

THE ORIGINS OF NONTHUK AND THE IMPORTANCE OF HIS MYTH

Manee-pin Phromsuthirak

Nonthuk,¹ in the *Rāmākīan*, the Thai version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is a *yakṣa* or demon who is to be reborn as Thotsakan.² According to the *Rāmākīan* he is an attendant of Śiva and his duty is to wash the feet of all sages and divine visitors to the god. Nonthuk performs his duty diligently but receives a reward unsuitable for his efforts. He is always mocked by Śiva's visitors; some of them find pleasure in patting his head and face; others like to pull his hair on every occasion. This makes him bald and it causes him much shame and anger. He comes to ask for justice from Śiva, saying that his services for the period of ten million years should be rewarded; he asks the god to grant him a diamond finger which will kill anybody at whom it points. Śiva, who is always compassionate and beneficent, consents. The demon who now possesses this magical finger becomes very bold and aggressive, killing all the sages and gods who tease him as they did previously. This agitates Indra very much; he hurriedly goes to seek Śiva's help; Śiva has to ask Viṣṇu to vanquish Nonthuk in order to bring peace back to Heaven. To achieve this, Viṣṇu then turns himself into the form of a very beautiful goddess with whom the demon falls in love at first sight. The goddess demands that Nonthuk imitate her dancing or else she will not accept his love. The demon, enchanted by the goddess's beauty, agrees to do so. The goddess then dances the *theṇ-pha-nom prathom*,³ at the end of which she points at her own lap. Nonthuk, unconscious of what he is doing, follows suit. Crippled, he falls to the ground and is trodden on by Viṣṇu, now in the form of the god with four hands. The demon is so infuriated to find that he has been tricked by Viṣṇu that he mocks the god: 'You have four hands so you can kill me easily. Why do you have to change yourself into a woman's form? Are you afraid of my finger?' Viṣṇu, infuriated, decides on another course of action. He answers the demon:

Not at all. I have to disguise myself as a woman in order to kill you because you are destined to be destroyed by your own lust. However, if you are complaining of having only two hands in this birth, I will grant a boon to you so that you will have ten heads and twenty hands in your next birth. And I will be reborn as a human being with only two hands and still kill you.

He then kills Nonthuk with his trident. (*Rāma* I 1971:56-63). Thus Viṣṇu incarnates himself as Phra Rām, or Rāma, and Nonthuk is reborn as Thotsakan.

Neither Nonthuk nor the myth of his being reincarnated as Rāvāna is found in any Indian version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, yet a very faint link between Nonthuk and Rāvāna can still be traced in a Thai text called the *Nārāi Sīp Pāng*, ('Ten Incarnations of Viṣṇu') (Lū'an Rit 1923; Praphan 1968), in which there is another explanation of how Nonthuk comes to be reborn as Rāvāna with twenty hands. The text narrates:

'After his death, Nonthuk, in the form of a ghost of an uncremated corpse, wanders along the foot of Mount Sumeru.⁴ He performs a penance by making his skull into a fiddle, his backbone into a musical bow, the skin of his head as the covering piece of the fiddle, and the sinews of his body into the strings. He plays the fiddle for Śiva who gives him the boon he wants. 'You will be born of the race of Phrom.⁵ You will have ten heads and twenty hands. You will be able to separate your heart from your body. You will live for one thousand years.' Nonthuk, therefore, is born into the race of Phrom as a son of Lord Latsatīan and of Ratchadā. He is named Thotsakan. (Lu'an Rit 1923: 76-7; Praphan 1968:28,65)).

The prototype of Nonthuk's severe penance in this myth may be traced to a South Indian myth about Rāvāna. A Tamil *purāṇa*, the *Tiruvārāṇicaram*, tells us that Rāvāna tries to uproot Kailāsa; Śiva presses him into Pātāla⁶ with his toe nail; Rāvāna then tears off one of his heads to make the *vīṇā** with it, using the tendons of his forearms for strings, and plays music for Śiva, who is very pleased and gives Rāvāna a *liṅga* he asked for (Shulman 1976:437).

The Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* has the story of Rāvāna being pressed into Pātāla by Śiva with his toe, but no mention is made of Rāvāna's severe penance, which is also absent from the *Rāmākīan*, although it had been adopted by the Thais to be the story of Nonthuk, Rāvāna's ex-incarnation, narrated in the *Nārāi Sīp Pāng*. However, the Thai account of Nonthuk possessing the frightful diamond finger and being charmed and tricked to death by Viṣṇu is not found in the *Tiruvārāṇicaram*. There are two Indian myths of the demon with a death-dealing finger, or rather a death-dealing hand: the one, a Sanskrit version found in the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*⁷, the other a South Indian version related in the Tamil *Kerālatecavaralāru purāṇa*. The myth in the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* goes as follows: The demon Vrka is the son of Sakuni. Advised by the sage Nārada,⁸ he pays homage to Śiva by means of his own body; he burns his flesh on his body as an offering

* The *vīṇā* is the Indian lute. (Ed.)

