Relevance of the Textual and Contextual Analyses in Understanding Folk Performance in Modern Society:

A Case of Southern Thai Shadow Puppet Theatre

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Traditional performing arts have become a matter of concern in many Asian countries. It is generally assumed that rapid social and technological change may affect these arts to the point of extinction, or else they may be forced to change beyond recognition. Using *nang talung*, the puppet theatre of Southern Thailand as a case study, this paper contends that folk performances have always been changing, and to understand such changes as a result of technological factors alone is inadequate. A model suggested here tries to account for the presence of a particular genre of performance as an interaction between the text, defined as the basic structure of a dramatic form, its limitation and potentials for change, and the context, defined as the sociocultural factors which function to create an environment of such performing art. In this way stylistic variations at a particular time can be explained. The paper will first give a brief description of the southern Thai shadow puppet theatre, then accounts for the text in terms of its visual form and form of presentation and for the context in terms of the instructor-entertainer tension, and commercialization of performance. Finally, it shows how the text and the context interact in the styles of two puppeteers.

THE SHADOW PUPPET THEATRE

The shadow puppet theatre, known in Thai as *nang talung*,[1] is one of the traditional folk performances of southern Thailand. It is known in all the provinces in the South, but concentrated on the eastern coast, particularly in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla, and Phatthalung. Material presented in this paper was collected in 1976–77 and 1982

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from the district of Hua Sai, Nakhon Si Thammarat, by closely observing and following the troupe of Nang Prathum, or Mrs. Prathum Somchan.

The performance can be described briefly as follows.[2] *Nang talung* puppet shows are performed by a group of eight to twelve people, one of whom is a puppeteer or *nai nang*, literally master of puppets, who is the leader of the troupe, the others are musical accompaniers. There may be up to two hundred puppeteers all over southern Thailand.[3] Most puppeteers are men from a peasant background with low level of formal education usually up to lower primary grade 4 (prathom 4). The popular ones tend to live in large towns and market towns in the three provinces mentioned above. Musical accompaniers live in nearby villages and gather at the puppeteer's house before a performance. Places of performance are usually some distance away and the group, including the puppets, musical instruments, and other equipment, travel in a converted pick-up van. A theatre is a temporarily built booth of about two meters wide by one and a half meters deep, on four posts of two meters high. The wooden board floor is only large enough for the group to sit on. There are palm-leaved roof and two-sided walls, the back is open, the front covered with a screen made of piece of white sheet (Figs. 1–3).

FIG. 1. Front view of *nang talung* theatre.

FIG. 2. Back view of the theatre, showing the musicians playing *pi* [flute], *so* [fiddle], and drums

FIG. 3. Puppeteer Prathum holding a *rup na bot* figure.

A performance takes place when a person or an institution commissions a puppet troupe to perform. The fee varies according to the distance they have to travel, the popularity of the group and, to a lesser degree, the purpose of performance. The puppeteers will distribute this fee among his musicians according to prearranged rates.

Several occasions call for a performance. In general they fall into two types: household celebrations and commercial fairs. The former consists of ordination, cremation, vow-releasing ceremony, and other merit-making occasions connected with a household. In all these occasions, a well-to-do household sponsors a troupe to perform in order to entertain his guests as well as enhance his reputation in the community. As for commercial fairs, temple committees, district offices, schools, or private promoters organize a fair as a profit-making activity. In this case, a puppet troupe performs as part of the entertainments offered to spectators who pay for tickets to enter the fair ground.

Performances take part in all these occasions as a night-time activity. For household celebrations a puppet show starts around seven to eight o'clock in the evening and goes on until dawn with a one-hour break around midnight. In large fairs where there are several types of competing entertainment a puppet show normally starts at a later time, around midnight or one o'clock when the noises from other shows already subside. Again it continues until dawn. A performance is given by using puppets to depict characters in a story. The narration is rendered in a combination of chanting, speeches, commentaries, jokes, and songs. It is virtually a one man show since all the puppet manipulation and vocalization are given by one puppeteer. *Nang talung* puppets are made of cow's hide which has been dried and flattened. A craftsman uses a special cutter and punches of various shapes and sizes to cut and chisel it into a desired figure, which is then colored and varnished. Finally two pieces of bamboo sticks are tied to the figure, one functioning as a central skeleton for holding it, the other is tied to the moveable arm. For the clowns, both arms and the lower lip can be articulated.

The Textual Analysis

The degree of openness to innovation of an artistic tradition is a crucial factor in deciding the manners in which that tradition adapts itself in new circumstances. In his comparative study of hill-tribal handicrafts in Northern Thailand, Cohen (1983) notes that the *Meo* (*Hmong*) craftsmen have greater freedom in combining basic motifs than those of the *Yao*. When they create new designs for tourist products, the Hmong designs show a greater variety than those of the *Yao*. Com-

parable to the *Meo* products, a theatrical art such as *nang talung* consists of several components: puppets, manipulation techniques, music, poetry, a story which can be combined and recombined. It is impossible to discuss all of them in detail, so they will be arranged in two complexes, the visual form and form of presentation. Although these topics are not exhaustive, they provide a useful frame for the more basic components to be analyzed.

The Visual Form

On comparing old sets of puppets with contemporary ones,[4] several points of similarity and difference stand out. The continuity and change in a hundred years of puppet making and performing will be approached from two perspectives: the technical and the iconographic aspects.

