

Mon Dance: Creating Standards to Continue the Performing Arts of Thai-Raman

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Received: June 22, 2014 Accepted: July 15, 2014 Online Published: September 22, 2014

doi:10.5539/ach.v7n1p29

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ach.v7n1p29>

Abstract

This investigation, Mon dance: Creating standards to continue the performing arts of Thai-Raman, has the following objectives: 1) To understand the history, current conditions of and problems with Mon dance of the Thai-Raman; 2) To examine the standards of Mon dance; 3) To create standards to continue the performing arts of the Thai-Raman. This qualitative research was conducted in three central Thai provinces: Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi and Samut Prakan. Data was collected from documentary study and field data by means of observation, interview and group discussion. Workshops were also held with a total of 100 attendees, comprised of 20 key informants, 50 casual informants and 30 general informants. Data was validated using a triangulation technique and findings are presented using a descriptive analysis. The research highlighted current conditions and problems in dancing process, melody, costume, performers, time and rituals, which have similarities and contrasts depending on the environment and the social and cultural changes in each area. The standardization of the dance was found to be similar to the dancing process, melody, costume, performers, time and rituals. Traditions are not supposed to change in order to demonstrate the identity of Mon Dance. It was concluded that the dance process has 6 indicators and points were set in the performance judging criteria as follows: 170 points for the melody with 3 indicators, 195 points for the costume with one indicator, 30 points for the performers with six indicators, 80 points for the time with 2 indicators, 25 points for the rituals with 3 indicators and 40 points for meeting the assessment criteria. The passing score for the dance will be 80%.

Keywords: Mon dance, performing arts, traditions, inheritance, standardization

1. Introduction

Dance is a medium created by human society to entertain and has become an integral part of cultures worldwide. The success of its continuation and transmission lie with the performers in each generation, who are responsible for either adhering to or diverging from traditional postures and practices. Original dances were a mixture of physical representation of human emotion, imitation of animal postures and reproduction of natural phenomena. Mon dance, the dance of the Mon ethnic group, is no different. Although there is no longer a Mon country or independent territory, the Mon people retain a strong sense of identity and their representatives in modern-day Thailand and Myanmar continue to perform traditional dances.

Thai people refer to the Mon ethnic group as *Raman*, which was a name derived from the ancient kingdom of Suwannaphum. Elsewhere, the Mon are known as *Taleung*, which derives from the name of a Southern Indian territory. The Mon people have a long and proud history, which is evident in their rich and diverse culture, not least their traditional dances. However, the function of modern Mon dance has changed. As shown by the research of Pairat Boonpook (1994), Mon dancing is primarily used for funerals. In reality, the dances can be employed for auspicious, as well as inauspicious occasions. Boonpook also found that the number of Mon musical troupes was decreasing and the musical form was affected by the influence of global music trends. A particular disadvantage of Mon dance in the modern world is the length and speed of dancer movements. The Mon dance steps are traditionally slow and deliberate. This causes people to associate the style of dance with sadness and inauspicious occasions and has led to the popularity of Mon dance at funerals. Moreover, this perception puts Mon dance at risk in an increasingly hurried and fast-paced modern society (Suntranon, 2005).

Given these problems, the research team was interested in creating standards for Mon dance that would enable uniformity in performance, its accurate inheritance and ensure that the performing arts of Thai-Raman could continue in the future.

2. Methodology

This was a qualitative study to study the background, current conditions and problems of Mon dance, to assess the requirements for standardization and to create a set of standards that may be applied uniformly to Mon dance. The research team identified six aspects of Mon dance for research, which were: dancing process, melody, costume, performers, time and rituals. Three provinces in central Thailand were purposively selected as the study area for this investigation. The selected provinces were Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi and Samut Prakarn. These locations were chosen because they are places with large ethnic Mon communities who still perform traditional Mon dances. By means of simple random and purposive sampling, a research sample of 100 individuals was identified. This number was split into three distinct groups for analysis: key informants, casual informants and general informants.

Research tools used for data collection during this investigation were survey, non-participant and participant observation, unstructured and structured interview, focus group discussion and workshop. Data was collected and arranged according to the aims of the research. All data was validated using a triangulation technique and analyzed by both analytic induction and typological analysis. The results are here presented as a descriptive analysis.

