

The Khon Nang Rao: An Ephemeral Thai Ritual

Theeraphut Tongnim
Bunditpatanasilpa Institute

— *Review of* —
**Integrative
Business &
Economics**
— *Research* —

ABSTRACT

This research article is an in-depth study of Khon Nang Rao. The objective of this article is to study the rites, form and performance of Khon Nang Rao and learn why it is rarely performed than other Khon performances and to uphold a real onstage performance. This is done for conservation purposes. The data were collected through documentary analysis and interviews with Khon scholars and performers. The result shows that Khon Nang Rao is a two day affair. It is a form of Khon performance in which the stage setting is a house built from the ground with bamboo racks placed lengthwise of the house. There is no singing in this performance but only dialogues and narrations accompanied with the music played by two orchestras “Phi Pat” situated at both sides of the stage. On the first day of the performance, when overture begins, performers do the “Staff dance”. Next there is the episode of Phra Ram, Phra Lak and Sida who are lost in Phirap’s Phawa-thong garden and looking for the way until they saw Phirap also. When this act is finished, the performance ends and all of the performers stay overnight. And the next day, they perform, as the schedule that is set.

Keywords: Khon Nang Rao,

Introduction

Khon, is the prestigious dramatic art of Thai, accepted nationally for its elaborate and aesthetic value because it is the focus of nearly every fine art of the Thai. There are literature, sculpture, painting, handicraft, music, drama and architecture dedicated on Khon. It evolved about 400 years ago. Khon is the royal entertainment in the royal court dating from Ayuddhya period, and in other special royal ceremonies. Performing Khon is considered a great honor for those who share in the performances.

Khon can be performed indoors in theaters or in outdoor settings. There are 5 kinds of Khon such as, Khon Klang Plaeng, Khon Na Jaw, Khon Nang Rao, Khon Rong Nho and Khon Chak. From these five, Khon Nang Rao is scarcely performed. Questions arise as to the reason why and what the original form might be. No clear references are available, and due to this the researcher laboriously searched to study Khon Nang Rao profoundly and search the reason why it is rarely performed, for academic and conservation purposes.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the form, rites, and performance of Khon Nang Rao.
2. To set a real onstage performance.

It should be noted that in the second objective of this study which is to set a real onstage performance of “Khon Nang Rao”, the researcher was able to set a real onstage performance on February 24, 2011 at Bunditpatanasilpa Institute. Photos depicting the real onstage performance are interspersed with texts which describes the theoretical part of “Khon Nang Rao”. This is done in order that the reader might have a better understanding of what comprises “Khon Nang Rao”.

Research Methodology

This study uses qualitative data as the domain of this research.

1. The researcher used documentary analysis, taken from archives, manuals, books, theses, researches and papers that show the theoretical part of Khon performance.
2. The researcher interviewed Khon scholars and performers, retired and active regarding Khon Nang Rao and how it is performed.
3. Finally, using the data gathered from the documents studied and interviews from Khon scholars and performers the researcher was able to set a real “Khon Nang Rao” onstage performance. The Khon performers who are respondents in this study also took part in portraying the “Khon Nang Rao” performance done on February 24, 2011.

Finding

Khon Nang Rao does not have evidence that states what exact period it began but by reference from mural paintings from archeological evidences it can be inferred that Khon Nang Rao performance started during the Ayuddhya period, as these paintings showed that Khon Nang Rao has been played during this era.



Khon Nang Rao mural painting from Wat Pho Hall (Wat Pho, 2001: 73)



Khon Nang Rao painting at the Royal pavilion, Wat Benjamaborpit (Mural painting at the site Wat Benjama, 2000:5)



Khon Nang Rao painting in “Sasda Hall” (Artifacts in Wat Borworn, 1963: 390)

All of these paintings show that the house where Khon Nang Rao was performed was erected from the ground with black screens and wood rack laid lengthwise where the performers sat.

Data analysis in this study can be divided in two parts:

1. Description of the different components that make up Khon Nang Rao.
2. How Khon Nang Rao is performed.

1. Components of Khon Nang Rao Performance

1.1 Khon Nang Rao Setting

In ancient times Khon performance was played on the lawn or on the vast ground. But it became unpopular as the audience cannot clearly see the performers and performance so the house was built as a stage setting for aesthetic purposes and so that audiences can clearly watch the performance without obstruction. That is the origin of the house setting of Khon Nang Rao. The house must be erected about 1.5 meters from the ground. It is rectangular in shape, size is approximately 8 x 12 meters and veiled by palm leaves except the frontal part.

