

Potential Development of Lam Reung Taw Glawn Performance (Northeastern Thai or Isan Musical Folk Drama) in Northeast Thailand

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Abstract: In a historical study of Lam Reung Taw Glawn (Isan or Northeastern Thai or Lao musical folk drama, it was found that this genre of Mor Lam (Isan or Northeastern Thai or Lao folk song singing) has evolved from traditional Lao folk song singing, which has been integrated with certain aspects of traditional Central Thai musical folk drama (known as Likay), resulting in a new form of performance called Lam Mu (folk song singing with multiple performers) or Lam Reung Taw Glawn (musical dramatic singing). Performers were dressed like those in Likay, perform on a stage with background settings and proceed in very much the same way as in a Likay performance. The dialogues were in local dialects. Musical instruments used in the performance include Phin (three-stringed lutes), Khene (mouth pipe organs), Saw (bowed string instruments) and Klong Thone (hand drums). Performances of Lam Reung Taw Glawn have been adapted to better satisfy the audiences in terms of storylines, characters, acting techniques and the application of new technology to make a performance more colorful, spectacular and exciting. The rhythms of music have also become more attuned to the contemporary styles. The study aimed to investigate the potential development of Lam Reung Taw Glawn in a Mor Lam troupe named Petch Ubon in Ban Non-ngahm Village, Si Khai Sub-district, Warin Chamrap District, Ubon Ratchathani Province. The study was qualitative by nature. The data was collected from fieldwork with 38 informants by means of structured and un-structured interviews. These informants included Mor Lam artists, troupe managers, troupe leaders who have been famous for over 10 years, audiences and individuals who hired the troupe. The Isan or Lao musical folk drama has been continuously developed by Petch Ubon Troupe in terms of instruments, performing arts, storylines, characters and presentational techniques. This continuous development means an increasing level of investment. A troupe that has nothing new to present to its audience will soon be regarded as mediocre or unimpressive and will finally sink into oblivion. Many musical folk drama troupes had to overcome many obstacles before they finally succeeded. They had encountered a number of problems. The key factor that helps them through the hard times is a good troupe leader who possesses very sound management skills, great interpersonal ability which enables him to get along with people of all social levels. The wider his social circle is the more job opportunities are provided. A successful performance of musical folk drama does not only require artistic abilities, but it also needs a combination of talents in administration, management, marketing, public relations, social relations and governmental psychology. In the time of the economic downturn, the business of Isan musical folk drama has inevitably received the impacts. Many troupes have to struggle with the wage reduction in order to get hired. For survival, some troupes even have to lay off some of their staff, otherwise they have to disband. Good management is, therefore, vital in saving Petch Ubon Troupe and giving it opportunities to survive in the Isan or Northeastern Thai society. Good management is indeed needed in reforming this Isan musical folk drama to fit the cultural and economic circumstances in the present.

Key words: Potential development, Lam Reung Taw Glawn (Isan Musical Folk Drama), Lao folk song, Petch Ubon, Mor Lam, Northeast Thailand

INTRODUCTION

Petch-Ubon Troupe at Ban Non-ngahm Village, Si Khai Sub-district, Warin Chamrap District, Ubon Ratchathani Province has been founded by Mr. Chalard Songserm who was also the leading male singer with Ms.

Chomsawai Saentaweesuk as a singing counterpart (Saentaweesuk, 2006). The troupe was founded in 1975 and became most well-known all over Northeastern Thailand in 1978 for the moralistic contents in its performances (Pikulsi, 2008). In 1982, Ms. Angkhana Kunchai joined the troupe. Before using the current name,

the troupe had been known under the name P. Chalard Noi. Among the troupe's most impressive performances were Teuy Keow (courting performance), Raekphop (enacting love at first sight), Teuy Kam Saban (swearing performance), Teuy Rak Nong Tem Thon (enacting passionate romance). The troupe was awarded an honorary plaque from her royal highness princess sirindhorn in an Isan musical folk drama competition held at a radio broadcasting station in Srinakharinwirot University, Mahasarakham Campus (Sonsanam, 1996).

