

Role of the Government Agencies in Documentation and Promotion of the Performing Arts in Thailand

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Documentation of any event, activity, creation, thought, and imagination is – in a broader sense – an attempt to record information expressed, etc. for conservation and promotion. In this regard, documentation activities began even during pre-historic time, as evidenced by rock arts and cave paintings. Documentation activities and methods have been passed from generations to generations, and have developed to become more effective and dynamic. The new information technology is beneficial for efforts to preserve, promote, and transfer knowledge.

Historical background

In Thailand, the performing arts have been in existence for centuries, and sometimes flourished to great heights. Some of the earliest rock arts reveal figures of dancers in

ritual celebration, and the first written record in Thai scripts, King Ramkhamhaeng's stone inscription, described religious processions consisting of musicians playing drums, string instruments and gamelan.¹ The Royal Palatine Law, dated back

to the Ayutthaya Period (A.D. 1358), informs of dances, puppetry and other kinds of performances organized for the ceremonies to welcome important elephants.² The ancient civil law also mentions positions for musicians, dances,



actors, harlequins, and puppeteers.³ According to the "Historical Record on Events after the Destruction of Ayutthaya" 1753 A.D. approximately, the *lakon*, or dance drama, was an essential component of state ceremonies.⁴

How have dance, dance drama, music and songs, knowledge and skills been preserved and transferred from generations to generations? Mainly through oral tradition. Teachers themselves are sources of knowledge and skills; they used verbal explanation to teach and inspire artistic creation.

Students of classical dances must dance exactly "like their teachers by adhering to the classical patterns".⁵ Singers memorize songs and sing from their memories; and musicians play music in the same manner since there were no music notation to look at.

However, some attempts had been made, in the past, for documentation of the performing arts. Right after the de-

struction of Ayutthaya by the Burmese, and as soon as Dhonburi was founded, King Taksin the Great, who established Dhonburi as the capital, ordered a search and collection of religious texts and literary works. Fully aware of the significant role of performing arts in ceremonial activities, as well as tools for disseminating messages, and morale uplifting, the king himself wrote parts of the Ramakien, or Ramayana, which is a renowned literature of dance drama in Southeast Asia.

Royal Support

The earliest methods used for notation were written words, drawing of illustrations, mural painting, and sculpture in relief forms. In the past, three institutions in Thailand were engaged in the creation, presentation, documentation and training of performing arts. 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 other patrons were the kings' relatives, and officers of very high ranks. Among the folks, there were masters of various troupes who trained apprentices.

Personage

King Rama I, the founder of Bangkok, continued the noble task of documenting the performing arts. Under his royal command, literary works for drama were compiled or written. For the mask dance *Khon*, the Ramakien was written in the poetic form, which was 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 puppetry, *Nang Yai*. According to H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, such books may



have been written during the Ayutthaya Period.⁶

Also during the reign of King Rama I, the whole Ramakien story was presented in the form of mural painting in the Temple of Emerald Buddha. All the characters' costumes and gestures are those of 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. He arranged for dancers to be photographed dancing with the basic gestures, and produced a publication called "*Tamra Fonrum - Dancing Treatise*". The same book included the photo of the *Nora* dance of the South of Thailand, and an interview with a famous *Nora* master. Prince Damrong also took advantage of modern techniques of sound recording, and arranged to have Thai songs and music phonograph recorded.

King Rama VI gave support to dance drama and music. He established a Department of Performing Arts, *Krom Mahorasop*, and a training unit for dancers and musicians. The King himself wrote and produced plays, and introduced western genres of plays into the country. Prince Naradhip Prapanpong, his uncle who had many of his plays published, introduced *Lakon Rong* which is an adaptation of the western opera and the Malay *Bangsawan*. H.R.H. Prince Nakorn Swan was involved in efforts to construct musical notation for Thai music, and notated some of the songs he composed.

Changes

After the change of the regime in 1932, from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, Thai dancing, drama and music which reached the zenith during King Rama VI's reign (1910-1925) declined for a few years. It was followed by economic crisis. The new government in 1934 established the Department of Fine Arts in the Ministry of Education, and transferred responsibilities for the performing arts from the Bureau of Royal Household to the new department.⁷ Many problems were caused by the economic crisis and master dancers were growing old. Attempts

were made by the Department to obtain co-operation from the old masters to teach a younger generation of dancers. 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 of Fine Arts. Under the directorship of Luang Wichit Watakarn, important Thai classical songs were notated with western notes, and printed in book form. To promote the arts, the Department organized a series of mask dance and other genres of dance drama.