for the god. On the seventh day, being disheartened at not having obtained sight of the god, he is on the point of cutting off his head with a sharp sword when Śiva comes out of the sacrificial fire and stops him. Śiva, pleased with the devotion of the demon, promises to give him any boon he desires and the sinful demon asks for the following terrifying one: 'May any body on whose head I shall lay my palm perish.' Śiva grants Vṛka what he has asked, whereupon the demon, in order to test the potency of the boon, tries to place his palm on the head of Śiva himself. Śiva, seized with terror in consequence of his own foolish act, runs to Viṣṇu who is in his paradise, Vaikuntha,* for help. Viṣṇu assumes the form of a *brahmacārin*** and plays a trick with the demon; he asks him to test the power of Śiva's boon with himself. The demon Vṛka, bewildered and amazed by the smooth and convincing words of Viṣṇu, places his palm on his own head, and falls down instantly with his head severed like a tree struck by a thunderbolt. (*Bhāgavata purāṇa* 1973:356-58).

It cannot be said for certain that the Thai story of Nonthuk has the Sanskrit version as its prototype since as we have seen, in the latter the motif of the demon being tricked by Viṣṇu in the form of a goddess is lacking, as too is the dancing. On the other hand, the Tamil story of the demon with a dreadful hand might be plausibly considered as the source of the Thai story of Nonthuk because two important motifs of the Thai story can be found in the Tamil myth also: one, the demon's use of a frightful finger as a powerful weapon; the other, the use of dancing as a device to defeat the demon by Viṣṇu assuming the form of a goddess. The Tamil myth of the sinful demon, related in the *Keralatecavaralāru purāṇa*, is noted here in order to attest this suggestion:

Bhāsmāsura (the Ash-Demon) is born of the ashes on the body of Śiva. He is so devoted to the god that the god grants him the boon of having the power to turn to ashes anybody on whose head he places his hand. Bhāsmāsura becomes arrogant because of the boon and hence a threat to the whole world. Viṣṇu changes himself to the form of Mohinī, 'the fascinating woman', and bewitches the demon into imitating the hand-movements of her dance; she puts her hand on her head and the demon follows her, and turns himself to ashes (Shulman 1976:314).

During the many centuries of the expansion of Hindu

* *Vaikuntha* is Viṣṇu's heaven, variously situated in the northern ocean or on the eastern peak of Mt. Meru. (Ed.)

** A *brahmacārin* is a student of Brahmanism. (Ed.)

civilization to South East Asia, a number of classical myths were adopted by the local peoples, but these myths, in the first step, seldom deviate far in any essential point from the original. More significant divergences may be found in the same myths retold by the isolated tribes of India, and in more far-away countries, which often utilize Hindu motifs but transform them into different tales when absorbing them into their non-Hindu ideological frameworks. The Sanskrit story of the demon Vṛka can be said to undergo this process. It is noteworthy that, although the Tamils changed the name of the demon from Vṛka to Bhasmāsura, they still keep the main point of the myth, that of Śiva's inferiority to Viṣṇu. However, some divergences had also occurred. In the Tamil story, Viṣṇu assumes the form of a goddess, not a *brahmacārīn* as in the Sanskrit version, and, closer to the Tamil, both the Thai and the Cambodian accounts describe Viṣṇu taking the form of a goddess to deceive the demon and using dancing as a device to defeat him. But some differences from the Tamil prototype do occur, one being that the frightful hand of the demon has been changed into a dreadful diamond finger. Moreover, there are still some divergences between the Thai and the Cambodian versions. In the Thai story, Viṣṇu kills the demon with his trident, while in the Cambodian account the god uses 'the globe'⁹ for the same purpose. Even more important is that the main point of the Thai tale is the supremacy of Viṣṇu, the most powerful destroyer of the unrighteous, especially of the demons, while the Cambodians emphasize Nonthuk's destructive conceit as an essential subject.

One may argue that the Cambodian story of Nandaka is the prototype of the Thai version, but this seems unlikely because of the dancing tradition. It is well known that South Indian peoples link dancing closely with religion and the dancing part in the myth of Viṣṇu and Bhasmāsura is more probably used by the Tamils to worship the god. Evidence indicates that the Thais adopted this South Indian myth at the same time as they learnt Indian dancing, using the adapted Tamil myth as a story piece for the preliminary dance (see n.3) from the Ayutthayā period onwards, a tradition which has been referred to by King Rama IV (1920:13) in his poetical script for the dance, the *Bot bōek Rū'ang Nārāi Prāp Nonthuk*. The tale of Nandaka has, on the contrary, not been used at all by the Cambodian dancers or actors; hence it is more likely that the Thai story of Nonthuk has its origin in the Tamil myth.

It is apparently the only Hindu myth relating to Thai classical dancing in Thai literature and its existence in Thailand must have preceded that of the myth of Śiva's performance of the Ānandatāṇḍavan dance in front of the assembly hall of Cidambaram¹⁰ or Tīllai - the centre of the universe - narrated in some Tamil *purāṇas*. The story in the Tamil *Koyīl purāṇam* runs as follows: