

Performing Arts during the Reign of King Rama IX¹

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Introduction

Performing Arts during the Reign of King Rama IX¹ is a research paper undertaken with the aim of studying the activities of performing arts in Thailand since His Majesty the King ascended the throne in 1946 (in 1999 the Thais celebrate his 72nd birthday and the 52nd year of his reign). The research focuses on the development of major theatre genres deriving from this period, including foreign forms which play a significant role in the performing arts culture of the country; information in available documents pertaining to performing arts of this period; interviews and questionnaires; and observation of live performances and videos.

The research in this paper is divided into five aspects. First, the description of His Majesty the King's contribution to performing arts. Second, the descriptive analysis of performing arts education which is definitely a great achievement. Third, a survey of the status of various performing arts being performed in this period. Fourth, the study of *rabam* or dance set pieces which were choreographed in a large scale. And fifth, an exploration into the characteristics of performing arts during this reign.

Historical Perspective

Performing Arts in Thailand were mentioned in stone relics and literature since the Sukhothai Period (1328-1350). *Rabam*, *ram*, *ten* are some of the terms which referred to certain kinds of



Nora Poom Tewa, a great nora dance guru, performed for His Majesty the King at Chitrlada Palace, 20 March 1971

performance; these words are used today to mean group dance, using hand and arm movements or leg and foot movements. *Len pleng* (sing song) dance presentation is also believed to be performed as early as during this period.

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Early Ayutthaya Period (1350-1456) saw more kinds of performing arts: *Kanlalen Kong Luang* or royal ceremonial dances, *nang* or shadow puppet, *hun* or doll puppet and *lakon* or dance drama. *Chak nak Dugdamban*, or ceremony depicting the churning of the ocean to create the immortal spirit, was performed on special occasions. These performing arts were gradually developed into *Khon* (masked play), *Lakon nok* (public dance drama) and *Lakon nai* (court dance drama) during the Late Ayutthaya Period (1456-1767). This period also enjoyed various imported performing arts from neighbouring countries.

The Thonburi Period (1767-1782) revived all kinds of performing arts which were diminished by the war that had caused Ayutthaya Kingdom to fall.

Started in 1782, the Bangkok period has been ruled by King Rama of the Chakri Dynasty. During the reign of King Rama I-III (1782-1852), revitalisation and refinement of the performing arts were derived from Ayutthaya and Thonburi periods. The *Lakon nok baeb luang*, a mixture of *Lakon nok* and *Lakon nai*, was an innovation of King Rama II to suit his court ladies' potential. *Lakon chattri*, a mixture of *nora* dance drama of the south and *Lakon nok*, were merged by professional artists in the reign of King Rama III.

There were various new kinds of performing arts during the King Rama IV and V reigns (1852-1911), with more social freedom and westernisation. The new forms mainly derived from early periods, containing or omitting some elements to cater to the new social mode. They were *Lakon pantang*, dance drama (flavored with foreign nationalities residing in Bangkok); *Lakon dukdamban* (a modification of *Lakon nok* and *Lakon nai*, with realistic scenery); *Lakon rong* (an operatta); and *Likay* (a musical dance drama interspersed with comedy). *Lakon pood*, spoken drama and *Lakon pood slab lam*, spoken drama

with songs, were initiated by King Rama V but did not become popular.

During the reign of King Rama VI (1911-1925), performing arts, old and new, were supported substantially by the court and the public alike. *Rongrien Pran Laung*, the first official school for traditional performing arts, especially *Khon*, was established under the royal patronage.

King Rama VII reign (1925-1935) saw the emergence of *Lakon pleng*, a musical drama with western musical ensemble. During this reign, the absolute monarchy was replaced by constitutional monarchy. Performing arts, once under the patronage and the leadership of the monarchs, passed into the hands of the civilian government.

The government, under a democratic system (in the reign of King Rama VIII, between 1935 and 1946), and the public were interested in new kinds of performing arts. *Lakon Luang Wijit* or Mr. Wijit Style of Drama or spoken drama, with song and dance expressing nationalism, was extremely popular. *Rongrien Nattaduriyangkasat*, a school of dance and music, was established. The development of Performing arts in Thailand, however, was greatly affected by dictatorship and the second world war.

His Majesty the King and Performing Arts

His Majesty the King has been involved in performing arts since his childhood. His involvement can be divided into five roles: first, as the good example of leader of the family; second, as the arts philosopher; third, as the great artist of the nation; fourth, as the divine king; and fifth, as the royal patron of the arts.

Firstly, His Majesty the King, the Queen and their royal children set an example as a family who always recognise the importance of the performing arts. Members of the royal

family have been involved in one kind or another of the performing arts. At school in the palace, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn performed *Khon* masked play on several occasions. Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, as well as Her Royal Highness Princess Chulaporn, also performed numerous Thai dance pieces, and Her Royal Highness Princess Ubolratna enjoyed classical ballet. Their Majesties paid much attention to this matter by closely observing their children's rehearsals and presiding over their performances. His Majesty's recognition of the performing arts for the royal children initiated a new trend for parents to let their children practise and perform traditional performing arts which was not well accepted before.

Secondly, His Majesty the King is keen in expressing his philosophical views pertaining to the performing arts. In many of his speeches, His Majesty displayed his thorough understanding of the performing arts, their functions and

contribution to improve the quality of life. In one of his speeches, he said:

"...Thus, artists are very important in order to express with efficiency, intention, and sincerity. Most importantly, artists must intend to achieve the goal of the arts. The goal is to let other people see the truth (of life). And when seeing the truth, the people will adapt and build themselves for the better. Arts can also lead to other directions. Arts may also invite other people to share the same feeling with those who intend to express the arts. Therefore, the importance of every group of artists including playwrights, directors and actors, is to have good intention ... the duty of artists is to set forth their sincerity and good intention that will lead to a good result which in turn will obtain a constructive attainment. This will



Khon Chak or Khon with realistic scenery, Silpakorn Theatre, 27 November 1959

make our world to have a true prosperity."

Thirdly, His Majesty the King was given the title of "The Great Artist of the Nation" on 24 August, 1982. This title was based upon his contribution to many art forms: music, painting, sculpture, photography, literature and performing arts. Although his creative works did not appear as performing arts per se, his music compositions and his literary work lend themselves to the development of the performing arts in Thailand. Many of his compositions were the musical accompaniment of many dance pieces such as *Sai Fon* (Falling Rain), *Khon Nai Fun* (Dream Island), *Saeng Duen* (Moon Light) and *Kwam Fan An Soong Soot* (Ultimate Goal). He purposely composed 'Kinnarie Suite' for the ballet, 'Manohra', in 1961. Khun Ying Jeneveive L'Espanol Damon, as the choreographer under His Majesty's supervision, created a new style of ballet which was a combination of the classical ballet and Thai classical dance, the first of its kind in the world of ballet.

His Majesty also wrote a book that became one of the great plays in his reign. In 1997, His Majesty wrote *Maha Chanok*, which is based upon an ancient Buddhist tale. He wished for the Thai readers to learn about the patience, endurance, and perseverance of the king who is the hero in the play, and use these virtues for their own success in life. His Majesty graciously permitted Seri Wangnaitham, a national artist, to adapt his literature into a dance drama script and production which became established as another play in the Thai theatre repertoire. Consequently, this is recognised as a royal composition.

Fourthly, His Majesty the King is traditionally believed to be the divine King who incarnates the supreme power of the Hindu Trinity, Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Protector), and Siva (the Destroyer). In 1983, the only

dance master who had the right to perform *Piti Wai Khru Khon Lakon* (the ceremony of paying homage to the theatre teachers) suddenly died of heart failure. This ceremony is regarded as the most sacred rite for dancers to participate in so as to obtain the right to perform or to teach. Since no one has obtained the right to perform such sacred ceremony, all junior dancers are not able to perform or teach their traditional dance and theatre. His Majesty, after being informed, kindly granted an audience of all qualified dancers and performed the royal ceremony Himself. He was able to lead the ceremony because he was endowed with the supreme power of Lord Brahma, believed to be the creator of the *Natya Saastra* or Dramaturgy of the universe. Five great dancers were given the right to be the masters of ceremony for the *Wai Khru Khon Lakon*. Subsequently, the great tradition of performing arts in Thailand, continues.



'Monohra', a ballet with Thai dance gestures based upon His Majesty's composition, at Amhorn Garden, 5 January 1962
(courtesy of Vanida Tulalamba)

Fifthly, one of His Majesty the King's great duties to the country is to patronise the arts. Since his accession to the throne, His Majesty the King has always attended performing arts functions privately or publicly. He grants audiences to and advises many performing arts organisations such as the Music Association and the Thai Movies Association, etc.. By accepting performing arts associations under his patronage, he renders to the associations and their members great honour and privilege. He has been granting the first class medal of honour to artists who are given the title of National Artist, and when these National Artists pass away, they would be gifted with the greatest honour in the life of a Thai - his King performing lighting the cremation fire ceremony at the funeral pyre.



His Majesty the King placing a sacred thread over the head of a performer during the Ceremony of Paying Homage to Theatre Teachers at Chitralada Palace, 20 October 1984.

His Majesty the King has been performing a great role in creating, promoting, supporting and patronising the performing arts in Thailand. He supports his family to take the lead in nurturing the performing arts, and helps his subjects to understand and to practice the performing arts for the benefit of human beings. Truly the epitome of the Thai performing arts, the King's artistic talent in music and literature, no less, contributes to its development: a new style of ballet, and a dramatic literature.

Performing Arts Education

Performing arts education has been a great achievement during the reign of the present King. At the beginning, there was only one school of dramatic arts offering high school diplomas in traditional theatre and dance (*khon* and *lakon*). After His Majesty the King allowed the royal children to practise and perform traditional theatre and dance, Thai parents followed suit. General schools started providing dance classes, and dance teachers were in demand. As a result, teachers' colleges began to offer two-year diplomas in Dance Teaching. Concurrently, another school of dramatic arts opened in Chiangmai, north of Thailand. Shortly after, both schools became colleges of dramatic arts offering two-year diplomas in Dramatic Arts. In the meantime, students also went to study western theatre and ballet in Europe and the United States of America. They became pioneers in performing arts education at the university level. Chulalongkorn university was the first university to provide a bachelor's degree in modern theatre. Teachers' colleges also started modern theatre programmes while the College of Dramatic Arts in Bangkok implemented new programmes in modern theatre and ballet.

Performing arts education expanded rapidly in the past two decades. The following are the colleges and universities offering various programmes in performing arts today:

1. Twelve *Witayalai Natasilp* (Colleges of Dramatic Arts) offer eight-year high school diplomas and two-year college diplomas.
2. One *Sataban Bundit Patanasin* (Institute of Arts Development) offers two-year continuing programme of bachelor's degree in dramatic arts.
3. Thirty six *Sataban Ratchapat* (former Teachers' College) provide two-year diplomas and four-year bachelor's degrees in Thai performing arts and in western theatre.

4. Seven universities provide bachelor's degree programmes in Thai theatre, modern theatre and/or ballet. In addition, Chulalongkorn university also provides a graduate diploma in modern theatre, a master's degree and a doctoral degree in Thai theatre and dance. The total number of students who graduated from these programmes is estimated to be 5,000 (with diploma), 3,000 (with bachelor's degree) and 32 (with master's degree).

Besides the educational institutes mentioned above, other international, national, local and individual organisations also contribute greatly to the development of performing arts education. They are, for example, Unesco, Asean, Spafa, National Culture Commission, National Research Commission, Naris Foundation and Damrong Foundation, etc.. These organisations support arts and cultural activities, and thus support the performing arts (in the form of scholarship, research fellowship, funding for workshops, seminars, productions or awards, etc.). Such support helps make many performing arts activities possible.

