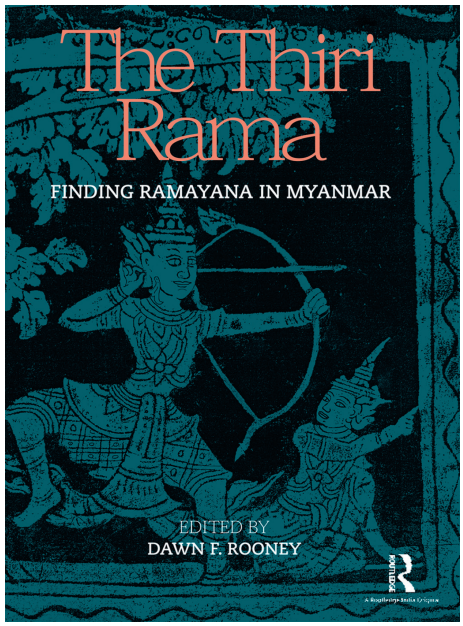
The Thiri Rama: Finding Ramayana in Myanmar edited by Dawn F. Rooney (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2017). ISBN: 9780367885656 (hard cover); 9781138229990 (paperback); 9781315313979 (e-book).



This important and splendid book contains an English translation of the Myanmar court drama of the Rama story (*Ramayana, Ramakien*), along with reproductions from an associated series of 347 illustrations, which were inscribed on sandstone plaques in Myanmar (Burma) around 1850. Although the Rama story was well known in Myanmar for centuries, the court drama developed only after members of the Siamese royal troupe were taken to Ava after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. This book is, thus, a fascinating contribution to the cultural aspect of the relations between Siam and Myanmar, and opens up opportunities for furthering comparative study of the Rama story in the Southeast Asian region.

Four people have contributed to the book. Tin Maung Kyi, who translated the text from Myanmar to English and organised rubbings of the plaques, is a descendant of the court players taken from Ayutthaya in 1767, and has described his family heritage in *JSS*.[1] U Thaw Kaung, the doyen of Myanmar cultural studies, instigated the project and contributes two articles on the background to the text and plaques, adding new material to an earlier account published in *JSS*.[2] U Aung Thwin contributes an article on the illustrations, focusing on the dress and masks of the characters in the Rama drama in Myanmar. Besides editing the book, Dawn Rooney contributes a summary of the story, an explanation of the *dramatis personae*, including matching of the Myanmar names to characters in the Indian *Ramayana*, and a very useful nine-page glossary.

The history of the text is not totally clear. After the Siamese players were taken to Ava in 1767, the "Yodaya" drama rapidly became popular. In 1796, the Myanmar Crown Prince appointed a commission of eight prominent persons and scholars to oversee the translation of Thai drama scripts into the local language. The scripts included the Rama story along with *Inao*, *Sankhapatta*, and *Ketsiri*. Probably they transcribed from oral recitations, including songs and music. The text, which appears in this book, seems to have been compiled by Nemyo Nataka Kyaw Khaung, who held the rank of "Thanya-thei-asu Sayei", the title of a court official involved with dance and drama. Some Myanmar scholars believe this text is the transcription made on the command of the 1796 commission. Others suggest that it is a recension made in the mid-19th century,

[1] Tin Maung Kyi, "Thai Descendants in Burma: A Thai Court Dancer's Family," *JSS* 89 (2001).

[2] U Thaw Kaung, "The *Ramayana* Drama in Myanmar," *JSS* 90 (2002).

after the original late 18th century manuscript had deteriorated and needed recopying. The Yodaya drama remained popular at the Myanmar royal court. The troupe numbered ninety-one artistes at the time the British captured Mandalay in 1886.

The Myanmar text used for the translation was first transcribed from fifty-four black *parabaik* in the Mandalay University Library and 1320 pages of manuscript, held in the Myanmar National Library. This text was edited by U Thaw Kaung and U Aung Thwin, and printed in Yangon in 2001–2 under the title, *Rama Pya-zat-taw-gyi* (The Great Royal Court Drama of Rama). Subsequently, it was decided to simplify this title to *Thiri Rama*, meaning "Rama the Glorious".

