

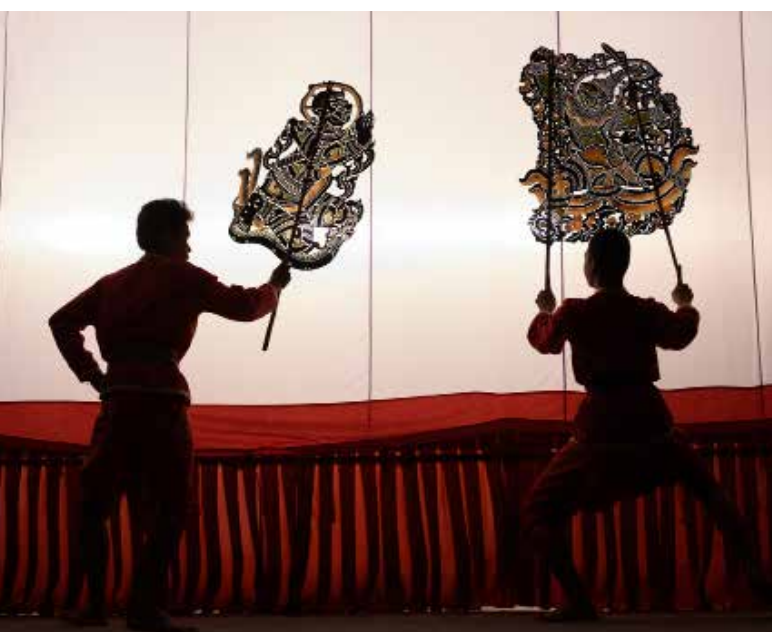


The SUPPORT Arts and Crafts
International Centre of Thailand
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Artisanal Handicraft

Nang Yai - Grand Shadow Play



“Nang Yai” initially was a performance in royal court. The reason it is called “Nang” or literally skin is because it is used as a mean of performance. It is perforated from cow or buffalo hide, which must go through a tanning process. Drawing on the hide requires Thai pattern drawing skill where the line must be connected thoroughly. Then, it is perforated or hammered, and painted to enhance clarity and make it beautiful during a show. Then, tie the hide with a rod to raise in synchronization with music from an Oboe-based Thai orchestra called Piphat group and a dubbing. It is considered as an origin of Khon or Thai classical masked ballet, which is regarded as Thai identity on art and culture up to the present time.



Characteristics which reflect the local wisdom and artisan expertise

According to knowledge of making Nang Yai of people in the past, they paid much attention from a step to prepare animal hide. In the past, skin of dead animal was tanned in a traditional way (read more on how to tan animal hide) to remove all hair and fascia. Clear and smooth hide will be acquired which can last in this state for a long time. This process is called “killing skin”. In the past, hide to make certain characters, such as a teacher, Siva, or a hermit must come from only a tiger or a cow that dies unnaturally. For example, a cow that is dead because of thunderbolt or from giving birth. It is believed to be sacred.

Drawing requires Thai drawing skill, mostly featuring characters from Ramakien. A technique that is employed is drawing in a big scale in preparation for hammering which will cover a part of pattern lines. A connecting pattern line technique is use to bind all patterns together without disconnecting from one another. This is called “a tendon of the hide”. It is an important

point for further hammering step that will not disconnect any pattern lines of a character.

Perforating is for a big-sized pattern, such as a face, eyes and a mouth. A knife is usually made by a craftsman himself to make sure it is of a right size for him. The purpose of hammering is to let the light through and to create details on the hide. Each hammering is to tear a line in one hit which must be done continuously. This is called “line of dots”.

In the past, choices of color were limited. Black was the most commonly used that renders clear light and shade. Green and red brown are mid-ranged colors. Once they are painted on the hide, they look easy on the eyes. Some Nang Yai is gilded with gold leaves to make it look outstanding and magnificent.

Making Nang Yai requires various kinds of craftsmanship ranging from drawing, painting, perforating or hammering. It requires expertise in making a piece of work on a big piece of hide that can be seen from far away through the light. Shadow of a character will create aesthetics in harmony of feelings that are originated from a shadow puppet and sound of music.





Thai Shadow Puppet

Thai Shadow Puppet can be divided into 2 kinds, namely

A shadow puppet to show in the night is called Nang Klang Keun. A body of a puppet is in black and space of lines is in white. Example includes Nang Yai of Wat Ban Don, Rayong Province.