3. Results

3.1 The Background, Current Conditions and Problems of Mon Dance

Mon dance is heavily influenced by Indian culture. There is no exact knowledge of the origin of Mon dance because it was first passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth, experience and observation. The history of the dance in the three provinces covered by this investigation is different. The dance first arrived in central Thailand with the mass migration of Mon people to the area during the Ayutthaya Kingdom. It was used for a variety of festivals and occasions. 8 to 12 female dancers take part in the performance, which is split into two sections. The first section is accompanied by the traditional *pleng 12 taram* music. The second part is accompanied by a choice of other musical pieces. The aspect of the performance that cannot be omitted is the Piphat Mon ensemble. Buddhism is integrated into the Mon lifestyle and temples have played a large part in the musical journey of the Mon people. Mr. Jeun Dontrisano established his Piphat Mon ensemble in Pathum Thani in the local temple. The abilities of ancestors have generated fame and reputation for modern ensembles, which stay with them today. Mrs. SompitPumyai (Personal Communication, 2013), said that dancers learn with traditional Mon teachers, who teach the 13 postures of Mon dance. She said that the teachers never refer to the postures by name and merely instruct how to replicate them. Mon dance is more difficult than traditional Thai dance because the rhythm is much more important. The thirteen musical pieces each have different postures and for a perfect performance 8 dancers must be used.

There are six areas of Mon dance: dancing process, melody, costume, performers, time and rituals. The similarity between the dance processes of the three studied provinces is the list of twelve dance postures used in the dances. There are three major differences between the dance processes, which are the names given to the dance postures, the use of dance postures in each song and interchange of dance position use for each song. The melody of the music is predominantly the same from one province to the next, although certain songs vary, notably the first, eleventh and twelfth. There are two forms of costume. For auspicious events, such as retirements and festivals, the ensemble will wear bold colors, omitting black. For inauspicious events, the ensemble will wear black and white. In each province, male and female performers are permitted. The length of the performance depends on the occasion. For a full program of twelve songs, the performance will last 20-30 minutes. However, nowadays the ensembles select appropriate songs for the occasion, performing only one or two in a 5-10 minute period. The rituals surrounding the performance are similar in each province. Before the performance, the ensemble will *waikru* to pay their respects to the spirits. If the occasion is a funeral, the ensemble must bow before the performance three times to the Lord Buddha, once to the deceased, once to the musicians and once to the audience.

3.2 The Requirements for Standardization of Thai-Raman Performing Arts

The dance process must adhere to original traditions and not be adapted. This will ensure that the identity of the dance postures is upheld. Despite replication of traditional movements, the length and style of the postures themselves will depend on the individual performer and harmony with the music and fellow dancers. The dancers should neither stoop too low nor dance too upright. No additional postures should be added to the

performance, which will cause divergence from the traditional identity of the dance. The dance arrangement will depend on the appropriate positioning for the particular ensemble. If the dances are to remain the same, the music must also strictly follow traditional melodies. The music must be played by a traditional Piphat Mon band. There must be two forms of costume. For auspicious events, such as retirements and festivals, the ensemble should wear bold colors, omitting black. For inauspicious events, the ensemble should wear black and white. Performers must display grace and elegance in their movements. They should be skilled in the traditions of Mon dance. The dancers should be able to observe and evaluate their surroundings and apply their findings to their dance technique. Performers must also possess desirable personal characteristics that permit them to train and develop their skill for formal presentation. Moreover, they must both realize and promote the value of their art with professionalism and responsibility. The duration of the performance must be tailored to meet the needs of the occasion and the host. It is essential to uphold the rituals of the performance in order to maintain the traditional identity and not undermine the original beliefs surrounding the dances.

3.3 Standards of Mon Dance

The standards created as a result of this investigation are as follows:

For the dance process there are six indicators and a total of 170 points, which are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Standards of Mon dance process

Indicator	Aspect	Points
Dance postures	12 postures for 12 dances	120
	Bow before each song	5
	Appropriate connections between postures	5
Posture identity	The feet are shuffled and not lifted, as in Thai dance	5
	When bowing, the weight should be shifted forwards	5
Posture characteristics	Dancing and movement should be complimentary	5
	Movements must be gentle	5
Organization of rows	There must be organization of rows	5
Dance rhythm	The dance rhythm must match the rhythm of the music	10
Number of performers	There must be at least 4 performers	5
	Total	170

For the melody there are three indicators and a total of 195 points, which are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Standards of Mon dance melody

Indicator	Aspect	Points
Songs	The 13 traditional songs must be included in the performance	130 (10 for each song)
Musical accompaniment	13 instruments are used in the Piphat Mon band	55 (5 for each instrument)
Rhythm	The rhythm of the music is appropriate for Mon dance	10
	Total	195

For the costume there is one indicator and a total of 30 points, which are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Standards of Mon dance costume

Indicator	Aspect	Points
Costume	The hair bun is adorned with a flower	5
	There is appropriate use of face make-up	5
	Shirt-sleeves should extend to the wrist or at least three quarters of the arm length	5
	The dancers must wear a frontal shawl	5
	There should be accessories and a belt	5
	An appropriate <i>pa nung</i> must be worn	5
	Total	30

