

# Lakhon Rong Songs of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe

*(Mae Bunnak Kanlayanamit) & the Phenomenon  
of Music in Siam*

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## Abstract

This study examines the evolution of lakhon rong, a form of Thai musical theater, within the context of Siam's socio-political and cultural changes during the early 20th century, particularly under the influence of Western modernization. The research focuses on the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe, exploring how adaptations in lakhon rong performances reflected and contributed to the broader societal efforts towards crafting a modern Thai identity. The integration of Western musical elements with traditional Thai forms exemplifies strategic cultural negotiation, aligning with theories of adaptation and appropriation. Through an analysis of play scripts and historic recordings, this study highlights how cultural practices are dynamically redefined in response to global influences, thus offering insights into the mechanisms of cultural resilience and innovation in non-colonized contexts.

**Keywords:** *Adaptation, Cultural Negotiation, Lakhon Rong, Thai Musical Theater, Western Influence*

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## Introduction

During the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), there were significant changes in the political, economic, and social structures of Siam, along with an expansion of education (Amornpradubkul 2023; Arphattananon, 2020; Kasetsiri, 2022). At that time, Western culture had a significant presence, played a role in elite society and had begun to influence everyday lives (Stengs, 2020). In those days, adopting Western culture was seen as necessary due to the prevailing influence of colonialism, and cultural adaptation was needed to align with Western values to reduce marginalization on the international stage. This hybridized Western-Thai culture thus became a preference among the affluent class at the time. This attitude directly affected tastes in Thai theatrical entertainment and led to the creation of new theatrical genres (Chonchirdsin, 2009). Lakhon rong (a Thai singing drama or form of musical theater) emerged as one such genre (Jungwiwattanaporn, 1999). Lakhon rong was a new form of performance during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, innovated by Prince Narathip Praphanphong. It derived inspiration from Malay opera and European comic opera, which had a tremendous influence on Thai theatrical performances and were embraced among the upper class and, latterly, the populace. Additionally, this form of performance also evolved from Thai opera-oriented dance drama performances.

## Origins of Lakhon Rong

The term lakhon rong is occasionally, and erroneously used as a synonym of lakhon phan-thang, a hybrid genre of Thai-Western opera mixing Thai traditional and western music in the 1930s (Sawangchot, 2021). Ratnin (1996) suggests that the two are distinctive due to the diminished importance of dance in lakhon rong, which had always been the heart of Siamese traditional dramas like lakhon phan-thang. Actually, the origins of lakhon rong are earlier. In 1890, during his tour of the Malay Peninsula, King Chulalongkorn observed a Malay theater performance known as bangsawan (Malay Opera) (Fine Arts Department, 2012: 84). This bangsawan was a new form of theater that had emerged around 1880 and was considered an activity of the aristocratic class (Tan Sooi Beng, 1997). Bangsawan was later performed in the capital at a theater near the Burapha Palace, allowing the people of the capital to experience the Malay theater of bangsawan (Fine Arts Department, 2012: 84). Simultaneously, in 1891, King Chulalongkorn instructed his half-brother Prince Damrong Rajanubhab along with Thai nobleman Chaophraya Thewet Wongwiwat to visit Europe to meet Tsar Nicholas II. During this journey, they had the opportunity to attend opera performances. Upon returning, they recounted about the opera, particularly about the music, singing, and staging (Rajanubhab, 2003). These experiences drove the integration of ancient Siamese orchestral music with Western influences and the creation of a new theatrical form involving orchestrated music and singing styles that harmonized, yet without fully adopting the format of a complete Western-style opera. It is from these two disparate sources that lakhon rong originates (Mahasarinand et al., 2016).

Around 1905 began an era of experimentation in Thai musical drama, pioneered by Prince Narathip. Drawing inspiration from bangsawan, which itself had been adapted from grand opera, and influenced by ancient Siamese theatrical styles which had by now absorbed Western influences, a new and modern performance style termed lakhon rong was developed (Jirajarupat, 2014; Vasinarom, 2006). This innovation directly influenced the cultural entertainment tastes in Thailand, marking an era of trial and error, and forming a foundational audience starting from the royal court and spreading to the general populace, known as the Pridalai Troupe (Witayasakpan, 1992). This became a highly popular new form of entertainment. The Pridalai Troupe attracted many actors to train and Worawan Palace

(the palace of Prince Narathip) served as its base, becoming a school for teaching lakhon rong, passing down the art of performing and singing from one generation to the next. The songs performed by the Pridalai Troupe also became templates that were passed down to many actors within the troupe, who branched out to form their own groups, performing at independent venues (Hin-on, 2021). Mae Bunnak Kanlayanamit emerged as a lead performer for the newly formed Pramothai Troupe from 1911 to 1920, which continued using the performance styles of the Pridalai Troupe but modernized its presentation methods (Nakpi, 2014: 62). After World War I, as films began playing a role in Thai society, audiences increasingly favored movies over lakhon rong, leading to the decline and eventual closure of the Pramothai Troupe in 1920 (Tungtang, 2011). Consequently, Mae Bunnak established her own lakhon rong troupe, called Nakhon Bantoeng. She adapted ideas and experiences from the Pridalai and Pramothai troupes for her own troupe (Amatyakul and Kitkan, 2010: 22).

