

# Dynamism of Ballet in Isan

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**Abstract** – *Isan is a region with diverse dancing art forms, such as Fon (Northertern-Thai-style-dance), Serng (Northestern-Thai-style-dance), and Ram (Central-Thai-style-dance) which are attached to important traditions associated with Buddhism and spiritual beliefs. Ballet is a unique cross-cultural dance that has spread into Isan society over a long period of time. This qualitative research aims to study the history of ballet in Isan from 1976 to 2012 and the factors that have led to the dynamism of ballet in Isan. Research methods used for data collection include document study, fieldwork and researcher experience. In this study, the population and area samples are in seven provinces: Khon Kaen, Nakhon Ratchasima, Udon Thani, Ubon Ratchathani, Maha Sarakham, Chaiyaphum and Buriram. Ballet first appeared in Isan in 1976 when Khunying Genevieve Damon, a French national, Ekachai Kaikaew and Kanoknat Homasawin set up as ballet teachers. Ballet schools are found in 12 public schools, 21 private schools and one school of the local administrative organization. Ballet shows take two forms, which are either Conventional Ballet and Non-Conventional Ballet. Seven factors affect the dynamism of ballet in Isan: government policy, education, economy, ballet teachers, parents of ballet students, communications and overseas organizations. Ballet teachers have a multidimensional role in educational society and are thus very important to the ballet shows in the Isan area. Moreover, ballet teachers in the Northeast also create, design, choreograph and direct the shows. The dynamism of education and economy are the second and the third most important factors.*

**Keywords** – *Ballet, dynamism, Isan, North-eastern Thailand.*

## INTRODUCTION

Ballet is an art that originated in Europe during A.D. 1300–1700. The style of dancing was dancing with music but no lyrics. The composers used ballet to tell the story and the emotion of characters while dancing. The dancers used their legs and feet as important tools for dancing [1]. The unique dance was called pointed shoes and expressed the emotions in through literature or performance through the dance creations of each dancer. Ballet is an art of dancing that has its own style and consists of various works of art, such as scenery, costumes, music, performance literature, props and performance equipment.

The development of ballet originated under the support of Italian noblemen in Renaissance Europe. In the beginning, ballet was mixed with other popular arts, such as masquerade and mummies in order to honour the kings and welcome visitors. Moreover, they showed the prosperity and the power of kings in

each era [2]. Later, ballet was developed gradually by Jean George Noverre. Ballet was clearly separated from drama, opera and storytelling to be its own style.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D., Italian prosperity led to the development of arts in the Renaissance. The rich supported artists to create their work and this was the origin of dancing arts. They were performed on stages to cerebrate governors. Although many countries in Europe tried to become the most powerful country, causing the economy and politics to suffer a downturn, this was also the time when Italian arts were distributed to other countries in Europe. Italy became the leader of arts and performance, such as music, drama, and operatic dancing arts. Ballet was dominant and Italian dancing techniques were created, which focused on the speed and excitement of techniques adapted from the past into the eighteenth century. A commentator, Chare Lifah described Italian dancing techniques as

‘gymnastics’. However, good ballet dancers who lived at the time were all Italian. Despite some dancers still performing in Italy, most travelled to perform in Europe and America [3].

Ballet was popularised in Italy and France by Princess Catherine de Medici and it was developed and became well-known and prosperous under the reign of Louis XIV of France (A.D. 1643–1715) when the dancing actions were defined by Pierre Beauchamp. Moreover, Louis XIV created the first ballet institution called ‘Academie Royale De Dans’ in A.D. 1661 and it became an important institution for educational reformation, affecting ballet careers around the world. Ballet became a performing art that was widely accepted in Europe and other countries around the world. Furthermore, ballet teaching was provided at all levels in schools and national ballet groups were established to distribute work to the public.

According to Supanee Boonpeng in her dissertation on the history of Ballet in Thailand, the history of ballet in Thailand is divided into three eras based on educational development [2]: 1) the first era was from 1934 to 1951. During this time ballet was taught in dancing arts schools; 2) the second era of ballet development was from 1951 to 1966. Ballet was more developed during this time because four ballet teachers from abroad opened ballet schools in Bangkok. The ballet teaching remained free-style and was practiced for performance. Later there were four Thai ballet teachers who had graduated from England and expanded ballet teaching in Chiang Mai province. The ballet performances were classical and combined with Thai dancing arts and ballet. King Rama IV composed many songs for ballet performances and supported ballet, increasing its reputation among Thai people; 3) the third era of classic standardized ballet was from 1996 to 1998. During this time, ballet dancing was developed continuously and provided in school curricula, starting from kindergarten and continuing to university level. Moreover, the curriculum was distributed all over Thailand and changed to the international curriculum of England in order to evaluate the standards of ballet in Thailand. The ballet performances in Thailand were divided into 2 types: school performances and business performances [2].

