

# The Role of Government in Documentation and Promotion of Performing Arts in Thailand

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*The main purpose of documentation of an event, activity, creation, thinking, imagination and inspiration, in the broader sense is to record for expression, information, conservation and promotion of whatever that has been documented. In this sense documentation activities were initiated even in pre-historic times. Rock arts are good examples of evidence of documentation activities. Documentation activities and methods have been carried over from generation to generation, and through time have developed to be more and more effective media for conservation, promotion and transfer of knowledge.*

Performing arts in Thailand have been in existence and sometimes very flourishing for centuries. Some earliest rock arts reveal figures of dancers in ritual celebrations. The first written record in Thai script, King Ramkhamhaeng's stone inscription described religious processions consisting of musicians playing drums, string instruments and *gamelan*.<sup>1</sup> The Royal Palatine Law, dated back to the Ayutthaya Period (AD 1358) dances, puppets and other kinds of performances being organized for the ceremonies to welcome important elephants.<sup>2</sup> The ancient civil law mentions positions for musicians, dancers, actors, harlequins, and puppeteers.<sup>3</sup> According to the "Historical Record on Happenings after the Destruction of Ayutthaya" 1753 AD approximately, the *lakon* or dance drama was an essential component of state ceremonies.<sup>4</sup>

How have dance, dance drama, music and song knowledge and skills been preserved and transferred from generation to generation? They have been transmitted mainly through oral tradition. The teachers themselves are records of knowledge and skills for artistic creation. They teach through some verbal explanation, demonstration and supervision of students' practical exercises. Some made written notes for their own use. Students of classical dances must dance exactly "alike their teachers by adhering to the classical patterns."<sup>5</sup>

Singers memorize songs and sing from their memories. Musicians play music in the same manner since there are no music notations.

However, in the past, some attempts had been made for documentation of performing arts. Right after the destruction of Ayutthaya by the Burmese, and as soon as Dhonburi was founded, King Taksin the Great who established Dhonburi as the capital, fully aware of the significant role of performing arts in ceremonial activities, as well as vehicles for spreading message and as tools for moral edification, ordered that religious texts and literary works be searched and collected. The king himself wrote parts of the *Ramakien*, which is a drama literature of high respect.

In Thailand, in the past, three institutions were engaged in performing arts creation, presentation, documentation and training. For classical music, dance and dance drama especially the *khon* and *lakon nai*, the throne took a leading role because, as mentioned before, performing arts were an integral part of state rituals and ceremonies. The second patrons were the royalty and the nobility. Some were the kings' relatives, some were officers of very high rank. Among the populace, there were masters of various troupes who trained apprentices. The earliest methods used for notation were written word, drawing of illustration, mural painting, and sculpture in relief form.

King Rama I, the founder of Bangkok, continued the notable task of documenting the performing arts. Under his command drama literature was compiled or written. For the mask dance *khon*, the *Ramakien* was written in the poetic form, meant to be enacted and

sung. The *Inau*, or *Punji* story, was created for the dance drama in the court—*lakon nai*. Treatises on basic dance gestures—*ram mae bot*—were written and illustrated. There were also illustrations of fighting scenes, meant for the making of puppets or *nang yai*. According to HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, such books may have been written in the Ayuttaya Period.<sup>6</sup>

Also during the reign of King Rama I, the whole *Ramakien* story was presented in the form of mural painting in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. All the characters' dress and gestures are those of the mask dance drama, *khon*. The painting shows scenes where the *khon*, *lakon nai*, *lakon nok*, *nang yai* and other genres of performing arts were presented. Such undertakings were followed by King Rama I's successor, the nobles, and the common people. Stories of the Buddha's life in the past were painted on the walls of the temples, utilizing the same style of drawing for persons involved, except the Buddha.

Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, during his chairmanship of the National Library Board, had the illustrated books on basic dance gestures redrawn. Furthermore, he arranged to have dancers dance the basic gestures and photographs taken. Later these were printed in book form. In the same book were photographs of the *nora* dance of the south of Thailand.<sup>7</sup> One famous *nora* master was interviewed. Furthermore, Prince Damrong, taking advantage of the modern

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technique of sound recording, arranged to have Thai songs and music recorded on the phonograph.

