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The Sutradhar and the Ringgit: A Study of Terms Related to the Early Puppet Theatres

by
Keith Rawlings

Victor H. Mair, Editor
Sino-Platonic Papers
Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305 USA
vmair@sas.upenn.edu
www.sino-platonic.org

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The Sutradhar and the Ringgit:
A Study of Terms Related to the Early Puppet Theatres¹

Keith Rawlings
Montreal, Canada

ABSTRACT

Certain words in Sanskrit, Old Javanese, and Ancient Greek that appear in centuries-old texts are thought by many scholars to be early references to puppetry, leading to certain theories about the history of that art. These particular words from antiquity and the Middle Ages and their interpretations and translations underpin currently received views about the antiquity of puppetry. This paper discusses the history of the related scholarship, examines varying interpretations of the words, and suggests other possible meanings, leading to questions about their interpretation. I hope to show that, because words in earlier eras of a language may have different interpretations from those accepted later, texts and the scholarship that relies on them should be re-examined in the light of current knowledge.

Keywords: puppetry, shadow plays, origins, languages, translations, *sutradhara*, *neurospasta*, *chayanataka*, *wayang*, *ringgit*, *beneditos*

¹ This paper is based on my article of the same title that first appeared in *Puppetry for All Times, Papers Presented at the Bali Puppetry Seminar 2013*, edited and published by Prof. Dato' Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof in 2015. The author wishes to express his gratitude to the late Prof. Yousof for having granted his kind permission to use that work as the basis for the expanded version published here. In addition, the author wishes to thank Beate Kraus, Maya Muratov, and Philippe Nolin for their invaluable help with the writing of this essay.

SUTRADHARA

In his 1900 address and publication, “The Home of the Puppet Play” (translated into English from German by Mildred C. Tawney in 1902), German Indologist Richard Pischel led the way to the commonly held idea that India’s puppetry is thousands of years old. Pischel based his thesis on a translation of the Sanskrit caste term *sutradhara* as “threadholder,” a term supposed by Pischel to be the word used for a puppet player in the tenth century in India, according to Ridgeway (1915: 161, 163) and Pischel (1900/1902: 9).

Ridgeway and Pischel were referring to Rajasekhara’s *Balaramayana*, written in the tenth century. A *sutradhara* is mentioned in that work as follows:

Then I sent for a machinist, Visarada, the first pupil of Maya, the father of Mandodari and the teacher of art and magic, and have respectfully set him to make an illusory image of Sita. It has been made by him to coax Ravana [multi-headed demon king in the *Ramayana*], and it is announced that the machine-made Janaki, whose body of wood moves by a contrivance devised by the carpenter [*sutradhara*] and who talks by a Sarika bird placed in the mouth, will beguile Lanka’s lord. (Sastrum: 105)

This use of the word *sutradhara*, translated as “carpenter,” who here fashions the illusory Sita – likely some sort of magical device or automaton – possibly means that we should understand this tenth-century *sutradhara* as the carver of the device, rather than as a puppeteer.

Further, according to Pischel:

From this fact [referring to the translation “threadholder” for *sutradhara*], as early as 1879, a native scholar of European education, Shankar Pandurang Pandit by name, drew the reasonable conclusion that performances by puppets and paper figures must have preceded those by human beings. Otherwise, it is impossible to conceive how the term *sutradhara*, i.e., “threadholder,” could be applied to a stage-manager, who has nothing whatever to do with threads. (Pischel 1900/1902: 9)

The meaning of "stage-manager" or "director" for *sutradhara* appears many times in *The Natyashastra* (I: 67–68, V: 28–30, V: 167, XXXV: 73–74, XXXV: 95–96), which is a Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts (c. 200 BCE – 200 CE). This is several hundred years before any definite use of the term for a puppet player (M. Ghosh: 11, 80, 97, 547, 550). But the term *sutradhara* existed even earlier than the *Natyashastra*, in contexts that did not refer to puppetry at all, or even to anything theatrical. It referred rather to an architect or carpenter.

Professor Victor H. Mair quotes from a fifth-century CE Sanskrit text (in translation), *The Brahman-vaivarta Puranam*, a discussion of the theory and origin of castes "where the events related ... supposedly refer to the Vedic period more than two thousand years before" (Mair 1988/1996: 216, n. 30).

Those who were begotten by the Vaisyas upon S'udra women were styled Karanas; and those who were begotten by the Brahmanas upon the Vaisyas women were Amvasthas. Afterwards, Viswakarma [a Hindu god] begat 9 sons on a S'udra woman. They are named as follows: Malakara, Karmakara, S'ankhakra, Kuvindaka, Kumbhakara, Kamsa-Kara, Sutradhara, Chitrakara and Swarnakara. All of them are illegitimate and expert in architecture; but out of these, the first six are particularly accomplished in architecture and the last three being cursed by a Brahmana became unholy and were deemed incompetent by the S'astras to offer sacrifices. Any one who engages them for the purpose of presiding in matters relating to sacrifice is also an outcaste; in other words, he is rendered unholy. (Rajendra Nath Sen: 30)

An excellent outline of the status and professions of the *sutradhara* over the centuries is given by M. K. Dhavalikar:

The epigraphical evidence ... shows that *sutradhara* was the most important artisan in ancient times. But his position began to deteriorate later. With the increasing use of timber in early mediaeval construction, the *sutradhara* perhaps had to concentrate on

woodwork. This probably led the authors of the Silpasastra texts² to brand him as an artisan who was well versed in carpentry. It is significant that the word *sutara* for carpenter in Marathi is derived from the Sk. *sutradhara*. The Prakrit form of the word – *sutta-ara* – occurs in an inscription in the Kutubuddin's mosque at Bijapur in Mysore state. This only shows how the greatest artist was reduced to the position of an ordinary carpenter in the course of time. The word *sutradhara* is no more to be heard; the artist has met the same fate as that of the stage manager in modern Indian drama. (Dhavalikar: 220)

Sutra means a string or cord and was likely a reference to the measuring-string used by the architect (i.e., *sutradhara*) in laying out temple foundations.

Sutradhara, which also means 'string-puller' [actually 'string-holder'], is used to refer to the head of a theatre company, the stage manager and the director of the actors, but the word has wider meaning, referring above all to an architect who measures with a 'string'. (Savarese: 469)

Radhavallabh Tripathi, in his article "Sutradhara" in the publication *Kalatattvakosa: A Lexicon of Fundamental Concepts of the Indian Arts*, volume II (1992), says:

The word *sutradhara* stands for the person holding the *sutra*. *Sutra* indicates different meanings in different contexts, viz., a thread, stringline, a cord, a fibre, the string of a puppet, a short rule or precept, a formula and the work comprising aphorisms or rules on any subject. In general, *sutradhara* is the person who has the say in any context, being at the helm of affairs.

² These are first millennium ce Indian texts concerning rules for architecture and other arts.

We thus find that etymologically, the term *sutradhara* covers a very wide perspective, but in practice it has been related to the world of drama and technical acumen more often. (Tripathi 1992: 321)

Tripathi mentions the *suta* class or caste that was known as far back as the *Yajur Veda* (XXX.6), dated c. 1200–800 BCE. The *Yajur Veda* "prescribes that persons engaged in various professions should be invited to perform their respective jobs of the *yajna* ceremony, *suta* and *sailusa* having been cited there at the very outset in a fairly long list" (Tripathi 1992: 322).

A person belonging to the *suta* class could also be engaged for construction of *yajnavedi* [fire altars]. The *vedi* had to be erected strictly in accordance with the measurements prescribed for it. A *sutra* or cord was used for measurements. [...] [The] *sutradhara* responsible for construction of the theatre-house himself held the *sutra* or the cord for measurement and started measuring the land at the prescribed auspicious occasion. (Tripathi 1992: 322)

The *Natyashastra* in II.27 says: "One should spread out a white thread at the time of the sixth lunar asterism" (quoted in Tripathi 1992: 323).

Some puppetry historians have said modern Indian puppeteers are called *sutradhara* (see below), but this is contested by Jonathan R. GoldbergBelle (in the case of shadow players in Andhra Pradesh and portions of Karnataka):

Each troupe is led by an elder male who was, in turn, the son or nephew of a previous troupe leader. Where this leader was given a title, it was always Bhagavatar and not Sutradhara as has been stated by previous scholars. (GoldbergBelle: 25)

GoldbergBelle lists these "previous scholars": Contractor, *Vijnanasarvasvamu*, S. P. Reddy, Radhakrsnamurti, and Sorenson. On this topic I will discuss only two of these authors: Meher

Contractor and Niels Roed Sorenson; the others' texts are written in Telugu, a South Indian language unknown to me, so I cannot comment on them.

When we examine Meher Contractor's article in the June 1968 issue of MARG, we see that a *sutradhar* is mentioned several times as the puppeteer (Contractor: 2, 3, 4, 14, 20, 32), and the specific Indian puppet traditions she mentions concerning this are in Karnataka (*Yakshagana* string puppets), Orissa (*Ravana Chhaya* shadow puppets), and Andhra (*Tholu Bommalata* shadow puppets).

The *Yakshagana* string puppeteers are actually called *bhagavatar*, according to *Traditional and Folk Puppets of the World* (Malkin: 81–82). A Sangeet Natak Akademi publication of 1990 says: "As in the Yaksagana human theatre, the Bhagavata sings the cantos, and the dialogue between the various characters is improvised by the puppeteers concerned" (K. S. Upadhyaya: 8).

Regarding Karnataka, the following description is from Valentina Stache-Rosen:

The shadow players of Karnataka belong to the caste of *Killekyatas*, who are also called *Killiketar* or *Killiket*, whereas further North, in Bombay district, the name *Katabu* or *Katbu* was used. The caste of the Killekyatas was divided into two groups, the *minahidiyu* or *burude* caste and the *bombeyadis* or *bombeyatadavar*. The former were fishermen, the latter puppeteers [sic]. This group was again divided into *dodda* and *cikka bombeyatadavar*, the major and minor showmen. The major showmen had a bigger stage, on which the performer and the orchestra could sit. All members of the group, including the women, were literate. The minor showmen, the *cikka bombeyatadavar*, had a smaller stage, behind which only one performer could squat. A woman or a man and a woman explained the play and accompanied it on a drum or some other instrument. (Stache-Rosen: 46)

In the Orissa (Odisha) *Ravana Chhaya* shadow theatre tradition, the main singer or interpreter is called *gayak*, not *sutradhar* (Ghosh and Banerjee: 72). As mentioned previously, in Andhra the troupe leader is not usually called *sutradhar* but instead *bhagavatar* (GoldbergBelle: 25), and the puppeteers are called *Bommalatavar* or *Charmanatakulu* (Sekhar: 26).

Neils Roed Sorensen's 1975 article also says, I think erroneously, that the puppeteers of the

Andhra Pradesh shadow puppet show tradition, *Tolu Bommalu Kattu*, are called *sutradhars* (Sorensen: 3, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15).

Similarly, Mel Helstien in his chapter on India in *Asian Puppets: Wall of the World*, has this to say: "The Rajasthani puppet troupe generally consists of the puppeteer (*sutradhar*) who works the figures, an assistant (a son, brother, or other relative), a *bhagavat* [narrator-singer], musicians, and the puppeteer's wife who sings and plays the harmonium" (Helstien: 18). You will note that Helstien calls them *sutradhars*, but they are known as Bhats, as will be shown below.

In Rajasthan, these string puppeteers are famous and popular with tourists. According to Sharmila Chandra, "The *Bhats* [string puppeteers] and *Charanas* [praise-poets] are both held in high regard in the society. Both these communities are invited to folklore festivals and are hired by the tourism industry to narrate epics and history by means of puppetry and storytelling" (Chandra: 30). Contractor describes the *bhat* community thusly:

The most alive of the still existing puppets are the Rajasthani ones, known as the *Kathputli* or string puppets. These are to be found in the North-West of India in the dry desert plains of Rajasthan. The people who make these puppets and operate them belong to the Bhatt community, who hail from Kupchman, Marwar. These Nat (dance) Bhatts, as they are known, lead a nomadic life, travelling with their performances all over the country, most of the year round. But in the monsoon season they return to cultivate their dry parched lands and to renovate their puppets. (Contractor: 6)

In the Palghat region of Kerala, the lead performers and reciters of the Kerala shadow puppet play (*tol pava kuttu*) are called *pulavars* (poet-scholars). Sreedevi Nair explains: "The lead narrator of *Tholpava Koothu*, who recites verses from Kamban [a twelfth-century version of the *Ramayana*] and interprets them, is respectfully called *Pulavar*. This title, which means 'scholar,' requires the performer to answer any question put to him by the respondent who makes a pair with him during the narration" (Nair: 175).

I believe that in India the puppeteers seldom called themselves *sutradhars*. I speculate that those among modern puppet players who did were very much influenced by the widespread scholarly

writings on the ancient history of Indian puppetry, so that they on occasion called themselves *sutradhars*, believing that a remote Sanskrit past would lend their profession more prestige. Alternatively, the historians and writers themselves perhaps assumed that all puppeteers should be called *sutradhars*, based on the supposed “string-holder” connection to ancient Indian drama and much previous scholarship attempting to show a glorious classical past.

Certain nineteenth-century inscriptions may perhaps have mentioned puppeteers by name. M. N. Sarma, writing in a 1990 issue of *Sangeet Natak*, reports that there exists

...a Telengana inscription recovered from Guduru in Warangal district (known as the Guduru inscription). It mentions the puppeteer’s art and especially the names of “Sutradhari Kommajanaha, Baraha,” indicating it is an inscription ordered to be written by Sutradhari (Puppeteer) Kommoji. Similarly the Panugallu inscription contains references to another Sutradhari Brahmoju (or Brahmoji). (Sarma: 18)

Before this, in 1130 Saka (1208 CE), Sarma located another Telugu inscription that “... shows that in that year Vippararula Kondapa and Gundapa donated a village to the puppeteer Sutradhari Bommalayya” (Sarma: 18).

However, I am skeptical that these Sutradhari were puppeteers. In looking at the Sutradhari Bommalayya reference one would think that the last part of the name refers to a puppeteer, because today in the Telugu language puppets are called *bommalata* (doll, puppet). However, an explanation of this inscription that I found in a 1948 publication says: “On a stone lying in a field at Mukkamal, Guntur Taluk, Guntur district. S[aka] 1130. States that Vipparula Kondapa-Nayaka and Gundapa-Nayaka of Durjayanvavaya made gifts of land to certain temples and also to certain persons, presumably servants of the temples, for the merit of Ketaraju” (Pantulu and Rao: 125). Could “servants of the temples” really be puppeteers honored with land? It is more likely they were persons who were carpenters and/or those involved in the building of the temple (*Sutradhari*). Further, Bommalayya may only be a family name, not necessarily the profession of that person. Speaking of the shadow theatre tradition of Andhra called *Tholu Bommalata*, Sekhar says:

There was a village in Anantapur District named after this art itself as Bommalatapalle. Apparently, the *Bommalata* experts should have settled in this village at one time. Now, there is none in this village who knows the art and it is reported that some families who knew this art and were residing in this village had left the village years back and nobody knows where they had gone. (Sekhar: 17)

So it appears that the person named Sutradhari Bommalayya in this inscription might have had no experience with any sort of puppetry.

Outside India, the Indonesian word *sutradara* currently refers to movie and show directors (Krishna: 104). Indeed, *An Indonesian-English Dictionary* defines *sutradara* as a movie or play director (Echols and Shadily: 354).