While ballet was expanding in Bangkok, local Thai dancing arts were reflecting the identity and the way of local life. Northeastern Thai (Isan) dancing was

divided into 2 groups, based on cultural groups: Thai-Laos and Thai-Khmer, who passed on traditional dancing to new generations. The aim of Isan dancing was to sacrifice and entertain in traditional ceremonies. Local Thai dancing was performed for entertainment, such as Phu Thai dance, Takkataen dance, Sueng Yae Khai Mod Daeng and Pong Lang dance. Besides, there were local Thai dances for sacrifice, such as the Sak dance, Tung Wai dance and Phi Mod Phi Mo dance. Moreover, dance was included in performance for Isan stories, such as Mo Lam stories Likae Lao and Isan Nung Talung.

The uniqueness of Isan dancing is to focus on the feet when the audience are watching. Parents realised immediately that it is an Isan dance because the dancing and acting in Isan is completely different from dancing in other regions of Thailand. The unique aspects of Isan dancing include costume, local songs, musical instruments and dance steps that show the way of Isan life and its dominant differences from other parts of Thailand [4].

Ballet is a western art-form that has been cross-culturally adopted throughout Isan for more than 36 years and developed in the aspects of education and ballet performance in schools, both private and public. For this reason, Isan ballet is united at the present time. While local Isan performances still remain strong, the researchers were interested in the dynamism of ballet in Isan which reflects to the complete change of economy, society, culture and education and will lead to cross-cultural understanding of arts in Isan communities and realisation of changes of circumstance.

## OBJECTIVES

This qualitative investigation had two main aims: 1) to study the history of ballet in Isan from 1976 to 2012; 2) to study the factors that have led to the dynamism of ballet in Isan. This is the first in-depth qualitative research aimed to study the history and the development of ballet arts in Isan. Since this topic and research area have not appeared in any studies and analyses before, it is necessary to examine ballet distribution in Isan in order to paint a full picture of the environment.

## METHODS

The scope of this study covers ballet in Isan and the factors that have promoted the continuation of ballet in Isan from 1976-2012. Seven provinces in Isan were purposively selected to comprise the

research area for this investigation. These were Khon Kaen, Nakhon Ratchasima, Udon Thani, Ubon Ratchathani, Maha Sarakham, Chaiyaphum, and Buriram. The research sample was also purposively selected and included the three pioneer ballet teachers in Isan, ballet teachers from institutions in each of the seven provinces, ballet students from each institution, their parents, school administrators from each province and local entrepreneurs in each province. Research data was collected from analysis of related academic documents that have been cited in the introduction and discussion sections of the paper, fieldwork and researcher experiences. During field data collection, tools used were participant observation, non-participant observation, close-ended and open-ended questionnaires and focused group discussions. All data was validated using a triangulation method and analysed by inductive analysis. The results are presented below as a descriptive analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The history of ballet in Thailand can be divided into 3 eras based on educational development: 1) from 1934 to 1951 ballet was taught in dancing arts schools; 2) from 1951 to 1966 ballet was more developed because four international ballet teachers opened ballet schools in Bangkok; 3) from 1996 to 1998 classic ballet was standardized and continuously develop through school curricula from kindergarten to university. Moreover, the curriculum was distributed all over Thailand and incorporated the curriculum of England in order to evaluate the standards of ballet in Thailand. The ballet performances in Thailand were divided into 2 types: school performances and business performances.

Amra Klumjaroen stated that Isan dancing was divided into 2 groups: Thai-Lao culture and Thai-Khmer culture [5]. The dancing of these two groups reflected their individual and unique lifestyles that had been developed over time and inherited by modern society. The two aims of dancing were as offerings and as entertainment at festivals. Isan dancing reflected the way of Isan peoples' lives in the new generation [6]. Isan dances were for ceremonial purposes and local Thai dancing was performed for entertainment. This included Phu Thai dances, Takkataen dances, Sueng Yae Khai Mod Daeng and Pong Lang dances. Besides, there were some local

Thai dances for sacrificial purposes, such as Sak dance, Tung Wai dance and Phi Mod Phi Mo. Moreover, there were performances of Isan stories, such as Mo Lum, Likae Lao and Isan Nung Talung [7].

Isan dancing often incorporated martial arts to show strength. Aspects of Isan Muay or traditional Muay and folk sports, such as Seng Klong, Kai Tor, Saba and Kite flying are visible in Isan dance. They were all part of the Isan cultural heritage.