Through the performances of Nakhon Bantoeng, lakhon rong regained popularity, in turn becoming a model for new forms of performance. Mae Bunnak not only incorporated the theatrical elements of lakhon rong into performances but also made some improvements by tailoring this performance style to different contexts and the needs of people in society. It became a significant part of the entertainment culture from the 1930s to 1950s, especially when foreign films were banned during World War II (Tungtang, 2011). Apart from that, a reservoir of knowledge became stored in the composition of lakhon rong scripts, the performance of those plays, and song recording through methods of imitation, adoption, adaptation and refinement to be compatible with changing social contexts. This adaptability ensured that the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe remained popular. In fact, 126 play scripts of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe have been conserved, each of the plays comprising many episodes and volumes, totaling 257 issues (Hin-on, 2018). Such an exhaustive list is crucial academic information in the area of music, exhibiting new dimensions which may not have yet emerged in the field. In addition, gramophone records of lakhon rong songs of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe were found, totaling 210 sides. A significant number of the songs were recorded and serve as valuable evidence, establishing a link between the history of music and the recording industry of lakhon rong songs. More importantly, they vividly portray the entertainment culture during that period. For these reasons, the present study seeks to examine the lakhon rong songs of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe (Mae Bunnak Kanlayanamit) and the musical phenomenon through the play scripts and the gramophone records. In particular, it focuses on investigating the significant features of the songs, especially elements relevant to lakhon rong, and the influences and social phenomena engendering the development and evolution of the lakhon rong performance style. Explicitly, the three primary research objectives are: 1) to analyze the significant features of the songs in lakhon rong play scripts of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe (Mae Bunnak Kanlayanamit); 2) to investigate the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe's incorporation of the lakhon rong songs; 3) to examine the musical phenomenon and the troupe's adaption of the lakhon rong songs in connection with the Thai entertainment culture.

### Literature Review

The emergence and development of lakhon rong during the reign of King Chulalongkorn provide a compelling case study of cultural hybridization under the pressures of Western colonialism and modernization. As Siam navigated the complexities of international politics and cultural identity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Western influence permeated its societal structures, prompting a blend of Thai and Western cultural elements.

This era was also marked by Thailand's efforts to modernize its military and government institutions, mirroring the transformations seen in its cultural productions (Ferrara, 2015). This period of transformation was marked by significant adaptations within the realms of politics, social norms, and cultural practices, as the Siamese elite sought to forge a modern national identity that both embraced and resisted Western norms. Theatrical arts, particularly the innovation of lakhon rong, epitomized this blend (Yamprai, 2011). These artistic developments occurred alongside major infrastructural changes, including the introduction of railways and modern education systems, which facilitated both the physical and ideological spread of lakhon rong (Subrahmanyam, 2013). This hybridization process not only mirrored societal shifts but also facilitated a unique space for cultural negotiation and redefinition, as discussed by scholars like Homi Bhabha (2015) and Stuart Hall (1993), who explore the dynamics of cultural identity in post-colonial contexts.

Within the broader spectrum of Thai musical theater, lakhon rong represents an evolution from traditional forms such as khon and likay, which were deeply rooted in Thai mythology and royal patronage. By incorporating Western musical styles and narrative forms, lakhon rong offered a new aesthetic and cultural experience that appealed to both the aristocracy and the burgeoning middle class, reflecting broader trends in Asian theatrical adaptations (Brandon, 2009; Cohen, 2014). Theatrical development in Thailand was also influenced by regional styles, such as Javanese Wayang and Chinese opera, highlighting a rich tapestry of cultural exchange and adaptation that was prevalent across Southeast Asia during this period (Cohen, 2007; Miller, 2010). This intercultural borrowing was a strategic adaptation to the changing tastes and socio-political demands of the time, such as the growing nationalist movements which began to seek expressions of Thai identity that could coexist with Western modernity (Laochockchaikul and Ratnatilaka Na Bhuket, 2023). Such intercultural borrowing was not merely imitative but a strategic adaptation to the changing tastes and socio-political demands of the time, illustrating the fluid nature of cultural identity and the role of performance art in its continual renegotiation.

The theoretical perspectives of adaptation and appropriation provide valuable lenses through which to view the evolution of lakhon rong in this context. Drawing on the work of Sanders (2006) and Hutcheon (2006), the adaptation of lakhon rong can be seen as a dynamic process that involves both the selective incorporation of foreign elements and the transformation of existing cultural practices to meet new social realities. This process is emblematic of a broader cultural negotiation that occurs in many post-colonial societies, where adaptation serves as both a survival strategy and a form of resistance (Jirajarupat and Rattanachaiwong, 2020). Although Thailand was never formally colonized, its strategic adaptations to Western influence reflect a unique form of cultural resilience and negotiation akin to those in post-colonial contexts, underscoring the relevance of these theories even in non-colonized nations (Van Esterik, 2020). The interplay between adaptation and appropriation in lakhon rong highlights the delicate balance between embracing globalization and maintaining cultural integrity, a theme that resonates across various forms of artistic expression in modernizing societies. The adoption of Western musical elements in lakhon rong was thus not merely aesthetic but also a deliberate act of cultural diplomacy, projecting a modern yet distinctly Thai identity. The lakhon rong scripts reflect these methods of adaptation through new presentations and the transformation of literature that has been modified in various presentation forms (Duangpatra 2020).

In the study of historic recordings, researchers apply a variety of methodologies, such as Amatayakul and Kitkan (2010), Wells (2010), Yampolsky (2013), and Mitchell (2017) and explore the linked concepts of discography - the study of data from record labels - and discology - the study of data within records. These frameworks hold potential for the exploration of the musical content and elements of lakhon rong songs. As Katz and Wedell (1977) highlight, the advent of recording technology has not only preserved the musical heritage of Thailand but also transformed its production, distribution, and reception. For lakhon rong, gramophone records have been instrumental in documenting and popularizing this theatrical form, enabling it to reach a wider audience and play a pivotal role in the cultural preservation of the art form while introducing it to new influences and modifications. This technological shift has extended the life of lakhon rong beyond live performances and facilitated a new form of cultural transmission that has significantly impacted how these performances are conceived, executed, and experienced, underlining the intricate relationship between technological advancement and cultural adaptation.