A shadow puppet to show during the day and the night is called Nang Klang Wan. A puppet is painted in various colors, including white, black, green, yellow and red, which makes a puppet look outstanding. Nowadays, this Nang Klang Wan can be found in 2 places, namely Wat Khanon, Ratchaburi Province and Wat Sawang-arom, Singburi Province.



Characteristics of Nang Yai

Characteristics of Nang Yai can be categorized into 7 types based on appearance, manner, gesture and habitat by nature as follows

Nang Chao or Nang Kru, this is a shadow puppet used in a guru worship rite, not for show. There are 3 main characters, namely, a hermit, Siva and Ravana. A puppet of Siva and Ravana is called “Phra Phlaeng” as both are in shooting an arrow posture.

Nang Fao or Nang Wai is a single-character shadow puppet with a partial face in wai (pray) gesture. For a character holding a weapon, a handle of a weapon will be placed in an armpit and the end of a weapon will be pointed backward or tucked at the waist. Examples of Nang Wai include Hanuman, Angada, Sugriva and Vibhishana. They are played in a scene of appearing before royalty.

Nang Kanejorn or Nang Dern, sometimes called as “Tua Dern”, is a single-character shadow puppet with a partial face. For characters of a protagonist, a heroine or a giant, they are in a walking gesture. This kind of shadow puppet is used in a scene of marching and reviewing an army by an army leader. For a monkey character, it is commonly perforated in a gaiting posture. (both feet are on the floor, one feet is placed on the floor, the other one is slightly above the floor). Example of Tua Nang Dern includes Rama Tua Dern.

Nang Nga is a single-character shadow puppet, with a partial face. A flying posture is expressed by lifting one leg up like that of Khon. Example of Nang Nga is a character of a monkey or a giant in a fighting posture and holding a weapon, such as a dagger or a sword. Example of Nang Nga in a flying posture is Hanuman in a flying posture.

Nang Muang is a single-character shadow puppet or multiple puppets in the same piece of animal hide. It consists of a picture of a palace, a pavilion, a throne room wherein characters in a story sit, sleep or appear in other postures according to a story.



Nang Jub is a shadow puppet featuring 2 characters and more in the same piece of hide. Mostly they are in a fighting posture. It is played after Nang Nga, for example, Nang Jub of Rama and Ravana, Nang Jub of a white monkey and a black monkey.

Miscellaneous Nang is not classified into any kind, such as Nang Tiew. It is a shadow puppet featuring 2 characters holding against each other, such as a white monkey is holding a black monkey. Castle Nang is a shadow puppet illustrating a character lying in a castle, such as Indrajit’s castle. Nang Khen is a shadow puppet featuring soldiers in a monkey troop, which is called Khen Ling, soldiers in a giant troop is called Khen Yak.



Background of Nang Yai

It has been said that **Nang Yai** has been existing since Sukhothai period. However, according to evidence, it was discovered in Ayutthaya period during the reign of King Ramathibodi I, when there was a performance of huge shadow puppets as a character. A puppeteer raised and moved a shadow puppet to create shadow on a screen and there was dubbing to run a story. The oldest Nang Yai was mentioned in a royal law during the reign of King Borommatrailokkanat. Nang Yai is therefore considered a high art form of performance. It was normally performed in royal ceremonies, such as a royal wedding ceremony, a royal ceremony related to death and other celebration. Stories were mostly related to monarch and bravery, such as Mahabharata or Ramakien. During Ayutthaya Period, Nang Yai was called as “Nang”. Later on, Department of Khon and Department of Entertainment were abolished during the reign of King Rama 7. Nang Yai was therefore under patronage of temples. It is called “Nang Rat”.

The Burmese - Siam War (1765-67) caused huge damages to performing art, ancient remains and antiques. They were restored again during Thonburi Period. Nang Yai has been found on show again since the reign of King Rama 1. He composed a drama “Panji” to play in Nang Yai apart from a story of Ramakien.

During the reign of King Rama 2, evidence of making Nang Yai and literature scripts of Ramakien was found. 2 troupes of Nang Klang Kuen were established, namely Pranakornwai Nang Yai troupe of Wat Plublachai, Petchburi Province, of which most of the shadow puppets were burnt while they were kept at the wall of the old national museum in 1960. Another troupe is Nang Yai Wat Ban Don, Rayong Province. Both shared some similarities.

