

## THE ORIGINS OF NONTHUK AND THE IMPORTANCE OF HIS MYTH

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Nonthuk,<sup>1</sup> in the *Rāmākīan*, the Thai version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is a *yakṣa* or demon who is to be reborn as Thotsakan.<sup>2</sup> 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*,<sup>3</sup> 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 Rāvaṇa is found in any Indian version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, yet a very faint link between Nonthuk and Rāvaṇa can still be traced in a Thai text called the *Nārāi Sīp Pāṅg*, ('Ten Incarnations of Viṣṇu') (Lū'an Rit 1923; Praphan 1968), in which there is another explanation of how Nonthuk comes to be reborn as Rāvaṇa 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 Rāvaṇa. A Tamil *purāṇa*, the *Tiruvārāṇicaram*, tells us that Rāvaṇa tries to uproot Kailāsa; Śiva presses him into Pātāla<sup>6</sup> with his toe nail; Rāvaṇa 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 Rāvaṇa a *līṅga* he asked for (Shulman 1976:437).

The Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* has the story of Rāvaṇa being pressed into Pātāla by Śiva with his toe, but no mention is made of Rāvaṇa's severe penance, which is also absent from the *Rāmākīan*, although it had been adopted by the Thais to be the story of Nonthuk, Rāvaṇa's ex-incarnation, narrated in the *Nārāi Sīp Pāṅg*. 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: one, a Sanskrit version found in the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*<sup>7</sup>, the other a South Indian version related in the Tamil *Keraḷatecavaralāru purāṇa*. The myth in the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* goes as follows: The demon Vṛka is the son of Sakuni. Advised by the sage Nārada,<sup>8</sup> he pays homage to Śiva by means of his own body; he burns his flesh on his body as an offering

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\* 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

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\* *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 Bhaśmāsura, 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 *brahmācārīn* 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'<sup>9</sup> 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 Bhaśmāsura 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 Cidambaram<sup>10</sup> or Tīlī - the centre of the universe - narrated in some Tamil *purāṇas*. The story in the Tamil *Koyīl purāṇam* runs as follows:

In the forest of Tāraka dwelt multitudes of heretical ṛṣi, the followers of the Mīmāṃsa\*. Thither proceeded Śiva to confute them. The god was accompanied by Viṣṇu disguised as a beautiful woman, and by Ādiśeṣa, the personified serpent couch of Viṣṇu. The sages at first disputed violently among themselves, but their anger was soon directed against Śiva whom they endeavoured to destroy by means of incantations. A fierce tiger was created in sacrificial fires, and rushed upon the god. Smiling gently, Śiva seized it and, with the nail of his little finger, stripped off its skin and wrapped it about himself like a silken cloth. Undiscouraged, the sages renewed their offerings and produced a monstrous serpent which, however, the god seized and wreathed about his neck like a garland. Then, when Śiva began to dance, there at last rushed upon him a monster in the shape of a malignant dwarf, Muṃḍalaka; the god then pressed the tip of his foot upon the demon and broke the creature's back, leaving it writhed upon the ground. So, his last foe prostrate, Śiva resumed the dance, witnessed by gods and sages. Then Ādiśeṣa should behold the dance again in sacred Tillai. (Rao 1916:235-6).

This dance forms the motif of the South Indian copper images of Naṭarāja, 'Lord of the Dance', described in detail in Rao (1916:236-7). The images are of all sizes, rarely if ever exceeding four feet in total height. (*loc. cit.*).

Some copper images of Śiva Naṭarāja are found in Thailand. Paintings of this motif are also of relevance; most of the details of these fine artistic pieces are similar to the Indian images of Śiva Naṭarāja dancing the Ānandatāṇḍavan on Muṃḍalaka's back. There is also evidence indicating that once upon a time images of Śiva Naṭarāja were popular among the Thais, but they were known as the images of Śiva's vanquishing the demon Mūlākhanī, not as of Śiva Naṭarāja. A reference to the popularity of these images is found in the *Rū'ang Nāng Nopphamāt*, compiled during the early Rattanakosin period (1800-24 A.D.). The text says that during the time of the author there were many images of Parameśvara (i.e. Śiva) treading upon the back of Mūlākhanī. These images were cast either of gold or of nine, or seven, kinds of metal; large images were about five or six *sok* (about 10 feet) high, while small statues were about the size of a monkey's kneecap (just a few inches), and various sizes between these two limits abounded (Nāng Nopphamāt 1925:14).

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\* A school of Hindu philosophy. (Ed.)