The origin of the plaques is also uncertain and fascinating. The 347 plaques were originally placed around the base of the Maha Law-ka Marazein Pagoda, situated in a sparsely populated area around 150 kilometres from Mandalay. The pagoda was built in the 1840s by U Neyya Dhamma, a head of the Myanmar Sangha, near his own birthplace. The illustrations are incised on fourteen-inch square plaques of sandstone, mined from the same area. Incising pictures on sandstone is not a quick or easy matter. The pagoda's inscription does not mention the plaques, their patron or their provenance. Illustrations of the Rama story are found elsewhere in Myanmar, but not on stone, and not in such an extensive series. Probably the illustrations of the series of 547 *Jātaka* stories, such as those at Bagan, provided the model and inspiration. Reflecting the difficulty of working in such a medium, many of the illustrations are relatively simple depictions of individual characters, and are primarily of interest as sources of knowledge about the dance poses and costuming used in the court drama. Several of the illustrations, however, are more ambitious, and often quite stunning. The creation of the plaques is probably connected in some way to the text, as the sequence follows the storytelling in the text, and the costuming reflects court drama. The plaques, which are now housed in a museum adjacent to the pagoda, were "rediscovered" only recently, prompting the project to compile this book.

The text translated in the *Thiri Rama* is a script for the masked drama known in Thailand as *khon*. The script is a narrative with occasional passages of dialogue. This script would have been chanted, sung, and recited as a voiceover while being interpreted by the performers. The Myanmar-language original is in a mixture of verse and prose. Tin Maung Kyi translated this into English, and Dawn Rooney edited the text, chaining the sentences into more comfortable paragraphs. The stage directions, including the insertion of songs, have been omitted, but otherwise this is a full rendering of the original. The result is highly readable.

The plot of the *Thiri Rama* clings fairly closely to the original Valmiki *Ramayana* from India, with the early parts of the story compressed, so that the emphasis is on the events from the marriage of Rama and Sita (called Thida in Myanmar), through the invasion of Lanka, to Rama's final return to the heavens. Although this is court drama, the telling has a folksy touch, which is very entertaining. Consider the passage where the Ravana character (called Dathagiri in Myanmar, Thotsakan in Thai), tries to wake up his giant brother, Kumbakarna (Kombikanna in Myanmar), from a six-month sleep to help with the fighting:

> The officers find Kombikanna in a deep sleep on a huge bed. His body is high like a hill, his nose as deep as a ravine, and he is snoring harshly like a storm. The officers try to arouse him by playing drums, gongs, and bells loudly. But, he still sleeps.… In yet another attempt to arouse him, a goat is driven into his huge ear but to no effect…

There is also a surprising, almost postmodern touch, not found in the Indian version. Towards the end when Sita-Thida and her two sons are banished to the forest, they are looked after by a rishi called Valmiki, the name traditionally ascribed to the compiler of the best known version from India. Valmiki proceeds to teach the two sons to recite the *Ramayana*. When the sons then recite this at court, Rama asks them: "Who is your father? Who composed this song? What is the text? What is the purpose behind the song? How many stories does it contain?" The son replies to Rama: "Your Majesty, this is not our work. It is that of Valmiki, the Great Hermit, who saw a vision of the future and composed it …. The verse was written 1,000 years before Your Majesty was born."

The publication of this text and illustrations opens up the possibilities for comparative study of the Rama story in Southeast Asia, and particularly of the cultural relations between Burma/Myanmar and Siam/Thailand. The visual part of this comparative project has quickly begun. Piriya Krairiksh visited the Maha Law-ka Marazein Pagoda, and presented the results in a talk at the Siam Society, soon to be published.[3] Piriya shows there are clear similarities between these plaques, incised in Myanmar around 1850, and the 152 stone reliefs of the Rama story, which King Rama III had placed on the exterior of the ordination hall at Wat Pho in 1835. The Siamese artistic conventions for portraying the Rama story and its characters are clearly replicated in the Myanmar plaques. However, the costuming has been modified to Myanmar court styles.

If the *Thiri Rama* text is descended from a script carried to Ava by the Ayutthaya war prisoners in 1767, then it opens up a tempting possibility. At present, no complete full-length Thai version of the Rama story is known to have survived from the Ayutthaya era, only selected scenes and episodes. As a result, the earliest and dominant version of the story is the *Ramakien* compiled under the auspices of King Rama I in 1797. As is well known, the Rama I version differs from the Valmiki *Ramayana* in several ways. Were these differences present in the Rama story in late Ayutthaya, or were they innovations by the First Reign court? Obviously, the *Thiri Rama* may have been modified after its arrival in Burma as the players adjusted the story to please a new audience. Still, the temptation to compare *Thiri Rama* and *Ramakien* is great.