### Research Methodology

The present study was intended to investigate the features and analyze the list of songs incorporated in the lakhon rong scripts, the song recording, and the attributes of Bunnak Kanlayanamit's lakhon rong songs through the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe's gramophone records. Furthermore, it explored the incorporation of the lakhon rong songs as well as identified the styles and the principles of selecting the songs in the play scripts. The data were further synthesized to establish a link with the social context in the past; in particular, this was based on evidence of historical documents which could depict the musical phenomenon, reflecting the Thai entertainment culture in the past.

This study was carried out through qualitative research. Specifically, it adopted a historical approach and a documentary research method to analyze data from historical documents, spanning primary sources and secondary sources, including lakhon rong scripts, gramophone records, historical writings, dissertations related to the musical phenomena, and other useful national and international sources of relevant information. The collection of lakhon rong scripts was conducted through research at the following institutions: 1) Naradhip Centre for Research in Social Sciences; 2) National Library of Thailand; 3) Musicology Hermitage, College of Music, Mahidol University. For the collection of gramophone records, coordination was carried out with various organizations, and data was gathered from the following sources: 1) King Rama IX Music Library; 2) National Library of Thailand; 3) Musicology Hermitage, College of Music, Mahidol University; 4) The Government Public Relations Department Gramophone Record Library; 5) Private collections of gramophone records; 6) YouTube; 7) Endangered Archives: Sounds of Siam, Australia. Interview data were obtained through formal and informal interviews conducted with groups of experts in three different areas, including gramophone records, music, and lakhon rong. The results are presented through descriptive analysis in accordance with the objectives of the study.

### Results

According to the account of Poonpit Amatayakul (Personal Communication, 8 February 2021), Mae Bunnak Kanlayanamit was trained in lakhon ram (dance drama) and lakhon rong (sung drama) by M.L. Tuan Sri Worawan, and eventually became a skilled and well-known performer, especially recognized for her leading male roles. In addition to her acting

talent, she also absorbed and learned playwriting and song composition from M.L. Tuan Sri Worawan. A recording from the Thai Music Teachers' Program recounts that Mae Bunnak had a melodious voice, which led to her being cast in lead male roles in the lakhon rong performances of the Preedalai troupe. As a performer within the Pridalai Troupe, Mae Bunnak familiarized herself with and acquired knowledge of composing lakhon rong songs, incorporating the songs, and performing lakhon rong styles from Prince Narathip and M.L. Tuan Sri Worawan. With the disbandment of the Pridalai Troupe, she emerged as a lead performer for the Pramothai Troupe and was in charge of overseeing its management. As a result of the business stagnation of the troupe and its cessation, she formed her own troupe named Nakhon Bantoeng in 1920. Historical evidence recording the performance of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe comprises lakhon rong scripts documented with years of performance during 1920-1931, except for the year 1927 in which no play scripts were found. This spans over 11 years during which the troupe thrived on the stage, performing lakhon rong amidst the emerging trend of the film industry. Nevertheless, the troupe continuously produced performances and earned recognition in society, a sample of which can be heard by following the QR Code in Figure 1 below. The prominence of the troupe is evident in its composition of play scripts and the enactment of these plays to raise funds for local bridge construction, philanthropic endeavors such as kathin ceremonies, events showcases such as New Year's celebrations and amusement park openings, and the recording of gramophone records for commercial distribution. Figure 2 is an excerpt from the play *The Bond of Vengeance*, written and with songs composed by Mae Bunnak Kalayanamit. These materials demonstrate Mae Bunnak Kalayanamit's talents in playwriting, song composition, and vocal performance and portray the values of the entertainment culture practiced among people in society during that period in which they continued to appreciate the lakhon rong performances of the Nakhon Bantoeng troupe. Still, irrespective of its endeavor to adapt to the social trend, the troupe was unable to withstand people's preference for motion pictures, thereby leading to dwindling interests for its performances and eventual closure.



Figure 1. QR Code to a gramophone audio recording on YouTube of Waansonsieng by Bunnak Kanlayanamit (1930). Waansonsieng (เพลงหวานซึ้งเสียง). Gramophone Record of Tra Siam. Source: Kanlayanamit, 1930; Mitchell, 2019.



Figure 2. An excerpt from the play, *The Bona of vengeance*, written and with songs composed by Mae Bunnak Kanlayanamit. The script is a translation of *Love's Dilemma* by Charles Gavice. Source: Kanlayanamit, 1923.

According to the thesis *Ethnomusicology: A Case Study of Ban Banglampoo* by Narong Khi-anthongkul (1999), it is recounted that the Bang Lamphu music ensemble played a significant role in accompanying lakhon rong performances for Mae Bunnak. The ensemble was regularly led by Khru Sook, who was highly skilled in providing musical accompaniment for theatrical performances. Moreover, Khru Sook's daughters (Khru Chueam, Khru Chaem-choi, Khru Chom, and Khru Thassanee) would often cross the canal to watch Mae Bunnak's performances, and at times participated as backing vocalists (*luk khru*), for which they received payment and greatly enjoyed the experience. Additionally, in a broadcast of the Meeting with Thai Music Teachers program, Poonpit Amatayakul noted that Luang Chan Choeng Ranat and Khru Montri Tramote contributed to the music for several of Mae Bunnak's theatrical productions. At the same time, records show the names of musicians who recorded gramophone discs for Mae Bunnak. Among them was Phra Phleng Phairo (Som Suwatit), whose work appears on Odeon label discs, including a 40-page recording of Arab Rasami. An advertisement disc under the Rabbit Label reveals that Khru Phrom Phatyakun provided musical accompaniment for several of Mae Bunnak's lakhon rong productions. These include *The Royal Chronicle of Thao Thep Kasattri* (spelled as in the play script), *The Heart of the Minister*, *Lady Khmer*, and *Rachathirat* (Figure 3).