Some years ago, on reading George Foucart's article "Divination (Egyptian)" in Volume 4 of the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, new insights into the origins of the term *sutradhara* were presented to me. In that article Foucart mentions that in ancient Egypt there existed a ritual term meaning to found a temple – which he translates as "holds the string." The following are Foucart's words (he is speaking here of mechanized oracle statues): "in many other circumstances besides interrogations proper, the statue seizes someone, or 'holds the string' (the ritual term for founding a temple), etc." (Foucart: 793).

But I did not find anything further on this "ritual term," until now. It seems Foucart is referring to a practice known in ancient Egypt as the "ceremony of the stretching of the cord," called *pedj-sesh(r)*. The most complete descriptions of this ceremony appear in the book *In Search of Cosmic Order: Selected Essays on Egyptian Archaeoastronomy*, edited by Juan Antonio Belmonte and Mosalam Shaltout, 2009. The article therein is in Chapter 7: "Unveiling Seshat: New Insights into the Stretching of the Cord Ceremony," by Juan Antonio Belmonte, Miguel Angel Molinero Polo, and Noemi Miranda.

This ceremony in ancient Egypt goes back to the First Dynasty (3100 – 2890 BCE). I quote from the article:

The antiquity of the Egyptian ritual of the "stretching of the cord" can be traced back to the 1st Dynasty. [...] We know that the "stretching of the cord" was used for the

orientation of Egyptian sacred constructions and the scenes represented in several temples are sometimes accompanied by texts with astronomical references. (Belmonte et al.: 197)

Indeed, there exist many images of this ritual in ancient Egyptian art. In each, the king always appears on the left, standing and pulling toward himself with his left hand a pole or stake held vertically to the ground; in his other hand is a stick or club that seems to have been used to hammer the stake into the ground. Opposite him is the goddess Seshat, who, facing the king, is performing the same tasks. Each of the two stakes is wrapped around halfway up by a cord or rope, which is being stretched.

The entire ritual is described thus:

1. The king departs from his palace;
 2. The king arrives at the site of the new temple;
 3. The king and the goddess Seshat “stretch” a cord around two poles and define the temple axis. This operation is called *pedj-sesh(r)*, stretching of the cord;
 4. The king digs the foundation trench down to the water table;
 5. The king moulds four bricks for each of the four corners of the temple;
 6. The king pours sand in the foundation trench, thus providing a compact surface for the construction;
 7. The king places a number of stone or metal plaques at the four corners of the temple;
 8. The king moves into place the first stone blocks;
 9. The king purifies the completed temple by throwing natron all around the building, represented as a small shrine;
 10. The king presents the temple to the god. Once more, the temple is represented as a miniature.
- (Belmonte et al.: 197–198)

I theorize that this could be the origin of the term *sutradhara* in India. It may further prove that *sutradhara* originally meant temple architect/carpenter, because of the earlier meanings of the word and the greater antiquity of the Egyptian ceremony; that there is a connection between the two appears probable (more on this below). It seems therefore that the usage of “string-holder” for a puppeteer was

a more modern development. The developments of meanings for *sutradhara*, in the order of their historicity, are: first, temple architect/carpenter; second, theatre-director; and lastly, puppeteer. This shows that, in fact, puppetry is not the oldest form of theatre, from which the human theatre developed; it is entirely the other way around. This also shows that puppetry did not necessarily originate in India, because the term "string-holder," the evidence for this theory, was originally a temple architect or carpenter and not a puppeteer.

We now return to the *Natyasastra* in order to show that there could be a connection between the Egyptian ceremony of the string and one similarly used in measuring theatre building sites in ancient India. I have earlier mentioned part II.27 of the *Natyasastra*, and I now quote extensively from that section, called "Measurement of the site."

II. 27a–28: The ground being cleared, one should measure out [the building site]. Under the asterism Pusa (*Cancri*) he should spread [for measurement] a piece of white string which may be made of cotton, wool, Munja grass or bark of some tree. (M. Ghosh: 21–22)

The person doing this is elsewhere called in the *Natyasastra* the "expert [builder]," the *sutradhara*, in II.24 (M. Ghosh: 21). Next, we go to the section called "Taking up the string."

II.28–31: Wise people should prepare for this purpose a string which is not liable to break. When the string is broken into two [pieces] the patron [of the dramatic spectacle] will surely die. When it is broken into three a political disorder will occur in the land, and it being broken into four pieces the master of the dramatic art will perish, while if the string slips out of the hand some other kind of loss will result. Hence it is desired that the string should always be taken and held with [great] care. Beside this the measurement of ground for the playhouse should be carefully made.

II.32–33: And at a favorable moment which occurs in a (happy) Tithi during its good part (*su-karana*) he should get the auspicious day declared after the Brahmins have

been satisfied [with gifts]. Then he should spread the string after sprinkling on it the propitiating water. (M. Ghosh: 22)

Note especially that II.28–31 says the string should be “*held with great care*” by the “string-holder,” the *sutradhara*.

NEUROSPASTA

The term used for puppets in Ancient Greece could further suggest the relatedness (or un-relatedness) of these two words: *sutradhara* in Sanskrit, meaning string-holder, and *neurospastai* in Ancient Greek, meaning string-puller (Inverarity: 172).

Henryk Jurkowski, a puppet historian, explains: “The Greek word for the puppet, *neurospaston*, was a juxtaposition of two words: neuro, adopted in all European languages as meaning nerve, and spaston, which remains in English in the modern form, spastic (involuntary movement)” (Jurkowski: 43).

The earliest occurrence, as far as we can tell, of the word *neurospasta* was by Herodotus, in his *Histories, Book II, Euterpe*, written c. 430 BCE, where he mentions *neurospasta agalmata*, “statues moved by sinews [strings]” (Inverarity: 168). These figures seem to have been used by women in processions. Says Herodotus: “Instead of a phallus, women carried from village to village figures one ell high, whose sex organs were as big as the other members of their bodies and which were moved by means of a string” (Jurkowski: 37).

Another very early occurrence of *neurospasta* appears in Xenophon’s *Symposium* (The Banquet), which was written about 380 BCE. It gives “an account of an evening in Athens about forty years before,” therefore 420 BCE (Xenophon: 530). The context here is a banquet with an entertainment offered by a Syracusan and his trained troupe of dancers and actors. In this text, the Syracusan is having a discussion with Socrates. I quote from the translation by O. J. Todd:

Soc[rates] “... And so you have a right to be proud of your flesh if of nothing else.”

Syr[acusan]. "And yet that is not the basis for my pride."

Soc. "What is, then?"

Syr. "Fools, in faith. They give me a livelihood by coming to view my marionettes [actually *neurospasta*]." (Xenophon : 592–593)

Herodotus' references to *neurospasta* (string-pulled figures) may not be puppets as we now think of them, i.e., little figures moved by strings by an entertainer for the amusement of spectators. He seems to be talking of processional statues. Also, even if Xenophon is using string-pulled figures as a metaphor for his dancers and actors (as some say), we can believe that string-operated figures as entertainment existed. Actual puppets are a distinct possibility.

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) talks of moving figures many times in his works, and the word he uses frequently is *automata*. In his *De Motus Animalium* (*On the Movements of Animals*), Book 7, he gives us some details of how the *automata* were moved.

The movements of animals may be compared with those of automatic puppets [*automata*], which are set going [i.e., set in motion] on the occasion of a tiny movement; the levers are released, and strike the twisted strings against one another; or with the toy wagon. For the child mounts on it and moves it straight forward, and then again it is moved in a circle owing to its wheels being of unequal diameter (the smaller acts like a centre on the same principle as the cylinders). Animals have parts of a similar kind, their organs, the sinewy tendons to wit and the bones; the bones are like the wooden levers in the *automaton*, and the iron; the tendons are like the strings, for when these are tightened or [re]leased movement begins. However, in the *automata* and the toy wagon there is no change of quality, though if the inner wheels became smaller and greater by turns there would be the same circular movement set up. (Aristotle/Farquharson: Part 7)

Note the ancient Greek word *automata* has the same root and meaning as today's "automaton" and "automata" in English.