On the technical side, theatrical genres in Thailand are known to be identified by the material and technique involved. *Hun* [a model] is a word for doll puppet show, *nang* [skin] is for hide puppet show. The unique characteristic of a *nang*, albeit *nang yai* (the large-sized puppet show), or *nang talung*, is the use of two-dimensional puppets made of carved and chiseled hide. These flat figures are placed against a white screen illuminated by the light from bonfires (in *nang yai*), an oil lamp, or an electric bulb (in *nang talung*) behind the screen. *Nang yai* puppets are held in front of the screen most of the time, while *nang talung* puppets are always behind the screen. Therefore one can say that, once the term *nang* is used it can be expected that the visual image will be created by shadows or projections on a screen.[5] It appears that once this is fulfilled, a number of technical variations and modifications are allowed. First the type of hide used has been changed. The thick, opaque, home treated hide is replaced by that bought from factories which comes in thin and translucent pieces already treated and flattened. This new hide is used for making most categories of puppets: human kings, princes, ladies, ogres, villagers. A notable exception is that of the clown figures. They are still made of thick hide. The reason why the conventional technology is more appropriate is that the clown figures appear in every performance and are therefore used more frequently than other classes. In addition clown puppets often experience rough handling because of their action-packed role in a play. So the more robust thick hide remains the choice. The availability of artificial dyes enables contemporary puppets to be more colorful. After the thin hide is carved and chiseled, it is painted with ink or other water-based pigments in bright colors. The colors show through clearly, particularly in a strong, unwavering light of a powerful light

bulb which has replaced the traditional oil lamp. The application of bright colors on principal characters is welcomed by puppet-makers and puppeteers because it enhances the regalia on the outfits of the royal characters and distinguishes them more sharply from the black, peasant clowns. Finally, size too can vary. In an ordinary set, puppet heights range from one foot to two and a half feet. Specially large sets which double the normal size have been made and used particularly by Nang Phrom Noi, the most popular puppeteer in the late seventies whose audience, according to one report (Sathit NIYOMYAT 1987, 4) reached thirty thousand people.

On the iconographic aspect, continuity of certain characteristics: composition of a set, basic shape of a figure, and the male-female distinction can be noted. A set consists of one hundred fifty to two hundred puppets which are arranged in groups. Each group represents a certain type of character in a play. These are kings, queens, princes or young men, princesses or young ladies, ogres, village characters such as old villagers, bandits, headmen; minor characters such as hunters, monks; deities and spirits; animals, trees, various stage props; and finally the principal clowns (Figures 4–11). Comparison with older sets shows that this composition follows a long tradition. Most likely it is structured in accordance with typical characters of the Rāmāyaṇa and other folk tales which from the basic repertoire of traditional Thai theatres. Broadly speaking, for the groups that represent traditional royal characters, new elements are introduced only in the form of change of decorative motifs such as outfit, hairstyle, ornaments. In the villagers and commoners groups, new puppets can easily be invented. So one may find bandits in cowboy outfits, military officers, gangsters, singers, dancers, and many other modern looking puppets.

A closer examination of puppets both traditional and modern, from the old and contemporary sets, shows persistence of a unique body outline. The characteristic shape of the body is similar to that of an S figure, consisting of the thrust forward chest, small waist, and accentuated hip. The upper part down to the waist of the body is in full view (or almost); from the waist down the body is twisted somehow so as to show the side view of hip and legs. The legs are in a walking position, except the ogre's leg which sticks up to represent a flying pose. In the older sets of puppets, the distinction between male and female faces is very obvious. The male heads are always presented in profile while the female are almost in full view. This distinction is retained to a large extent in the contemporary puppets. Those that depict kings, queens, princes, princesses, male and female ogres, and most of the supporting characters are presented as described above. Overall one

FIG. 4. A queen and a king.

FIG. 5. A traditional style princess.

can say that the characteristic S shape and the male-female distinction have been modified only little. Some contemporary figures may look more straigthened up but the basic structure has not been challenged.

While the traditional outline is strongly preserved, other parts of the body—hairstyle, costume, decorative elements—are subject to considerable modifications. The heroes, for example, appear in three

FIG. 6. Princesses or ladies.

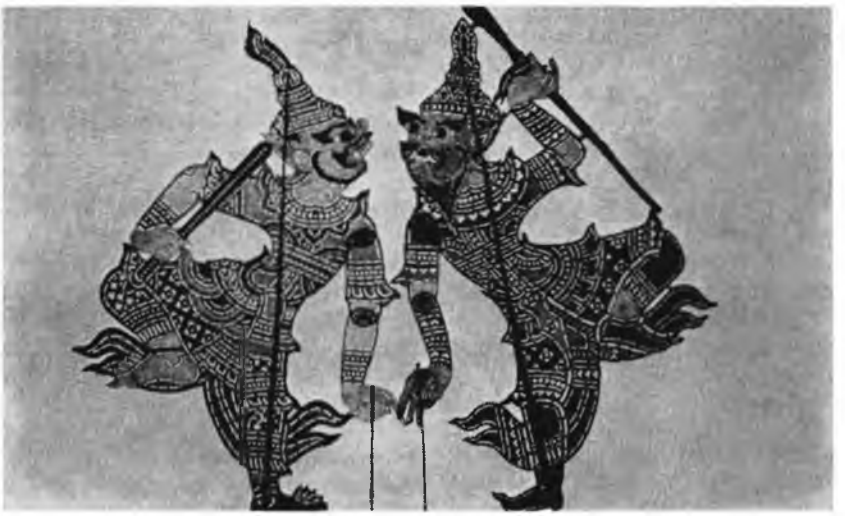

FIG. 7. Ogre kings.

styles of costume: traditional style, *li-ke* style, and modern style. The traditional style shows the headdress, and traditional dance-drama costume. The *li-ke* style, whose name is derived from a genre of popular drama, is less ornamented. The heroines' hairstyles and costumes appear to be an area where puppet makers enjoy catching up with the latest fashion most.