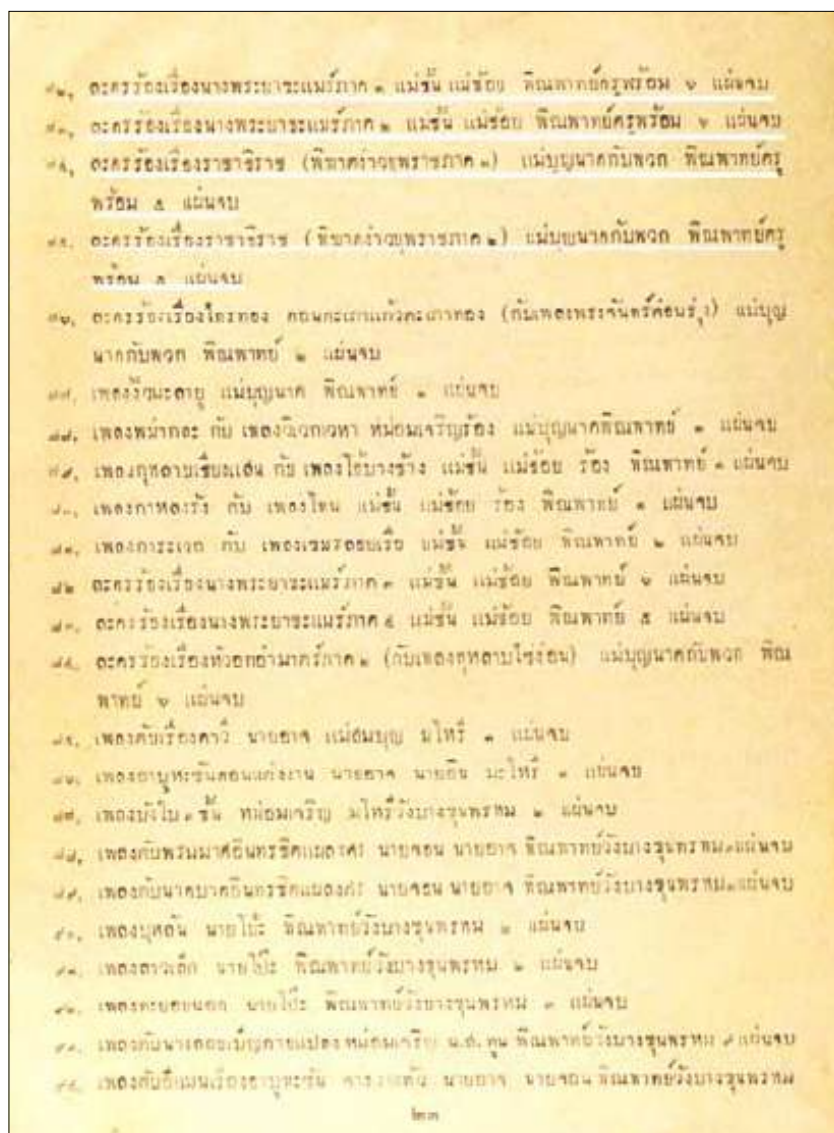


Figure 3. List of Songs from Kratai Label Record No. 1. Source: Khianthongkul, 1999.

### Songs in Lakhon Rong Scripts of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe

The songs utilized in lakhon rong plays perform a prominent role since they articulate narratives, emotions, and connotative meanings of the characters. The results of song analysis demonstrated that the play scripts contained miscellaneous musical pieces, namely *Kred Sam Chan*, *Kred Song Chan*, and *Kred Chan Dieu*. Such pieces were included in the performances of Khon (a masked dance drama) and plays and had been extensively incorporated into lakhon rong scripts. However, considering that lakhon rong was a novel form of performance incorporating Western influences at the time, the musical styles were changed and developed with melodies adapted to lakhon rong scripts (Mookdamuang and Pidokrajt, 2024; Premananda and Phrom-indra, 2024). The influence of other musical styles brought about the new ‘musical language’ of lakhon rong song, “whereby rhythmic and melodic elements from other musical system and traditions have been incorporated into Thai classical songs (known as *Pleng Thai Daem*)” (Kanchanapradit, 2018: 372).

Accordingly, this contributed to the emergence of increasingly varied musical arrangements tailored to the narratives of the characters. Simply put, the melodies were trimmed or improved to achieve conciseness and ensure compatibility with the play. These song titles are concluded with the words 'trimmed' and 'new.' Alternatively, where modification and refinement of the melodies occurred, the song titles capture a variety of emotions and enable ethnic diversity among the characters. The word 'modified' is added to the titles of these songs to serve as a symbol of the modified melodies.

Simultaneously, a naphat piece as instrumental music was employed as an accompaniment to actions and expression of emotions among performers, just as background music used in Khon and play performances. However, the performance style of lakhon rong is different. In lakhon rong, dance movements were not utilized to deliver lines, so a naphat piece was included to accompany gestures or actions and simple emotions. In particular, typical naphat pieces were *ot*, employed to express the characters' feeling of sorrow or act of crying, *choet* and *phraya doen* used to represent their act of walking, *tra non* accompanied the act of sleeping, and *sen lao* represented their drinking or intoxication from alcohol. This reflected the use of musical pieces to convey a variety of actions and emotions in sync with the characters, unlike Khon which incorporates more sophisticated naphat pieces into its performances.