In his *Metaphysics A.*, Aristotle also uses another word, *thaumata* (wonder, marvel), to refer to mechanical devices and automatons, the same as does Plato (428–348 BCE) in *The Republic: Allegory of the Cave* (Bowe: *passim*).

Subsequent ancient Greek and Roman authors mention marionettes and like devices in fairly obvious ways. For instance, in the first century BCE, Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus), in his *Satires*, Book 2, Satire 7, says: "You are controlled, like a wooden puppet, by somebody else's strings (*duceris ut nervis alienus mobile lignum*)" (Byrom: 36). Then we have Athenaeus (born c. 200 CE), who wrote the following in his *Deipnosophists*, Book 1: "And the Athenians gave Pothimos the puppet-master [*neurospastes*] the very stage on which Euripides had exhibited his noble dramas" (Yonge: 32).

Another author from antiquity using the word *neurospasta* (and *thaumata*) is Philo Judaeus (c. 10 BCE–50 CE) in his *Quaestiones et solutions in Genesin*, Book 3, Sec 48: "For as in the puppet show (*thaumati*) all those things which are visible are inanimate while that which works the puppets (*neurospastei*) is invisible" (Byrom: 9).

Michael Byrom in *The Puppet Theatre in Antiquity* says: "In his [i.e., Clement of Alexandria, 2nd c. CE] *Stromateis* [Bk 4, Chap 11] we find: "Truly the judge in his authority should hold his opinion, and not be pulled by strings like inanimate puppets (*neurospastoumenon*) set in motion only by external causes" (Byrom: 6).

In the second century CE, Epictetus' metaphysics were transcribed by a pupil, Arrian; he himself did not write. In *Simplicii Commentarius In Epicteti Enchiridion* Book 1, Chapter 1, we have: "But the rational soul itself when controlled by the bodily senses, changes into a mindless puppet (*neurospasteitai*) as if drawn impulsively by strings and therefore loses much of its freedom and power" (Byrom: 9).

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, who was an Emperor of Imperial Rome and lived in the second century CE, wrote in his *Meditations*, Book 6, Sec. 28 (in Greek): "Death is a release from the attractions of the senses, from the passions that make us into marionettes (*neurospastoumena*), from wanderings of the mind and the tyranny of the flesh" (Byrom: 9–10).

After this, in Greece and Rome from the third century to the fifth, in the main, words other than

neurospasta were used for puppets, such as *sigillario* (small statue), "images with cords," *catenatio mobilis* (moveable limbs), etc. (Byrom: *passim*).

In A. R. Philpott's *Dictionary of Puppetry*, "Neurospastos" is defined as a "Greek word for 'puppet.'" In addition he notes "there is no precise evidence that the method of control was similar to that of the modern marionette; some of the small jointed terracotta dolls (female) found in Athenian tombs (*neurospasta*) have the vestige of a head rod, a miniature version of that of the large Sicilian puppets still in use. Archaeologists may yet come up with a full-size puppet and miraculously preserved 'cords'" (Philpott: 169–170). This was written in 1969; today we can refer to actual specimens, and these possibly could demonstrate their existence in ancient Greece and Rome.

This possible archaeological proof of the existence of marionettes in antiquity can be found in the appendix of Maya B. Muratov's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, entitled "From the Mediterranean to the Bosphorus: Terracotta Figurines with Articulated Limbs" (Muratov 2005). Presented there for the first time is a preliminary publication of a large marionette-like articulated figure made of terracotta. This indeed might be Philpott's hoped-for archaeological discovery. Muratov also deals with this figure in her article (Muratov, forthcoming).³ The figure, which is fully articulated and could be worked from above by the attached strings, was discovered in a private collection in New York. The specimen has been known since at least 1970 but never mentioned in any publication. Moreover, apparently there are ten other such articulated figures in a public collection in Munich, Germany. The provenance of this group has not been established thus far. A monograph on all eleven figures is currently being prepared by Dr. Muratov.

In the preliminary publication, the New York puppet is described in some detail:

The piece is 53.3 cm high and represents a standing male figure, composed of ten articulated parts, including the body, a head with a separate moveable lower jaw, two arms, two separately molded hands, two legs, and an oversized phallos. All the body parts are hand-modeled out of yellow-pinkish clay. The surface is covered with a brick-red slip. Marks left by a modeling stick are visible on the exterior. All parts are solid,

³ A draft has kindly been shared with me by Dr. Muratov.

which makes the puppet rather heavy. The eyes of the puppet were once accentuated with black paint, traces of which are still noticeable. The figure underwent some minor restorations – right foot, right hand, and the chin are modern. (Muratov 2005: 179)

The issue of dating the New York figure is also brought up: “[This] large male figure has no known parallels thus far and its origin remains unknown. Dating singular objects is notoriously difficult – as nothing could be done based on style or iconography. However, two independent thermoluminescence tests yielded a chronological window between the 2nd century BCE and the 3rd century CE” (Muratov: forthcoming).

From the above evidence we can conclude that the Greek term for puppets did not originate from the Sanskrit term (or vice versa). The Greeks’ word for marionettes came from actual experience with marionettes and automata, and the Sanskrit term originally came from India’s experience with architecture, carpentry, and the human theatre, and may have travelled from First Dynasty Egypt.

CHAYANATAKA

We now move on to the Sanskrit term *chayanataka*, which is also used inconsistently and perhaps erroneously.

The precise meaning of the Sanskrit term *chayanataka* (some Medieval Sanskrit plays have this designation) has been an ongoing controversy among theatre scholars for more than a hundred years. Because a handful of Sanskrit plays are described as *chayanatakas* in their colophons, there has been much discussion as to what exactly is meant by such a classification. Many scholars have sought to prove that it meant “shadow-play” and consequently that India possessed shadow plays in ancient times and that the shadow play must have been a type of classical Sanskrit drama. Since the primary meanings of “chaya” are “(granting) shade,” “shadow,” and “reflection” (Monier-Williams: 406), and a “nataka” is a play, the proposal that *chayanataka* could be translated as “shadow play” is not impossible.

Professor S. K. De's "The Problem of the Mahanataka," from 1931, gives us a good summary of all the controversies up to that point.⁴

Although it has been held by Pischel and others to connote a shadow-play, the meaning of the term *chaya-nataka*, which is nowhere connected with the *Mahanataka* but which is used in some other plays alleged to be of the irregular type, is uncertain. It is not recognized in any Sanskrit work on Dramaturgy as designating a dramatic *genre*, but several dramatic compositions like the *Dharmabhyudaya* of Meghaprabhacarya, the *Dutangada* of Subhata, the *Ramabhyudaya*, *Subhadra-parinaya* and *Pandavabhyudaya* of Ramadeva-Vyasa, have been designated as *chaya-nataka* in their respective *prastavanas* or colophons. Wilson held that the term *chaya-nataka* might mean 'the shade or outline of a drama' and expressed the opinion that the *Dutangada* "was perhaps intended to introduce a spectacle of the drama and procession, as it is otherwise difficult to conceive what object its extreme conciseness could have effected." Levi appears to leave the question open, but remarks [I translate Levi from French]: "Their name is obscure; one would be tempted to explain it by 'shadow drama' if the rules of grammar were not opposed to this analysis of the compound *chaya-nataka*."⁵ They admit at least a related and almost identical explanation: 'drama in the state of shadow.'" Rajendralala Mitra describes Vitthala's so-called *chaya-nataka* as "an outline of a drama" and suggests that the *Dutangada* "was evidently intended to serve as an *entr'act* to a theatrical exhibition." Other suggested but rejected explanations are "a play that is but a shadow, a play in shadow, i.e., a miniature play." Having reference to the derivative nature of such plays as the *Dutangada*, which incorporates verses from other plays, it is not impossible to hold that the term *chaya-nataka* may also mean "an

⁴ The *Mahanataka* is an old Sanskrit play that many scholars have speculated was one of the *chayanatakas*. However, it is not designated as such anywhere in its text.

⁵ This remark by Levi is extremely interesting because he says that the rules of Sanskrit grammar do not favor the translation of "chaya-nataka" as "shadow drama." Could this be the key to solving the mystery?

epitomized adaption of previous plays on the subject,” the term *chaya* being authoritatively used in the sense of adaption. Pischel was originally of the opinion that the term might be explained as “the shadow of a drama” (Schatten von einem Spiel), or “a half-play” (halbes Drama), but [later] in his well-known monograph on the Indian shadow play, he attempted to shew that the *chaya-nataka* was simply and solely what is known as the shadow-play, in which the shadow-pictures were produced by projection from puppets on the reverse side of a thin white curtain. (De 1931; 543–544)

In addition, De, in S. N. Dasgupta's *History of Sanskrit Literature* Book II, Section 7, “Dramas of Irregular Type,” describes the *chayanataka* plays in this way: “Although nominally keeping to the outward form of the drama, the works [at least seven in number] are devoid of all dramatic action, being rather a collection of poetical stanzas, descriptive, emotional or narrative, with slight interspersed dialogues and quasi stage-directions” (De 1947: 501). De says further:

Of these works the most interesting, if not the earliest, is the *Dharmabhyudayo* of Meghaprabhacarya ... a definite stage-direction in it is said to support its claim to be recognised as a shadow-play. As the king takes the vow to become an ascetic, the stage direction reads *yamanikantarad yati-vesa-dhari putrakas tatra sthapaniyah* ... “from the inner side of the curtain is to be placed a puppet wearing the dress of an ascetic.” ... One need not, however, see in the stage-direction any definite reference to the shadow-play; on the contrary, it is a puppet (*putraka*) which is directed to be placed, apparently on the stage, from the inner side of the curtain, i.e., from the *nepathya*. ... Although the drama styles itself a *chaya-nataka-prabandha* in the colophon, it is in all other respects an ordinary, if unpretentious, play of the usual type, dealing with the Jaina legend of king Dasarnabhadra. It is a short play, which consists of one Act but three or four scenes, with a regular *nandi*, *prarocana* and *prastavani*; and we have, with the one exception, referred to above, the usual stage-directions, enough prose and verse dialogues and some Prakrit prose and verse.

It is curious that no such stage-directions are to be found in the other so-called

chaya-natakas, not even in the *Dutangada* which is probably the earliest of the group and which is upheld by Pischel and Luders as a typical specimen. (De 1931: 546–547)

For all these reasons, and more, many scholars are reluctant to call these plays "shadow plays," since according to them they are ordinary plays, and nothing in them seems to indicate they are to be shown as shadows on a screen. One factor in the early days of these discussions and debates that caused some to hesitate to think of these plays as shadow dramas, is the fact that, up to 1935, no one studying the matter had seen or found any shadow plays in India, so to them it was doubtful that India even had shadow plays at all. This situation is explained by Stuart Blackburn:

... Indian shadow puppetry is little known both inside and outside the subcontinent. Like Buddhism, the art was thought to have vanished from its Indian birthplace as it migrated and flourished elsewhere in Asia. But Indologists debated whether references in old Sanskrit texts proved the existence of an ancient shadow puppet play; if such a tradition had existed, where was it now? The answer came in 1935 when a German scholar saw a performance in Karnataka and, in an uncanny coincidence, an American journalist stumbled on another in Kerala. The vanishing act had been an illusion, and we know that Indian shadow puppetry is performed in Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, and until recently, in Maharashtra and Orissa. (Blackburn: 1–2)

Yet, surprisingly, in 1930, five years prior to 1935, there was published a short, one-paragraph article by the famous Indian scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy entitled "The Shadow-Play in Ceylon," wherein he quotes from a twelfth-century CE Buddhist chronicle, *Mahavamsa*, LXVI, 133, as follows: "Amongst the many Tamils and others (employed as spies) he (Gajabahu II, r. 1137–53 A.D.) made such as were practiced in dance and song, to appear as showmen of leather puppets (*camma-rupa*) and the like." This undoubtedly was missed by the scholars, especially since Coomaraswamy further wrote: "Here *camma-rupa*, leather figures, seems to afford positive evidence of the shadow-play in Southern India and Ceylon in the twelfth century" (Coomaraswamy: 627).

In 1955 G. Bhattacharya wrote an article entitled “Virttivalabha – A Chayanataka,” in which the author discusses the *putraka* stage-direction mentioned above by De:

The correct translation of the passage should be, ‘from the innerside of the curtain is to be placed a puppet wearing the dress of an ascetic.’ But unfortunately the passage has been translated otherwise, frankly speaking in a wrong way, and this has helped to serve the purpose of the shadow-play-theorists. Hultsch has translated it as, ‘in the interior of the curtain is a puppet which bore the dress of an ascetic, to appear there.’ This translation is ambiguous. The term ‘tatra’, as translated here, means ‘behind the screen’ and not ‘on the stage.’ This interpretation has helped them to find out a clue of the shadow projection and thereby identify the drama with the shadow-play. The stage-direction, on the other hand clearly indicates that the work is a specimen of a puppet-show and no trace of the shadow-play is to be found in it. It is simply to be understood that a puppet is to be placed on the stage from the inner side of the screen, i.e., from the *nepathya*. (Bhattacharya: 130–131)

There is another *chayanataka* with very interesting dialogue, which some say shows it is meant as a shadow play. I quote Jiwan Pani from his 1978 monograph *Ravana Chhaya*:

For instance, in Ullagharaghava, another *chhaya-nataka* by Somesvara written in the 13th century, a dialogue between two characters reads as follows:

Friend, my images of Rama and Laxama that I carry in my heart, I have depicted in this picture for the pleasure of my Lord. Please have a look at it (He gives the picture).

(Taking it and looking at it) Well done, great man, well done. This has been beautifully painted according to the conventions of shadow-theatre. (Thus he speaks).

One who has little idea about the presentational techniques of shadow-play would hasten to believe that the word *patrapata* means any picture on a flat surface. In shadow-play the puppets are made of flat pieces of leather. But confusion arises as to how a painting could be shown in shadow play? In Karnataka style of shadow-play there is an interesting technique of presenting at times a composite colourful scene depicted in one puppet-figure. These highly decorative scenes or 'group-figures' are brought on to the screen to punctuate and intensify the dramatic effect in the same way as in movies 'freeze-shots' are used. There are strict conventions for the delineation of these colourful group-figures. Therefore, Karpatika says in the above quotation that the picture is painted according to the conventions of shadow-play which clearly indicates this is not a picture painted in the usual way and hence not a picture-scroll. There are distinct differences in the conventions of stylized delineation of characters in shadow-play from those in picture-scrolls. Therefore, the dramatist intentionally used the word *chhayanatyanusarena* which otherwise becomes redundant. (Pani 1978: 9)

Pani is quite correct that today in Karnataka there are indeed leather puppets that show complete scenes, including backgrounds, and even sometimes additional characters, all without any articulations, and all in a single piece of leather. For this to work in the above *chayanataka* (if it even is a shadow play), there would have to be a special shadow puppet showing what they call a painting or scroll, presumably imitated in leather, to the other character, also a shadow puppet. But I think Pani is not entirely correct in saying that this reference to a painting that is being presented as using the art conventions of *chayanataka* well, may not necessarily be referring to a painted picture or scroll. In my view, this idea is wrong, because the styles of the Karnataka pictures/scrolls and shadow figures share the same art styles and the same art traditions; accordingly, this reference in the play to the stylistic conventions of *chayanataka* could very well be referring to the scroll/painting tradition. Victor Mair affirms: "The Paithan [Maharashtra picture story-telling] paintings are closely related stylistically to the leather shadow puppets of Karnataka (Mysore), Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala" (Mair 1988/1996: 104).

Returning to Bhattacharya's article, in a footnote he writes: "I am informed that in South India one act Sanskrit plays are called chayanatakas and they have no connection to the shadow-play. But I am not definite about it" (Bhattacharya: 131).

Meanwhile, R. Upadhyaya attempted, in two articles, to find once and for all the meaning of the term *chayanataka*.

Around Chayanataka has centered a controversy for over half a century. I have already published some articles with a view to finally solving the mystery of Chayanataka but it appears that the trail of past controversy has not subsided.

I have explained Chaya as an illusory character on the basis of Chaya, the illusory wife of Surya. (R. Upadhyaya 1980: 46)

As R. Upadhyaya says, he had previously explained this in his earlier, 1974, article "The Meaning of Chayanataka":

...it may be concluded that during the thirteenth century Chayanataka was a name given to dramas which adopted any one of the following four stratagems recognised as Chaya —

- (i) An illusory character played its role on the stage and the audience could not differentiate it from the real character as in Dutangada.
- (ii) A statue or puppet was installed on the stage to represent a character as in the Dharamabhyudaya.
- (iii) A picture-scroll, containing some scenes of the activities of some characters and a few stanzas, was studied by some characters on the stage. The characters in

the picture created the same impression on the mind of the onlookers as if they were present before him in person.

- (iv) Some characters appear on the stage in disguise or in the garb of animals. (R. Upadhyaya 1974: 528)

Amongst the modern plays the most important Chayanatakas have been *Savitricarita*, *Dhrivabhyudaya*, *Goraksabhyudaya*, *Srikrnsa-candrabhyudaya*, and the *Amaramarkandeya* by Sankara Lal of Gujarat. He composed them in the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth century. He names all these plays as Chayanatakas.

It is all the more strange that this controversy of Chayanataka had been raging during the life-time of the author but no critic or historian ever cared to ask him as to why he named his dramas Chayanataka. (R. Upadhyaya 1980: 46-47)

F. Seltmann has also made some comments about these *chayanatakas*, which I find to be highly interesting:

Although the conceptions of Pischel, Jacob and Luders [German scholars who wrote about the shadow theatre in the early twentieth century] were accepted by many scholars, the discussion continued. So Sri V. Ramasubramaniam, a Tamilian Sanskrit scholar from Madras points out (1962: 71, 1970: 119): "*You know that in Sanskrit drama the various Prakrits employed were not always intelligible to the reader. There were, therefore, footnotes giving their exact rendering in Standard Sanskrit. This Sanskrit rendering of Parkrit and other vernacular passages were technically called cchayas. Now, when whole plays, intended for performance in vernaculars, were written down in Sanskrit, omitting dialects altogether, these Sanskrit versions too began to be called 'cchaya-natakas.'*" This explanation is a new argument in the discussion [italics his]. (Seltmann: 356)

Ramasubramaniam may very well be right, for in a 2006 publication, *The Recognition of Shakuntala*, Somadeva Vasudeva, in the section “CSL conventions,” explains: “Classical Sanskrit literature is in fact itself bilingual, notably in drama. There women and characters of low rank speak one of several Prakrit dialects, an ‘unrefined’ (*prakṛta*) vernacular as opposed to the ‘refined’ (*samskrta*) language. Editors commonly provide such speeches with Sanskrit paraphrase, their ‘shadow’ (*chaya*)” (Vasudeva: 12). And further on, in the section called “Chaya”: “The following is a Sanskrit paraphrase (*chaya*) of the Prakrit passages (marked with corner brackets) in the play” (Vasudeva: 366).

I am of the opinion that these plays were Sanskrit adaptations of folk festival plays (whether live plays, puppet plays, narrated pictures, or shadow plays), that were performed in the local languages (Prakrit, not Sanskrit), and which were taken down in Sanskrit and written in summary, hence very short. These live performances put on during a festival celebration must have been important or interesting enough to be recorded for posterity in Sanskrit. But I do think that folk shadow-plays were performed as far back as the seventh century CE, if not earlier, and that they were in fact known as “chaya-nalai,” a Prakrit form of the Sanskrit “chaya-nataka.”

This very valuable information has long been hidden to puppetry historians, but Prof. Mair in 1982 has at last brought it to our attention:

Proof of the existence of Indian-derived shadow plays in Buddhist Central Asia during the T'ang period and earlier is found in the mention of the Prakrit name *chaya-nalai* in a Khotanese text. *Chaya* means, literally, “shadow” (cf. Greek *skia*) and the Sanskrit form of *nalai* is *nataka* which means “dance” or “drama.” In the so-called *Book of Zambasta* (V. 98), *chaya-nalai* occurs in combination with several words indicating unreality:

“So does he recognize this *parikalpa* [deception], it is like a dream, a mirage. Until *bodhi* [enlightenment], it is like a magic illusion. A mere shadow-play is being performed.” (Mair 1982: 232)

In R. E. Emmerick's 1969 article “Notes on the Book of Zambasta,” he indicates: “The Book of Zambasta cannot be dated with any precision. A long discussion by S. Konow concluded only that it could not be

earlier than the end of the seventh century because of the allusion to attacks by the Tibetans" (Emmerick: 59).

WAYANG AND RINGGIT

Next, we go to Java, Indonesia, where were discovered inscriptions on copper of very old dates that seem to refer to the Javanese theatre of shadows, called today *wayang purwa*, *wayang kulit*, or merely, *wayang*.

COPPER PLATES OF CENTRAL JAVA BY KING BALITUNG DATED 907 CE

Following are two translations of the *mavayang* (performing *wayang*, or *vayang*) section of these plates:

1. Si Nalu recited the *Bhimakumara*, dancing like Kicaka; Si Jaluk recited the *Ramayana*, blowing flutes and making buffoonery; Si Mungmuk (and) Si Galigi showed *vayang* in honour of [the] gods and presented (above all) *Bhimaya-Kumara*. (Sarkar 1972: 96)
2. Si Nalu recited *Bhima Kumara* (and) danced as Kicaka; Si Jaluk recited the *Ramayana*; Si Mukmuk play-acted and clowned; Si Galigi performed *wayang* for the gods, reciting the story of *Bimma Kumara*. (Soedarsono 1984: 3)

The first translation has two *vayang* performers, Si Mungmuk and Si Galigi (are these the puppeteer [*dalang*] and an assistant?), but the second translation has only Si Galigi performing *wayang*. It appears to be partly a ritual performance "for the gods," telling a story about Bhima from the *Mahabharata*, and staged along with other performances and entertainments. The other performers are clowns, musicians, human actors, and dancers, and there is no connection to the word *mavayang*, so the *wayang* performance here must be different than any of these other performances: it's not a dance, not a farce, and not a (human) play. But is it a shadow play?

We ask this because, today, the word *wayang* refers to almost any type of performance, whether performed with puppets or with humans.

The Balinese *Wangbang Wideya*, written during Majapahit times (1293–1527 CE), mentions *wayang* performances several times and gives detailed descriptions (Robson: *passim*). It is very clear in this work that they are speaking of *wayang kulit* shows: *wayang* by itself is used to refer to the puppets themselves, and *wayang kulit* (*kulit* means leather) refers to the play. So it seems that, very early, *wayang* on its own did often mean “shadow play,” and this is not merely a convention of modern times. It may be that, later, when other forms of *wayang* shadow shows proliferated, or, after the *wayang* shadow plays outstripped all other entertainments in popularity, it was necessary to qualify the different kinds of shows with separate *wayang* names, that is, *wayang beber* (picture scrolls), *wayang kulit* (shadow plays), *wayang golek* (puppet plays), *wayang wong* (human dance), etc.

