

Ruem An Re: its Evolution

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Introduction

The ethnic Khmer community in Surin province has a variety of folk genres, especially those pertaining to singing and dancing, which are original and unique. Despite the influences of foreign cultures, its indigenous language, music, melody, singing and dancing have remained relatively unaffected. Load An Re is an example of such a unique folk genre in which anyone can participate. It is a tradition revised and improved in its standard form, re-named Ruem An Re (Pestle Dance), that is performed during the fifth month of the calendar. It was and has been presented alongside the annual Elephant Festival since 1960.

Load An Re ('Load' means hopping and 'An Re' means pestle) refers to traditional folk plays which are not based on standard choreography. It is enacted specifically during the Songkran New Year festival (Kae Jaed: water festival) and focuses on free hopping, jumping and improvisation.

Ruem An Re ('Reum' refers to dance; 'An Re' refers to pestle) is a developed form, with standard choreography, of Load An Re. It is marked by set gestures, music accompaniment, a greater number of performers, and appropriate duration to suit the performance context. Currently, the performance is staged during many festivals, and focuses on aesthetics and the act of entering the pestle arena.

Background of Load An Re

Load An Re is a traditional ethnic Khmer folk performance in Surin, a Thai province on the border with Cambodia. There is no historical evidence of its origins; only ancient tales. Public participation is welcome in the event, which is usually held during the easy period after the harvesting season, on the first day of the waning moon during the fifth month.

The dance gestures are informal as leisurely enjoyment is the major objective of the performance, and the musical instruments used for which are a pair of wooden pestles, a pair of wooden supporters, a

Trua (fiddle) and two Skuals (drum). The participant who enters the pestle arena has to display his/her personality, with improvised movements.

As there is no fixed duration for the performance, the dance often takes place through the night. However, tradition dictates that the merry-making dance end its celebration by the fifteenth day.

Beliefs and Functions of Load An Re

Passed down through generations, the belief behind Load An Re is that the dance festivity begins in Kae Jaed month (fifth month) in the day of Tom Thom (greater holiday). The festivity starts and should last for seven days or till the end of the month. Anyone can join in the activity which is held in any household or community.

The villagers visit the temple during the day, so the Load An Re is usually held at night under a full moon and clear sky (it is before the rainy season). According to ancient beliefs, violation of this convention will result in a curse.

During the period of three days during Tom Tuij (lesser holiday) and seven days during Tom Thom, members of the community refrain from all strenuous labour as it is strictly a period of merit-making in the temple and communal activities, such as Ruem Troj, Kan Truem, Jreang, Chuang Chai, Sa Ba, and the bathing of the Buddha's image, as well as water-throwing during the Songkran festival.

The elderly and community leaders would form a troupe that accompanies a dancing group in a parade, make announcements, and sing ballads in and around the village. The lyrics of the songs pertain to merit-making, cessation of work, folklore, and advise against violating tradition, which would lead to the curse of being harmed by tigers when in the forest or by crocodiles when in water. The caution is mainly to ensure full communal participation.

Clearly, Load An Re has the function of binding individuals and community as a whole. The activities not only create conviviality, but also lead to opportunities among the young in seeking spouses. As a function of the collective, it creates the occasion for the whole community to enjoy gregariously after a long year of agricultural labour. On the other hand, Ruem An Re, as it is modified into a classical art form, functions to uphold dramatic virtues.

1. Movement Vocabulary of Load An Re and Ruem An Re

Both Load An Re and Ruem An Re share specific yet common bodily movements. The table below will identify the commonalities shared by both forms. They include: Kom Tam, Ram Kwang, Mai Huang Tua, Karn Jeeb, Jangwa Kao Saak, Karn Song Tua and Kohn Ngon or Sapohk Hak. A brief description is as follows:

i. **Kom Tam** (Curving down). The bending body is the characteristic posture of the performer when entering the pestle, and moving to throbbing rhythms. Sometimes, accidents happen when the performer is inserting his/her leg into the pestle. Performers, therefore, have to curve down to look at the clap of the pestle all the time. In Load An Re, the attention of the performer is directed more towards the throbbing rhythm than the graceful choreography.