The essential feature of songs or pieces used in lakhon rong plays lies in the fact that the songs were composed for theatrical usage. Specifically, they were characterized by different forms, namely Thai songs, dialect songs, adaptations of foreign melodies, and composition of new foreign melodies with inspiration from military music. Lakhon rong songs, in fact, depicted a variety of narratives and ethnic diversity among the characters in plays. At the same time, they made a significant contribution to enhancing the enjoyment of the performance, stimulating imagination, portraying events, expressing emotions, indicating ethnicity, and narrating the stories of lakhon rong.

The analysis of musical pieces incorporated in 126 lakhon rong scripts, 257 copies in total, and discovered a total of 10,090 songs. With the exclusion of duplicate entries, there remained 1,373 songs featured in lakhon rong. These songs can be classified below:

1. Pleng Kred (เพลงเกร็ด): Featured were 687 musical pieces, including pleng kred sam chan (เพลงเกร็ดสามชั้น), pleng kred song chan (เพลงเกร็ดสองชั้น), and pleng kred chan diew (เพลงเกร็ดชั้นเดียว). Pleng kred song chang was most predominant.
2. Naphat (หน้าพาทย์): 15 musical pieces were found. In fact, *ot* (โอด) and *tra non* (ตระนอน) pieces were found being used to portray the characters' sorrow and act of sleeping, respectively. In addition, other pieces emerged, such as *satukarn* (สาธุการ), *rua* (รัว), *choet* (เช็ด), and *sen lao* (เช่นเหล้า).
3. Trimmed songs and modified songs: 48 songs were featured in lakhon rong. These were derived from Kred pieces and lakhon rong songs with melodies reduced to suit the length of the plays, along with kred musical pieces with melodies modified to enable a melodic variety, such as dialect songs.
4. Lakhon rong: There remained 614 of the songs. Their titles served as signs of time indication, and ethnicity or locations; some songs had been given specific names, such as those with names beginning with *wan*, with melodies originating from Western songs.

Additionally, a substantial number of dialect songs were discovered, such as Indian, Cambodian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian, Burmese, Mon, Japanese, and Western. The Pramothai Troupe adapted these songs from those of the Pridalai Troupe and composed new lakhon rong songs for its own theatrical usage.

5. **Bettalet:** Featured were nine musical pieces. These were folk songs, for example, kiao khaw (เกี่ยวข้าว) and so mueang (ซอเมือง), along with sepa (เสภา) used to maintain narrative conciseness and pacing and he, such as hea klom (เห่กล่อม) and hea ruea (เห่เรือ), to highlight the significant point of the narrative such as singing lullabies and traveling by waterway.

The list of the songs portrayed the distinctiveness of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe's creative and captivating lakhon rong titles. In fact, some capture the characters' emotions, while the others portray a certain point in time; they serve to represent the characters' ethnic backgrounds as well. Given the ethnic diversity among the characters, there exist a variety of dialects in lakhon rong songs of the troupe, which harmonize the narratives of the plays and different dialects.

Based on the synthesis, it can be concluded that there were four functions of lakhon rong songs performed: conservation, reduction, reconstruction, and recreation. Specifically, conservation entails adopting the traditional songs, such as pleng kred and lakhon rong songs of the Pridalai Troupe, while reduction refers to the practice of trimming and adapting the melodies of the traditional songs to fit the context of the Pridalai Troupe's lakhon rong. Additionally, reconstruction involves reworking and rearranging the existing melodies to produce new melodies, whereas creation can be described as the composition of new lakhon rong songs for the repertoire of the troupe's theatrical performances.

### **Incorporation of Lakorn Rong Songs of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe (Mae Bunnak Kanlayanamit)**

The repertoire of 126 lakhon rong scripts of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe features a diverse array of genres, namely tragedies, melodramas, farces, romances, comedies, and modern dramas. The compositional styles of lakhon rong plays can be categorized into three groups as follows: 1) the transmutation of chronicles or historical records into lakhon rong plays; 2) the transmutation of foreign literature into the plays; and 3) the composition of the new plays. Based on those classifications, four plays were selected for further analysis: 1) Princess Milanda (1921), a play adapted from Arabic chronicles; 2) Nang Sao Chao Talat (1924), a literary work based on *Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare; and two newly composed plays, namely 3) Thang Sawan (1926) and 4) Wira Burut (1929). These were chosen to analyze the elements of the plays, including plots, characters, languages, and the incorporation of lakhon rong songs into the plays, with the aim to uncover the approaches utilized by the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe to incorporate the songs. Based on the analysis and synthesis, the principles of incorporating lakhon rong songs can be summarized below:

1. Incorporating the songs based on the drama patterns entailed incorporating the songs into the plays according to the patterns of dance dramas; for example, Oh Lom Lom Nok (โอย์โลมนอก) was used for the act of courtship. At the same time, incorporation of naphat pieces adhered to the principle of meaningful expressions to accompany the characters' gestures and actions.