The stage setting is outstanding as the right and left side are taller than the central part to accommodate the orchestral bands. In the past during the reign of King Rama IV, earthenware pots were installed at the ridge of the roof which Mr. Prames Bunyachai, expert in Thai dramatic arts from Bunditpatanasilpa Institute said “on the roof ridge, two water pots were installed, it is for the purpose that in case of fire, the water pots will be broken to extinguish the fire.” The rear of the house consists of bas-relief screens of mountains. But the most important item is the bamboo rack which is about 6 meters long, laid lengthwise across the house. It serves as seats for the performers. Mr. Samsak Dhatti, expert and teacher at Bunditpatanasilpa Institute explained that the most distinct feature of Khon Nang Rao is the long bamboo rack.



Photo of Bamboo Rack used in Khon Nang Rao

Taken from Khon Nang Rao Performance, February 24, 2011, Bunditpatanasilpa Institute

According to the data gathered, in order to build the Khon Nang Rao house, three styles of houses are acceptable: small, medium, and large in size and either triangular, rectangular or square in shape although a medium rectangular house is the most popular for the convenience of performance, speech and chanting. The floor of the house must be smooth, firm without bone pieces, broken sharp brittles or any protruding debris.

To conclude our findings, the Khon Nang Rao house must be erected high from the ground. The roof is made of palm leaves with palm leaves covering the back and two sides of the house except the front. At the rear of the house a screen is erected with bas-relief pictures of mountains. A bamboo rack laid lengthwise instead of a formal broad stool serves both as the seat of the performers and one identity of Khon Nang Rao.



Stage Setting of Khon Nang Rao

Taken from Khon Nang Rao Performance, February 24, 2011, Bunditpatanasilpa Institute

1.2 Musical Band for Khon Nang Rao

“Phi- Phat” or Thai traditional orchestra is the main band used. The band is divided in two parts situated on both ends of the stage. On the left side of the spectators is the “Wong Hua” and at the right side is “Wong Thay”. The two bands will alternately perform for the overture “ Hom Rong” till its end as “Na Phat” or sacred instrumental songs are needed. “Phra Pirap ” is played first followed another such as “Chert”. The two bands will continually play in alternately for it is too long. This teamwork performance is called “ Chert Tor Tua.”

1.3 The Costumes of Khon Nang Rao

Formal Khon costumes “Yeun Khroung” is the standard costume used. The hero is in his brocade, hanging clothes with his headdress. The heroine in her royal costume uses brocade clothes pleated in front with embroidered cloak and a queen’s crown. For the demons and monkeys their costume design is based on their ranks and characters they play.



Photo Depicting the Heroes and Heroine in their Costumes

Taken from Khon Nang Rao Performance, February 24, 2011, Bunditpatanasilpa Institute



Photo Depicting the Character “Phra Phirap” in his Costume

Taken from Khon Nang Rao Performance, February 24, 2011, Bunditpatanasilpa Institute



Photo Depicting Demons and Monkey Characters in their Costumes

Taken from Khon Nang Rao Performance, February 24, 2011, Bunditpatanasilpa Institute

1.4 Performers' Sitting Arrangement

It is the same as sitting on a large stool, with one leg crossed across the bamboo rack, showing only one side of the body. The major characters are the first ones who sit on the bamboo rack while the minor characters are on the floor. And when the main characters are on their places, the common characters salute and take their place.

1.5 Oration and speeches in Khon Nang Rao

As in “Khon Rong Nok” or “Khon Khlang Plaeng” the role runs by chanting and oration. The speech mostly are “ Phlap Phra”, “Muang”, “Chom Dong”, without “ Robh”. The speech used is a set of speeches such as “Cat Thap”, Patathap”, Ya Thap” which has been used since the beginning. Sometimes comedy in ancient way is added, to please the spectators.

2. How Khon Nang Rao is Performed

It can be divided into two parts: rites and practice done before the performance and the act of performance itself.

2.1 Rites and Practice Before the Performance

On the first day of performance, the Master of the House must hold an ancient rite of praising the House and praising the Gurus before the overture, sacred staff dance, and the acting of the episode of “Phra Phirap”.

2.1.1 Praising the Gurus

Before a Khon performance, this practice must be done. This is a very important event as the purpose for this is first to invoke the gods to join in the festivity. This is also done to pay homage to the spirits of deceased khon performers, pay homage to those who are still alive and pay respect to the house and to the spirit that dwells in it. This is also done to ask the gods and spirits for a successful performance. After the show the orchestra will play the “Kraw Ram” song to celebrate the success of the performance, bless the performers and send the gods back to their rightful dwelling. In Khon Nang Rao the ritual begins before the overture.