ii. **Ram Kwang** (Widened hand gesture). The hand gestures of village performer are located higher than classical style. The great virtue of Ram Kwang is that you can balance your body well.

iii. **Mai Huang Tua** (Free movement). The shoulder, waist, hips and body are left to free manipulation while the rest of the body is weighed down to follow the rhythm in full scale.

iv. **Karn Jeeb** (Finger gestures). There are two prevailing styles:

1). **Jeeb Kod New**: The bending of base knuckle of the forefinger which points towards the performer's body, while the other fingers are stretched outward, and the wrist is slightly bent. (picture on the left).

2). **Jeeb Kad New**: The configuration is similar to Jeeb Kod New, but the thumb is folded around forefinger. (picture on the left).

v. **Jangwa Kua Saak** (Entering the pestle). The rhythm of inserting the leg into throbbing area, which is the main highlight of both Load An Re and Ruem An Re. The rhythm is composed of two main categories:



Jeeb Kod New



Jeeb Kad New

- 1). **Jueng Mui**: Inserting one leg. There is only one pattern to this procedure.
 - 2). **Jueng Piir**: Inserting two legs. There are three patterns: Jueng Piir, Malob Doeng and Kaj Paka.
- vi. Karn Song Tua** (Body balance). The significance of body balance in both folk forms differs from classical arts style which follows foot pace and gravity. The balance requires a lot more defiance of gravity, particularly so in the Malob Doeng pattern. Here, the performer steps forward on beat 7, bends his body forward on beat 8, transfers his body weight to the back feet immediately before beat 1. His head must maintain a forward bent, while he continues stepping forward until beat 6. The resulting pattern is akin to the natural swaying of the wind-blown leaves of a coconut tree.
- vii. Kohn Ngon** (Bending hips). This characteristic physical posture of the ethnic Khmer group, bent hips, is influenced by the daily activity of bowing down. Such a posture is, of course, regarded as unorthodox when compared to the formal bearing of the body in classical dance.

Evolution of Ruem An Re

The first modification of Load An Re into a more refined performing art form, and subsequently re-named Ruem An Re, took place in 1952. The first presentation of Ruem An Re was in the Student Arts and Crafts Exhibition held at Suan Kularb College in Bangkok in 1953 during the term of M.L. Pin Malakul Na Ayuthya, then under-secretary of Minister of Education. The next revision was in 1955 for the occasion of honouring the presence of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej and the royal family during their visit to the northeastern provinces. Since 1960, Ruem An Re has been introduced as a part of the Elephant Festival.

Four main aspects of the evolution can be traced as follows:

- i. Entering the pestle arena (Jangwa Kua Saak)
- ii. Concept of choreography
- iii. Performers
- iv. Costumes

i. Jangwa Kua Saak

There are essentially two methods of entering the pestle arena: with one or both legs. The following are the variations of entry:

- 1). **Jueng Mui** is the method of inserting one leg into pestle arena in a delicate manner adopted from Load An Re of Wat Sala Loi community. The rhythm was adjusted to synchronize with the music.



Jueng Mui

- 2). **Jueng Piir** is the method of inserting both legs at the same time, to the quick tempo of Jueng Piir music. The relation between the steps, the clapping and drum tempo therefore need synchronization.



Jueng Piir

- 3). **Mlob Doeng** is the most difficult pattern involving inserting both legs since the performer has to tiptoe both legs across the sticks. The steps were re-invented with the clapping rhythm to make it look more delicate and synchronized.



Malob Doeng

- 4). **Kaj Paka Sapadan** is a term referring to picking flowers (Kaj Paka) as offerings to teachers (Sapadan). The method of inserting both legs, in moderate motion, was invented in 1978.

Overall, the choreography can be arranged as follows: 1) Slow Jueng Piir; 2) Wai Kru (gestures of respect to teachers); 3) Kaj Paka; 4) Jueng Mui; 5) Malob Doeng; and 6) Quick Jueng Piir. The performance often ends with spectacular improvisation, such as Kabal Jangkuang, Bong Snan, and Angaeb Ngueb.