2. Incorporating the songs to link the narrative was intended for narrating the story with a chorus group as a vocalist and for the progression of the story with the characters as a vocalist.
3. Incorporating the songs based on the characters' emotions involved choosing the songs with significant contributions to express the characters' emotions to the audience. It is evident that an array of songs was available, each tailored to suit the characters' roles. However, people well-versed in selecting the repertoire of the songs may modify the melodies to capture a variety of emotions, thereby instilling the thought-provoking feeling.
4. Incorporating the songs based on the characters' ethnic backgrounds entailed incorporating dialect songs into the plays which resonate with their ethnicity. In addition, the accent of the particular ethnic group may be imitated.
5. Improving the songs to suit lakhon rong plays involved trimming, modifying the melodies, and refining vocal arrangements in sync with the length of the play. This can be classified into three groups: 1) songs with trimmed melodies, such as Tao Kin Phak Bung (trimmed) (เต่ากินผักบุงตัด), Farang Khuang (trimmed) (ฝรั่งควงตัด), Lao Siang Thian (trimmed) (ลาวเสียงเทียนตัด), Srasom (trimmed) (สระสมตัด), and Kara Wake (trimmed) (การเวกตัด); 2) songs with modified melodies, for example, Ngew (modified) (เงี้ยวแปลง), Yuan (modified) (ยวนแปลง), Malayu (modified) (มาลายูแปลง), Jean Keb Buppa (modified) (จีนเก็บบุปผาแปลง), Khaek (modified) (แขกแปลง), Khaek Malayu (modified) (แขกมาลายูแปลง), and Huang Alai (modified) (หวางอไลแปลง); and 3) songs with refined melodies, such as Lao Krasae (new) (ลาวกระแซใหม่), Oi Ing (new) (อ้อยอิงใหม่), Lao Lampang (new) (ลาวลำปางใหม่), and Lao Pan (new) (ลาวแพนใหม่).
6. Incorporating the songs based on versification: The majority of lakhon rong plays featured the utilization of Thai octameter poems largely owing to the ease of incorporating lyrics into the plays and singing along Thai melodies. Nevertheless, different forms of versification necessitate selecting the songs and arranging the lyrics to be appropriate and harmonious. Specifically, maanawakkachan (มาณวักขันธ์) – a kind of Thai verse – is characterized by its lively rhythms, capturing the energy of young individuals. This versification was found in songs such as Sut Sawat and Tat Sawat, typically used for the act of courtship and interactions between male and female characters. Meanwhile, in literature, Intharawichianchan 11 (อินทรวีเชียรฉันท 11) is typically employed to capture objects of beauty, convey a sense of empathy as well as compassion, and occasionally to portray a feeling of sensitivity, sorrow, and indifference. It was used in these two songs, namely Soimas (สร้อยมาศ) and Dam Nern Samut (ดำเนินสมุทร), particularly in scenes where a male character describes his beloved woman. Witchumaalaachan (วิชชумаลาฉันท), on the other hand, is used in literature to depict a feeling of nervousness; this was employed in the song Hip No Tai (ฮีบโนไต) to bemoan the parting of a beloved woman. Finally, Wasantadilokchan 14 (วสันตดิลกฉันท 14) is renowned for its beauty and often used to depict objects of exquisiteness; it was found being used in the song Ngew Malayu (เงี้ยวมาละยู). Additionally, other forms of versification, such as Khlong Si Suphap (โคลงสี่สุภาพ) and Kap Yani 11 (กาพย์ยานี 11) were employed in composing lakhon rong plays. Taking into account the composer's intentions, the selection of versification would match and be in line with the characters' emotions. In terms of music, versification influences the placement of lyrics or verses, singing, and sentiments of the songs which should resonate with the characters and the storyline of the plays.

Moreover, the study of the incorporation of songs in the plays reflected two dimensions of literary adaptations. The first was associated with the development of chronicles and foreign literary works into lakhon rong plays, which essentially are literary works for theatrical performances and subsequently are adapted for listening, while the other concerned the development of newly composed lakhon rong plays into literature for listening in the form of gramophone records. These are displayed in the following diagram (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Diagram of the literary adaptation of lakhon rong plays of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe during 1920-1935. Source: Researchers, 2024.

### Musical Phenomenon and Adaptation of Lakhon Rong Songs of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe

The analysis of the data from gramophone records and lakhon rong songs from the plays of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe contributed to establishing the link of historical events throughout different periods, thereby providing a reflection of social and musical phenomena regarding its lakhon rong songs. It was discovered that what shaped the adjustment of the styles of the lakhon rong songs, including singing styles, musical arrangements, the melodic structure, rhythmic patterns and the formation of musical ensembles, were the Western influences and the social trends. The changes in the songs can be classified into three different periods below.

#### *The Early Period*

During this period, the Piphat Mai Nuam ensemble was used in accordance with performances in theaters, influenced by the Pridalai Troupe. In addition, the utilization of a Thai string ensemble with khim and organs was discovered only in the recording of gramophone records. The development of the so-called mixed string ensemble was derived from Kaew (Phrawat Khocharik), with Bunnak and others as vocalists and recording the gramophone records.

The method of singing still adhered to the practice of the traditional singing style, specifically singing Thai songs with lyrics and embellishments. The vocal usage involved using the throat as an articulator to project the voice, so the vocals were characterized as high-pitched and sharp tones. A variety of factors influencing the vocal usage for performing lakhon rong songs may be at play. Particularly, while melismatic phrasing was concerned with combining single melismas into phrases or sentences in sync with the melodies,

dialect songs relied on melismatic phrasing varied by the accent of the particular ethnic group in the play, such as the melismatic vocalization of ‘ah aa aa aa’ in a Chinese style. In the meantime, singing was performed with the modulation based on the rules of tonal conjugation, orthography, and dead and live syllables in compliance with the principle of linguistics. In fact, singing was clear, owing to the necessity of conveying the narrative through performances. Moreover, the unique attribute of singing was associated with the production of sounds to establish a link between lyrics, which may be attributed to techniques favored by each individual, particularly Bunnak. This method of singing is similar to singing lae (แหล่) pieces, referred to as ‘assimilation’ in Thai linguistics. Simultaneously, lakhon rong songs during this period can be divided into two types, namely the songs adapted from Thai songs and newly composed songs based on the style of Thai songs. Na-tub (หน้าทับ) rhythms, a drum pattern for accompaniment, entailed using dialect-based drum patterns and reduced drum patterns to be in sync with lakhon rong songs. Both types of na-tub were characterized as simple, concise, and uncomplicated, thus facilitating the accompaniment of the Lakhon Rong performance.

