional music.



Figure 6: Her Majesty the Queen at Khon Performance organized by the SUPPORT Foundation
By Courtesy of the SUPPORT Foundation

Royal support has greatly promoted the Thai traditional performing arts; the Royal Khon Performances at the Thailand Cultural Centre in recent years have been greatly appreciated by both Thai and international audiences. Various great episodes of Khon organized by the SUPPORT Foundation (The Foundation of the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit of Thailand.) were presented: Prommas Episode in 2007 and restaged in 2009, Nang Loi Episode in 2010, The Battle of Maiyarap in 2011, and Jong Tanon Episode (the Building of the Causeway to Longka) in 2012.

The SUPPORT Foundation of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit of Thailand was established in 1976 by Her Majesty to promote supplementary occupations and related techniques for the people in the rural areas who are, by nature and practice, quite skilled in traditional handicrafts. Their excellent craftsmanship has been passed down from generation to generation. Her Majesty has accompanied His Majesty the King on his visits to remote villages in all corners of the kingdom, and she has discovered that the majority of Thai farmers do not earn enough to support themselves, yet they possess extraordinary craftsmanship that should be promoted seriously. This is the main purpose of the SUPPORT Foundation of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit of Thailand.



Figure 7: Phra Ram and Phra Lak on the war chariot

By Courtesy of the SUPPORT Foundation



Figure 8: Dasakantha on the war chariot

By Courtesy of the SUPPORT Foundation



The SUPPORT Foundation plays a great role in upholding and developing handicrafts of Thailand. Moreover, it also helps to promote the performing arts. To illustrate this point, “Her Majesty the Queen has demanded that the newly-made costume of *Khon* would be exquisitely refined and the make-up for the open-faced characters should be improved to meet the modern theatrical standards” (The Royal Khon Performance “Jong Tanon” Programme, 2012: 3). Therefore, SUPPORT has inspired the re-creation of the Khon costumes to the high standards of earlier times while the make-up is modernized. The Khon masters in the Fine Arts Department followed the original story written by King Rama I and Rama II, but adapted the scenes to suit the taste of a contemporary audience, adding special effects to make the story come alive.

If King Rama VI could see how Khon has been developed further, clearly seen in the three great episodes organized by the SUPPORT Foundation, he would be pleased that his promotion of Khon has been continued up to the present day.

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