Another question that scholars and theatre specialists are sometimes divided on is: does the Javanese, Balinese, and Malay word *wayang* originate in the Malay word *bayang*, meaning “shadow”? Robson, the author of our English translation of the *Wangbang Wideya*, also says that *widu* (singer) in Javanese is cognate with *bidu* (singer) in Malay (Robson: 17). These similarities in the languages support the possibility that Javanese, Balinese, and Malay *wayang* is equivalent to Malay *bayang*, meaning “shadow.” If this is true, shadow plays would be shown, at least as far back as 907 CE, to have existed in Java.

But there is another way to think about this issue. Although *wayang* comes from a root word meaning “shadow,” it often refers to puppet, scroll, or human performances and so also means “performance” or “theatre.” It is possible that *wayang* has a much wider meaning than just “shadow.” The Dutch scholar J. J. Ras explains it in this way: “... since the Javanese word *wayang* (Krama: *ringgit*) means not only ‘shadow-play puppet,’ but rather ‘puppet’ in general and also ‘dancer’ or ‘actor,’ *the term shadow-play is definitely too narrow a rendering for ‘wayang performance’ and hence it is more correct to think of wayang in the more general terms of a ‘dramatic performance’ involving either human actors or puppets, not necessarily projected against a lighted screen*” (italics his) (Ras: 443).

And, with even more clarity, we have this explanation from Prof. Mair:

The statement that *wayang* means “shadow,” therefore, must be qualified in the sense that it refers not so much to the technique of illumination from behind to throw a shadow on a screen as it does to the phantasmagorical appearances presented before

the eyes of the beholder. Hence picture-scrolls, puppets, shadows, and dancers can all legitimately be referred to as *wayang*. The illusory effect is enhanced by the fact that most such performances were given at night, in caves or in rooms without windows, and illuminated solely by flickering lamps or candles. (Mair 1988/1996: 55)

What about the ancient term *ringgit*, as used in the more polite mode of speech, Krama? Old literary references to it are often translated as *wayang*, which word is from the familiar speech mode, Ngoko. But there are other meanings put forward. We will try to clarify the issue, starting with one of the earliest references to *ringgit*, if not the earliest. This is contained in:

COPPER PLATES OF KUTI (JAHA), IN JAVA DATED 840 CE

Aringgit is mentioned on plate 6 but with no description, and on this plate it appears among other kinds of performers. The word *ringgit* is held by many scholars to be synonymous with *wayang*. But does *ringgit* really mean *wayang*? Some of the senses of *ringgit* are "milled or serrated," "jagged or toothed" (i.e., cut out) (Wilkinson 1959: 975). So, the meaning of *ringgit* as a "leather cut-out puppet" follows easily. As it also means "dancing girl" (Wilkinson 1959: 975), we may ask how that additional meaning came about? It is said that Javanese dancers in the *wayang wong* generally mimic the movements of the flat leather figures in a *wayang* shadow play, so that *ringgit* could mean "dancer acting as a puppet" is also quite logical.

However, I have discovered that there existed two Sanskrit words, *ringi* and *ringita*, which could be the origin of the Javanese word *ringgit*. As *ringi* in Sanskrit means, according to *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, "going, motion," and *ringita* means "motion, surging (of waves)" (Monier-Williams 1899: 880), it would therefore seem that *ringgit* may originally have referred to female dancers. It follows then that the copper plates from 840 CE mentioned above could employ this sense for *aringgit*.⁶

⁶ Victor H. Mair tells us that Sanskrit is used in the Javanese theatre arts. "The dalang speaks, sings, and chants a mixture of Sanskrit, Old Javanese (kawi) ... and colloquial language" (Mair 1988/1996: 68).

TRANSLATIONS AND COMMENTARIES

In my studies, I have found that many writers repeat “facts” from other writers without it seems checking the original sources. For instance, we have the following in *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*:

India has a very long and rich tradition of shadow theatre. According to many scholars, the art originated here two millennia ago. The earliest reference appears in *Cilappatikaram*, a Tamil classic written during that time. (Lal 2004: 433)

To further examine the supposed reference in the *Cilappadikaram* (also spelled with an initial “S”), we can consult Jiwan Pani’s book *Living Dolls*, in which he states: “There is a reference to shadow play in the Tamil epic *Silappadikaram*, which is believed to have been written between [the] second century B.C. and [the] first century A.D.” (Pani 1986: 30). But, in fact, in the *Silappadikaram* there actually is no specific mention of shadow plays. Pani’s mention of shadow plays appears in a twelfth-century commentary by Adiyarku Nallar in connection with a term occurring in the *Silappadikaram*. The word is *potuviyal*, which refers to a so-called “common” show, as opposed to a royal show (*vettiyal*) (Meenakshisundaran 1966: 116–117). As an example of a “common” show the commentator mentions the *tol pavai koothu*, the shadow play of Kerala (Swaminathan 1990: 40). So really the *Silappadikaram* itself does not refer to a shadow play and cannot be used to date these performances to the time of the composition of that epic.

Translations of Sanskrit works into English are highly variable. For example, what are we to make of the following two translations of a seventeenth-century commentary by Nilakantha on a term in the twelfth book of the *Mahabharata*? There, the *Mahabharata* mentions *rupopajivana* and the meaning of this term is uncertain, so the commentator Nilakantha says (here follows two different English translations from Nilakantha):

1. *Rupopajivana* is known as *Jalamandapika* to the southerners. After spreading a thin cloth the activities of the kings, ministers etc., are exhibited before the eyes with the help of the figures of leather. (Pischel 1906/1977: 221)

2. Among the people of the Deccan water-pavillions are well known. Here behind a thin veil performers in the nude show the department of kings, counsellors and others. (Chitrabhanu Sen 2005: 32)

The second version has quite a different meaning! Our second translation comes from a Sanskrit expert trained in India, Chitrabhanu Sen, so his translation must be considered plausible. Looking up the term *jalamandapika*, we see that it seems to be a composite of two Sanskrit terms. *Jala* refers to water, and a *mandapika* is a small structure or pavilion, specifically a customs house.

The occurrence of the term *mandapika* such as *Sulkamandapika*, *Vadarya-mandapika*, *Samipati-mandapika*, in some Jain inscriptions and inscriptions other than the Jain and *Jala-mandapika* and *Sthala-mandapika* in the *Puratana-prabandha-sangraha* shows regular custom houses in towns and elsewhere. (Choudhary: 367).

Also, we have the following from Wilhelm Printz in his *Bhasa-Woerter in Nalakantha's Bharatabhavadipa und in anderen Sanskrit-kommentaren* (many thanks to Beate Kraus for the translation):

Jalamandapika can without doubt be divided into *jala* and *mandapika*. *Mandapa* – with derivatives and composite words – is well documented in Sanskrit, and has also found its way into the new Indian languages: skr. *mandapika* "little pavilion", *puspamandapika* "flower-pergola," *patamandapa* "tent"; G.M.H.B. *mamdapa*, *mandapa* "an open shed, a temporary building (erected for a ceremony)"; M. *mamdapi* "a canopy of light framework." In all these, the basic idea is quite clear: a light building, a scaffolding. (...) *jala* – in Sanskrit as in modern languages appears as the first element in numerous composite words, yet always meaning "water".... (Printz: 25)

Further valuable information on Nilakantha's commentary comes from F. Seltmann in his 1991 article "Studies Concerning Indian Shadow-Theater and Indian-Marionette Theater, with special consideration of German scholars." Seltmann comments:

[Pischel] also quotes the comment of Nilakantha (17th cent.) who gives the definition of *rupopajivanam* in the context of the screen and leather figures of a shadow play. He explains it as the art of shadow play, and says the Southerners are calling it *jalamandapika*. Pischel adds that this word is not traceable in any Southern Arian or any Dravidian language. Here he is mistaken. In Kannada you will find the words *jala* and *mandapike*; they mean 'to shine, to glitter and a little pavilion'; If you read *manda* then you will find 'a wall', 'a paper' or 'transparent to some extent' and *pikka* means 'faint, pale' (Kittel 1968–71: 678b, 1266a, 1281b, 1037b). All these meanings deal with items belonging to the paraphernalia of the shadow play. In any case there is a certain plausibility that shadow play in India was known already when the 12th book of the Mahabharata had been written. (Seltmann: 357)

Looking back to the word *rupopajivana* in Sanskrit, we find that *rupa* can refer to one's beautiful form or body, and *jivana* is a common word that most frequently refers to one's means of gaining a living, so *rupopajivana* consequently can mean "living by the beautiful form of one's body." Ludwik Sternbach in his 1951 article "Legal Position of Prostitutes According to Kautilya's *Arthasastra*," from the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 71, no. 1, says the following of the term *rupajiva*: "K[autilya] uses frequently, in addition to the word *granika*, the word *rupajiva* for the designation of a prostitute. A *rupajiva* was a woman who lived on her beauty" (Sternbach: 28). Therefore, with Nilakantha, we can also have nude dancing performed in a water-pavilion, and Sen's translation can stand solidly on this basis.