Figure 1. Conventional ballet in Thailand



Figure 2. Non-conventional ballet in Thailand

The research found that ballet was brought to Isan for the first time in 1976 by Khunying Genevieve Damon, Ekachai Kaikaew and Kanoknat Homasawin. Currently, ballet is taught in twelve public schools, twenty one private schools and one school of the local administrative organization. The teaching styles are free form and model courses from overseas. In addition, the show format consists of two forms which are Conventional Ballet (**Figure 1**) and Non-Conventional Ballet (**Figure 2**) [8].

It was found that there are seven factors which affect the dynamism of ballet in Isan: government policies, education, economy, ballet teachers, parents, communications and overseas organization. The ballet teacher is the most important factor in the dynamism of ballet in Isan because he/she has a multidimensional role in the educational society and the ballet shows in the Isan area, whether as a producer, artist or ballet teacher for one of the many educational institutions in the Isan region. Moreover, the ballet teachers in Isan also create the shows by themselves as the ballet artists, choreographers, directors and creative directors. Education and the economy are the second and the third most important factors and interact with each other all the time.

The body of knowledge gained from this research indicated that the case study of art which crosses the culture in new social contexts is accepted and can be firmly established thanks to the dynamic factors that permit the art to exist and continue to develop in new social contexts.

The three main factors that reflect the dynamism of ballet in Isan are summarized as follows:

**The Ballet Teacher.** The ballet teacher is the most important component of ballet in Isan because he/she has a multidimensional role in the educational society and the ballet shows in the Isan area. For this reason, the roles of ballet teachers in Isan define the direction of learner development, creativity and performances in society. This is especially the case for ballet teachers who teach in colleges and instruct on courses where qualifications for further education are offered. Their role at universities includes ballet testing and evaluation of ballet dancers before their graduation as professional ballet teachers, ballet businessmen and ballet creators of the future.

**The Education.** The role of ballet teachers in Isan has increased since ballet education started from kindergarten level and continued to university level.

In the 7 provinces examined there are 12 public institutions and 1 institution under the administration of the office of local government organization that operate by using a ballet curriculum that has been re-defined from international curricula.

**The Economy.** As ballet teachers drive ballet teaching and performance, they help expand the education and economy in Isan. It was noticed that there are many new branches of department stores from Bangkok opening in Isan, for example the Central Plaza department store and The Mall. These department stores provide ballet teaching as well. Besides expansion promoted by the department stores, music schools from Bangkok also have a presence in Isan. These help ballet education expand continuously in Isan.

The researchers found that ballet is more accepted in Isan now than in the past. It does not mean that Isan people necessarily have more understanding and absorption of the elegance of performing arts but they do realize the advantages of ballet practice. It was noticed from the questionnaire of ballet students' parents all over Isan that the reasons for sending children to study ballet are to develop personality, promote concentration, build confidence, build strong health, create imagination and give a chance to children to admire the art of ballet. Moreover, the trend of ballet for wedding ceremonies in Isan is increasing because people think that ballet makes weddings more luxurious and rarified. Besides, ballet at weddings increases the status of the wedding. In conclusion, the acceptance of ballet in Isan in the past was facilitated by rich people living in towns, with high incomes and high education, who realized the importance of ballet practice.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This qualitative research aimed to study the factors that have led to the dynamism of ballet in Isan. The research found that ballet was brought to Isan for the first time in 1976 by Khunying Genevieve Damon, a French national, Ekachai Kaikaew and Kanoknat Homasawin who were pioneering ballet teachers. Currently, there are ballet schools in twelve public schools, twenty one private schools and one school of the local administrative organization. The teaching styles are free-form and courses are taken from overseas. In addition, the format of ballet shows consists of two forms, which are Conventional Ballet

and Non-Conventional Ballet. Meanwhile, it was found that there are seven factors which affect the dynamism of ballet in Isan: government policy, education, economy, ballet teachers, parents of ballet students, communications and overseas organizations. The ballet teacher is the most important factor in the dynamism of ballet in Isan because he/she has a multidimensional role in the educational society and the ballet shows in the Isan area. Moreover, ballet teachers in Isan are also creators who design the shows by him/herself as ballet artists, choreographers, directors and creative directors. The dynamism of education and economy are the second and the third most important factors, which interact with each other. A body of knowledge gained from this research indicated that the case study of art which crosses culture in new social contexts allows the art to be accepted and firmly established.

This investigation about international performing arts in Isan found that an obstacle to the study was the limitation of data, related research and significant documents. Thus, the data analysis and synthesis required interviews and the experience of the researchers. For this reason, participants concerned with the education and performing arts recorded data systematically, which can be used as a resource for people interested in performing arts and other international performing arts that still remaining in Isan. These can be systematically studied for new research angles about performing arts in Isan..

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