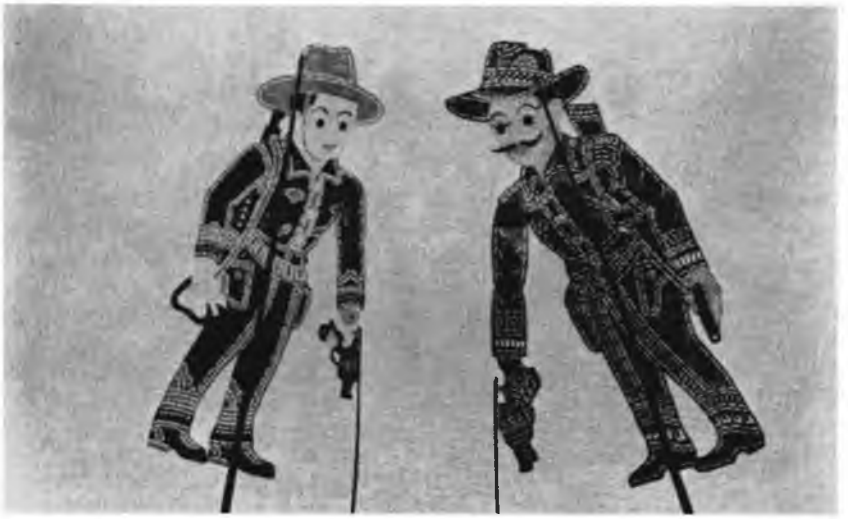

FIG. 8. Bandits.

FIG. 9. A rich man and a military officer.

The above observation of puppet manufacturing, image-making technique, and icononography shows that while certain elements such as the use of hide, composition of a set, and basic body structure have continued, other areas are allowed to be affected by technological inventions and cultural change. So there is room, as far as the visual form is concerned, for *nang talung*, to adapt itself to meet contemporary

FIG. 10. Clowns Nu Nui and Theng

FIG. 11. Clowns Thong and Kaew.

requirements. A similar pattern is found in the next section—the presentation.

THE PRESENTATION

Performances consist of two major parts: the ritual and the dramatic. The first one occurs at the beginning of all performances and consists of

a series of short episodes in the following order.

rusi Figure of a hermit is placed on the screen and danced to the music. This style of articulation is described as an imitation of an old man walking and flying.

Shiva Figure of a deity riding a black bull, referred to simply as the " bull figure " and interpreted as the figure of *Phra Isuan*, a Thai name for *Shiva*. The bull figure is articulated to the rhythm of the music.

In the middle of these two episodes there is a pause during which the puppeteer recites some magical formula silently.

rup na bot This is a figure of a young man holding a lotus flower in his hand. It is described as a symbol of the puppeteer showing his gratitude to many people such as his parents, his master, his host. There is little manipulation in this episode except occasional gestures of paying respect. During this episode the puppeteer chants a long poem in which he lists the names of people to whom he is grateful.

rup bok rueng The final figure of the series is a clown, typically Kaew, but other clowns can also be used. There is neither chanting nor manipulating. The figure greets his audience and announces the title of the play.

The above is a set series of episodes which together form the opening ritual of a performance. Observations of some fifty performances show no case of a puppeteer altering the form, the sequence, or the style of manipulation and chanting. What can be altered is the duration which is shortened by some puppeteers, especially the younger ones. But it is evident that over a long period of time certain episodes can be omitted. Old puppeteers and spectators can recall certain episodes, such as the monkey episode, which have been dropped in all normal present day performances. They also say that the articulation used to be longer and more sophisticated. However, what can be said is that, comparatively speaking, the ritual part is much less dynamic than the dramatic part.

This second part has seen a great deal of modifications. It is said by many puppeteers and informants that in the past *nang talung* performed the *Ramakian* (Thai version of the Rāmāyaṇa) story. In 1976–77 however, no *Ramakian* episode was performed although its influences can still be felt. Present day stories are made up by puppeteers out of themes from various sources: the *Ramakian*, Jataka tales, folktales, as

well as modern mass media. Modern stories may resemble scenes from movies, showing villains in cowboy outfits or girls in miniskirts. Characters in traditional stories are typically princes, princesses, ogres, hermits, whereas in modern stories they are district officers, school-teachers, rich merchants; even presidents and army generals appear in some performances. The settings also change from palaces, forests, and hermitages to villages and towns. It should be noted, however, that the distinction between traditional and modern stories is not clear-cut. Most stories alternate between both settings with various degrees of emphasis. So characters and settings can be adapted to make them more contemporary. New themes have been included too. Traditional stories often tell of adventures of princes and princesses—they leave the court to study with a hermit, they receive some magical weapons or formula, they are captured by ogres, they seduce ogre princesses. Modern ones are concerned with village life, conflict between poor villagers and rich influential merchants, conflict between good and bad sons.

While there is room for adjusting to current situation in the form of characters and themes, detailed comparison of all types of stories performed indicates that they share some common narrative structure. One well-known method for analyzing folktale morphology is that of PROPP (1968). His model has been applied to *nang talung* stories with limited success (CHALERMPOW 1981, 199–240). There is no space here to present the analysis in details. Suffice it to say that PROPP's functions do not fit actions in *nang talung* stories precisely. Nevertheless the exercise reveals that all *nang talung* tales share a common structural pattern at a broad level. Events can be seen as forming a chronology consisting of three parts: the initial complication, the adventurous middle part, and the final crisis. The initial complication in traditional stories often takes a form of a departure, an abduction, or an eviction of an innocent person. The adventures consist of such events as transference, acquisition of help, courtship, unrecognized encounter, temporary reunion, misfortunes. The final part is the development of a crisis which is always unsolved, such as a hero in danger, a quarrel between co-wives, or a fight. In modern stories, the initial part may be an arrival of a selfish merchant in a village. His evil plan then triggers a series of actions that follow. In addition to the structural pattern, two more peculiar characteristics of *nang talung* stories persist. The first is the appearance of several principal characters whose adventures we are to follow simultaneously. Some of them are connected by blood or marriage, often unbeknownst to themselves. Each scene change is a switch from one character to another. While these pro-

tagonists may meet each other and go away in the course of the story, there is a common assumption that finally they will all be reunited. Such grand finale, however, is never reached by any performance. This forms the second characteristic of these tales. As has been mentioned earlier, a performance invariably ends in a commotion, a quarrel, a fight —in brief, an unresolved crisis. This ending has the same function as familiar " cliff-hanging " scenes in serialized novels which keep the readers waiting auxiously for the next issue. Some puppeteers explain that a performance in the old days lasted several nights and such a dramatic device was employed to keep up the audience's enthusiasm. Such device appears to have persisted into present day performances even though they are scheduled to perform only for one night.