Kaj Paka

ii. Concept of choreography

- 1). Imitation of human behaviour: This includes the natural human action or behaviour in daily life, such as walking, running, and so on, taking into account as well that the stimulation from emotions or music causes change and variation in actions.



Dai Pad Mek Cher (weaving through branches)



Tamrai Yol Pru (swaying tusks of elephants)

The dance patterns of Load An Re which imitate human actions are 1) Boh Lui: swatting fly. 2) Bong Boi: shading from sun. 3) Dai Pad Mek Cher: weaving through branches. These patterns are revised and adopted into slow Jueng Piir of Ruem An Re, as shown below

- 2). Imitation of animal behaviour. An example is the beginning patterns of Kaj Paka Sapadan, which employs actions derived from the behaviour of elephants, such as Tamrai Yol Pru (swaying tusks) and Tamrai Yol Dai (swaying trunks). These actions of Load An Re take after the elephant which is an icon as well as pride of Surin town.



Kaj Paka Sapadan in Ruem An Re



Tamrai Yol Dai (imitating movements of elephant's trunk)



Jueng Mui in Ruem An Re

- 3). Imitation of nature: this involves the appreciation of the beauty of nature, resulting in the movement of swaying trees or branches. In Malob Doeng (swaying leaves of coconut tree), the hands of performer represent the movement of leaves, as figures below show:



Malob Doeng in Load An Re



Classical Malob Doeng in Ruem An Re

- 4). Imitation of Supernatural Behaviour: one significant ritual of the ethnic Khmer is Ma Muat – a trance ritual for healing the sick. When modern medicine fails, the patient usually relies on Ma Muat. The ritual, supervised by a lady medium called Ma Muat, is marked by offerings, costumes, and music accompaniment. Commencing with Wai Kru (paying homage to the teacher) and inviting the spirit into Ma Muat, the medium then dances to the music in various patterns and tempo, in strong or delicate manner

depending on the emotion of the spirit. The spirit will send messages through the medium to participants or family members of the sick with instructions on what the spirit itself wants or would like them to fulfill.

The Pakum Kru (paying homage to teacher), Pongwil Patuel (rolling cup), Kawued Joll (throwing cup away) and Pan Joel or Joel Ma Muat (trance) from Ma Muat ritual are shown in the figures below:



Pakum Kru in Ruem An Re



Pongwill Patuel in Ma Muat



Pongwill Patuel in Ruem An Re



Kawued Joll in Ma Muat



Kawued Joll in Ruem An Re

Table 1: Ruem An Re choreographic concept and development

Folk patterns	Ruem An Re patterns
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Imitation of human behaviour: Dai Pad Mek Cher, Boh Lui, Bong Boi 2. Imitation of animals: Tamrai Yol Pru, Tamrai Yol Dai. 3. Imitation of nature: Malob Doeng 4. Imitation of Ma Muat: The Pakum Kru, Pongwil Patuel, Kawued Joll and Pan Joel or Joel Ma Muat 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Revised into patterns of stepping out of pestle arena 2. Revised into Kaj Paka Sapadan patterns in Kaj Paka song 3. Revised into slow Malob Doeng synchronized with 8 musical beats 4. Revised into additional patterns of paying homage, performed with Kamua Mae song (teacher song)

Table 2: A Comparison of Folk Ruem An Re with Classical Ruem An Re

Folk Ruem An Re	Classic Ruem An Re
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Body bent low, wide hand gesture. 2. Bowed knees, slightly stretched, bent hips. 3. Each ending pattern set to rhythm of drum. 4. Gestures concentrate on concept of patterns rather than gracefulness. 5. Delicate pacing. 6. In Jueng Mui pattern, the slanted head follows upwards Karn Jeeb (see page 37) in front of the leg. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Open face, stretched body, hand curved at eyebrow level for female and at temple level for men. 2. Slightly bowed knee, body torsion, slanting and flexible, following steady clapping. 3. Each ending pattern synchronized with musical beat. 4. Gestures concentrate on gracefulness rather than concept. 5. Pacing follows classical patterns. 6. In Jueng Mui pattern, the slanted head follows high moving hand in front of the leg.

iii. Performers

In the past, Load An Re was enacted only by women. The men were spectators, occasionally dancing near the pestle arena to make advances to the women. Traditionally, this paves the way for the

young to become acquainted with the opposite sex, leading to courtship and consequently, marriage.