For every performance, a programme booklet was printed and distributed. These were later compiled and published.⁸ One book on the *Khon* was published. For the first time, the Thai mask dance performance, entitled “*New Petch – Diamond Finger*”, was filmed. Later on, His Majesty the present King ordered one very important dance, the *Papirap*, to be recorded in film.

The use of modern technology in documenting dance drama for the purpose of teaching was limited at the time. Dance teachers tried to simplify choreography in writing and drawing. The most popular system of dance notation and documentation is the dance vocabulary and terminology, but this is limited to only the classical dance. Akom Sayakom, who was a famous dancer and teacher, published a book on basic dance vocabularies which were described in detail.⁹ Today, modern techniques for documentation have been in use to record the performing arts, though not to a large extent.

Institutions

Concerned governmental agencies, institutions and organizations involved in documentation 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 Life-long Education, and Ministry of Education.

The National Identity Board of the Prime Minister's Office set up committees to study and publish books on drama literature and traditional theatre. Financial assistance have 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 information on the performing arts, the Board conducts radio broadcasting and television programmes on the dramatic arts.

Under the Department of Fine Arts, the Division of Music and Dance perform classical drama of various genres at the National Theatre, some performances of which are videotaped. The Division publishes programmes of performances which are also sources of information.

The National Library hold collection of books, published and unpublished researches on the performing arts. Few years back it made attempts to film

folk dance and to record folk literature on tape. One book was published on music terminology, with pictures of musical instruments, and bibliography.

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 videotapes. Copies are made available to schools (most secondary and some elementary schools offer dance, dance drama and music as selective subjects; there are also school clubs for music and drama).

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 establishes a Centre for Cultural Information which has created databases of outstanding artists, and other databases relating to folk arts. Its collections include slides, cassette tapes and video tapes of 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 the tourism promotion. The organization arranges performances, at historical sites such

as Pimai and Sukhothai, that are video-taped and photographed. Their well-known magazine, entitled 'Tourism Thailand', occasionally includes articles on the performing arts.

Private institutions engaged 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, and set up a Music Art Centre that stores a large collection of tapes, slides, photographs and printed materials. The Centre organizes performances of folk dance, drama and music for the public, as well as produces television programmes on traditional arts including the performing arts. Some oil companies provide financial assistance for documentation.

Regional and international organizations such as Unesco, ASEAN and SEAMEO SPAFA have significant roles as facilitators of documentation activities. SPAFA Centre has programmes of training courses, workshops and research on documentation of the performing arts. The library of the Centre collects materials on the subject, publishes and distributes proceedings of workshops, and seminars, and issues a journal 'SPAFA Digest', which was later entitled 'SPAFA

Journal'. The journal contains articles on the performing arts in Thailand as well as in other countries in Southeast Asia.

Institutions devoted to training are the College of Dramatic Arts which has branches in large cities all over Thailand. The College, which carries out research, conducts courses for artists as well as for teachers in the performing arts. Trainees graduating with courses in teaching methodology become teachers in arts in the elementary or secondary schools, as well as at tertiary level institution (e.g. at the Teachers Training Colleges). At the University level, Chulalongkorn University, Silpakorn University, and Kasetsart University offer courses on classical as well as modern dance drama, and as part of the practical exercises, these academic institutions present students' performances for the public.

Conclusion

The roles of the Thai government agencies in documentation and promotion of the performing arts can be summed up as follow:-

1. *To ensure that the performing arts activities be created, organized and performed for fostering appreciation of traditional drama, dance, music and songs; and for*

developing aesthetic values among the people. Towards this end, the Government has established the governmental departments responsible for the production of the performing arts; examples are 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. Documentation and promotional activities such as publication of brochures, photography, tape recordings and videotape-recordings are integral parts of the organization of events.

2. *To train the performing arts personnel.* In order to accomplish this task, the Government has established training institutions (e.g. the Colleges of Dramatic Arts under the Department of Fine Arts, Ministry of Education, teachers' training colleges, and some universities) that offer courses on various genres of the performing arts, as minor or major subjects leading to a Bachelor's degree. Text books and other institutional materials have been created for training.
3. *To document the traditional performing arts which are disappearing because of the*

old ages of the master artists, and the lack of understanding and appreciation among the younger generation. Budgetary allocation 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 artists of the performing art.* Measures taken toward this end are the conferring of honorary degrees, decorations, and awards for distinguished achievements at national level. The Office of the National Commission for Culture, in co-operation with the National Library, has created within the National Library a 'Hall of National Artists' which in future will be developed into a full-fledged permanent exhibition hall in its own right.

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