The Thai myth of Śīva in the form of Natarāja also differs from the Indian version. In Thai texts the myth loses its main motif, that of the god's supremacy exhibited through his cosmic dance; it is preserved in Thai literature as no more than the myth of his destruction of the demon dwarf Mūlākhanī. The story goes as follows:

Once there was a demon named Mūlākhanī, who was born at the same time as the Earth. He obtained a boon from all three of the gods - Brahma, Śīva and Viṣṇu. Both his eyes become blazing flames. He was very proud of himself, deeming himself greater than all gods and human beings, and, therefore, he persecuted and oppressed the three worlds. All the sages consulted each other about what was to be done and then went to see Śīva, telling him what had happened. Śīva, therefore, went down from Mount Kailāsa in order to wage war with the demon who opened his eyes of fire and caused the fire to encircle the god. Śīva, by means of his divine power, trod on the back of the demon Mūlākhanī; from both his ear-holes he opened the tubes of water and of fire which fell on the head of the demon and deprived him of his power. His eyes of fire were lost forever. Śīva then cursed the demon to become King Phalī<sup>11</sup>, who was to roam about in the world eating offerings made to spirits whenever human beings perform any of their ceremonies; a curse which was to last for a period of one *badra kalpa*\*. Śīva then went back to Kailāsa. (Praphan 1968:39).

It can be seen that the extant Thai myth of Śīva-Mūlākhanī does not contain any dancing episode whatsoever. At the same time, because of the obvious similarities, it is difficult to dismiss the relationship between the demon Mūlākhanī in Hindu mythology and the demon Mūlākhanī in Thai literature as coincidence. The differences between the names of the two demons might easily have been caused by the story being related orally long before it was ever written down; the story has also been changed. The theme of Śīva's taming of the heretical sages of the Tāraka forest is changed to his vanquishing of the malicious demon Mūlākhanī. It is plausible, too, that some parts of the Thai story of Śīva-Mūlākhanī are influenced by the image of Śīva-Natarāja rather than by the original Sanskrit myth. The fire flowing from the ear-holes of the god might

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\* *badra kalpa* 'the beautiful' or 'good' age, and the name of the present one! (Ed.)

have been inspired by the image of the fire in his left hand, and by the circle of fire around the Indian image of Śiva-Naṭarāja, while in some images of him standing on the back of Muṃyālaka, the halo of his braided hair is depicted as flowing out from both sides of his crown and this, too, might have been misunderstood by the Thais to be the fire and water flowing from his ear-holes.

Certainly, in the year 1923, in a Thai book called *Tamrā Fōn Ram* (Treatise of Dancing) published by the Royal Library, the images of Indian Śiva-Naṭarāja, with Śiva dancing on the back of Muṃyālaka, were identified with those of his vanquishing the demon Mūlākhanī (*Tamrā Fōn Ram* 1923:(5)) and the complete version of Śiva's taming of the sages of the Tāraka forest, narrated in the *Koyīl purāṇam*, is also given. Nevertheless, although it is also very similar to that story, it cannot be treated as evidence for the early existence of this Hindu myth in Thailand because the *Tamrā Fōn Ram* does not say definitely whether this myth in particular was transcribed from Thai manuscripts or translated from foreign books. In its introduction, Prince Damrongrāchānuphāp says that the book is compiled from some English books, from Sanskrit manuscripts in the Thai Royal library and from the Thai treatise on dancing (*ibid.*, (8)). The myth might also conceivably have been from stories related in a book on the postures of Śiva's dance as they are carved on the *gopuram*\* of a temple at Cidambaram given to the Thai Royal Library in 1914 (*ibid.*, (9)).

In addition to this, the presentation of the story of Viṣṇu in the form of the goddess vanquishing the demon Nonthuk had been used as the *bot bōek rōng* - the preliminary dance at the opening of the theatre - since the Ayutthayā period. King Rama IV (1920:13) has referred to this tradition explaining that this story began to be performed as the preliminary dance because in this episode, the teachers of the *lakhōn nai*,<sup>12</sup> the dance drama of the Inner Court, were able to show their pupils how to dance various movements supposedly as the 'goddess' Viṣṇu did in the ancient times (*ibid.*, 13). And further, the reason why this story was presented as a preliminary dance in the first place can probably be found in the Indian tradition of dramatic art as prescribed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In the elaborate series of preliminaries (*pūrvaraṅga*) performed before the actual drama begins, one finds the dancers practising their steps (Keith 1924:339). The Indian teachers of dancing must have brought this tradition with them to Thailand and must have taught it too, at which point the main content of the Bhaṣmāsura

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\* *gopuram* is a gateway of a Hindu temple. (Ed.)

myth (i.e. the demon imitating the dance of the god) would have been chosen as the most appropriate piece for the practice. Moreover, it can be said that the main theme of this myth, that Viṣṇu is the almighty god, has been widely favoured by the Thais. This can be attested by the characteristics of the Hindu myths in Thai literature from the Ayutthayā to the Rattanakosin<sup>13</sup> period. Therefore, this myth must have been accepted pleasantly by the Thais to be performed as the preliminary dance in order to pay homage to Viṣṇu.