Having considered the ritual and the dramatic sections of a performance, it seems appropriate at this point to take a brief look at the narrative modes employed, and observe the area into which innovation can take place. Narrations falls into three modes: verse, dialogue, and clowns speech which includes songs and jokes. A typical scene begins with a chanting of one or two stanzas describing the physical and moral circumstances of the characters involved in that scene. Then comes a dialogue between the principal characters, conducted in the central Thai language. In between, more chanting may be heard such as admiring flowering trees in the forest, lamenting the loss of a loved one, each rendered in specific poetic composition and tune. Next is the elaboration of the previous dialogue but this time in the southern Thai dialect, through the voices of the clowns who join in to give comments and crack jokes. The scene is closed by another chanting and music which leads on to the next scene.

These modes of narrative presentation and the sequence described are preserved in present-day performances to a large extent, although it is commonly agreed that the emphasis is placed more and more on conversation rather than chanting.

It is evident that a great deal of improvisation is at work in dialogues and jokes. They function together as a channel for the puppeteer to communicate directly with his audience, and most importantly in their mother-tongue. Thus it is of no surprise that this part is exploited to the full to reflect on national and local current issues. In one story, for instance, a clown joked about a certain abbot whose dubious conduct was widely known and criticized in the district. Many stories performed during M. R. Kukrit Pramoj's administration made fun of how his rural development fund found its way into the pockets of many local-level government officials. The style of humor can also be tailor-made to suit the audience's taste. Some puppeteers report that their

jokes for the uneducated villagers and those for the sophisticated townsmen are purposely made to differ. The distinction between the simple and the sophisticated is often referred, to although in practice village performances and town performances of the same story by the same puppeteer can be identical.

The above analysis of the formal aspects of *nang talung* suggests that already inherent in this performing art is a considerable degree of dynamics. There is room of different kinds that can be manipulated to meet the requirements of the changing social environment. At the same time there is a continuity of some basic structures that make it unique. Two factors have contributed to such characteristics of *nang talung*. One is the fact that it has always been operated in an oral tradition. Playscripts have been written down only recently. All along there has been no codification in written form, no development of a formal organization such as a school or a system of patrons that might have functioned to control or steer performances in any one direction. A second factor is the fact that *nang talung* is, to a large extent, a one person activity. Except for the help of the musical accompaniers, puppeteers perform independently of any other performers. They manage their troupes, make up stories, manipulate puppets, and perform all by themselves. So puppeteers enjoy a relatively high degree of freedom to control and manipulate their art.

While artistic forms can be and have been manipulated, the question remains as to why certain performers present their performances in a certain way. The problem cannot be fully understood in terms of personal preference alone. The contention is that analyses of some relevant social structural factors can offer a fruitful perspective for approaching this problem. The paper will focus on two such factors: the instructor-entertainer tension and the commercialization of performance.

The Instructor-Entertainer Tension

The perception of a performer of his relationship to his community has an important consequence on the manner by which he designs his performance. In the case of *nai nang*, his role can be seen as embedded in the tension between being an instructor and being an entertainer. On the one hand puppeteers, especially the ones who have trained several pupils, are regarded as *khru* (teachers). On the other hand they earn their living by simply giving pleasure.

The role of teacher arises out of the body of knowledge a puppeteer has in his possession and can pass on to others by various methods. His knowledge is of two kinds, cultural knowledge and spiritual knowledge.

As for the former, a good part of a performance is spent on emphasizing cultural values—obligations to parents, adherence to the law of *karma*, the virtue of gratitude. Such values are presented throughout a performance in many forms. Characters tend to appear as stereotypical persons who embody specific moral qualities. A prince hero is brave, well versed in martial arts and magic, grateful; a giant is amoral, brutal; a step mother is jealous, and so on. Puppeteers' commentaries, either direct or disguised in clown speeches and jokes, often assume a didactic tone.

Along with the content of performance, a puppeteer's way of life also enhances his teacher's role. Not only is he a teacher of his pupils who aspire to become puppeteers in their own right, but he is also a respected member of his community. This respect grows out of his special knowledge in religion, language and literature. According to one elderly puppeteer, Nang Prawing, some forty years ago when he was in his prime, nobody in the district except himself could speak the central Thai dialect. Such ability, which he relates with pride, must have been a considerable achievement. This particular puppeteer also has a wonderful gift of poetry and has won admiration from his audience and all those who know him. His talent represents a special quality which is valued and remembered. Puppeteers in the past who attained the status of " masters " are usually remembered for their poetic mind. One notable example is the celebrated Nang Pan Bod, who was blind from birth but became a successful puppeteer with some help from his assistants. The ingenuity of his composition is still remembered long after his death.

In addition to personal accomplishments, successful puppeteers tend to be financially better off than others. In the district of Hua Sai, a market town, where the fieldwork was carried out, out of the three puppeteers who lived around the market place, one owned a pick-up van and another was having a second house built. Their children received high education. Nang Prawing's children, for example, all have a university degree.

The second form of knowledge is concerned with the puppeteer's special ability to contact the spirit world. The ritual specialist role is marked in the *kae bon* (vow-releasing) performance. The making of a vow is a common practice in Thailand. A person who is about to engage in an important undertaking, who suffers from misfortunes or persistent illness, in brief a person who is anxious to secure for himself a bright future, can appeal to a spirit or other sources of power and offer a contract that if his wish is granted he will present a gift to the spirit in return. Such a present takes many forms depending on the

stake involved. It can range from a garland of flowers to entering monkood temporarily. A performance of *nang talung* functions as one such gift, usually for an important deal. It is during a vow-releasing performance that the puppeteer's ability to contact the spirit world becomes crucial. Prior to a normal performance, a special ritual has to be performed as an announcement that the promise has been fulfilled by the host. To end the contract ritually, the puppeteer has to " break off " the contract, orally in some cases by reciting some magical formula, or in other cases he has to perform the cutting with a special knife. Unless the ritual is performed properly, the host remains in danger of being punished by the spirit for not honoring the contract.

