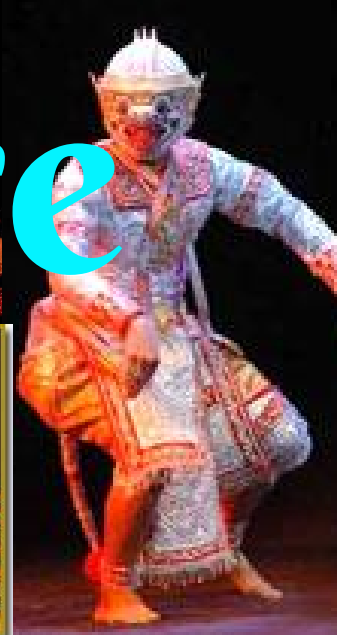


Khon Theatre



By: Naveen Yeung



Introduction

Khon is a type of traditional masked dance originating from Thailand. It was originally only performed by men for the royalty. There are several types of Khon which all share the same performance style, but are performed in different locations for different occasions and tell different stories. Dance, music, pantomime and drama is used in these performances. Most Khon tell the story of the *Ramakien*, a Thai epic poem.

Origin

It is known that Khon originated from Thailand, but the era in which Khon was first performed is unknown. However, it was first found mentioned in King Narai's "Lilit Phra Lo" which was written in the Maharaj era. The origin of the word Khon is also unknown, however the word has many different meanings. Khon is a type of leather drum used, it is also used to describe gender of the body, which can also be related to the theatre performance.

Purpose

Khon was only performed for the royalty but different types were performed in different occasions for different purposes. There were mainly performances during celebrations, religious festivals, ordination of royalty, the king's birthday celebration, and even at funeral processions for royalty or well respected persons. It is performed mainly as a form of art and entertainment, but Khon performances often also gave the audience space for thought and reflection on one's ethics, morals and maxims.

Story

Tells the story of the Thai epic poem *Ramakien*, which is an adaption of the Indian epic poem *Ramayana*. It tells the story of the incarnation of the god Phra Narai, Phra Ram, who's wife is kidnapped by the demon king Tosakanth. With the help of gods, deities, angels and, most importantly, monkey warriors, he is able to rescue his wife after battling the demon king and his soldiers.

Types of Khon Theatre

Khon Klang Plaeng (open air masked drama) - Is performed outdoors without a stage and uses the natural surroundings as a backdrop. It is performed only by men and often depict scenes of war and battle from the Thai epic poem *Ramakian*. There is no singing in this type of Khon, instead background music is played and narration is used. The performers also use dance, pantomime and acrobatics to perform the fighting scenes.

Khon Nang Rao/ Khon Rong Nok - Is also performed outdoors, but on a stage with a roof. the stage has a bamboo railing for actors to sit on after they have finished their parts. This type of Khon also does not have singing, but narration is used accompanied by two Pi Phat orchestras playing Na Phat music. All characters wear masks, Also performed by men

Khon Na Cho (screen front dance masked drama) - Is performed using a blank screen as the backdrop. The two sides of the stage respectively represent the military quarters and barracks, and the palace in the mystical Longka capital city. Performers enter the stage from doors cut into the screen on the two sides of the stage. This type of performance also uses narration accompanied by Na Phat music. All characters wear masks, performed by men only.

Khon Rong Nai - Is a mix between court dance drama Lakhon Nai, and Khon Na Cho. It is one of the few Khon theaters that traditionally allow women to perform. This type of Khon has non narrative dance parts, narration, music and Lakhon Nai style singing. Human characters in this type of Khon do not wear masks. This type of Khon can be performed both outdoors and on stage in front of a screen.

Khon Chak/ Khon Rong - Invented during King Rama V's reign, it was the first time a painted scenery was used as a backdrop. This type of theatre can only be performed indoors on a stage and uses singing, dancing and Na Phat music. The performance is divided into acts and scenes and the scenery and background will change according to the story.

Characters

There are four types of people in Khon, the performers, the singers, the orchestra and the chorus. The orchestra and singers are usually on the side of the stage and will perform according to the scenes in the story. The chorus do the narration and dialogue. The performers are the ones dancing and acting on stage, they play one of four characters, man, woman, monkey, or demon.

