

Formal Dramatic Arts in Thailand

by Dr. Supachai Chansuwan

The area known as Southeast Asia today was not originally divided into separate countries. It was inhabited by a number of indigenous peoples far and wide, each with their own specific culture. These individual cultures in time evolved, spread to and were shared by neighbouring areas, as was the case in the Chao Phraya river basin.

To the east lived the Thai-Lao-Khmer ethnic groups, while the Thai-Mon-Burmese ethnic peoples were found to live mostly in the west. These ethnic cultures and traditions, transferred from one place to another, merged in such a way that it would be difficult to trace to the original source.

Likewise, dramatic arts of Southeast Asia showed several similarities, e.g. hand folding, repeated steps on the spot, and knee bending. After the emergence of individual countries, their dramatic arts began to diverge reflecting different geographical identities, climate, social beliefs and religious faiths. The lifting of the arms and elbows to form an acute angle and the degree to which the knees are separated when bending are just some of the differences. In addition, there is a literary influence, especially from *Ramayana*, featuring the battles between gods and demons, which shaped the development of the dramatic arts of Southeast Asia.

The Thais, too, had their own indigenous dance styles. However, when the Thai kingdom was expanded close to the Khmer territory and sometimes annexed some of its towered stone sanctuaries, they saw a variety of dance movements and figures involving the curving of the arms and the angling of the legs. Thai artists adapted and added those dance gestures to their original repertoire. These dance movements have eventually evolved into being distinctly Thai.

It can be said that the Thai dramatic arts had begun to be formalized since the Ayutthaya kingdom. The French diplomatic mission during the reign of King Narai the Great noted that Thai people performed *rabam* (group dance of male and female performers), *lakhon* (drama with storylines), and *thon* (mask dance).

Furthermore, toward the end of the Ayutthaya period the Thai drama had integrated dance moves and evolved into what is known as "*Lakhon Ram*" or dance drama. In other words, plays were written for dance performances, as seen, for example, in the courtly play of *I-nao* and popular plays of *Sang Thong*, *Mani Phichai* and *Manora*. All this shows that the dance drama began its formalization in the late Ayutthaya period. The dance drama performed inside the palace was, of course, more elaborate than the popular entertainment of the general public.

Even after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 Thai dance drama continued uninterrupted and reached its zenith in the Rattanakosin period established in 1782.

King Rama I commanded the writing of a dance manual to be used as the basis for dance instructors to teach their students. Dance figures were sketched into line drawings, each with a name designed to facilitate the instruction, e.g. the gait of a deer, wind blowing against banana leaves, peacock strutting, elephant lifting its trunk, and snake coiling its tail. These dance figures have formed the basis of Thai dramatic arts. Thus, Thailand has had its own dance textbook since the reign of King Rama I.

In addition, King Rama I himself composed *Lakhon Nai* (plays performed inside the palace) for courtly artists, especially *Ramakian* and *Unnarut Dan Lang*. It is certain that the dance figures sketched in the text would be used.

During the reign of King Rama II Thai dramatic arts reached an even greater height than in the previous reign, simply because the king graciously provided patronage to artists of all branches. The performing artists, in particular, were very active. The king composed a dance drama of *I-nao*. Performers were required to rehearse in front of the mirror so that any wrong movement could be corrected to the standard.

In the reign of King Rama III, although the king might not show manifest support for the dramatic arts, he allowed the general public to set up a dance group or training. Thus, the places to practice dance drama would still be found in Bangkok.

During the reign of King Rama IV the dance drama once again re-emerged. The king composed a number of dance dramas and designed several sets of choreography. In addition, an act was passed to collect taxes from dance troupes, indicating that the profession of dance drama must have been prosperous enough to be required to pay taxes to the treasury.

During the reign of King Rama V Thai dance drama saw another progress. Traditionally, there were the *Lakhon Nai* (plays performed inside the palace walls) and *Lakhon Nok* (plays of the general public). The fifth reign saw new dimensions added to the existing performance. The new types of drama were Mon and Lao-related, incorporating dance figures of those ethnic groups. The new movement appealed to the spectators because of the fast pacing of the plot and new storylines.

A new type of drama, called *Lakhon Duk Dam Ban*, spiced up the traditional dance drama with a more Western approach. The players were required to sing and dance at the same time. The setting was more realistic with graphic forest, mountain or palace scenes, thus creating more excitement in the viewers, who were used to seeing just a backdrop at the back of the stage. This was another advance made in the Thai dramatic arts.

During the reign of King Rama VI the dramatic arts were developed to the international standard. The king set up a school providing formal education in the dramatic arts with an internationally recognized curriculum. The morning was devoted to general education, i.e. mathematics, geography and English, while the afternoon session would see teaching and training of formal dances in the dramatic arts. Of special interest was the revival of *Khon*, performed by dancers wearing monkey or demon masks, a dance performance designed only for *Ramakian*. It can be said that the dramatic arts during the sixth reign was most prosperous in every aspect. In addition, attempts were made to reproduce the dance sketches made in the reign of King Rama I using real people as models for study and comparison purposes, as can be seen in the following examples:



[picture] from the Thai dance textbook developed during King Rama I's reign

Rattanakosin period

(line drawing)



[picture] figure in Thai dance drama according to the Thai dance textbook

Performed by Miss Sa-ngiam Nawisathian and Mr. Wong Kanchanawat

Department of Theatre

In addition, King Rama VI composed a large number of dance dramas and *Khon* passages for artists and interested people to use in their performances.

After the reign of King Rama VI Thai dramatic arts went into decline. As a result of the First World War, the world was beset by serious economic problems, including Thailand. Nevertheless, many noble families associated with the palace continued to give their support to dramatic arts. After Thailand underwent a change of government from absolute monarchy

to democracy during the reign of King Rama VII, a government school was re-established to teach dramatic arts in 1934 and has continued to do so today.

The establishment of the national institute designed to teach dramatic arts has made it possible for artists to develop new dance figures for performances and dance dramas on a regular basis. The National Theatre is also open for the general public to view them throughout the year. It can be said, therefore, that the discipline of the Thai dramatic arts has been in place for at least 700 years. The first formal dance textbook developed in 1782 during the early Rattanakosin period has been in use all along and served as a basis for developing new dance figures and dramatic representations over the years. The Thai dramatic arts are indeed representative of Thai identity today.

Dr. Supachai Chansuwan