King Rama VI gave much support to dance drama and music. He established a Department of Performing Arts, *Krom Mahorasop*. A training unit for dancers and musicians was set up. The king himself wrote and produced plays, and introduced into the country the western dialogue type of play. Prince Naradhip Prapanpong, his uncle, introduced *lakon rong* which is an adaptation of the western opera and the Malay *bangsawan*. Many of his plays were printed in book form for reading as well. HRH Prince Nakorn Swan set up notes for Thai music and notated some songs he composed.

After the change of the regime in 1932 from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, Thai dancing, drama and music, which had reached the zenith during King Rama VI's reign (1910–1925), was followed by economic crisis and declined for a few years. The new government in 1934 re-established the Department of Fine Arts in the Ministry of Education, and transferred the performing arts responsibilities from the Bureau of Royal Household to the new department.<sup>8</sup> Many problems arose due to the economic crisis and old ages of master dancers. Attempts were made by the department to get co-operation from old masters to teach younger apprentices. The School of Dramatic Art was set up, and later developed into the College of Dramatic Arts, under the

administration of the department.

Documentation of dance drama and music was undertaken by the Department. Under the directorship of Luang Wichit Watakarn, important Thai classical songs were notated with western notes and printed in book form. For promotion, the Department organized series of mask dances and other genres of dance drama. For every performance, a programme booklet was printed and distributed. These were later on compiled and printed in book form.<sup>8</sup> One book on the *khon* was published. For the first time Thai masked dance performance was filmed entitled "*New Petch*" (Diamond Finger). Later on His Majesty the present King ordered one very important dance the *Prapirap* to be recorded on film.

The use of modern technology for documentation of dance drama, for the purposes of teaching, however was limited. The dance teachers tried to digest, simplify and describe dance gestures in writing and drawing. The most popular system of dance notation and documentation is the dance vocabulary and terminology. And this is limited to classical dance drama. One famous dancer and teacher, Akom Sayakom, published a book on basic dance vocabularies which were described in detail.<sup>9</sup>

Nowadays, modern techniques for documentation have been in use for performing arts notation and documentation, though not to a large extent. A number of governmental agencies and some private organizations have undertaken actions

in documentation.

Institutions devoted to training are the College of Dramatic Arts which had branches in big cities all over Thailand. The college conducts courses for artists as well as for teachers in performing arts. Some researches have been conducted by the college. Those graduated with courses in teaching methodology become teachers in arts in elementary or secondary, as well as at tertiary level, such as at the teachers training colleges. At the University level, Chulalongkorn University, Silapakorn University, and Kasetsart University, for example, offer courses in performing arts at bachelor's degree level. Courses on classical dance drama as well as modern drama have been offered. As part of the practical exercises, these institutions present students' performances for the public as well.

Institutions and organizations devoted to documentation and promotion are the National Identity Board of the Prime Minister's Office; the Division of Music and Dance, Department of Fine Arts; the National Library; the Office of the National Culture Commission; the Centre for Education Technology; Department of Non-formal Education, Ministry of Education.

The National Identity Board of the Prime Minister's Office has set up committees to study and publish books on drama literatures and traditional theater. Financial support has been given to scholars to undertake research and documentation of folk dance and drama.

One outstanding scholar, Khunying Pa-ob Posakritsana undertook study and documentation of *likay*, *nang yai* and children's games. The books on *likay* and *nang yai* were published. For promotion and dissemination of performing arts information, the Board has conducted radio broadcasting and television programmes which include dramatic arts.

Under the Department of Fine Arts, the Division of Music and Dance produces classical drama of various genres at the National Theater. Some performances are recorded on videotape. The Division publishes programmes of performances which can be also used as sources of information. The National Library has sometimes undertaken the filming of folk dance and tape recording of folk literature. The National Library holds collection of books, published and unpublished researches on performing arts. One book on music documentation has been published. This book consists of music terminology, pictures of musical instruments, and bibliography. One section of the National Library is devoted to music.