### *The Adaptation Period*

In this period, there was a change in the recording of gramophone records of lakhon rong songs, shifting from the utilization of Piphat Mai Nuam ensembles (ปี่พาทย์ไม้นวม) and Khruangsai phasom ensembles (วงเครื่องสาย) to the incorporation of Western string ensembles for accompaniment. This transformation was attributed to the influence and the rising popularity of the Khruangsai Luang ensembles (วงเครื่องสายหลวง) formed by the Fine Arts Department; as a result, the musicians of this ensemble helped perform and record the gramophone records for Bunnak’s troupe. Additionally, the influence of military music with march and waltz rhythms contributed to the adaptation of the Western vocal styles. The Thai singing style was still practiced during this period. Despite that, there was a marked difference in the vocal usage, compared to the early period. Specifically, a broader vocal range was employed. The melodic patterns influenced by Western marches led to the change in vocal techniques. Instead of a throat voice style used in the early period, the chest voice was employed. The singing style also entailed the use of semitones (a flat tone). Embellishments were influenced by the Western marches as well; simply speaking, they had been reduced but were still intertwined within the lyrics. With a reduction of embellishments, lyrics were incorporated, thereby rendering the songs similar to full-bodied Thai songs. Apart from that, singing would be adjusted to the melody of the song characterized as the Western melody with disjunct progression, unlike Thai songs in the early period with conjunct progression. As a consequence, singing became increasingly challenging due to the need for precise pitch control, yet this singing style enabled vocalists to showcase their talents and skills. Additionally, the rhythmic pattern of lakhon rong songs during this period was a quick waltz, an accompaniment for dance, influenced by the growing popularity of dance events. Both waltz and march were inspired by military music. Furthermore, Western melodies were adapted for lakhon rong songs.

### *The Progressive Period*

This marked the final period of the Nakhon Bantoeng Group, which depicts a significant transformation towards the embrace of internationalization through the change in the musical ensemble. That is, they made a shift to jazz with incorporation of Western musical instruments, including piano, violin, saxophone, and trumpet. Piano chords served as a bass

accompaniment, with chord progression as a rhythmic guide of the song for the members of the band, harmonizing and complementing their interplay and singing. The practice of the Western singing style, incorporation of Thai embellishment elements, and articulation during vocal performances resulted in a more melodious performance, compared to the previous periods. Melodies and vocal modulation entailed using embellishments to bridge the notes, while vocal modulation was based on Thai orthography. The singing style featured organum, a two-voice polyphonic technique. There was an increasing variety of the use of rhythms such as foxtrot, while the melodies of musical instruments were harmoniously arranged, contributing to greater intricacy and complexity of the music. Furthermore, the singing style was designed to allow for harmony between two vocalists at certain parts, which can be simply described as a two-voice polyphonic style. The Western melodies were also adapted for dialect songs in lakhon rong.

With the analysis and synthesis of the data throughout different periods, it can be stated that lakhon rong of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe portrayed a significant link between Thai and Western music, essentially representing an area of interaction influenced by the adaptation and changes in accordance with the social trend. Such a transformation contributed to the emergence of lakhon rong, a product of the entertainment business, which evolved into a model for modern Thai songs emerging in the subsequent period. Among many examples was the emergence of the song titled Sangkeet Sampan (สังคีตสัมพันธ์) of the Public Relations Department which adapted Thai classical music to the Western musical ensembles, with Aue Sunthornsanan as a prominent figure bringing this musical phenomenon to life. From a different perspective, modern Thai songs are a product of musical evolution which has been derived from lakhon rong songs; figuratively speaking, lakhon rong songs served as a station contributing to the transformation from traditional Thai songs to modern Thai songs. The following diagram (Figure 5) provides an overview of the adaptation of lakhon rong songs of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe.



Figure 5. Musical Phenomenon and Adaptation of Lakhon Rong Songs of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe. Source: Researchers, 2024.

## Conclusion

The present study investigated lakhon rong songs of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe through the play scripts and gramophone records with links to historical events. The results reflected the musical phenomena of the past transforming through the evolution of lakhon rong performances. This has contributed to providing a comprehensive body of musical knowledge of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe, which portrays the endeavors of Bunnak Kanlayanamit. In respect of music, she improved the songs and composed new lakhon rong songs for theatrical performances while improving vocal techniques, leading to a more modern style of singing. As a result, there were changes in the musical ensemble to accompany the theatrical performances. Regarding literature, the results depicted the transmutation of literary works for reading into those for performance. The other significant approach involved composing a substantial number of new lakhon rong songs for theatrical usage as well as the development of literature for listening in the form of gramophone records. It can be summarized that Bunnak Kanlayanamit, the owner of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe, improved lakhon rong songs, transmuted literary works, adjusted the musical ensemble, and most importantly creating the lakhon rong scripts, the songs, and the musical ensemble for her troupe's theatrical performance. This serves as a crucial milestone and evidence which underscores the transformations for survival and provision of entertainment to fulfill the needs of the audience. This marks a significant period of time which reflects the phenomenon of Thai entertainment culture while serving as crucial information for exploration of the history of music.

## Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the interplay between cultural adaptation and the evolution of lakhon rong within the socio-political and cultural dynamics of early 20th century Siam. Reflecting on the literature review and theoretical frameworks highlighted by Sanders (2006) and Hutcheon (2006), the adaptations observed in the lakhon rong performances by the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe can be understood as both reflective and constitutive of broader societal transformations. Firstly, the adaptation of Western musical elements into lakhon rong underlines a strategic cultural negotiation process, where Western influence was neither wholly adopted nor completely resisted. This aligns with Sanders' notion of adaptation as a dynamic and reciprocal engagement with cultural texts and forms. The selective incorporation of Western elements into traditional Thai musical theater did not merely result in a hybrid form of entertainment but also functioned as a cultural statement of Siam's modern identity, navigating the pressures of Western colonial presence without direct colonization. Comparable patterns of selective incorporation can be seen in Japanese shingeki (new theater) during the Meiji period and Chinese Huaju (spoken drama) in the early 20th century, both of which synthesized indigenous forms with Western dramaturgy as part of national modernizing projects. Similarly, in colonial India, Parsi theater adapted Shakespearean and European operatic conventions to vernacular narratives, facilitating a popular yet nationally inflected genre. Moreover, the evolution of lakhon rong as documented through the play scripts and gramophone records of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe exemplifies Hutcheon's (2006) idea of adaptation as an integration of the familiar and the new, allowing a cultural form to maintain its relevance within changing social realities. This is evident in how the adaptations performed by the troupe were not just artistic decisions but were also embedded within the larger context of Siam's nationalistic responses to globalization and Western modernization. These adaptations were part of broader efforts to forge a modern national identity that was distinctly Thai, yet open to global influences (Laochockchaikul, 2023).

The synthesis of the historic recordings and play scripts further illustrates the dual function of cultural preservation and innovation. This duality is critical in understanding the role of adaptation in post-colonial contexts, as discussed by Bhabha (2015) and Hall (1993), who highlight how cultural identity is continually negotiated and redefined through such processes. Although Thailand was never colonized, the strategies employed by the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe reflect similar cultural resilience and adaptive tactics seen in post-colonial societies, suggesting that the theoretical post-colonial framework is applicable for analyzing cultural phenomena in Siam. The integration of lakhon rong into the fabric of Thai cultural expression through adaptations that responded to both internal desires for cultural continuity and external pressures for modernization underscores the complex nature of cultural adaptation. This phenomenon echoes broader transnational trends in musical theatre, such as the adaptation of operetta forms in early 20th-century Hungary and Austria, where local folklore and national themes were embedded within Western musical frameworks. In the Philippines, the *sarswela*—a musical play heavily influenced by Spanish *zarzuela*—similarly functioned as a vehicle for expressing nationalist sentiment while drawing from foreign operatic structures. These examples suggest that hybrid theatrical forms like lakhon rong were part of a global movement of vernacular modernization through performance.

In addition to the existing theoretical framing, the concepts of auto-colonization and crypto-colonization offer valuable lenses through which to understand Siam's cultural transformations. As Tsianos and Papadopoulos (2006) and Alexander Etkind (2011) suggest, these frameworks highlight how non-colonized or semi-colonized nations may internalize imperial structures and aesthetics in the pursuit of modernity. In the Thai context, the selective incorporation of Western operatic and theatrical elements into lakhon rong may be viewed not only as cultural adaptation, but also as an act of auto-colonial mimicry—reinforcing external standards of civility while preserving sovereign autonomy. Furthermore, regional theatrical forms such as *bangsawan* in the Malay world offer a compelling Southeast Asian parallel. Emerging during the height of colonial presence, *bangsawan* exemplified a strategic use of popular theatre for cultural diplomacy, identity assertion, and resilience in the face of imperial influence (Lindsay, 2016). Like lakhon rong, it blended local traditions with Western operatic elements, serving both as entertainment and a subtle form of cultural negotiation. The case of the Nakhon Bantoeng Troupe not only provides a vivid illustration of these processes but also highlights the role of artistic creativity in negotiating cultural integrity and openness in the face of global influences. This study not only contributes to our understanding of Thai musical theater but also enriches the broader discourse on cultural adaptation and resilience, offering insights into the ways societies navigate their cultural identities amid global dynamics.

Interestingly, the popularity of lakhon rong was initially driven by its acceptance by the elite, especially Prince Narathip and King Chulalongkorn (Tungtang, 2011). This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of fashion leader theories, which suggest that a small group of influential figures can significantly impact cultural trends. In the context of Siam, the royal and aristocratic classes historically played a pivotal role in setting cultural standards, their preferences often cascading through society as desirable norms (Chung, 2003; Motion, 2020). The elite's endorsement of lakhon rong, therefore, not only elevated the art form's status but also facilitated its diffusion across different societal layers, embodying the trickle-down theory where trends start at the upper echelons of society and gradually permeate the lower strata (McCracken 1985; Jardim 2020). Similar elite-driven

dissemination of musical innovation can be seen in the French court's patronage of Baroque opera under Louis XIV or the Qing dynasty's support for Kunqu opera, both of which used courtly taste as a means to standardize and disseminate artistic forms across class boundaries. The royal backing of lakhon rong illustrates the interconnectedness of cultural innovation and elite influence in traditional societies. As these cultural trends became more accessible and widespread, they evolved, losing some of their exclusivity but gaining a foundational place in cultural tradition (Caulkins et al., 2007). This pattern reflects the modern dynamics of trend dissemination, increasingly mediated by mass communication tools that accelerate the spread and transformation of cultural trends (Atik et al. 2022; Rocamora 2013). In the case of lakhon rong, the royal patronage not only affirmed its cultural value but also acted as a mechanism for cultural diplomacy and identity construction, projecting a modern yet distinctly Thai identity in a period of significant national transformation. This alignment with elite preferences underscores the significant role of societal leaders in shaping and steering cultural trends and highlights the multifaceted nature of adaptation as both a response to and a driver of broader socio-political changes.

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