Theatre and Dance Performances

As with the education aspect during this period, arts performances thrived. Dance theatres from the past are still active, and adhere to their traditions and aesthetic quality. Folk theatres continue to adapt their presentations to meet current audience's appreciation and demands. There is a trend to search for roots in many folk dances, while dramas and western musicals of the previous era are being revived. Modern spoken drama, ranging from socialistic to

melodramatic, are very popular on television and stage alike. In recent years, contemporary dramas have become more acceptable among younger audience; and the mass media, particularly television, plays a very important role in the preservation and promotion of the performing arts.

Many earlier forms of traditional theatre, such as *khon*, *lakon ram*, *hun*, and *nang yai* (masked play, dance drama, doll puppetry and large shadow play) are mostly supported by the government and are still being welcomed by the public, although some of them are staged



*Rachatirat, a dance drama depicting a war scene between Chinese emperor and Burmese king at Silpakorn Theatre, 28 March 1952.
(The Khon and Lakon P.228)*

only as a demonstration for educational purpose. Preservation of these theatre forms is mainly the task of the government educational institutes who actually preserve and promote ancient performing arts through practice and performance. In addition, some ancient forms are still active due to their ritualistic functions for the public. The Thais habitually make wishes to the deities, and after their wish is



'Manohra', a ballet with Thai dance gestures based upon His Majesty's composition, at Amphorn Garden, 5 January 1962 (photo courtesy of Vanida Tulalamba)

fulfilled, they traditionally thank the gods with a performance of theatre or dance. This keeps many traditional performances alive today.

Traditional performing arts also developed further in content and style (towards western realism such as in costume and scene design). Folk theatres such as *likay*, *mohlam*, *nora*, *nang talung* and *lakon saw* constantly add new elements into their productions to cater to the ever-changing taste of their audience. These folk theatres remain as popular as ever before, and become even more popular through television.

There has also been significant development in traditional dances. *Fon tai lue* is created by northern artists and scholars who are searching for their roots, and finding the northern identity in dance expression. Concurrently, northeastern artists are also making an effort to standardise the dance gestures of the northeast. Meanwhile, the *nora* dance, once a

male dance of the South, is gradually being replaced by female dancers; the masculine dance form and domination of *nora* is thus, in decline.

Recently, the development of a dance style called Thai contemporary dance, which is a combination of Thai and western dance forms, has emerged. The most outstanding development in term of dance, however, is the *rabam*. More than 300 *rabams* were newly choreographed for various purposes and occasions in the past three decades.

Sung drama from the early period was very popular during the first decade of the reign of the present Thai King. Spoken drama, which was not well received by the public before, proved to be perfect for television, turning into popular professional theatre on air ever since. The growing movie industry drew stage actors and actresses away from the stage. Still, spoken drama has become major events of

educational theatres, with Western adaptations and reflections of Thai society as the two primary subjects of the plays.

Today, Thai contemporary theatre is the new trend that attracts a large number of young audience in Thailand. Social development, which has been moving towards westernisation and globalisation, is also reflected in Thai theatre and dance. Searching for new styles that are suitable for the new era, Thai artists are inspired by the main motives relating to reinterpretation of traditional literature, re-examination of the roots of cultural identities, and revitalisation of the disappearing arts. Mainly, they mix Thai traditional theatricalism, especially costume and dance, with western impressionism or expressionism. Traditional plays were retold in a mosaic picture of various Thai and western performance elements; for examples: Thai classical dance combined with the classical ballet; Thai masked play with shadow play and contemporary dance, and etc..

The younger generation, particularly in schools, colleges and universities, are drawn to ballet, modern, and contemporary dance. These western dances have become increasingly popular and are well established during these past few years because they had been major study subjects in colleges and universities. Currently, private dance studios are also nurturing a great number of talented dancers, several of whom have been training since childhood.

