

Analysis of the dance of native Isan artists for conservation

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Abstract –*This is a qualitative investigation to analyse native dance in North-eastern Thailand. There were three objectives for this investigation, which were to study the history of Isan folk dance, current dance postures and ways to conserve the current dance postures of Isan folk artists. Research tools were interview, observation, participation, focus group discussion and workshop. The purposively selected research sample was composed of 3 groups of national artists. The findings show that Isan folk dancer have their own unique dancing styles. Each artist has his or her own identity, which is constructed based on personal experience of dancing and singing. Mor lam is a dance used to accompany traditional Isansung poetry. Modern dance postures have been adapted from the traditional forms. Dance postures have been adapted from three primary sources: traditional literature, the ethnic and Lanchang dancing in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and rhythmic Khon Kaen compositions. The conclusions of this investigation suggest that preservation of the dancing arts and postures should centre on the incorporation of new knowledge, as well as the continuation of traditional dance postures. Further research is required for people interested in performing arts conservation in other provinces and other traditional performing arts.*

Keywords –*Mor lam, North-eastern Thailand, conservation, dance, traditions, customs*

INTRODUCTION

North-eastern Thailand was an abundant area in prehistory. It was a land whose power ruled all over the country. According to documentary evidence, it was a land where more than 10 different ethnic groups settled. They integrated their identities, customs and culture perfectly [1]. Thai-Chinese and Thai-Laos people were particularly proud of their local art, *mor lam kaen*, just as people in central Thailand were proud of Thai folk songs and Thai orchestra. *Mor lam kaen* was a creative dance that was considered as entertainment, a way of life, a tradition and an integral part of culture. It has been continuously inherited from ancestral generations from the past to present [2]. The ancestors of local Isan communities created many creative works of art, including architecture, murals, sculptures, pharmaceuticals and dramatic music that the new generations have inherited as their own.

The importance of local culture is not only the reflection of social prosperity but also as a medium of education that can help humans to understand life. Culture is also a frame for lifestyles, beliefs and discipline. Therefore, it is very important that people and communities learn their own culture and

community history in order to understand the roots of their life. With this understanding, it is hoped that they can relate to their ancestors, recognise the importance of their customs and preserve their culture with pride to benefit the goodness of society. Besides, sheer preservation, they must also continuously develop these values.

Local culture is the lifestyle of people in the community. There are similarities and differences between the lifestyles of people in different communities. These differences make up the identity of each locality, which is inherited, preserved and adjusted over the course of time. This identity is related to the community context and society in each era. Folk dancing began as a religious ceremony, which Isan people adapted over time. It began as part of a traditional belief of human sacrifice to appease the spirits of dead ancestors. People believed that dancing was a holy ritual to protect them and dispel the bad things from their lives. Isan art performances occurred from the study of these conditions of the way of life, customs, ceremonies, beliefs, plays and local literature, including the living and nonliving surrounding environment. These performances can be invented for

specific shows and their content presented in different ways from community to community, depending on many factors. Plays and performances in each area were different. Original productions were adapted to integrate the trends of society or influence of foreign cultures. Traditional cultural performances were slowly warped and gradually disappeared. The development of cultural performances for preservation by new generations is intended to remember and reflect the way of Isan ancestors' lives, including entertainment, sacrifices and social activities [3].

Mor lam was a science and art of performance that gave both knowledge and entertainment directly and indirectly to the audience, such as the knowledge about the way of life. Performances were used as materials for teaching with morality of Buddhist values and social rules. Furthermore, *Mor lam* was a local performing art for giving knowledge and entertainment and was related to human behavior in society for cultural, traditional and belief inheritance. *Mor lam* was an art that has been related to Isan people from the past to the present. Besides, performing arts reflect the cultural origin of local people and present their characteristics to the public. *Mor lam* performances at festivals require Lao reed mouth-organs, singers, dancers, music, scenery, lighting and sound. These performances are driven by local Isan lifestyle.

Mor lam is a kind of ancient Laotian songs that has been adopted by Isan people in the Northeast of Thailand. *Mor lam* is divided into a variety of songs, such as *lam toey*, *lam klon*, *lam puen*, *lam rueng tor klon*, *lam ploen* and *lam sing*. *Mor lam* is a combination of two Thai words: *mor* and *lam*. *Mor* refers to the performer, who is an expert at dancing, and *lam* means a story explained with a beautiful rhythm. So, *mor lam* means the person who can explain a story with a beautiful rhythm. The performance is usually accompanied by a Lao reed mouth-organ. Traditionally, these were played with the imagination of the artists depending on the rhythm of the piece and did not have a fixed style [4]. Many artists tried to create their own standard criteria for dancing but they were not clear about dancing postures. The comparison of the differences and similarities of each artist's dancing and costumes have never been thoroughly examined. The research team thus realized the importance of posture in dancing performances and the style of each local artist's dancing, wanting to generate academic information for artists and, students in arts education and people interested in the process of dance postures. For the