There is, however, as has already been noted, no certain date for the introduction of Indian dancing to Thailand. In the invocation to him in the *Lilit\* Ōngkān Chaeng Nam*, a work attributed to the 14th century, and which means the sacred exclamation for ritual oath taking, Viṣṇu is described in a passing reference as the god who assumes the form of a woman in order to destroy the demons (*phīru awatān asura lān laeng thak*) (*Lilit Ōngkān* 1974:7). However, what is certain is that this *phīru awatān* (Skt. *bhīru avatāra*), or Viṣṇu's incarnation as a woman, cannot be said to be a reference to the myth of the churning of the ocean like that of the Sanskrit for in that myth Viṣṇu, in the form of Mohinī, does not destroy any demon directly, he only deceives them in order to gain *amṛta*, or the ambrosia water for the benefit of the good! Myths continue to entice.

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\* *lilit* is a Thai combined metrical form. (Ed.)



## NOTES

1. Nonthuk (Skt. *nan-du-ka*) or Nonthok (Skt. *nan-da-ka*) is probably dervied from the Sanskrit Nandi, the Bull of Śiva, since Nonthuk is Śiva's door keeper. This accords well with one of the main characteristics of Nandi, the chamberlain of Śiva.
2. Thotsakan, 'ten-necked' (Skt. *daśakanṭha*) is an epithet for Rāvaṇa, lord of the demons, Rāma's chief opponent.
3. This dance always begins with the movement of *thep-pha-nom* ('a god with folded hands'), which is usually followed by the *prathom* ('preliminary') movement. This second movement may be misleading, making people think that the preceding one is the preliminary whereas the *thep-pha-nom prathom* is actually a dance with various movements.
4. Sumeru, mythically the mountain in the centre of the Hindu world, is submerged in the sea to a depth of eighty-four thousand *yōjanas*, and rises above the sea's surface to that same height, being surrounded by seven mountain ranges. On its summit is Tavatīmsa, heaven of Indra, the most beneficent god of the Buddhists [sic.]. For the Thais, Mount Sumeru is as sacred as Mount Kailāsa is for the Śaivaites. Kailasa, a mountain in the Himalayas, north of Manasa lake, is said to be the site of Śiva's paradise.
5. Skt. *brahma* (masculine). For Thais influenced by the *Rāmakīan*, the race of Rāvaṇa, is called Phrom because in that story the Hindu god Brahmā is the founder of Rāvaṇa's race.
6. Pātāla is the lowest of the seven infernal regions which *nāgas* (highly respected serpent creatures) and all kinds of demons inhabit. For the Thais, it is the world of snakes and of *nāgas* and abounds with valuable treasures.
7. The *Bhāgavata purāna* is a work of great celebrity in India and exercises a more direct and powerful influence upon the opinions and feelings of the people than any other of the *purāṇas*. It is so named because it is dedicated to the glorification of Bhāgavata, or Viṣṇu. The most popular part of this *purāna*, however, is the tenth book, which narrates in detail the history of Kṛṣṇa.

8. A rishi (Skt. *ṛṣi* 'sage') to whom some hymns of the Rigveda are ascribed, he is one of the *prajāpatīs* ('great-fathers') and also one of the seven great rishis; he is the inventor of the *vīṇa*, and the chief of the *gandharvas*, ('heavenly musicians'). Nārada is also the author of a text-book on law called *Nāradeya dharma śāstra*. For the Thais, Nā-rōt (Skt. *Nārada*) is worshipped as a divine music teacher.
  
9. It is a profound tradition of the Cambodians that 'the Earth' (Skt. *bhū*) is one of the objects held in Viṣṇu's hands, a tradition which can be traced back to the seventh century A.D. The symbol of this *bhū* takes on a variety of forms in Cambodian art: a sphere, a disk, a segment of a sphere, or a discus that has been hollowed out. It is likely that 'the globe' in Judith Jacob's translation, which follows, is the same object as this *bhū*.
  
10. Cidambaram is today a town in Tamilnadu. It has been held very sacred by the Śaivaites who call it 'the temple', but was already very famous in the middle of the seventh century A.D. and has always been the seat of activity of Śaiva scholars.
  
11. This Krung Phalī originally derives from the name of the demon King Bali in Viṣṇu's Vamana incarnation in Hindu mythology and must be influenced by the Cambodian Krōn Pāli. (cf. Porée-Maspero 1961). Like the Hindu demon Bali, Krōn Pāli has to yield up his treasure, or the world he created, to a god who is actually the Lord Buddha, not Viṣṇu, as in the Hindu story. But the Cambodians interpolate something: before Krōn Pāli agrees to disown his world, he asks Buddha to let him have offerings given at the beginning of any ceremony and is granted what he requests.
  
12. For more information on *lakhōn nai*, see Damrongrāchānuphāp, Kromphrayā. *Tamnan lakhon inao*. Bangkok: s.n. 1964.
  
13. There are many literary evidences showing that, for the Thais, Viṣṇu is the god of power and might. Two texts of the Ayutthayā period, *Lilit Ōngkān Chaeng Nam* and *Lilit Yūan Phāi* ('the war-loss of the Northerner'), clearly illustrate him as such. The *Rāmakīan*, the most celebrated and sacred Thai epic, and the *Nārāi Sīp Pāng* ('Ten Incarnations of Viṣṇu') are the best examples on this same subject from the Rattanakosin period.

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