During the reign of King Rama III – King Rama IV, Nang Yai was also found in Ayutthaya, Samut Songkhram and Ratchaburi.

In King Rama V’s reign, Nang Klang Wan were found created in 2 places, namely, Nang Yai of Wat Sawang-arom, Singburi Province and Nang Yai of Wat Kanon, Ratchaburi Province. Both share the same perforation patterns.



Nang Yai is a combination of 5 types of art, namely Craftsmanship A carver is required to have knowledge on Thai patterns and know a story of Ramakien so that he can choose a piece of hide to perforate into a character and a scene properly.

Dancing Art A puppeteer is considered as a life-giver for a shadow puppet. He/she must have skill and understanding of Thai music. He/she must practice on gesturing, walking, dancing and wagging. He/she must raise a shadow puppet in synch with the rhythm and a story as told in the dubbing.

Artistic language is a dubbing dialogue of a show that helps convey expression of a shadow puppet. It helps create imagination so that audience can understand a story. Even though a major story

was Ramakien, there was evidence that King Narai ordered Pra Maha Ratchakru to compose Samuthakhot Khamchan to play in Nang Yai. Moreover, another story was composed to play in Nang Yai, which is Anirut Khamchan.

Rhetoric A tone of a dubber must be resonant to build emotion of audience. A dubber should be witty to make enjoyable dubbing. He must understand music to cadence a piphat group.

Arts of playing music A music band that is normally played in Nang Yai is Piphat Krueng Ha, Krueng Kru and Krueng Yai. Other musical instruments include pi klang that renders mid-range sound throughout a show, klong ting and krong.



Nang Yai Performance in Thailand

At present, only 3 troupes still remains, namely Nang Yai Wat Kanon, Ratchaburi Province, Nang Yai Wat Sawang-arom, Singburi Province and Nang Yai Wat Bandon, Rayong Province. Also, there is a royal Khon troupe of Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture.

According to history of Nang Yai Wat Kanon, during the reign of King Rama V, Pra Kru Satthasoonthorn, an abbot, together with Kru Ung created a shadow puppet, for example, a story of Rammakien in an episode of Hanuman proposing a ring, Sahaskumar War, Bairaikun War. The old set of 313 shadow puppets still remains and they have been still restored. A new set has been created to replace the old ones. The temple establishes a museum of Nang Yai to be a source of study. A new set of Nang Yai is also put on show.

Nang Yai Wat Sawang-arom, according to history, Kru Pia from a Nang Yai troupe in Ayutthaya offered a set of Nang Yai to Luang Por Rueng, an abbot in 1875. He also practiced Nang Yai to people in the community. Nang Yai from here featured Nang Jao, a prelude included a monkey show that is performed early in the evening, Rammakien in an episode of Indrajit War (Nagabas), Wiroonjambang War, a great war (with complete set of characters and was on show frequently) and Pra Mongkut-Pralop War. There were approximately 270 characters. At present, acting practice is on-going. New shadow puppets are still created by the locals.

Nang Yai Wat Ban Don, in 1888, Praya Srisamutphokhachaichitsongkram, a Rayong governor, bought a set of Nang Yai from Phatthalung, including Nang Chao, a prelude features a story of Rammakien, in an episode of Prommas War, Ravana Order a City, Sita on Fire, A Birth of Two Kumara, Releasing Oopakarn Horse and A fight of Praprot and Pra Suttarut against Pra Mongkut-Pra Lob. A temple also establishes a museum to restore old shadow puppets and acts as a source of knowledge on this.



Moreover, there are also Nang Yai from Wat Plubplachai, Petchburi Province, Wat Prasook, Singburi Province, Wat Bangnoi, Samut Songkhram Province, Wat Takien, Lopburi Province (Currently, they are stored at Somdet Phra Narai National Museum). Some Nang Yais are stored at Bangkok National Museum.

During the reign of King Rama IX, a set of 130 Nang Yai characters were created. A prototype of Nang Yai Pranakorn Wai was used as a reference. The aim was to make it as a form of entertainment of the reign. After completion in 1996, they were on show in important celebrations.



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How to prepare animal hide for perforation

Thai people normally use cow hide rather than other kinds of skin as it is thin and translucent. It can be perforated in a more detailed pattern. Goat or sheep hide is in a small size which is normally perforated as Nang Talung or for souvenir.