By virtue of his cultural and spiritual knowledge, the puppeteer is singled out as a special person in the community and placed in a position which commands respect. But ambiguity is inherent in the puppeteer's role. While he is well respected, some of his behaviors can give rise to dubious attitude towards him. Regarding his performances, humor is an indispensable part which is largely communicated in clown's speech. The nature of jokes is varied but one which is found among all troupes is sex. This characteristic is an integral part of the appearance and personality of the clowns themselves. Some part of their body, *Theng's* forefinger in particular (see Fig. 10), is cut out in the shape of the male sexual organ. Their jokes play on sex both implicitly and explicitly. On another level there is a sense that puppeteers, the majority of whom are male, are not trusted by women. Because they are clever with words, women can easily be attracted to them. It is not unusual to find a puppeteer who has two wives simultaneously, each living in a different village. This may be a consequence of his popularity among his audience but it presents an image which stands in contradistinction with his instructor's role.

It is difficult to say whether at any one time, one role is more predominant than the other. Both may have always existed side by side, but one is chosen as the acceptable role at a particular time according to particular circumstances. What can be said is that the instructor-entertainer tension forms a rationale which is much cited by the puppeteers themselves when they explain the difference between the " traditional " and the " modern " puppeteers. They argue that traditional puppeteers are the ones who aim to instruct the public whereas the modern ones aim to entertain and please. In 1976–77 the puppeteer who was much cited as a leading example of a modern puppeteer was Nang Phrom Noi. At that time his popularity in terms of audience size and income was unmatched. His style of performance emphasized modern setting, criticism of the establishment, particularly on the issue

of corruption among government officials, and political and sexual jokes. Nang Phrom Noi declared that he is a *sinlapin* (artist), whose aim is to earn his living by giving pleasure to his audience.

In connection with this tension between the traditional and modern forces, it is interesting to note the role of educational institutions in attempting to rediscover what is thought to be the authentic tradition. One implementation of the national policy of cultural preservation is the setting up of cultural centers which are operated by personnel from Teachers Colleges. Their role is to collect, preserve, and promote local cultural items. Performing art becomes one such item which has to be consciously preserved and directed. It leads to movements to rediscover the truly traditional way of performing. The attempt to promote the traditional-style *nora* at the Songkhla Teachers College, or the teaching of *nang talung* as a course in the Performing Art college in Nakhon Si Thammarat, are some such examples.

Having considered the instructor-entertainer tension which constitutes one crucial framework out of which each puppeteer perceives his role and relations to others in the community, we can now turn to another factor which is equally important in shaping the style of each performance, the commercialization of performance.

Commercialization of Performance

The socio-economic organization of *nang talung* is experiencing a transition from being part of a peasant way of life to that of a commercial enterprise. All puppeteers used to be, and many still are, part-time performers who bring spectacles to a rice-growing community during the dry, agricultural off-season months. The rest of the time they are engaged in rice farming like any ordinary peasant.

The traditional context of performance arises out of household celebrations. Some of these are associated with transitional rites, particularly cremation and ordination. In the case of cremation, performances take place during the nights following death when the body of the deceased is kept at his house to receive monks' prayers and last respects from friends and relatives. A similar situation is repeated before cremation and there may be more performances then. As for ordination, on the nights before a man enters monkhood there is a large gathering of relatives at his parents' house in order to help prepare the food for the next day and participate in this important merit-making occasion. On these occasions, a well-to-do householder prefers to engage a puppeteer to perform for his relatives and guests as a way of showing his gratitude to them as well as increasing his prestige in the community. Apart from these two popular occasions, other merit-

making ceremonies connected with a household such as moving into a new house, after harvest ceremony, or the offering of water to the elderly ceremony can all give rise to a performance.

Commercial fairs are more recent phenomena which have become regular features of rural life. There are various types and sizes of fairs. Each province and district usually organizes an annual fair, during the after-harvest months (February through May). These are large fairs which feature hundreds of stalls selling food, clothings, consumers goods, as well as entertainments including performances such as *li-ke* (popular dance drama in the central-Thai style), *ramwong* (dancing), movie shows, *nora* (popular dance drama in the southern Thai style), and *nang talung*. Villagers come in from near and far to enjoy themselves. Temple fairs form another important category. They are organized in order to celebrate Buddhist festivals as well as raising funds for the temple. In addition to district and temple fairs, there are fairs organized by private promoters purely as a profit-making activity.

At present puppeteers perform for both domestic occasions and fairs of all kinds. Statistics are difficult to obtain but a recent study reports that the type of occasion in which they perform most frequently is temple fairs (Sathit NIYOMYAT 1987, 14). From my own study of Nang Prathum in 1977, the troupe tended to perform in temple fairs and cremation rites more than other occasions. Although we cannot conclude that *nang talung* is moving out of the ritual sphere into the commercial one, one indication that the number of household performances is on the decrease is the continual rise of the performing fee. In 1977 a troupe of average size and popularity demanded around 1,500 baht (approx. US$75) per night (CHALERMPOW 1981, 114), in 1987 an average fee is 2,200 baht (approx. US$90) per night (Sathit NIYOMYAT 1987, 20). Householders will find it harder to hire a troupe as the fee keeps rising.