To further demonstrate the fluid and variable nature of translations from Asian languages into English, in addition to the above two translations of the Javanese King Balitung inscription of 907 CE, we also have yet another English translation of that passage:

Entertainment was requested. The representative of God (the puppeteer) sang, the story of young Bima killing Kikaka was going to be performed. (Then) the story of Rama was (also) requested. Si Munmuk performed it with such merriment, whilst si Galigi performed the shadow-play for the public with the story of Young Bima (Santoso: 23)

This is taken from Soewito Santoso's article "The Old Javanese Ramayana: Its Composer and Composition," in the 1980 publication *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*. Mr. Santoso being an internationally respected expert in Old Javanese, his translation is likely not as far-fetched as it seems.

Finally, we present the "usual" interpretation of the shadow/puppet-play passage in the very old *Therigatha* ("Songs of the Elder Nuns"), along with a more modern translation, to show that the old translations, often repeated from scholar to scholar, should perhaps be re-examined.

The date of this text cannot be determined with exactitude, but according to one scholar, "Evidence from scholarly research supports the view that the verses collected together in [the *Therigatha*] were uttered over a period of 300 years, from the end of the 6th century to the end of the 3rd century BC (...), that is, from the time of the Buddha up to Asoka" (Tan: 2006).

To examine the accuracy of this statement, I first quote from Katherine R. Blackstone's 1998 book *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therigatha*, in which she quotes from the *Therigatha* :

... well-painted puppets, or dolls, have been seen by me fastened by strings and sticks, made to dance in various ways.

These strings and sticks having been removed, thrown away, mutilated, scattered, not to be found, broken into pieces, on what there would one fix the mind?

This little body, being of such a kind, does not exist without these phenomena; as it does not exist without phenomena, on what there would one fix one's mind?

Just as you have seen a picture made on a wall, smeared with yellow orpiment; on that your gaze (has been) confused; (so) the wisdom of men is useless.

O blind one, you run after an empty thing, like an illusion placed in front of you,
 like a golden tree at the end of a dream, like a puppet-show in the midst of the people.
 (*Therigatha* ll. 390–394, quoted in Blackstone: 73)

Then there's Claire Holt's similar version translated from same section of the *Therigatha*, which she quotes in her *Art in Indonesia*:

You throw yourself, oh blind one, upon something non-existent
 even as upon a mirage evoked before your eyes,
 upon a golden tree appearing in a dream
 a shadow play (*rupparupakam*) amidst a human crowd. (Holt: 129)

Next, again from Piya Tan:

25. For I have seen the well painted | puppets and marionettes,
 hitched up with sticks and strings, | and made to dance in various ways.
26. Removed are those string and sticks, | thrown away, broken, scattered,
 not to be found, made into bits and pieces — | where would the mind find a
 roost?
 [on what would this mind fix itself?]
27. This body of mine, being of such a kind, | exists not without these states.
 When it exists not with any state, | where would the mind find roost?
 [on what would this mind fix itself?]
28. Just as you when you see | a picture painted on the wall,
 perverse is your view: | the perception that they are human is groundless.
 Like dreaming of a golden tree, | made to look real like an illusion,
 you blind one, you run after what is false | as if in a sham show in the midst of a
 crowd.
 [as if chasing a false image in the midst of a crowd.]

This is Tan's footnote on the term *rupparupaka* (his “sham show”):

Comy [one of Tan's references]: *jana,majjhe-r-iva ruppa,rūpakan ti māyā,kārena mahājana,majjhe dassitaṃ rūpiya,rūpa,sadisaṃ sāraṃ viya upaṭṭhahantaṃ; asāraṃ ti attho* = ~ means “like forms of gold (*rūpiya, rūpa, sadisaṃ*) shown in the midst of a crowd by a conjurer, they appear as if they have substance. The meaning is that they are without substance [essence].” Norman [another of Tan's references]: The ref here is presumably to confidence tricksters who try to deceive credulous bystanders and persuade them to buy what seems to be (ie has the form of) silver [*rūpiya*] (Thī:N 394n). The *Arthaśāstra* (2.14) deals with the methods of producing and detecting this kind of frauds [sic]. I have rendered *ruppa,rūpakam* (false silver) idiomatically as “fool's gold.” (Tan: 2006).

BENEDITOS

In *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires* (1512–1515), the writer, a Portuguese apothecary, states:

The land of Java is [a land] of mummers and masks of various kinds, and both men and women do thus. They have entertainments of dancing and stories; they mime; they wear mummers' dresses and all their clothes. They are certainly graceful; they have music of bells – the sound of all of them playing together is like an organ. These mummers show a thousand graces like these day and night. At night they make shadows of various shapes, like *beneditos* in Portugal. (Cortesao: 177)

The footnote to this passage in the 1944 London edition of *Tomé Pires* (the only English translation ever made as far as I can determine) has led astray a few scholars because the footnote explains *beneditos* as follows:

The word is perhaps related to the *sambenito* or *sanbenito* (*saccus benedictus*), formerly worn by penitents. It is possible that the *tapih*, or *petticoat*, worn by the graceful Javanese dancers, suggested the comparison to Pires. (Cortesao: 177)

On my website, “Deeper Investigations into Shadow Theatre and Puppetry,” I surmised that *beneditos* had nothing to do with petticoats and was instead a Portuguese form of shadow theatre known to Pires in the sixteenth century, because he compares the Javanese *wayang* (“they make shadows of various shapes”) to something called *beneditos* known in Portugal.

However, I have recently discovered that in Brazil, there is a well-known puppet character called *Benedito* that originated in Portugal.⁷

Punch’s Brazilian Cousin: *Benedito* is ... a (former?) slave. The Brazilian popular puppetry tradition he springs from is called *mamulengo* — with an evocative derivation from the words “*mano*” and “*molenga*” which means it translates as “floppy hands.” (Edwards: 2001)

So perhaps Pires is merely comparing the Javanese shadow plays to the native hand-puppet shows of Portugal. It seems he may be telling us that in Java they display shadows in performances in a manner similar to that of the *Benedito* hand-puppet shows seen in Portugal. In other words, the Javanese also perform with puppets, but these are done with shadows; Pires likely does not mean to say that the *beneditos* in Portugal are shadow plays.

⁷ A common language and shared history seem to connect the *beneditos* of Pires (Portugal) with the “*Benedito*” puppet character (Brazil). The colonization of Brazil by Portugal began in 1500 and continued until 1822, when Brazil claimed independence. Portuguese is the official language of Brazil.

CONCLUSION

I hope I have made the case here that scholars need to reexamine assumptions related to the foundations of puppetry. Instead of relying on past efforts in translation and interpretation, they must go back to the original texts. A number of unproven ideas — such as that shadow plays and puppets have existed in India for millennia, or that shadow plays are mentioned in the oldest texts, along with other such notions — can then emerge from our received scholarship. Then mistakes that result from assumptions being repeated from book to book and from writer to writer can be avoided. We will be on a solid historical footing, on which more thorough and accurate knowledge can be reached.

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