

The Concept of Human Power in Court Ritual Dance and Folk Ritual Dance in Thailand

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This research aims at studying the relation of Thai court ritual dance and Thai folk ritual dance primarily by following the concepts in anthropological theories of mainstream culture and subculture which mainly relate with the majority and minority people in a particular cultural group classified by linguistic methodology. In spite of the difference in the artistic forms from other cultural groups, the studies are hypothesized that a ritual dance of any race shares similarities in terms of functions, as ritual dance functions as a ceremony. The research is a work of cultural studies done mainly by participatory observation and documentary review of the ancient sacred text. In order to serve the philosophical concepts of the two major religions playing an important role in the cultural area, the ritual dance of mainstream culture in Thailand is highly influenced by Buddhist and Hindu mythologies, while it still serves original beliefs of Thai people: animism and ancestorism. Ritual dance culture in Thailand has four functions; dance as offering, dance as healing, dance as rite de passage and dance as social protocol. While Thai court ritual dance functions as dance as offering, the folk dance tends to have the four functions investigated. These two schools of ritual dance share basic belief of deities and are seemed to exchange some of their dance related activities. Healing ritual dance seems to reflect passive power of human, the other ritual dances deal with active power of human.

Keywords: religious studies, Thai dance, dance studies

Concept of Apsaras and Gandharvas in Thai Supernaturalism

Situated in the mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand has been highly influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism since their arrival in the region. The two religions well merged with the indigenous beliefs i.e. animism and ancestorism. It is well accepted by scholars that Hinduism has special

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characteristic in Southeast Asia and Buddhism has better flourished in the region than in the Indian subcontinent.

One of the identical concepts Hinduism and Buddhism discuss is the idea of beings. The two religions divide beings into categories including those heavenly ones. Among various kinds of beings noted in the canonical literature and the commentaries, found a class of the performers, Apsaras and Gandharvas.

Apsaras, or nymphs, are those mentioned, in Natsasastra, major Hindu textbook of dramaturgy, of being taught the art of dancing by Bharat, the mythic author of the textbook while Gandharvas, male celestial beings, were repeated many times during the chapters concerning life of the historical Buddha in the Tipitaka. In Dighanikaya, Suttantapitaka particular. As a society valuing both Hindu and Buddhist culture, Thai society has reflected the reverence of the concepts of philosophy and the practices of the two religions in various ways, as well as in the performing arts.

Concerning Hinduism and Buddhism a mainstream culture influencing Thai culture, performing arts are partly supernatural activity. This is more or less similar to etymology of the word music as it is the adjective of the word Muses, a group of angels representing various fields of art in Greek mythology.

Classification of Thai Ritual Dance

The research has grouped Thai ritual dance into 4 groups concerning the functions of dance.

1. Dance as offering
2. Dance as healing
3. Dance as rite de passage
4. Dance as social protocol.

Court Ritual Dance: Ritual Dance as Offering

The idea of dance to satisfy or glorify Hindu gods or indigenous gods is found in the royal court for the god Sayamdevadhiraj in particular, the practice has been continued since the image was created since the reign of King Rama IV. This special event is annually held in early April, the exact date is the 1st day of the 5th month according to Thai lunar calendar.

In the reign of King Rama IX, the king annually presides over this ceremony at 10:00 a.m. there are 3 sets of performance i.e. 1) Sadhukarn dance at Chakrabartibimarn Throne hall; 2) Berk Rong dance of Jayajestha from the Wandering to the Forest episode, these first 2 sets follow the royal court tradition, 3) the third set not only can be a dance drama originally either Lakorn Nai or Lakorn Nok, but also other types of newly invented Thai dance dramas.

Since dance is believed to have special power to communicate to supernatural being, in some ritual and ceremonial practice the use of dance is observed. In March 2012, when the royal chariots were to be moved for duty in the cremation of Princess Bejraratana Rajasuda, the only daughter of King Rama XI, angel dancers were dancing to give blessings for the event.



Angel dancers giving blessings during the move of chariots used in royal cremation 2012 in Bangkok (www.m-culture.go.th)

In addition, dance plays an important role as ritual in offering ceremonies related to white elephants: a) The records in Ayutthaya period, such as the Thai chronicle found at British Library, has described a scene of Ayutthaya king dancing to pay homage to the Buddha's footprint at Saraburi. The tradition continued until Rattanakosin period, King

Chulalongkorn was the last king practicing this ceremony; b) The Brahmins working in the royal court's Elephant House have practiced a ritual dance in a ceremony concerning ropes used with elephants, the ceremony are internal activity, general public participation is prohibited.

Folk Dance

Apart from functioning as dance as offering, folk dance ritual culture additionally functions as healing, rite de passage, and social protocol.

1. Dance as healing

Healing is the most common function found in Thai folk ritual dance, ritual dance of different ethnic minority in Thailand tends to employ healing function and rather than other functions. Phi Fa dance of northeastern Thai ethnic is among the famous healing dance as well as Ma Muat dance of Austro-asiatic people in the lower northeastern region. The healing dance reflects the concept of passive power as the illness is determined and healed through dancing by receiving supernatural power.

2. Dance as Rite de Passage

The term Rite de passage refers to the ceremonial practice to mark great changes in human's life. Thai folk ritual dance involved in rite de passage especially found in cremation. Ram Suat, chanting dance, is a comedy folk dance as plays imitating monastic rites in cremations originally found in central and eastern parts of Thailand. Rite de passage reflects the active power of human since it remarks profound events in life.

3. Dance as Social Protocol

Ritual dance as social protocol is purely secular rite and is normally found in welcoming ceremony. The tradition of welcoming dance as a diplomatic protocol is especially found in Keng Tung, in modern Burmese Shan state, and former northern kingdoms colonized by Siam, presently northern provinces of Thailand. The welcoming dance is glorification to the comers.



Royal members from the northern dynasties dancing in welcoming ceremony dedicated to King Prajadhipok (Rama XII) and Queen Ramaibarni during their visit to northern territory of Siam.

Conclusion

Ritual Dance of cultural and subcultural group in Thailand are highly influenced by the contextual religions and belief, Buddhism, Hinduism and animism, in order to serve the philosophical concepts of the beliefs. Ritual dance culture in Thailand has four functions; dance as offering, dance as healing, dance as rite de passage and dance in social protocol. While Thai court ritual dance functions as dance as offering, the folk dance tends to have the four functions investigated. These two schools of ritual dance share basic belief of deities and are seemed to exchange some of their dance related activities. These two schools of ritual dance share basic belief of deities and are seemed to exchange some of their dance related activities. Healing ritual dance seems to reflect passive power of human, the other ritual dances deal with active power of human.

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