In contributing toward the performing arts, the mass media (radio, film and television) have a very important role. Radio broadcasts, which featured traditional plays as well as soap operas for a large audience, used to draw audience to theatres and movies houses, creating box office successes. They also helped to popularise the company that had the chance to perform on air. Radio drama, however, declined and was gradually replaced by televisions. Thai movies follow the same pattern, with television

broadcasting traditional as well as modern plays to a large audience. Television is a very effective medium in educating and promoting many disappearing arts to the audience. It also served as a channel through which different dance cultures can be disseminated, integrated, and compared.

Professional artists establish professional organisations to protect themselves as competition in professional theatre is very serious. Most organisations started as charity groups, and became more regulated for the professional benefits of each member, when more members joined. It is likely that the union for performers may emerge with full law enforcement in the near future.

***Rabam*: Creative Dances**

Rabam in this research means dance with some meanings or short story lines, not amounting to a full-fledged dramatic form. *Rabam* is a major kind of Thai performing arts since ancient time. It was created mainly as a decorative element to embellish the play production; very few *rabams* were choreographed for dance *per se*. At the beginning of the current reign, *rabams* were also created as a part of *khon* and *lakon*. Until about 1967, *rabams* began to be choreographed independently. The research shows that more than 300 dances were newly choreographed in the past three decades. These new *rabams* were the results of two governmental policies, preservation of Thai identities and tourism promotion, and may be categorised into six groups:

1. Dance as a part of theatre
2. Dance enlivening ancient lyrics and myths
3. Dance initiating traditions, ceremonies and games
4. Dance expressing local identity
5. Dance depicting arts and craft-making
6. Dance with various purposes

1. Dance as a part of theatre derived from earlier tradition and is still practised today. This type of dance contributes to the extravagance of the production. It also helps dramatise emotion and imagination, and makes theatre productions more colourful. Many dances of this group are highly valued and are placed in the dance curriculum.
2. Dances enlivening ancient lyrics or myths are choreographed by bringing dance postures found in stone carving and mural paintings in ancient time, or from ancient lores and myths. Choreographers brought those ancient movements to life.
3. Dance initiating traditions, ceremonies and games is choreographed by adapting the gestures and procedures of various rituals, festivals or traditional games and sports into a dance form.
4. Dance expressing local identity uses symbols of a local village, district, or province (such as local flowers).
5. Dance depicting arts and craft-making process reflects gestures, postures, movements and sequences of working processes of villagers in producing arts and crafts.
6. Dance with various purposes are miscellaneous dance pieces which can be divided into three small groups: dance glorifying beauty, dance imitating animals' movements, and dance expressing friendship between Thailand and other nations.

As *Rabam* is the major kind of performance that enriches the performing arts of King Rama IX's reign, there is a large quantity of *Rabams* choreographed during his reign, many of which attain high aesthetic quality.

Characteristics of performing arts of King Rama IX Reign

Performing arts during this reign can be characterised as follows:

1. Combination of Thai dance and other forms of dance, particularly western dances;
2. More freedom in traditional performing arts, which allows artists to create new choreography within the tradition;
3. Revival of local dance identities;
4. Condensation of traditional performances by avoiding repetition but still maintaining their aesthetic quality.

Performing arts at this time still maintain their principles and traditional patterns in the core of their performances, and add other current contents, styles and techniques to provide innovations to the productions. They also aim at a realistic expression of contemporary visualism while maintaining the refinement of the past.

This research is devoted to the commemoration of the 72nd Birthday of His Majesty King Bhumibhol Adulyadej The Great who rules Thailand since 1946. Peace and tranquillity in the reign of King Rama IX provides a great prosperity to the performing arts in Thailand, both in preservation and development. Through the support of the monarchy, education, performance and artistic creation of the performing arts will continue to serve various segments of the society as an everlasting cultural heritage of Thailand.