The Centre for Education Technology holds collections of phonograph records, tape cassettes and videotapes. The centre undertakes programmes for recording classical music and songs on tape, and classical dances on videotape. Copies are made available for schools. Most secondary and some elementary schools provide group courses in dance, dance drama and music as elective subjects. There are also school clubs for music and drama.

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The Office of the National Culture Commission offers financial support to the cultural centres all over the country, to document folk dance, music and drama. It also has a Centre for Cultural Information which has created databases of outstanding artists, and other databases relating to folk arts. It has collections of slides, cassette tapes and video tapes of the performances presented at the Thailand Cultural Centre.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand is also engaged in activities to promote traditional dance and dance drama as part of tourism promotion. It has arranged performances at historical sites such as Pimai and Sukhothai. The performances are videotaped and photographed. It also issues a well-known magazine entitled "Tourism Thailand," which occasionally publishes articles on performing arts.

It is worth mentioning here that in Thailand private institutions also engaging in documentation of traditional folk arts are the Bangkok Bank, Sri Nakorn Bank and Thai Farmers' Bank. The Bangkok Bank supports researches, documentation of folk songs and dance. The Music Art Centre of the bank has large collections of tapes, slides, photographs and printed materials. The centre organizes performances of folk dance, drama and song for the public. It also organizes television programmes on traditional arts which include performing arts. Some oil companies give financial support to promote public appreciation of traditional performing arts.

Regional, and international organization such as UNESCO, ASEAN and SPAFA have also significant roles to play as facilitator of documentation activities. SPAFA has programmes of training courses, workshops and research on documentation of performing arts. The SPAFA Library collects materials on the subject, publishes and distributes proceedings of workshops, and seminars. SPAFA also issues this journal, which includes articles on performing arts in Thailand as well as in other countries in Southeast Asia.

The roles of the Thai Government in documentation and promotion of performing arts can be summed up as follows:

1. To ensure that performing arts activities be created, organized and performed, for state ceremonies in the past and at present, for fostering appreciation of traditional drama, dance, music and songs and for developing aesthetic value among the people. Towards this end, the Government has established governmental departments responsible for the production of performing arts, such as the Division of Dramatic Arts under the Department of Fine Arts and the Thailand Cultural Centre under the Office of the National Commission for Culture. As part of the organization of performance, documentation and promotion activities such as publication of brochures, photographing, tape recording and videotape recording are undertaken.

2. To train performing arts personnel. In order to accomplish this

role, the Government has established training institutions, such as the Colleges of Dramatic Arts under the Department of Fine Arts, Ministry of Education teachers' training colleges, and universities offering courses on various genres of performing arts, as minor or major subjects leading to a bachelor's degree. Text books and other instruction materials are created for training.

3. To document traditional performing arts which are disappearing because of the old ages of the master artists, and the lack of understanding and appreciation among younger generations. Budgetary allocations have been provided to governmental units concerned to collect relevant materials, and to undertake researches and documentation of classical as well as folk dances, dance drama, music, songs etc.

The use of modern technology for documentation and promotion has been encouraged and given financial support.

4. To give moral support to performing artists. Measures taken toward this end are the conferring of honorary degrees and decorations, awards for distinguished achievements at national level. The Office of the National Commission for Culture, in co-operation with the National Library, has established within the National Library "A Hall of National Artists" which in future will be developed into a full-fledged hall.

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# Book Review

KABUKI DANCER BY SAWAKO ARIYOSHI

Sawako Ariyoshi's "Kabuki Dancer" is informative reading for anyone curious about Japanese expressive culture or anyone just looking for a book on *kabuki* history to read. It has aspects of Japanese life, intrigue, murders and assassinations, love triangles, jealousies and hatred interwoven together. It offers a behind-the-scenes story for those who are not satisfied with the facade of the *kabuki* stage. As *kabuki* is now only performed by males, it tells us about the unusual birth of *kabuki* by a woman in the late 16th century in Kyoto, who was totally devoted to dance for its pure pleasure, never for gain, material or otherwise. The name of the legendary figure is Okuni.

