

Nattakam Phon Chang (Elephant Catching)

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Abstract

The study entitled The Development of Ritualistic Performance in Elephant's Traditional Lasso Ceremony in Mekong Sub-region was aimed to 1) explore the history of elephant lore and the folklore of elephant-worshipping people in Surin Province, Thailand, and those in Champasak Province , Lao People's Democratic Republic; 2) analyze the aspects of the elephant lore – how to deal with elephants, and the folklore in Southern Esan of Thailand so as to suggest guidelines in conserving elephants and pachyderm ecology and culture in the Mekong-sub region; 3) develop arts of performance concerning the elephant lore and the folklore of elephant-worshipping people in the Mekong sub-region. The researcher hoped that the findings of the study would strengthen the group of elephant-worshipping people as well as shed light on their lifestyle, society and culture of for general people. Likewise, the result of the development of the performing arts concerning the elephant lasso would give a guideline in further studies and development studies in the branches of dance and music so that younger generations would insightfully appreciate esthetics, hearing as well as movement. Consequently the esthetics would meet the structure of human psycho-intellectual desire, endorse the value and fulfill human spirit. The area of study was the group of elephant-worshipping people in the village of Taklang, sub-district of Krapho, district of Thatoom, in Surin Province, Thailand. Also the area of study was the group of elephant-worshipping people in Kiatngong Village of Champasak Province, Lao People's Democratic Republic. The study was the ethnographic & quantitative research in which the aspects of association between the elephant lore and the folklore before developing a prototype of drama performance were analyzed.

The findings of the study were as follows;

1. The elephant-worshipping people in Thailand and those in the Lao People's Democratic Republic have long been instilled the lore of elephants. They have the knowledge of how to round-up and domesticate wild elephants. They have beliefs, rituals dealing with Phi Pakam - the ghost which haunts the noose (for catching wild elephants). They also have rules, regulations and taboos concerning elephants for

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a long time. These wisdoms are common identities among the elephant-worshipping people in Thailand and those in the Lao People's Democratic Republic including all the elephant-worshipping people in the Mekong sub-region. The bodies of knowledge, gathered from the experiences of predecessors have been instilled in procedure to new generations.

2. Four aspects were found, from the analysis of the concerning aspects of the elephant lore of the elephant-worshipping people in the Mekong sub-region, namely 1) *Phi Pakam* and its relationship with *PachiyaiKrubakachatam* (a class of mahouts); 2) the *Phasom* – a piece of cloth embroidered with a design telling the rank of mahouts including *Kalams* or taboos and the rice ritual; 3) the hunting of wild elephants according to the lore of elephants, and the elephants being wise because the women have elephant lore; 4) the legend for the love of rain, forest, pier, *Naga*, water, traditions ruling over three folklores and biosphere of elephant-worshipping people. It was also found that only 3 aspects were efficient enough to be counted as guidelines for elephant conservation namely 1) *Phi Pakam* and its relationship with *PachiyaiKrubakachatam* 2) the *Phasom* – a piece of cloth embroidered with a design telling the rank of mahouts including *Kalams* or taboos and the rice ritual of mahouts; 3) the hunting of wild elephants according to the lore of elephants, and the elephants being wise because women have elephant lore. The three aspects were related to the result of a qualitative study.

3. From the result of the study, the arts of performance could be developed concerning the elephant lore, folkloristic of elephant-worshipping people in the Mekong sub-region. The performance was a drama representing elephant round-up, interpolated with bodies of knowledge concerning elephant lasso, choreography, costumes, traditional music in combination with contemporary arts of performance based on the identity of elephant lore of elephant-worshipping people in Mekong sub-region.

Key words : Performance Arts, Elephant catching and keeping, Folktales, Animal Worship, The Greater Mekong Sub-region, Elephants

Introduction

Mekong River is one of the world's important rivers running from Tibet, China, through six countries, including China, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, Lao PDR, and Cambodia. Areas around Mekong River are rich of natural resources such as forests, wild animals, fishes and aquatic animals. The ecology around Mekong River is suitable for inhabitation of human and animals. There have long been many

tribes of human settled down around the Mekong River, so this region has been one of the world's important civilizations. This region is where cultures, beliefs and local ways of life begun.