One major difference between the *Ramakien* and the Valmiki *Ramayana* is the expansion of Hanuman's role and the modification of his character. In the *Ramakien*, Hanuman overshadows Rama. His birth is a grand scene in the preliminary section. He holds centre stage throughout the attack on Lanka. And he is a great womaniser with an impressive string of conquests. In *Thiri Rama*, Hanuman's role is very different

[3] Piriya Krairiksh, "The Rāmāyaṇa in Myanmar" at the Siam Society on 18 July 2019, and "Nineteenth-Century Sculpture of the Rāmāyaṇa in Myanmar and Thailand," *Journal of Liberal Arts* (Thammasat University), vol. 2 (July-December 2020).


Thida sits in a sala flanked by kneeling attendants


Rama, Thida, and Lakkhana in the forest


Hanuman takes the entire mountain back to Rama's camp


An orchestra plays music in an open-theatre boxing stadium

to the *Ramakien* and very similar to the Valmiki *Ramayana*. He does not appear until the fighting starts. His birth is recounted in a quick flashback. He is prominent in the fighting, but does not threaten Rama's top billing. He has no romantic dalliances at all. There is no trace of Rama I's Hanuman in the *Thiri Rama*.

More generally, the Valmiki *Ramayana*, *Thiri Rama* and *Ramakien* tell the same story, but each has a distinctive style and reflects a specific cultural inheritance. This can be illustrated by two key scenes.

At the start of the final act of the war over Lanka, Indrajit, the son and champion of Ravana (Dathagiri in Myanmar, Thotsakan in Thai) is killed, signalling the beginning of the end. The scene in which the death is reported to the father is a tense and dramatic moment. In the Valmiki *Ramayana*, Ravana flies into a rage, grabs a sword and intends to kill Sita in revenge, but is restrained by his courtiers. The scene reflects the action-

packed style of the *Ramayana*. In the *Ramakien*,[4] by contrast, Thotsakan delivers a formal eulogy for his son in epic style: "Oh, alas, my Itharachit your name renowned throughout the three worlds…. How could you lose to this adversarial foe? A waste of your strength in the lineage of *Phra Phrom*, with such proficient knowledge of archery, as well as the power to conquer in all directions. How could you lose to the might of humans who walk on the earth? Such ignominy and humiliation before everyone in the three worlds …." He then mobilises a massive army to avenge his son's death. The scene perfectly encapsulates the self-consciously epic style of the *Ramakien*. In the folksier *Thiri Rama*, the devastated father simply falls off his throne and has to be picked up by his courtiers.

The second example is in the famous scene where Rama and Sita meet again after Rama is victorious over Ravana, and Rama doubts her loyalty. In the Valmiki *Ramayana*, Sita senses that Rama has doubts about what happened to her in the ten months she was captive in Ravana's court. She decides to immolate herself like a *sati* widow on her husband's pyre. The god of fire protects her from the flames, and then Rama relents and welcomes her back. In the *Thiri Rama*, the scene is modified by elements found in the *Jātaka* tales. Rama explicitly and brutally declares: "I do not believe that you have been faithful and I do not want to make you my queen." Sita-Thida responds by swearing an oath of truth, a device used by the bodhisatta in several *Jātaka* tales: "I love no other man than Rama. If this is true, may the fire not burn but cool and cleanse me. If I lie may it burn me to death." The fire does not harm her, without any intervention by the gods. In the *Ramakien*, Rama does not openly accuse Sida of infidelity, but cruelly casts insinuations. In response, Sida says: "I would ask to prove by a trial of fire." Rama enthusiastically welcomes this. The scene becomes a law court where Sida is tried by one of the methods of judicial proof found in the Ayutthaya laws.

The *Thiri Rama* is a publication of major importance, beautifully executed, highlighting the close cultural relations between Myanmar and Siam, both in the past and the present day.

Chris Baker

[4] I am grateful to Frederick B. Goss for access to his full translation of the *Ramakien*.