Photos Portraying “Praising of the Gurus”

Taken from Khon Nang Rao Performance, February 24, 2011, Buditpatanasilpa Institute

2.2 Actual Performance

The actual performance itself is divided into two parts: the act done on the first day and the act done on the second day.

2.2.1 The First Day

Due to the ancestral rite that must be done, the first part of the actual performance starts at 5:00 P.M, beginning by praising the gurus of the house with sacred instrumental music “Hom Rong Yen”, continually until the next song “Kraw Nai”. After the praising of the gurus, the orchestras play music for the prelude. Then “Kratung Sao” or “Staff dance” is performed. This dance is performed by low rank demon characters wherein they parade from inside the house with staves in hand. They make a row facing the spectators from behind the bamboo rack and they stamp their staves against the floor harmoniously according to the rhythm of the music until everything is finished. The purpose of this is to test the durability of the stage and to test the strength of the performers and their expertise in timing to the rhythm of the music.



Photos Depicting Performers Portraying the “Kratung Sao” Dance

Taken from Khon Nang Rao Performance, February 24, 2011, Buditpatanasilpa Institute

After the “Staff dance”, the orchestra performs the sacred music “Na Phat Ong Phirap” at full length. This is when the “Phra Phirap” act is performed. In this act, Phra Ram and Phra Lak (younger brother of Ram) and Sida (wife of Ram) who had a good time in the forest, and they lost their way and continued to the scene where meet Phirap (the good giant) on his way from hunting. When this act is finished everyone exits.



Photos Showing Performers Portraying the “Phra Pirap” Act

Taken from Khon Nang Rao Performance, February 24, 2011, Bunditpatanasilpa Institute

Time passed by, in the past there is no electricity so all performances would cease. The performers would rest in the theater house which earned Khon Nang Rao its other name “Khon Non Roeng” (Khon stays a night in the house)

2.2.2 The Second Day

The next day, a new episode, none taken from yesterday’s performance, is done. The acts done on the second day is similar to other Khon. Any act or scene taken from any chapter of Ramayana can be performed. On the real onstage performance organized by the researcher, the second day was composed of the act “War of Dasakan II” or “Yok Rop”, set in Longka. It includes the “Phak Muang” oration followed by the instrumental song Kraw Nay” which sets the scene of the battle. The setting for Dasakan in “ Kraw” both for Act 1 and 2 would include the speech “ Phrap Phra”, “ Kraw” for the marshalling of the forces in battle.



Photos Depicting “Yok Rop” or “War of Dasakan”

Taken from Khon Nang Rao Performance, February 24, 2011, Bunditpatanasilpa Institute

The battle act in Khon Nang Rao is similar to “Khon Chak” starting with the monkey-warriors and higher rank monkeys facing the demons in action. Finally, Phra Ram fights Dasakan, the demon was defeated, and an arrow cut away his head and arms. This is where the act ends, with the defeat of the demon and the end of the war.



Photos Depicting “Yok Rop” or “War of Dasakan”

Taken from Khon Nang Rao Performance, February 24, 2011, Buditpatanasilpa Institute

Conclusion and Discussion

To conclude the findings in this study, it can be said that Khon Nang Rao is unlike other Khon performances. It has distinct features that differentiate it from other Khon. First, it is a two day affair, with the first day is reserved for ritual performances designed to honor the gurus and the house; with instrumental musical performance, staff- stamping performance and the episode of “Phra Ram in Phirap’s garden performance. The next day performers would perform what episode that was set for them to portray. The stage setting must be built according to specific requirements to suit the effectivity of the performance. The house must be built from the ground up as it is required according to description .Any other stage or setting will not do. Next reason is with regard to the performer who will act as Phirap (the good giant). From his research, the researcher found that the performer who acts as Phirap needs to be appointed by the king to perform this specific character. Any other performer not appointed cannot act as Phirap and there are not many of them in the present moment.

With this, the researcher concludes that the reasons for the declining number of performances of Khon Nang Rao is due to the impracticality and difficulty of building the house setting where Khon Nang Rao is performed and also due to the scarcity of performers who are appointed to perform the character of Phirap. With this finding, the researcher opines that even though presently, Khon Nang Rao is not regularly performed but due to its outstanding

identity, it needs to be preserved as other Thai dramatic performances as it is an integral part of Thai art.

Suggestions

Bunditpatanasilpa Institute should provide more supports to the study of Khon's Thai heritage. Khon's Thai culture and way of life cannot be separated. The institute should promote more performances relating to Thai cultural and historical heritage. These performances can also be used to help promote and educate people about Khon's Thai.

Acknowledgement

This research is funded by Bunditpatanasilpa Institute.

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