reasons given above, the researchers recognized the value of local Isan performing artists who have a strong realization of their cultural heritage and dedication to the transmission and inheritance of folk dancing to modern society. The researchers analyzed the dance of native Isan artists for conservation according to the following aims: 1) To study the history of dance of Isan folk artists; 2) to study the current dance postures of Isan folk artists; and 3) to analyze the current dance postures of Isan folk artists for conservation.

METHODS

This research was a qualitative investigation. Data was collected by document analysis and field study from August 2013 to March 2015. The research population and sample was purposively selected and included nine key informants. The nine key informants was composed of three groups of national artists. The first group of three artists were musicians with majors in Isan folk performing arts, the second group of three artists were three local traditional knowledge teachers and the third group were three local artists with expertise in dancing and singing. Data collection tools included structured and unstructured interview, participant and non-participant observation, focus group discussions and workshop. All collected data was validated using a triangulation method and analysed by typological analysis and analytic induction according to the three predefined research objectives. The results are presented here as a descriptive analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results showed that the dance of Isan folk artists differs according to the style and preferences of the individual performer. Jaruwat Thammawat stated that Isan plays can be divided into three categories: sport, music and folk dancing [5]. Isan folk dancing is an imitation of the daily work of people. People in Isan work in a lively, if disorganized manner. The beauty of their work depends on the locality. These individual nuances are reflected in the different forms of northeastern Thai dance, such as *fonPhu Thai*, *kranop ting tong* and *mor lam*.

Pornsawan Porndonkoh showed that Isan folk dancing has a high freedom in acting [6]. There is no fixed style for both finger and toe postures, which makes it unique from the traditional dances of Central Thailand. Most dance postures are created from gestures, the natural manner of the dancer and each basic posture in each area. Good examples of this fluidity are *fonPhu Thai*, *fon phi fa* and *fon Thai*

ruendumruean re. As Jearapon Petsom concluded, this fluidity in Isan performing arts has many advantages, not least agility and uniqueness [7]

The three artists majoring in Isan folk performing arts analyzed as part of this investigation were Northeastern-style singers. The first was *mor lam* Chawewan Genetic. She has a dance posture that is used for dancing with singing performances and it is created from her re-imagination of Manorah's swimming performance. This new dance creation follows the singing verse and a *laikaen* rhythm, such as in *laitoey* and *lai lam ploen*. It is unique and based on Chawewan's style. The second performer to be analyzed was *mor lam* Chalad Songsoem (Por Chalad Songsoem). His own dancing style is based on singing and local folk literature, such as Nang NokrayangKhao, Thaokam Kadum and Pra Suton Manorah. He is a leading actor and northeastern-style singer for composition pieces. His own unique dancing technique is backward dancing while going behind the scenery. The third *mor lam* to be examined from the first group was northeastern-style singer NittayaRakkaen. Her dancing style has been created from her imagination following composition and songs. Most of her dancing style is improvised from dancing to folk songs. It is a beautiful and unique dancing style. The second group of informants, local wisdom teachers, had an altogether different approach. Northeastern-style singer, *mor lam* Wandee Ponthonsathit performs with a dancing style adapted for compositions in a Khon Kaen rhythm. *Mor lam* Ratreesriwilai Bongsithiporn dances to poetry or applied poem singing. It is a mixed form of dancing, combined with other dancing styles. *Mor lam* Krisana Boonsen's dance posture is used for performances using poems or the model of poems. Besides, her dance posture has been created from native Isan techniques mixed with her own creation. The final group of respondents, local artists who have expertise in dance with singing had a different dance style. *Mor lam* Jintana Yensawas's style has been self-created and consists of 12 postures, such as Bok Kwum Bok Hngai and LompatPai. *Mor lam* Angkanang Kunchai's dancing style is adapted to suit poetry sung in an Ubon rhythm that has been adapted from Isan literature, such as Pa-Daeng Nang-ai, Khulu Nang-ua and Nang Nokyang. Her own dancing style is performed with songs that include Tha Sok, Tha Nok Jao Binwon and Thanak Kliew Klao. *Mor lam* Monrudee Promjak's dancing style has been influenced by dancing in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and her dancing

incorporates postures from different ethnic groups, such as *lam salawan*, *lam sarawan*, *lam sipan don*, *khupthum Luang Prabang*, *lamsom* and Phu Thai dance. Most of these have in turn been adapted from ceremonies and, when used in *mor lam* MonrudeePromjak's performances, are performed according to her own interpretation.