For the performers there are six indicators and a total of 80 points, which are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4. Standards of Mon dance performers

Indicator	Aspect	Points
Dance skill	The dance is beautiful	5
	The dance is gentle and delicate	5
Sense of dance	Performers can solve dance problems	5
	There is observation and evaluation of any new circumstances	5
Dance ability	The performers know the dance postures well	5
	Performers are able to listen to the musical melody and adjust their dance to suit	5
Behaviour, emotion and feelings	The dancers are calm	5
	The dancers are committed	5
Desirable qualities	The dancers can convey the emotion, feeling and mood of the dance	5
	There is no consumption of alcohol during the performance	5
	The dancers are in harmony	5
Personality	The performers are punctual	5
	The performers are dignified	5
	Their vision is compatible with their environment	5
	The dancers are calm	5
	The performers' appearances should be fresh and bright	5
	Total	80

For the time there are two indicators and a total of 25 points, which are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5. Standards of Mon dance time

Indicator	Aspect	Points
Defined time	Dancing is consistent with the melody of the music	10
	Dancing corresponds to the rhythm of the song	10
Appropriate time	The length of the dance is appropriate for the occasion	5
	Total	25

For the rituals there are three indicators and a total of 40 points, which are outlined in Table 6.

Table 6. Standards of Mon dance rituals

Indicator	Aspect	Points
Pre-performance rituals	Components of rituals	10
	Lighting of candles and incense sticks before performance	5
	Respect paid to teachers, trainers and seniors before performance	5
Mid-performance rituals	Respect paid to instruments, teachers, audience and corpse (if at a funeral)	5
Others	No walking over instruments or decorations	5
	Items used for worship, especially money, should not be used and must be given as donations to charitable causes	5
	Used costumes should not be discarded in undesirable places.	5
	Total	40

4. Discussion

Mon dance differs slightly in the three provinces covered by this study. The reason for the minor differences is the independent immigration of Mon people when their territory was assumed by Myanmar. The people brought their collective culture and adapted it to the existing Thai society. As adaptations were made independently of

one another and inherited from generation to generation, there were minor differences between the styles in each province. This corresponds to the research of Suksan Puwangklad (1996), which identified stages of transmission and inheritance from ancestors to descendants. There are two ways for inheritance to occur: direct and indirect and the Mon culture was both directly passed on from one generation to the next and indirectly influenced by the surroundings of its new home (Pongsapit, 1994). This phenomenon was proposed by Franz Boas (1914; Bashkow, 2004; Chantachon, 2010) as is also rooted in the cultural ecology of Julian Steward (1990), which stated that culture in each society develops differently when influenced by different internal and external factors. In fact, there are four methods for the spread of culture from one society to the next, which are territorial expansion, historical research, archaeological excavation and observation (Kroeber, 1963).

During this investigation, six aspects of Mon dance were researched: Dancing process, melody, costume, performers, time and rituals. The reason for desired development of a set of standards for Mon dance is to ensure that the old traditions do not disappear. In order for dance performances to adhere to the original ways, they must be monitored by government institutions and the private sector, especially local educational establishments because creation of a specific curriculum is one of the best ways to maintain traditions (Upatamnarakorn, 2009). Maintenance and preservation of culture must also be a community initiative rather than an independent or private project. This will ensure that all parts of a society contribute to the same unified goal (Malinowski, 1944).

A number of indicators were determined to comprise the standards for Mon dance identified during this investigation. The detail of the standardization process corresponds to the findings of PratinPuwangsamlee (1971), which concluded that the intricacy, beauty and identity of a dance are determined by many different factors. This is supported by the aesthetics theory of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1986).

5. Conclusion

The dancing process, melody, costume, performers, time and rituals have similarities and contrasts depending on the environment and the social and cultural changes in each area. The standardization of the dance was found to be similar to the dancing process, melody, costume, performers, time and rituals. Traditions are not supposed to change in order to demonstrate the identity of Mon dance. It was concluded that the dance process has 6 indicators and points were set in the performance judging criteria as follows: 170 points for the melody with 3 indicators, 195 points for the costume with one indicator, 30 points for the performers with six indicators, 80 points for the time with 2 indicators, 25 points for the rituals with 3 indicators and 40 points for meeting the assessment criteria. The passing score for the dance will be 80%.

6. Suggestions

From the research results, the following suggestions can be made: the standards should be employed by government institutions and the private sector to maintain the traditions of Mon dance; a Mon dance curriculum should be created by local education institutions to preserve the traditions of Thai-Raman dance; further study should be conducted into the inheritance patterns of other ethnic minority performing arts in Thailand; further study must concern other aspect of Mon culture to expand the academic literature base and create resources for the understanding of Mon culture.

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