The advent of commercial fairs has given a new direction for *nang talung*. As one form of entertainment among many on the same occasion, a sense of commercial competition enters into it. No longer is *nang talung* a sole spectacle in a peasant village; in a fair it must compete with new forms of entertainment, particularly the motion picture. The tastes of the audience have also changed. They are speedily exposed to national and international cultures. In 1977 a few shophouses in Hua Sai already possessed television sets; on a second visit in 1982, people were watching Benny Hill on video tape. There is an indication too that the shadow play is losing its audience to other shows. In most fairs, all shows start around seven o'clock in the evening, except

nang talung which begins around midnight after the others have already closed down. An explanation given is that the slow pace of *nang talung* cannot compete with the others and therefore should be reserved for a quieter part of the fair. What this points to is the fact that puppeteers may feel increasing pressure to keep up with contemporary taste as their popularity wanes more and more.

Popularity becomes an important issue since financial returns depend on it. One consideration that determines the choice of performers to be engaged in a fair is the size of audience they can attract. This does not necessarily mean that the most popular ones will always be sought after as other considerations such as type of fair, location, and budget will have to be taken into account. In general, however, the popular ones demand higher fees and have a busier schedule all the year round. The concern for popularity seems to be indicated by a number of *nang talung* contests. The province of Nakhon Si Thammarat organizes the biggest contest annually. The winner is given a large sum of money and other prizes. Troupes that have won a prize will proudly display the title on the screen.

A parallel trend is an increasing dependence of some puppeteers on income from performing. While traditional puppeteers are village peasants, contemporary ones become more varied. Some of them, especially the ones who have just started performing, may still live in villages and farm their land. The better known ones tend to live in towns rather than villages and no longer do the farming. It is still very common for them to have other sources of income—small trading, teaching, puppet-making—but for the popular ones their main income derives from performing. An exceptional case is that of Nang Phrom Noi who in 1977 claimed that he performed every single night of a year. His troupe is more professionally organized than any other. Musicians are paid monthly salaries instead of being paid only when they perform.

Cases of *Nang Talung* Variations

Having investigated the internal structure of *nang talung* performance and the socio-economic context of the puppeteers and troupes, we can begin to see that the situation cannot simply be described as a direction towards extinction or revival. Performing art in the oral tradition is an ongoing process where the tension between the traditional and the modern operates in different dimensions. The result is an non-uniform development, a combination of options available in both the textual and contextual aspects. This is a framework out of which stylistic variations existing among *nang talung* performances can be

understood. In other words, these variations cannot be adequately explained in terms of purely artistic differences, or purely results of social and technological change, but in terms of an interaction of the two. The cases of Nang Kan and Nang Phrom Noi will be used to illustrate the ununified manner in which each puppeteer, influenced by different contextual factors, presents his art.

Case 1-Nang Kan (1910–1988)

Awarded the title *Folk artist of the Nation* in 1985 after over sixty years of performing, Nang Kan or Mr. Kan Thonglo, has a special place in the history of *nang talung*. Born in 1910 in a village within the province of Songkhla, he began a career of a puppeteer around the age of 20, after having been attracted by it since his childhood. His uncle, Nang Iat Pakpon, himself a famous puppeteer, showed him the necessaary techniques, but the masterly performances since an early age seemed to have been a result of his personal talent.

As his reputation spread, aspiring youths sought him out and offered themselves as his pupils. At one time over fifty pupils stayed in his house and helped doing some household chores including farming. In his life-time Nang Kan trained over a hundred puppeteers and was referred to by the title *po* (father) and treated with great respect. Owing to his success, he could save up enough to buy a large piece of rice land near his house. He lived in his home village till his death in 1988 at the age of 78.

In his own view his success is due to two things. First, he describes his style as " gentle, good-mannered, and avoiding impropriety " (PINYO 1986, 14). The description alludes to the style of another puppeteer, Nang Phrom Noi whose risque jokes are much criticized as morally corrupting. Secondly, he always aims to instill moral points as a guide to good conduct for his audience. Among these values, gratitude and social harmony are emphasized.

Although Nang Kan's performances and life style have a conservative outlook, he too initiated some practices which set new standards for *nang talung*. He improved on the music, introduced the use of a microphone and a loudspeaker, dropped events which were considered too imaginary, and finally began to offer reflections on rural problems in his plays.

In 1977 when the fieldwork was conducted, Nang Kan was already approaching 70 but came to perform in Hua Sai once for a cremation. In 1986 he said he still gave performances for vow-releasing occasions. The performance in Hua Sai in 1977, entitled Prince Thinnawong, was fully recorded and transcribed. It was a story of a prince-hero who

leaves his palace to seek a mentor, and encounters a series of adventures on his way. In a forest he sees a king cobra mating with a mythical serpent, a naga. The cobra attacks him and is promptly killed. The naga disappears, then reappears as a woman. Later it transpires that the naga is a princess and when the prince breaks this news to her father he is rewarded with magic medicine. This he uses to cure the eyes of another king who gives him a princess and a kingdom in return. Parallel to the main story, there is a secondary one in a village setting, where rich and influential men try to take advantage of poor villagers who are saved by the prince. The performance ended in a quarrel between Thinnawong's first wife and the second one.

Prince Thinnawong is a story which combines the traditional theme of princely adventures with that of village life. It includes supernatural beings and magic as its main ingredient. The presentation assumes the didactic tone in many places. One example given below is from a scene when the knowledge of the past lives of her dead husband, the cobra, is revealed by a monk to the naga princess.

Naga Princess:	Is he (the cobra) a friend of yours?
Monk:	Yes. In that past life he was born a human being. He killed a snake. Because he killed a snake, he was reborn as a snake in another life to be killed by a man. Once his karma is expiated, he will be reborn again.

If the didactic flavor, drawn from a stock of knowledge about popular Buddhism and cultural values is predominant in Nang Kan's performances, an entirely different one prevails in another equally popular puppeteer, Nang Phrom Noi, who is chosen as our second case.