Petch Ubon Troupe has based the brilliance of its performances on the superb voice quality of the leading male and female singers (or performers) and other supporting singers who played their characters suitably. Comedians with great sense of humor also color the performance by getting the audience to laugh for a change. Utmost importance is given to accurate recitation or memorization of singing lines and perfect turns in each performance (Smutkupt *et al.*, 2001). Storylines are either based on folk tales or made-up stories. Most of the plots are found in daily life such as family feud, conflicts between real and step-children, arguments between mothers and daughters-in-law. Leading characters and certain roles such as kings and queens are usually dressed like Likay (Central Thai musical folk drama) performers. Dancers wear form-fitting suits (similar to bathing suits) showing their belly buttons for agility or better physical movements while, dancing (Source: Interview with Santi Simsen).

The stage is considered central in each performance. It is usually decorated with pieces of colorful cloth. Canvas backdrops or backgrounds painted with pictures of various landscapes such as forests, palaces, cities can be raised or lowered by a pulley. There are openings in the backgrounds through, which performers can walk. Musical instruments mainly used include a set of drums, bass guitars, a keyboard and Tomba drums. Wind instruments usually include saxophones and trumpets. Other supporting instruments are big and small cymbals, tambourines, while indispensable traditional folk instruments include kaen (mouth pipe organs) (Terry, 1985). The first performance by the musical band and the dancers usually precede the performance of the main folk musical drama. The contemporary pop songs and Luk-Thung songs (Central Thai country music) are often played by the band as a prelude or a warm-up. The musical band plays an important part throughout the musical folk drama in coloring the troupe performances, so does the sound equipment in top quality. Last but not least are the various lighting systems (e.g., bright neon lights, spot lights, flashing lights, spot lights shone into the sky to make beams visible at 10-15 kilometers away from the stage (Champadaeng, 2008).

The study aimed to investigate the potential development of Lam Reung Taw Glawn in a Mor Lam troupe named Petch Ubon in Ban Non-ngahm Village, Si Khai Sub-district, Warin Chamrap District, Ubon Ratchathani Province.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study took place within the analyzed area with several troupes of Isan or Northeastern Thai musical folk drama. But the focus was Petch Ubon in Ban Non-ngahm Village, Si Khai Sub-district, Warin Chamrap District, Ubon Ratchathani Province. The research methodology was qualitative. The study was conducted through analysis of documents and fieldwork data. There were 38 informants including 4 Lam Reung Taw Glawn artists (Isan musical folk drama performers), 9 troupe leaders, 5 Mor Lam office heads, 10 hirers of Mor Lam troupes and 10 audiences. Data was gained by means of structured and un-structured interviews. The results were presented in the manner of descriptive analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following is how the potential development of Lam Reung Taw Glawn, which is suitable to the current cultural and economic situations proceeds.

Culture is the very factor that inspires a Mor Lam troupe to manifest their artistic creations. Social circumstances in turn, motivate cultural changes, which consequently encourage Mor Lam (Isan folk song singers) to adapt, create and re-create themselves for increased effectiveness. Examples of cultural adaptations in Mor Lam performances include the ritual of showing respect to their teachers, the dressing styles of Mor Lam singers or performers, the mixture of Central and Northeastern Thai dialects in the lyrics or the singing lines, the name given to each performance that conforms to local cultures, the combination of folk musical instruments and Western ones and the improvement of dancing styles, which have been inspired by appreciation of the beauty in literature.

Mor Lam troupes have been compelled to adjust themselves by another important factor, the economy. Adjustments happen in many ways. For example, the troupe leader must think of all possible means to maximally attract audiences and satisfy their needs in each performance; performances are video-taped and transformed into CDs for sales; plots become more wide-ranging; public relations are extended to radio and television to promote the reputation of the troupe and to attract potential customers. Distribution of incomes

among the troupe performers and other staff must be fairly managed by the troupe leader in order to maintain the economic satisfaction and stability of the troupe. Depending on this, performers and staff will be loyal to the troupe. However, outstanding performers are made aware that they always have the rights to be independent or to establish their own troupe if they wish.

In studying, the potential improvement of in the performance of Lam Reung Taw Glawn by Petch Ubon troupe, important issues, which satisfy the research objectives have been revealed. These issues cover how to develop or improve the potential of Lam Reung Taw Glawn performance.