The analysis the dance of native Isan artists revealed that each artist has his or her own unique style depending on his or her experience of dancing accompanied by singing. *Mor lam* Chawewan Panthu's dancing style is similar to the dance styles of *mor lam* Jintana Yensawas, *mor lam* Krissana Boonsen and *mor lam* Wilai Bongsithiporn. It is a dance used for local Isan performing and sung poetry. The dance postures have been adapted from the original models used by poetry-singing artists. Dancing postures that have been adapted from literature include those of *mor lam* Chalad Songsoem and *mor lam* Angkanang Kunchai. *Mor lam* Monrudee Promjak's dancing style is influenced by dancing in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and her dancing is also an adaptation of styles from different ethnic groups and Lanchang culture. *Mor lam* Ponthonsathit's dancing style is specialised to accompany compositions in the Khon Kaen rhythm.

During this study, the researchers examined and preserved the dancing styles documented in academic textbooks, including Ae, Aan, and Phon. These were used to outline a model of dancing to develop Isan performance and cultural preservation. Analysis of the history of dance of Isan folk artists found that the history of dance creation by each folk artist is related to the individual theory of aesthetics, which states that each individual with have a unique set of aesthetically pleasing forms based on their own experiences, and the symbolic interaction theory, which states that people create cultural symbols based on their interpretation of social identity and the cultural preferences of others [8].

The study on the current dance postures of Isan folk artists found that dance posture of each artist has been inherited from highly expert teachers who created and transmitted their unique dance postures to new generations. These individuals are the source of the cultural heritage of Thai dance. Surat Jongda stated that folk dancing is a sacrificial ceremony that has been inherited from the past to the new generation of Isan society [9]. The beliefs surround the sacrificial nature of dance, which protects and washes bad things away from life. Given this spiritual link, it is important that Isan

dance remains in society to uphold the values and morality of northeastern Thai society.

The analysis of the current dance postures of Isan folk artists suggests that conservation should focus on new knowledge, traditional dance postures and further research for people interested in performing arts conservation and further study.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The original objectives of this investigation were to analyse of the dance of native Isan artists by studying the history of Isan folk dance, studying current dance postures and considering how to conserve both modern and traditional dance postures used in the *Mor Lam* performances of North-eastern Thailand. The research tools were interview, observation, participation, focus group discussion and workshop. The sample of this qualitative research was purposively selected and included 3 groups of national artists. The results showed that the 3 groups of artists have their own unique dancing styles. The analysis the dance of native Isan artists revealed that each artist has his or her own unique style depending on his or her experience of dancing accompanied by singing. This suggests that the art form is far more flexible than may be permitted by a rigid conservation plan. In order to ensure that the art remains a fluid representation of each individual artist's expertise, dancers must not be restricted to a single accepted form of dancing. Rather more appropriate would be a recognition of traditional dance components and their integration into the artist's style. Mor lam Chaweewan Panthu's dancing style is similar to the dance styles of mor lam Jintana Yensawas, mor lam Krissana Boonsen and mor lam Wilai Bongsithiporn. These similarities are due to their incorporation of traditional techniques. They are different due to the reflection of the dancers' personal experiences in their postures. Mor Lam is a dance used for performances to accompany local Isan sung poetry. The dance postures have been adapted from traditional models using influences from a number of different sources. A number of dance postures have been adapted from literature, which include those of mor lam Chalad Songsoem and mor lam Angkanang Kunchai. Mor lam Monrudee Promjak's dancing style is influenced by dancing in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and her dancing is also an adaptation of styles from different ethnic groups and Lanchang culture. This is evidence of the geographic influence on the dances. Due to the proximity of Northeastern Thailand to the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the postures North of the border

have been transmitted and absorbed by Thai culture. Mor lam Ponthonsathit's dancing style is specialised to accompany compositions in the Khon Kaen rhythm. This shows the continuation of local influence, despite the integration of foreign cultures elsewhere. Further research is required for people interested in performing arts conservation in other provinces and other traditional performing arts. Attention should be given to the dance postures of each ethnic group in Isan and other parts of Thailand for preservation and distribution; contemporary Isan performing arts should be created based on the dance postures of the local Isan artists studied as part of this research; dance postures of each part of Thailand should be analysed for preservation and distribution. Following this investigation, the authors also wish to make some recommendations for practical application of the research results and further areas of study: 1) Documents and textbooks for conservation of performing arts should be created; 2) Local performing arts should be incorporated into local school curricula; 3) Performing arts knowledge should be compiled in knowledge centres for conservation and distribution.

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