The novel reveals the life of Okuni, the unusual originator of *kabuki* from 1588, the time she was discovered by Omura Yuko Hogen Baian, personal attendant to Toyotomi Hideyoshi who was Regent to the Emperor, dancing in a side show at the Plum Blossom Festival at the Tenmangu Shrine in Osaka until her early death in 1609 at the age of 38 somewhere in the Iron Mountain of Izumo, her place of birth.

Okuni's original dance at the Plum Blossom Festival attracted Lord

Baian because its light buoyant steps and energetic movements were in direct contrast with the restrained style of *noh*; the preferred entertainment of the rich then. Okuni herself was also a significant factor as she was an extremely sensuous dancer. The only accompaniment then were bells struck in unison with the chanting of Buddhist hymns. Lord Baian then

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introduced the *noh* drum into the routine and wove an exotic tale about the origin of the group introducing Okuni as a high priestess from the Grand Shrine in Izumo. Lord Baian also started Okuni on her love for gorgeous colours and beautiful fabrics.

Subsequent innovations continued to make the dances more exotic, more unusual; the entry of foreigners

introduced Western styles which Okuni incorporated into her dance and her impersonation of male characters completely took Kyoto by storm. It was at that time unthinkable that a woman would dare to dress as a man.

After the initial interest, Lord Baian left the troupe completely to their own devices as he was too busy attending to Lord Hideyoshi. So the troupe started to set up shows at street corners and collected fees from customers. Later when they became successful, they built a magnificent theatre, the first of its kind, on the Kamo River collecting fees for all their shows. The success of Okuni's troupe naturally attracted many imitators and the Kamo River in Kyoto where they had a theatre was packed with similar shows. Even the prostitution houses from Yanagi Ward used Okuni's idea to parade their girls and lure customers. The troupe then travelled to Edo in search of new audiences.

As Okuni's shows became the talk of the town, the troupe was invited to homes of the rich and elite to perform; including the emperor's consort, Sakiko and Hideyoshi's favorite mistress, Otane, not to mention rich merchants and powerful court officials. Apart from her own friends from the village in Izumo and the common people who went to Okuni's theatre on the Kamo River, Okuni also had access to the elite.

The 348-page book, published by Kodansha International, translated by James Brandan, does provide many interesting insights into the Japanese way of life of that era, from the lowest to the highest stratum. The period of rule by Lord Hideyoshi was exceptionally colorful as he was particularly partial to parades and parties of record breaking dimensions.

The lyrics of the hymns and popular songs used by Okuni are given, allowing us to have a good idea of the prevailing thoughts and interests of that era. Many were love songs which reveal to us a much less reserved society than one might have imagined.

As a novel, the style of narration leaves something to be desired. Events are described in chronological order with some very short instances of recall. There is no climax to the book and so the story seems to meander along like a river on a plain. Okuni's first use of the term *kabuki* to describe her performances, her innovations with foreign accessories and costumes, music and lyrics are all presented in a rather calm and monotonous style. Even her love affairs with Sankuro, the *noh* drummer and Nagoya Sanza, a city dandy come across as incidental phases in her life. What came across very effectively, as a result, was that all Okuni cared about ultimately was dancing, dance and more dance. In fact, her dance became an obstacle in her love life; her pure desire for dance with no motivation for gain drove a wedge between Sankuro and her while her ultimate fame as Best in the World forced Nagoya Sanza away from

her. It is ironic that while the book is interesting as a result of detailed insights into life and society of that era, it made the book suffer as a novel, as the life of Okuni pales in comparison against the colorful background of civil uprisings and struggle for power by the ruling class.

It would have been a nice finish to the book and an appreciated enlightenment if the missing link between Okuni's *kabuki*, which was essentially an all female troupe became today's *kabuki* with an all male cast, was provided.

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