Case 2-Nang Phrom Noi (1936–)

In the late seventies, before he became a full fledged politician in 1979, Nang Phrom Noi was undoubtedly the most popular puppeteer in southern Thailand. Born in 1936 in the district of Khuan Khanun, in the province of Phatthalung, Nang Phrom Noi or Mr. Phrom Bunyarit, began his career as a puppeteer at the age of 15. His teacher is Nang Phrom Atsawin, another puppeteer famous for his jokes. In 1968 Nang Phrom Noi won the first prize in a *nang talung* contest in Nakhon Si Thammarat. He was elected a member of the House of Representatives in 1979, and again in 1983. Nang Phrom Noi's popularity rose steeply after the 14 October 1973 event when military leaders were ousted by students. During the three-year period between 1973 and 1976, a style of performance known as *nang kan muang*,

or political puppet theatre, developed to an unprecedented level,[6] and was associated with such puppeteers as Nang Prakhiang or Nang Mun Nui. After a violent uprise of the 6 October 1976 event, political plays were suppressed. Most politically oriented puppeteers were banned, or forced to adhere to traditional style and closely supervised. Nang Phrom Noi continued performing with much success, both in making his performances acceptable to the authorities and in gaining popularity and income. He claimed in 1977 that he performed every night, and demanded three to seven thousand baht per night,[7] Nang Phrom Noi was clearly then the *nang talung* star whose name would be written in bold letters on posters advertising a fair and would always guarantee a huge crowd of spectators.

The story repeatedly performed by Nang Phrom Noi in 1977 was called Feudal Wall (*khampaeng sakdina*). A young prince falls in love with a peasant girl and marries her in defiance of his father. In an attempt to get rid of his daughter-in-law, the king sends his son away to study and in his absence, he drives away the girl who subsequently becomes a beggar. On his way to a hermitage, the prince enters two giant kingdoms, seduces the princesses, and leaves them. He returns home and sets out to search for his wife. In the mean time, the prince's offspring (one is the son of the peasant girl, the other is the daughter of one of the giant princesses) grow up without the knowledge of their true origin, so they set out to search for their mother and father. They accidentally go to the same hermitage and are joined by the peasant girl, all ignorant of their connections. The giant kings and princesses meanwhile set out to find the prince. The performance ends in a scene where one giant princess and the peasant girl meet at the hermitage, begin to quarrel and exchange insults fiercely.

This story succeeds in combining traditional and modern themes together in an amazing way. The traditional themes of princely adventures, non-human beings, search for origin, and rivalry and jealousy between co-wives appear side by side with the themes of oppression of the poor by the rich, abuse of power, and bad treatment of peasants by officials. In comparison with Nang Kan's story, which also alternates between princely adventures and village scenes, Feudal Wall employs and manipulates traditional forms in order to match a contemporary message to a far greater degree. A human king, a benign character in traditional stories, is made to represent a tyrant. Puppets representing the prince and the peasant girl are in completely modern outfits. Even the characters' names, Channarong, Oi Daeng, Nara seem to have been chosen from novels serialized in magazines rather than the traditional repertoire.

But perhaps the most striking area where Nang Phrom Noi brings traditional dramatic form to satisfy contemporary taste is in the commentaries and jokes. As stated earlier, these parts give full freedom for each puppeteer to improvise. Nang Phrom Noi uses it extensively. His commentaries on social issues through the parts of the clowns take the largest proportion of performing time. Woven into these speeches at regular intervals are jokes which make explicit references to sex. It is clear that his commentaries do not aim to preach but to capture the attention of his audience by sharing criticism and humor as illustrated in the following excerpts from Feudal Wall.

In a scene when the king orders his aide, Phun, to set fire to his daughter-in-law's hut:

King: You set fire to her house, I'll get the baby myself.

Clown: Arson is punishable by death.

King: When a town ruler tells you to burn, burn it. When you've burnt it, write down that you have burnt a communist camp. Do you understand? You'll be famous. Maybe next year you'll get a promotion. Your picture will be in the paper with a caption " *o so* Phun burnt a communist camp " (*o so* is a title for members of the village defence volunteer organization).

Clown: How clever our leader is! The ruling ones are really great. They burn other people's hut and say that they have burnt down a communist camp, in fact, just a hut in a rice field. Sometimes they take a couple of pots and hang them up. Then they take photographs and put them in newspapers with a caption " officials storm the area while communists are cooking rice." But all the pots have holes in them . . . .

In another scene when the prince returns and meets a beggar (his own wife whom he does not recognize):

Prince: Why? With a pretty face and a good figure that you have, why have you got to beg for living?

Nara: Because I have no job sir.

Prince: Why? Can't you get yourself a job?

Nara: Nobody employes poor people, without education, like myself. I've only finished ***prathom*** 3 (lower primary education). What chance do I have these days. ***Prathom*** 4 means nothing nowadays. Even washing up in a Chinese restaurant, you've got to have finished ***mathayom*** 6 (secondary education).

Clown: Oh. I suppose they have to wash up in English! That's the reason why the country is in such a mess. Communists are able to infiltrate, all because of this unemployment problem. If the government cannot solve it, what's to become of it. So many people are out of work. As she says, a person with *prathom 4* can't do much these days. Even washing up you need a *mathayom 6* certificate. If this unemployment problem isn't solved, then there will be trouble. If country farmers have no work, no employment, they can still dig a pond and breed fish, or grow bananas at home. But those who have university degrees or higher education diplomas, and can't get a job, they can't do the same thing as we do. They can't carry heavy loads of rice, or climb palm trees and make palm sugar to sell. No, they can only make Molotov Cocktails to throw at each other's head, that sort of thing, or stir up trouble. They can't do anything useful, those with university degrees. If the government doesn't solve it, this problem of people without jobs will lead to more trouble.

Nang Kan's and Nang Phrom Noi's styles from these two performances are similar and different on the following points. On the visual form both used more or less similar sets of puppets, with the conventional classification. Choices of puppets representing a prince were different (in the performances observed). Nang Kan used the traditional-style prince, Nang Phrom Noi used the modern-style prince. Sizes of puppets were similar in these performances, but as noted earlier, Nang Phrom Noi could use a large set if necessary.