The Greater Mekong Sub-region connects the northeastern part of Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam. There are many civilizations occurred around the region as well as well-known religious places such as Angkor Wat Angkor Tom in Cambodia, Wat Phoo in Champasak, Lao PDR, Panam Roong and Pimai in Thailand. These places show that people had inhabited in this region since the pre-historic time. The first inhabitants were Mon-Khmer ethnic

group. It was found that there were more than 150 ethnic groups disseminated around the region. The inhabitations were crowded in the southern part of Lao and the northeastern part of Thailand, especially around the Dongrek mountain range. Jayavorman VII founded the Khmer empire in the seventeenth century. Many well-known religious temples were constructed during his reign. For example, Angkor Wat Angkor Tom and the Bayon were built during this period. The sculptures of this period did not only tell about religion, but also the relationship between human and elephants. Elephants were trained by human to be royal elephants, war elephants, and to help men load their luggage. These aspects reflected that the Greater Mekong Sub-region was a large biosphere for elephants. The knowledge regarding elephants has been passed down from generations to generations until the present.

Elephants played an important role in the life of people around the Greater Mekong Sub-region, including political, religious, cultural, and economic aspects. Elephants involved in the life of both the local people and the royalists. The wisdoms regarding elephant hunting, training and keeping became the way of life of people who worship elephants in the Greater Mekong Sub-region such as people in Ta-klang Elephant Village, Tha Tum, Surin, Thailand and Giad-Ngong Elephant Village, Pathum Phon, Champasak District, Lao PDR.

Changes in ecology and society nowadays have a big impact on the wisdom of elephant catching and keeping and folktales in Thailand and Laos. Thus, this research, which

aims to study the wisdom about elephants and to develop a performance art, helps sustain and prolongs the wisdom and preserve the custom, ceremony, way of life and culture.

Objectives

1) explore the history of elephant lore and the folklore of elephant-worshipping people in Surin Province, Thailand, and those in Champasak Province, Lao People's Democratic Republic;

2) analyze the aspects of the elephant lore – how to deal with elephants, and the folklore in Southern Esan of Thailand so as to suggest guidelines in conserving elephants and pachyderm ecology and culture in the Mekong-sub region;

3) develop arts of performance concerning the elephant lore and the folklore of elephant-worshipping people in the Mekong sub-region.

Research Methodology

This research uses the Ethnographic method and qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Data were gathered from related documents and field study through observations and interviews in order to study factors concerning the wisdom about elephant catching and keeping and folktales. All data gathered were analyzed according to the Exploratory Factor Analysis method.

Research tools are 60 items of questionnaires which the researcher had created and selected from the qualitative research and had been approved by five peer reviewers. After

the orthogonal varimax rotation was used, the validity and reliability's result was .79. The rotation resulted in factor loading, which categorized each question item. The questions greater than .30 were selected. Questionnaires were done by five hundred people and then were brought to do the statistical analysis in order to find the outcome according to the quantitative research methodology. The final stage was to write a study report.

Study area and target population

Data were collected after the question items about elephant catching and keeping and folktales of people who worship elephants in the Greater Mekong Sub-region, especially in Thailand and Lao PDR, were created. The population, selected by purposive sampling, was villagers in the Ta-klang Elephant Village, Tha Tum District, Surin, Thailand. The number of population was five-hundred people, including doctors for elephants, mahouts, educationists, teachers, students and tourists.

Conclusion

1. Regarding the historical background, people who worship elephants in the lower Mekong sub-region in Thailand and Laos shared the same origin. Champasak was once ruled under Siam (Thailand). Due to migration of folks, cultures and wisdoms transferred from one place to another. From various documents, it mentioned that Hindu and Buddhism spread from India to Southeast Asia. Therefore, people in this region shared the same belief. When the Khmer empire had grown its influence over the area, religious wisdom, as well as elephant wisdom

and folkloristic, was respected among the locals. Elephant catching wisdom in Laos was originated by Lanchang Dynasty. The knowledge about elephant catching and elephant raising wisdom were passed to the common people and then to people in the tribe. The Kuys originally were from Attapeu, Sekong and Champasak. Then, they migrated to the South of Esan in Thailand, which was around the Dongrek Mountain range and Moon River in Surin and Srisaket Province in Thailand. It was assumed that the wisdom of elephant catching originated from the South of Lao. So, people in the Lower Mekong Sub-region shared the same origin.