Phra Ram - The king of Ayutthaya, also the incarnation of the god Phra Narai. He has a strong sense of justice and seeks to eradicate all evil in his lands. The demon king Tosakanth is his sworn enemy. Originally in Kohn, all characters wore masks, but now the human characters and gods do not wear masks, instead, different roles wear different ornaments and costumes. The royals, like Phra Ram will wear more ornaments and have a more intricate headdress or crown.

Tosakanth - The incarnation of the demon gate keeper Nontuk. He is the king of Longka and has ten faces and twenty arms. He uses the power he has to eradicate anyone who displeases him. He is the sworn enemy of Phra Ram and the father of Sida. He and all his demon soldiers wear masks. They each have distinct features which help the audience tell them apart. Originally, in Kohn, the wives and daughters of demons also wore masks, however, nowadays, they have discarded the masks and the features are painted onto their faces instead.

Sida - Phra Ram's beautiful and loyal wife, Tosakanth and Montho's daughter. She is the incarnation of the goddess Laksami. Originally she wore a mask, but now she only wears makeup and extravagant and distinctive ornaments to help the audience identify her. In the past she was played by men, but now she can be played by performers of either gender.

Hanuman - Phra Ram's monkey general, also the one who slays Tosakanth in the end. He is the son of the god of the wind, and is a loyal, intelligent and humorous friend. He and his monkey soldiers all wear masks. He is the one with the most distinctive features as to help the audience identify him.

Masks & Makeup

Traditionally in Khon theatre, all the characters except goddesses wear masks, however, overtime, the human characters have stopped wearing masks in order for the difference between man, animal and demon to be more distinctive. The masks in Khon theatre are made of a special kind of paper called 'Koi', and rice flour. Gold leaves, ornaments and buffalo hide is used to make ears, teeth and other decoration. Khon masks are full masks that cover both the front and back of the performer's head. it covers the mouth so the actor cannot speak. Instead, the chorus narrates the scene and does the dialogue.



Demon Masks - There are over a hundred demon masks, each unique with different features and expressions. Demon masks are usually painted red, white, green or blue. The features are highlighted using contrasting colors. There can be two types of eyes and two types of mouths. Bulging eyes or crocodile eyes. Bulging means they are wide open protrude while crocodile means they are partially closed. The mouths can be clamping or snarling. All demon masks show teeth, they are either curling tusk canines or straight canines. Status is shown using the height of their crown. The demon king Tosakanth has a three tiered crown, green face, bulging eyes, snarling red mouth and curled tusk-like canines. The face is highlighted with blue and gold lines and is repeated on all four sides of the mask to represent his ten faces.



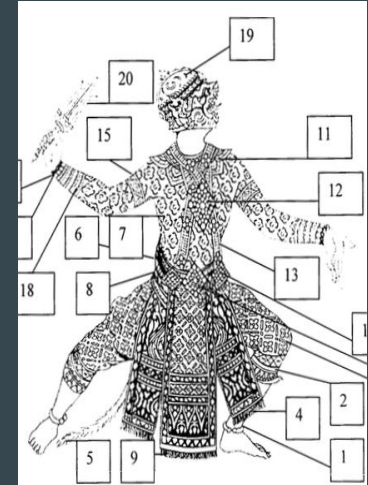
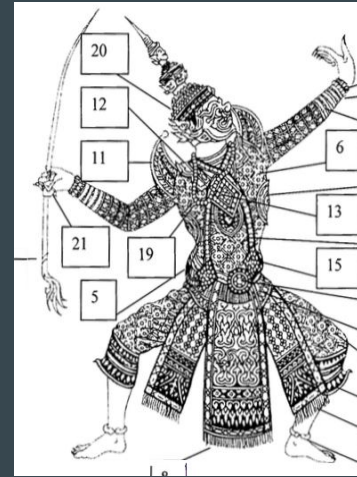
Monkey Masks - There are around thirty to forty monkey masks in total. The color of their mask represents their parentage, the son of a god of fire would have a red face, while a son of the god of water would have blue. All the monkeys have bulging eyes, but their mouths can be open or closed. Their crowns show their status and there are seven types of headdresses for the monkeys. The Yodbat crown is worn by the two monkey kings, the YodChai crown is worn by one of the generals. The higher and more intricate the crown, the higher the rank. Hanuman has a white face with green and pink highlights. Though he only wears a ring around his head, he is a very special and important character. Hanuman has teeth, a trait mostly carried only by demons, he also has a jewel in his mouth showing his parentage, the god of the wind. He can fly and has another jewel on his forehead symbolizing his inner power.