In the old days, fresh hide from a dead cow was tanned in a natural way which took many months to finish. Nowadays, a craftsman buy ready-to-use hide from a tannery (a former Tanning Organization), Samut Prakan Province. It is called “Dried Glue Skin”, which can be in both brown and white color. It can be divided into 2 grades as follows

Surface skin or grade A skin is suitable to perforate for Nang Yai or to make a drumhead. It is normally exported to Japan and Brazil.

Stomach skin or grade B skin is tied into a bundle as a plaything for a dog.

A perforated Nang Yai for a show must be 1.5 mm. thick. The biggest Nang Jub is measured at 1.8 meter wide. For Nang Dern, Nang Kanejorn, Nang Nga, Fighting Nang and Nang Diew is at a size of 1.2-1.5 meters.

Hide that has been through a traditional tanning process will last longer. It takes longer to fade compared to the hide that is chemically tanned. During a tanning process, chemicals will be absorbed and embedded into the hide. This will shorten its useful life and cause color to fade quickly.



A traditional tanning process

Ferment fresh skin with lime water. Pound until it gets soft. Then, have it immersed in Datura fruit water for 3-5 days to remove fascia and fat. Bring it to pound again. Tightly stretch it and dry it in the sun. Once it becomes completely dry, clean it one more time by using a coconut shell, a knife, a chisel or a clam shell to scrape all fascia and hair until a whole piece of the hide is all even. Tanning in a traditional way is a process called killing skin which results in smooth skin that is not crook, not sear and it will remain in this state for hundred years.

Fermenting hide is not practiced in some areas. Fresh skin is mixed with ashes and stretch it in a wooden frame which must be nailed to ensure it is fully tight. Use a knife to dissect all fascia that is still attached to the skin. Dry it in the sun until it gets dry and remove it from a frame. Use a knife to scrape and decorate both sides of the skin to remove hair, fascia and fat. Then, have it tanned.

At present, mix 1 liter of vinegar with 20 liters of water to use in a tanning process. Ferment the hide that is already scraped to remove all hair and fat in a bowl or a jar of mixed vinegar. Leave it for around 3 hours. Then clean it and aerate it until it is completely dry.



Designing a pattern for Nang Yai

In the past, an ancient craftsman who was skilled at designing a pattern used a steel called “Lek Jarn” to draw a pattern onto the hide. A trail of steel on the hide can be erased easily by wiping water on it. Nowadays, it is changed to draw a pattern on paper first. Once a pattern is finalized, it will be minimized or maximized as desired. Then, a pattern will be attached on the hide to proceed with perforation.

According to tradition, designing shares similarities with drawing murals which is using the same Sen Kru (guideline). Importantly, all patterns must constantly cling together. This is called “a tendon of the hide”. It is an important point for further hammering step that will not disconnect any pattern lines of a character.



Perforating the hide

A craftsman use a tool called a hollow punch (toodtoo) or “mook” to hammer the hide out which is called Kud Mook. A carving knife is used for a part to create a space. For a circle pattern or a line of dots, a craftsman uses a mook to hammer along a line. As for a pattern in a bigger area or the one with angle, a carving knife will be used. There are various sizes of a mook, ranging from a big, a medium and a top mook. Carving in some angles of a pattern, a chisel at various sizes will be used so that the light can get through and make beautiful shapes. A sparse pattern will be in white color.

Perforating the hide will start from a big pattern to create a structure of the hide. In the past, a chisel was a main tool. A puppet that is hammered with a chisel to perforate is normally in a local pattern which is considered as a unique identity.

Nowadays, a craftsman uses a handy knife that is made on his own. While perforating, a hilt is in a palm. The end of a knife is at the same length as the end of a forefinger. Place a stake or a soft wood chopping block underneath so that the end of a knife will push into a chopping block. This will result in a clear pattern of a shadow puppet.

A craftsman uses a big mook to perforate a shadow puppet. Once viewing from a far sight, a pattern will be clearly shown. As for a puppet for decoration, a small mook is used instead to work on a more detailed pattern which is normally viewed in a nearer sight.

As for a chopping block that was used in perforation, an ancient craftsman normally used hardwood to help maintain equipment. Velvet tamarind wood, which is considered the hardest wood was normally used. It can be found by waterway in dry ever green forest and mixed forest. It is mostly found in the east and in the northeast. Nowadays, acrylic or fiber chopping block is used instead. If there is any defect, it can be fixed by gluing and then polish it with sandpaper.