The belief about *Phi Pakam* among the Kuys in Surin Province, Thailand, and the elephant raiser community in Pathum Phon, Champasak in Laos was almost the same. The people who raise elephants revere *Phi Pakam*, as well as they cherish the social and administrative wisdom. The way they place the hierarchy of their caravan was a model of how they rule their village. In the caravan, the position of *Mor Chang* is divided into *Kru Baa Yai* or *Tiyai*, *Mor Sadum*, *Mor Sadiang*, *Ja* and *Ma* or mahout. *Kru Baa Yai* is the most significant position. He is like the head of the village. The head of the village is selected according to his ability in catching elephants and his morality. The way they administer the caravan is a good model for the villagers to apply this wisdom to use in their daily life. The wisdom about medicine and herbal are also retrieved from the elephant surroundings. Elephants usually flock in biodiversity forest. They know what foods are edible and can be used as medicine. Therefore, the mahouts recognize

herbs that are useful for them. People who raise elephants adapt the wisdom they learn from elephants to make use about herbs and medicine that can heal illnesses. In preserving nature in order to raise elephants, people become more aware that if deforestation continues, the number of wild elephants also decreases. Nowadays, Thailand and Laos have announced a preserved area for wild elephants to live. There are more defensive measures against elephant killing for commerce and for agricultural land protection. Regarding economy, in the past, elephants were used for log dragging, transportation, agricultural work such as ploughing and product transporting. However, the roles of elephants have been tremendously changed. Most elephants are in tourism industry and services such as performing in an elephant show or carrying tourists around town. Elephants have an important role in economic from the past until present.

1. Components about the wisdom about elephant catching and keeping and folktales of people who worships elephants in the Greater Mekong Sub-region

The researcher created a questionnaire of sixty items about the wisdom about elephant catching and keeping and folktales of people who worship elephants in the Greater Mekong Sub-region in Thailand and Lao PDR. The questionnaire items were reviewed by five peer reviewers. After that, the validity and reliability were tested. Questionnaires were done by five hundred people at Ta-klang Elephant Village,

Krapho Subdistrict, Tha Tum District, Surin Province. Findings were as follows:

The result of the Orthogonal Varimax rotation, after the components had been extracted, was the component criteria. The questions greater than .30 were selected (without considering the plus/minus value). The result was used to categorize the question items into four criteria as follows:

“The Pakam Spirit and the relationship between elephants and doctor for elephants.”

“Love legends, rainfall, water, and regulations of people who worship elephants.”

“The embroidered loincloth of the doctor for elephants, the regulations and rice culture.”

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2. The Development of Performance Art of People Who Worship Elephants in the Greater Mekong Sub-region

After the exploratory principal component analysis was done, the researcher used the components to develop a performance art and named it, “Nattakam Phon Chang” (Elephant Catching), which is performed according to the four component criteria.

- **“The Pakam Spirit and the relationship between elephants and doctor for elephants”**

This act is interpreted from the life of Kuy people and their belief about Pakam Spirit. Kuys have a strict way of following their tradition. They believe in the spirits and do not disparage them. Kuys believe that, in each family, there is one Pakam spirit with them. To reflect this belief, the

researcher designed this act to consist of 12 main dancers, including 4 doctors for elephants, 1 Kru Baa Yai, 1 Mor Sadum, 1 Mor Sadiang, 1 Ja, 1 Ma and 4 decoy elephants. The dancers imitate the life of Kuy people in the village. For example, there are housewives reeling the silk or winnowing rice grains. Village men do the basketwork and cast fishnet. Children play Banana Tree Horse and Humming and Tagging games joyfully. A parade of Galmore dancers marches along the road. People gather together to perform the Kuy ceremony.

- **“Love legends, rainfall, water, and regulations of people who worship elephants”**

This act portrays female dancer preparing necessary tools for her husband who is going to catch the elephants in the forest. She is worried and sad to be apart from her husband. Also, the natural make-up and long straight hair reflect the belief about Kalum (prohibitions). The wife wears old textile cloth with various embroidered patterns on it. Doctor for elephants and Ma wear Jigganorb (combined yarn dyed fabric) loincloth without shirts or head-wrap cloth on. There is a piece of cloth and a harpoon place upon their shoulder. Their waist is wrapped around with their wife or mother's skirt top as an amulet.