Makeup - Nowadays, all human characters do not wear masks, instead, makeup is used. Humans have a more natural look with bright and sharp colors highlighting their features while the wives and daughters of demons have patterns drawn onto their faces in blue, black or green. Humans are also defined by their costumes and headdresses which show their character, status, rank and relationship with other characters.

Costumes

Khon theatre costumes are intricately made and are made to be as traditionally accurate as possible. All of the actors perform barefoot. Overall the costumes have the same shape, style and structure, but the details, designs and colors on the costumes are very different and vary from character.



Male Human Characters - Mostly wear traditional Thai clothes. For royalty, that includes, a loincloth, breeches, a sash, a jeweled belt and a tight jacket paired with countless rings bangles, anklets and most importantly, the headdress, which states the status of the character. The costumes for royalty are mostly bright colors with golden string embroidery with jewels and stones sown in. The costumes are often handmade and can cost a fortune.

Female Human Characters - Dress similarly to the male characters except they wear a skirt fashioned from a cloth with a scarf around her neck. They wear more accessories than the male characters especially on their necks and wrists. Their costumes are mostly colored pink, orange, yellow or white with strips of green. Almost everything they wear are embroidered with jewels and stones set into the fabric.

Male Demon Characters - The costumes for demons are made to display strength and ferocity so they tend to have a darker color and have sharper patterns and shapes. The color of a demon's costume often also matches the color of the demon's mask. Though the costume itself does not show the character's personality and background, the demons will sometimes hold weapons to help the audience see who the demon is and the relations the demon has with other characters.

Male Monkey characters - The monkey characters have less extravagant masks and headdresses. They wear comparatively simpler clothing with a color that matches the animal's original fur color or a color that is close to the color of the mask. Though the monkey's costumes are embroidered, they do not have as many jewels and stones set in and the patterns are much more simpler. The monkeys also carry weapons at times to state their personality and background.

Staging

Different kinds of Khon can be and are performed in different places, however it is most commonly performed indoors on stage. In the past it was only performed in the royal palace, but now there are performances held by the national theatre of Thailand and outside the palace for tourists and those who are interested.



Khon Chak - Most common type of performance nowadays, the first type of Khon to use a colored scenery as a backdrop. Was invented during king Rama V's reign. This type of Khon is only performed on stage indoors. The backdrop will change throughout the performance according to the story's development.



Khon Klang Plaeng - Is performed outdoors without a stage and uses the natural scenery as the backdrop. The actors will move around in a certain area and the orchestra will be on the side in a fenced area. The audience usually watches from the front.



Khon Nang Rao/ Khon Rong Nok - Is performed outdoors on a stage with a roof. Often accompanied by Pi Phat orchestra who play Na Phat music. The image shown is of a modern version where women are also allowed to perform. The audience sit in front of the stage and face the actors.

Connections and Transfers

I think that Khon is a very unique type of masked theatre. Like many others, it has become a dying art that is only performed in two places nowadays in Thailand, many younger generations have no interest in this art. Khon nowadays have little difference to traditional performances except women are allowed to perform, all masks, costume, music and dances are made and performed to be as historically and traditionally accurate as possible. I think that Khon is very aspiring because it has many distinct and unique features which, if used in our own performances, can make them much more interesting. I think that dance, music and especially acrobatics are good elements to add to our performances because it can make them much more interesting and lively, I think the audience would enjoy it a lot too. Khon has made me realize the effect good costumes, props and masks have on the audience, I think that beautiful and intricate costumes can really increase the visual experience and make the image more vivid and help bring the story and performance alive. In my next performance I think that we should combine elements of dance, music and acrobatics with elements of comedy and narration to make the performance as interesting as possible. I think that if these elements are combined, it can create a new type of theatre which allows the audience to have fun and relax.