A hollow punch (mook or toodtoo) is forged from general iron. Its tip is immersed into zinc to enhance strength because it cannot be sharpened like a chisel or a knife. In the past, a drill was used to punch the tip of a steel and have it immersed into ash water to strengthen the steel.

A “hammer” is made of hardwood, such as velvet tamarind wood or rosewood. It can be made into various sizes depending on a craftsman’s desire. Initially, a craftsman used a steel hammer. However, once it was used for a while, a handle part spread out resulting in a hole in a hammer part. A craftsman had to always polish a hammer and the tip of a mook. Then, a wood hammer is used instead to extend usage of a mook and a hammer.

Among almost all Nang Yai characters, a heroine is the most difficult one to perforate. To make a white face or a white body, these parts have to be curved out first, which is called “Nang Nah Kwae”. To make it white in some parts which are slightly white when putting through the light, a craftsman will scrape the black part out to make that part thinner. Or to make it white in certain parts, a craftsman uses a mook to make a very detailed perforation. This process is called “Ao Mook Dern”.



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Painting

Painting onto Nang Yai is done on both sides of the hide. Start with light colors and follow by black color. Nang Yai for a night show is mainly painted in black and red brown. The emphasis is made on a face and the edge. As for Nang Yai for a day show, since the light will get through from all sides, a craftsman will paint it in bright colors, such as green, yellow and light blue.

Black color is from soot of clay pots. In the past, cooking was done with a charcoal brazier. Once a bottom of a charcoal brazier was black, the soot was removed to make into color.

Red brown color is from boiled heartwood of sappanwood. However, due to a complicated process, dried betel nut fermented with rice whiskey is used instead.

Khiaotangsae color is an ancient color which was commonly used among muralists. It is acquired by immersing brass and bronze into hydrochloric acid water to cause chemical interaction. Green rust will appear on metal which will take at least 1 year and up. A craftsman scrapes the rust and sifts it with a strainer (a device having holes punched in it or made of crossed wires for separating solid matter from a liquid). Wash hydrochloric acid away with water. Then mix it with wood apple gum or Indian Leucaena gum to get this Khiaotangsae color. Presently, food color in green mixed with white whiskey is used instead.

Advantage of using ancient colors is ability to control color tone without using breaking color theory. Nowadays for color that is manufactured from chemicals, once it is dried, it will get deviated or mixed with other colors. For example, once green color is dried, yellow color will appear also. This is because green color has yellow color mixed with it. Ancient people therefore mixed the color with white whiskey to suppress the mixed colors. Still colors are those that will always be displayed in the same old color no matter it is wet or dry.



A rod

The final step of making Nang Yai is to tie it with a rod to control a movement. A rod is called “Mai Tub” or “Mai Kab Nang”. For a small size of Nang Yai, one pair of rods is used while a bigger one, it will be tied with 2 pairs of rods, at a certain space wide. Dried spiny bamboo is sharpened into a small rod. The inner side is sharpened till it is flat and smooth to fix with the hide. Exterior surface is sharpened into a round shape which is not too thick or too thin. The rod is 0.5 - 1 inch thick. The tip is slightly smaller than the base. The rod must be smoked first to prevent it from being bitten by weevil or wood boring insect. Use a small sharpened rattan to tightly tie the hide with a rod like tying the edge of a rice winnowing basket or a sieve. Leave a space at the bottom to hold while raising a puppet.





Equipment to make Nang Yai

- Animal hide
- A hollow punch (mook or toodtoo)
- A wooden chopping block or a wooden anvil
- A knife for perforation
- Paint color
- A black pencil, drawing paper
- A wood hammer
- A rod





Nang Yai is a combination of various kinds of art, namely craftsmanship, dancing art, rhetoric and arts of playing music. At present, Fine Arts Department and Bunditpatanasilpa Institute play important role in conserving and carrying on Nang Yai. Also, there is a royal Khon troupe of Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture. At present, only 3 troupes still remains, namely Nang Yai Wat Kanon, Ratchaburi Province, Nang Yai Wat Sawang-arom, Singburi Province and Nang Yai Wat Bandon, Rayong Province. Government and private sectors are encouraged to promote and sustain this Nang Yai in the country forever.



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