Dresses of Galmore female dancers were designed as follows: a long sleeved, ebony tree-dyed blouse, a vertical thread mudmee with brown and black background color sarong. The skirt top is in brick red color and ram silk pattern. There is a white piece of cloth places upon shoulder. The domestic elephant dancers wear

grey silk shirt upon a black T-shirt. Their waist is wrapped around by an elephant's ear-shaped pleated cloth. The leader in the herd wears a white cloth and wrapped his waist around in the same way as the domestic elephant's dancers do. A white elephant's head mask with a crown on signifies its high rank. This act consists of the same male dancers from act 1, the same 4 female dancers from act 1, the same 3 housewives. Totally, there are 19 dancers in this act.

- **“Elephant hunting and the women”**

This act reflects the Phon Chang (elephant catching) process. There are 12 male dancers from the first act. The role of wild elephants are added (4 wild elephants and 1 white elephant). This act ends when Kru Baa catches the white elephant. Mor Ja and Mor Ma bring Pakam divine rope to tie a big tree.

- **“The embroidered loincloth of the doctor for elephants, the prohibitions and rice culture”**

This act combines the belief about the way of life, ceremony and folktales like Pra Mor Thao, Nerng Tun Satra and Pa Daeng Nang Ai together. This scene portrays the success and peaceful happiness achieved after people follow the strict rules or Kalum prohibitions. The dancers convey the ideas by performing as doctor for elephants parading back to the village with the elephants they can catch. All villagers come to welcome both human and elephants and bring the rice offerings to do a ceremony called “Riak Kwan.”

Dancing music Production

The idea in producing dancing music derived from the act of the Kuys performing *Phon Chang* (Elephant Catching). It is the way of life of people in the southern Esan. The music used is *Galmore Guntrum Haehom*, which is southern Esan music, play in accordance with *Sanai*. Some sentences from the song are recomposed by using a computer program, Sibelius Version 7. The music has a mixture of western musical instruments with flute and lute as lead. There is a background sound of Esan reed mouth organ (Can). Brass instruments, wood instruments and string instruments are played in chords to reflect the traditional lifestyle. A sound effect of animal crying such as rooster, bird, cow, buffalo and elephant is also inserted to make the audience feel the life of people in the old time.

Dress Design

The dresses worn in the “Nattakam Phon Chang” (Elephant Catching), reflects the refined beauty and characteristics of the performers. It also portrays life of the people in that period. The researcher used the theory from Visual Art to design the dresses by using red, black and grey to symbolize the nature, ceremony, social and way of life of people who worship elephants. There are six dimensions concerning the dress design: function, pattern, character of performer, production, dress changing and economical price.

Stage Design

In designing a stage background, the researcher focuses on unity and harmony. The stage decoration and background will go along

with the performers' color of dresses. In the scene which performers perform ‘the Paying respect to *Pakam Spirit House*’ scene, all stage properties are related tools such as *Sanai*, *Pakam Rope*, hook, *Mai Kanjam* (a lasso wood stick), water flask and *Gatasong*, etc.

Conclusion

This research was developed by using Ethnographic methods and qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The body of knowledge about elephant catching and folktales was created. To confirm the accuracy of the data received from the qualitative methodology, the exploratory principal component analysis, which is a quantitative methodology, was used. The equivalent category variables were grouped together. The last step was to develop the performance art about people who worship elephants. The aim of this performance is to maintain the wisdom about elephant catching and keeping for the next generation.

After the quantitative research was done, four components about elephant catching and keeping were found as follows: 1) The *Pakam Spirit* and the relationship between elephants and doctor for elephants. This factor reflects the life of the Kuy ethnic group and their belief about *Pakam Spirit*. Kuys have a strict way of following their tradition. They believe in the spirits and do not disparage them. Kuys believe that in each family there is one *Pakam spirit* with them. 2) The embroidered loincloth of the doctor for elephants, the prohibitions and rice culture. This reflects the life of Kuys that normally weave their own cloth; Kalum or prohibitions; and rice

culture. 3) Elephant hunting and the women. This reflects the belief, tradition and way of life of people who worship elephants. 4) Love legends, rainfall, water, and regulations of people who worship elephants. This also portrays the way of life, belief and ceremony of people who worship elephants.

After the principal component analysis was done, the researcher developed a performance art named Nattakam Phon Chang. This performance aims to maintain the wisdom of elephant catching and keeping and folktales of people who worship elephants in the Greater Mekong Sub-region and to build an understanding about it

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