Lam Reung Taw Glawn performance by Petch Ubon has successfully developed crucial artistic elements such as the physical attractiveness of the performers, the beauty of singing lines or lyrics that are adapted from folk literature and the musical components. The development is based on faith in aesthetic theories which emphasize appearances, personality, dressing styles, dancing skills, impressive voice quality and good rhythmic controls. A research study by a cultural scientist (Khammong, 1995) stated that smooth steps in a performance, attractive personality and dressing styles of the performers all contribute to the popularity they gained from the audiences. In addition, all kinds of stage props and equipment such as lighting, sound and background-creating systems play a role in the success of each performance. After all, success resulted from the contribution of performing arts, storylines, characters, presentation skills as well as administrative or management abilities, knowledge of marketing, public relations, human relations and governmental psychology or good governance on the part of the troupe leader can be considered a form of integrative adjustment which conforms to the structural-functional theory.

The cultural and economic suitability of Lam Reung Taw Glawn has been supported by Pikulsri (2008), which stated that Mor Lam (Isan folk song singing) business is an entertainment or show business, which has entertained large audiences with a form of folk performing arts. Not only has it preserved the traditional culture, but it has also been socially and economically helpful by generating and distributing incomes to families and communities.

The Lam Reung Taw Glawn troupe named Petch Ubon has adjusted itself to the current cultural and economic situations by catching up with the globalization trends, while respecting the principles of sufficiency, moderation, accountability and by developing self-initiated immunity to impacts from both internal and

external changes. They need to rely on knowledge and intellectually apply the knowledge in every step of their strategic planning with conscience, honesty, perseverance and carefulness. All these are necessary in creating a balance on the basis of his majesty the king of Thailand's sufficiency economic theory to appropriately deal with the fast-changing world in terms of materials, societies, environments and cultures.

CONCLUSION

In this study of potential improvement of a musical folk drama troupe named Petch Ubon, it was found that cultural changes most powerfully dictate the changes in an Isan musical folk drama's storylines, dressing styles, characters, dancing gestures, singing lines or lyrics. Current economic situations also play a crucial role in encouraging the troupe to adjust itself for survival in the economically afflicted society. The integration of extensive public relations, more spectacular stage decorations, state-of-the-art sound and light systems, additional performances by comedians and adaptation of popular hit songs with stylishly dressed dancers has happened in order to attract and maintain the attention of the audiences to Lam Reung Taw Glawn performances.

The useful and appropriate adaptation of Petch Ubon musical folk drama troupe has been initiated by the troupe leader and manager who want to adjust their show business to fit the tastes of the audiences as well as the cultural and economic conditions. Incomes generated from the troupe's performances in various areas in Northeastern Thailand and some other provinces would then be returned to and circulated in the Thai economic system. This points to the inter-dependent relationship between Mor Lam troupes and people in general (Suwannarong, 2008).

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the results of this study, the following two main suggestions are given: The information gained from this study should lead to certain actions; firstly, according to the study, Lam Reung Taw Glawn (Isan musical folk drama) can reflect the life styles, characteristics and beautiful cultures of the Isan or Northeastern Thai people. This form of folk drama representative of art and culture should, therefore, be preserved, passed on to later generations, publicized extensively by both the government and the private sector. Secondly, the public should be educated about the

importance and value of art and culture preservation. They should be made aware of both the tangible and intangible effects that Lam Reung Taw Glawn or Isan musical folk drama can have on people and the society. At a national level, this performing art has somehow shown how civilized and prosperous Thailand is in terms of art and culture. Thirdly, the government agencies that are assigned or appointed to revive local or folk cultures should pay serious attention and make genuine attempt to preserve, pass on, create and publicize the folk arts. Moreover, further research in this area of Isan musical folk drama is very much encouraged are; Firstly, factors affecting Lam Reung Taw Glawn in terms of development, survival, establishment in forms of clubs, associations or networks should be studied. Secondly, Folk performing arts in other areas in the neighborhood should also be studied in comparison with Lam Reung Taw Glawn so that more useful or insightful information can be gained. Thirdly, this line of folk arts research should be conducted in other regions with the aims to establish clear directions for the folk arts and develop professions out of them. Fourthly, comparative studies of folk arts in different regions of Thailand should be conducted since adaptation and integration of a variety of regional performing arts have a very strong future potential.

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