On the form of presentation, both followed the set series of opening rituals but Nang Phrom Noi's pace was considerably faster. Narrative forms in both cases were adventurous events in the life of a prince. But while Prince Thinnawong had magic and supernatural happenings, Feudal Wall did not. Themes were different too. As for commentaries and jokes, Nang Kan was didactic and avoided sex jokes, Nang Phrom Noi was critical of the status quo and deliberately used sex jokes.

Their performances are taken here as neither the text nor context but a combination of both. They are not the text which is set and unchanging. We have seen that both Nang Kan and Nang Phrom Noi continuously adapted their styles of performances and incorporated many new elements. Nang Kan introduced the microphone, village setting and ethical points appropriate to contemporary life. Nang Phrom Noi introduced the largesized puppets, political themes, elabo-

rate commentaries and extensive sex jokes. They are both affected by social context of their time. The pressure of adapting their performances to suit contemporary audience is felt by both of them. Nang Kan has acquired an image of a traditional moral instructor, and in later life when he does not have to compete in contests and fairs, he can afford to perform in a didactic manner which does not attract a particularly large crowd. Nang Phrom Noi, on the other hand, presents himself as an entertainer. His image, his financial interest, and his political ambition account for his elaboration of political themes and sex jokes.

Conclusion

The cases of Nang Kan and Nang Phrom Noi are but two extreme examples of how existing forms of folk performing art have been manipulated in different directions. They both use the availability inherent in the artistic form as an avenue to keep in step with society, in their own way and according to their own circumstances. Social, economic, and technological changes both affect them, but their responses are different depending on their self perception which in turn influence the area and degree of innovation they choose to introduce. Nang Kan, whose prime arrived some thirty years ago, chooses to innovate by incorporating technological invention and realistic settings into his style. But he also adheres strongly to the didactic tradition, which is appropriate to his teacher role. Nang Phrom Noi seizes the social and political climate of his time and turns it to the benefit of his performance through elaborate commentaries and jokes.

In conclusion, *nang talung* is a traditional folk performing art which neither becomes extinct in modern society, nor has it been transformed into a completely different genre. This paper has shown that its presence is due to the interaction between two factors. First, the nature of the theatre whose oral tradition allows its structure to accommodate new components, namely the introduction of new visual elements: colors, decorative motifs, outfits, size, and the introduction of new themes in the form of contemporary settings and characters. Such open characteristics enable the theatre to develop without a complete break from the past. It is capable of shedding off components which are considered anachronistic as well as adopting those that are meaningful to contemporary way of life.

The second factor that has been investigated is the time and place in which the theatre is situated. The paper has focused on two things, the role of puppeteers and the relationship between performances and community. Both areas are continually changing. Inherent in the puppeteer's role is the tension between being an instructor and being an

entertainer, each leads to a different emphasis in a performance. The increasing commecialization has put pressure on *nang talung* to become exposed to other modern forms of entertainment and conscious of a sense of competition.

These two factors meet, interact, and lead to the development of different styles by different puppeters. A rich variety of performing styles in this folk theatre at a particular time cannot be adequately explained as a result of a unique artistic style, personal preference, or direct consequences of social change. It is in the dialogue between the textual and contextual that the dynamics of folk performing art should be conceptualized.

NOTES

1. This is a standard term, officially recognised and used nationwide. There are other local variations such as *nang khuan*, or simply *nang*. Prior to the introduction of motion picture to the South, it was probably referred to simply as *nang* in everyday usage. Nowadays *nang* can be either the shadow theatre or movie. The word *nang* means skin or hide. The origin and meaning of *talung* remain inconclusive. It could be an abbreviation of Phatthalung, a province. Another theory is that it means elephant poles which originally served as vertical frames for putting up a screen.

2. For a fuller description, please see CHALERMPOW 1981.

3. The exact number of puppeteers is very difficult to obtain since there is no system of registration in existence. This figure is estimated from the following. 1) A report from the puppeteers conference in the province of Yala in 1973, in which over seventy puppeteers attended. The organizers pointed out that these were some of the established ones only. 2) There were ten puppeteers of different degrees of popularity in the district of Hua Sai and it is generally known that puppeteers can be found in any district of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla, and Phatthalung. A more recent study (Sathit NIYOMYAT 1987, 8) gave a figure of forty to forty-five troupes. I believe this estimate is far too low.

4. The sets used for comparison are as follows.

   1. The collection in the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. Late nineteenth century A.D.
   2. The collection in the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden. Late nineteenth century A.D. (acquired by the museum in 1886).
   3. The collection of Nakhon Si Thammarat Teachers Training College, believed to be 80 years old.
   4. The sets owned by Nang Prathum and Nang Khru Khian represent the contemporary ones.

Data on the Berlin collection can be found in MÜLLER 1894. Data on the others are collected by the author.

5. It can be noted here that although *nang yai* and *nang talung* are commonly rendered " shadow play " in English, they involve different techniques of image making. In the case of *nang yai*, the spectators see the actual puppets which are dark, almost black, figures against a white background. In the case of *nang talung*, for clown puppets, which are made of thick hide and colored black, their dark shadows appear.

For other characters, mostly made of thin, translucent hide, their colorful projections are shown.

6. Political message in *nang talung* is not unique to the 1973–76, or so-called democracy, period. Long before it, *nang talung* was used in order to attract a crowd during election campaigns. It was also reported that the USIS used it to spread anti-communist propaganda. (SMITHIES and EAUYPORN 1975, 134)

7. His claim to perform every night was probably an exaggeration, but the fees stated were feasible. On average, the puppeteers' net income is about 30–50% of the total fee. In an interview in 1983 he said his fee for a local performance is 7,000–8,000 baht (US$300–350), and 15,000–18,000 baht (US$650–780) for a performance in Bangkok. (*Matichon*, 24 March 1984)

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