After its refinement as Ruem An Re, male performers were included, especially in the three patterns of stepping into the pestle arena; namely, Jueng Mui, Jueng Piir, Malob Doeng as well as improvisation in the last session. The first presentation in 1950 was the first time that four male performers participated in all sessions whereas the others were women dressed in male costumes.

In 1955, in front of His Majesty's Royal Presence, all of the performers were female except for one in the last session of improvisation. The woman performer playing the male role had to dress in male costumes, such as round-neck shirt, shoulder loincloth, Joeng Krabehn (cloth around waist), etc..

At the Elephant Festival in Tha Tum district, in 1960, twenty-five pairs of male and female performers participated in the Ruem An Re, and this has become the standard composition since.

iv. Costumes

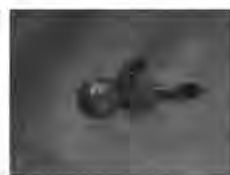
Load An Re costumes comprise mostly of silk shirts and silk tube-skirts of the best quality. In Ruem An Re, the costumes are revised from formal wear made of local silk, accompanied by ornamentation.

1). Female costumes

The Sampuad Hoel skirt, which is costly and the best, can be categorised under two types: Hoel Pabow and Hoel Tongkoh. The shirt is usually one with round neck, tight shape and plain colour – pink, green, lac, indigo or white. It is worn with a plain-coloured Chanood Lerk (shawl) wrapped around the right shoulder, that ends in a bow-tie shape at the edge at the left waist. The ornament, Jaarr (silver breast chain) wraps around the left shoulder and over the shawl on right shoulder. Kajorr (silver earring) or Takau Raya (golden chandelier earring) are shown in the figures below.



Jaarr



Kajorr



Takau Raya

Table 3: Overall Comparison of Load An Re with Ruem An Re

Load An Re	Ruem An Re
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Held on the annual Kae Jaed festival or the fifth month from the first day of waning moon or Tom Thom (greater holiday). 2. No formal choreography, but it focuses particularly on stepping into the pestle arena. 3. The step patterns are improvised. 4. Miscellaneous music, except the song for paying homage. 5. The pestle-clapping patterns differ in each household or community. 6. No fixed costumes. 7. Woman performers except during the last session. 8. No set duration. 9. No fixed musical instruments: 1 Trua, 2 Skuals. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The performance is in conjunction with the annual Elephant Festival. 2. The step patterns are specifically created and set. 3. The patterns are arranged in this order: Kaj Paka, Jueng Mui, Malob Doeng and Jueng Piir. 4. Each song has a corresponding choreography. 5. The pestle-clapping has five distinct patterns. 6. Fixed costumes of formal styles for male and female. 7. Male and female performers are paired up, with at least four couples. 8. Fixed duration of not over thirty minutes. 9. Fixed musical instruments: 1 Pii Slai, 1 Trua (could be more), 1 Pii Aw, 2 Skuals and other percussion.

2). Male costumes

Joeng Krabehn. A long cloth is wrapped around the waist and fan-folded along its edges. The folded portion is passed between the legs and hitched at the back waist. The cloth is silk-woven with double-thread and each thread is of a different colour, such as the combination of black and green to create luminosity. The silk shirt is of a plain colour, with round neck and short-hand breast slit with one button at the end placed inside Joeng Krabehn. There are two pieces of loincloth – one wrapped around the waist and the other around both shoulders, with both ends hanging.

The Ruem An Re costume, which every performer must possess, is regarded as a unique ethnic Khmer identity in Surin. It is inexpensive as it is a household or heritage item.

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Female and male costumes