

History, Origin, Beliefs, Rituals and Livelihood of Hun Krabawk Puppet Shows in Central Thailand

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Abstract: Hun Krabawk or also known as folk puppet show, cylinder puppets, Thai marionette, used to be a favorite past time of Thailand. Modern trends and new types of entertainment from technology and globalization are pushing Hun Krabawk into extinction. Factors driving the disappearance of the arts include; lack of support from the government, lacking of support from the provincial culture office, many new types of entertainments move into Thai society quickly, puppet performance is not well-known, audience cannot understand the art and realize the beauty, less publicity promotion, most puppeteers are senior citizens, new generations do not pay much attention in practicing, low income. Conservation and rehabilitation methods to revive the arts of Hun Krabawk can be done by supporting schools and universities to add Hun Krabawk (cylinder puppet) to their curriculum. Hun Krabawk performances should be produced in a form of CD or DVD for students or people to study either at schools or at offices nationwide. Puppet exhibitions and demonstrations should be organized and included in cultural fairs. Create website in Thai, English and other popular languages to promote Hun Krabawk to interested people around the world. Developments of existing Hun Krabawk performances should come in the form of standardization of prices, wages and creating added value by selling souvenirs and crafts. Hun Krabawk troupes or troupe should continue to pass on their knowledge and keep up their performance by being strict to rehearsals and be strict and have sincere dedication to the traditions, rituals and crafts of Thai puppeteer.

Key words: Hun Krabawk, puppet shows, marionette, Thai, conservation, rehabilitation

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and modernization has created a borderless commerce (Laoakka *et al.*, 2009). Traditional customs and entertainment are being replaced by waves and waves of technical amusements imported from foreign cultures. Many traditional indigenous art forms have disappeared and those that remain face a losing battle for survival. Thai puppets are not only a form of drama but an art form as well (Steve *et al.*, 1999). Seldom seen and never widespread, Hun Krabawk is a theater of Thailand's only remaining non-shadow-type puppets. Evidence that rod-type puppets with moveable arms manipulated from below were once somewhat common is found in the National Museum. Of greater certainty is that in 1892, a prince observed bamboo-rod puppets said to have been copied from puppets brought from Hainan Island, off the southeastern coast of China. He brought one back to Bangkok, where it was copied and the first Hun (puppet) troupe was founded in 1893, with another in 1899. Evidently iron sticks, used to move the arms, were

added only in 1899 (Terry and Williams, 2008). Hun Krabawk (cylinder puppets) is based on popular Hainanese puppet shows. It uses 30 cm hand puppets that are carved from wood and they are viewed from the waist up (Cummings *et al.*, 2005).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The history, origin, beliefs, rituals and livelihood of Hun Krabawk puppet shows in central Thailand is a qualitative research conducted during June 2007 to February 2009. The purpose of the research include; the study into the history, origin, beliefs, rituals and livelihood, which are the cultural characteristics or identity of Hun Krabawk puppet shows in central Thailand. The second purpose of this study is to study the current problems of Hun Krabawk puppet shows in central Thailand. The third purpose of this study is to study conservation, rehabilitation and development of Hun Krabawk puppet shows to increase the value of local indigenous arts. Research areas include the province of

Krungthepmahanakorn (Bangkok), Nakhon Sawan, Nonthaburi and Lop Buri province. The selected area was purposely selected because the 5 provinces have local Hun Krabawk puppet troupes that are still giving performances. Primary source of data was gathered and analyzed via document analysis from surveys, questionnaires, interviews and observations. Other sources of information were gained from analyzing text books, research, articles and documentaries related to the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hun Krabawk puppet shows in Central Thailand: The 8 puppet troupes in central Thailand are groups that can be divided into 2 categories. The first are puppet troupes that have a history of >100 years. The second are puppet troupes that were just recently established <20 years ago.

Puppet troupes that were established over 100 years ago have existed their operations through the transfer of performances and techniques through relatives and family members. The imparting of the puppetry arts were customarily or compelled onto family members to carry on the family's tradition. Puppets were only made from wood and the head pieces carved from soft wood, lacquered and gilded with gems. Puppeteers were mostly aged between 60-85 years old.

Puppet troupes that were established <20 years ago were created by individuals who were inspired by local puppet shows. As their love for the indigenous art grew, they were motivated into learning the techniques from experts on how to perform the puppets, making the backdrops, puppet theater and backdrops and eventually how to make the puppet puppets. When all the knowledge was obtained, the owners were able to establish their own Hun Krabawk puppet troupes and were opened for business. The imparting of knowledge was transferred to whoever had interest and family members. Individuals who were interested were mostly close friends or acquaintances that would come learn the arts when they were free from work. When there were enough puppeteers, the troupe would go out and perform. The level of the troupes performances would be less than puppet troupes established for over 100 years. But they were successful because of their love for the performing arts. Some troupes did not create their own puppet heads, but created their own puppet clothing and decorations. The puppet heads used in the troupes were changed from soft wood to favor puppet heads made from resin which were more detailed and faster to create. Lacquering and gem gilding was replaced by colorful painting and gold gildings. New techniques and innovation allowed the

resin heads to be made cheaper and provide more details. But the disadvantage is that the resin heads are fragile than soft wood and would be damaged during battle or heavy contact scenes. Most of the puppeteers were aged 20-25 and had backgrounds in performing arts. Most of the puppet troupes know each other and are related to one another such as relatives or used to be a puppeteer within the troupes in the past and later established their own business.

Cultural identity of Hun Krabawk puppet shows: All 8 puppet troupes share the same cultural identity. Unique characteristics such as puppets, puppet theater, stage, backdrop and music, which is usually an Atone fiddle. The puppet theaters of the various troupes are similar which is that the theatre's for most troupes are about 5 m wide and 4 m high. The theatre's structure and post are made from metal and backdrop made from a single sheet of cloth. The backdrops are single sheets of cloth painted accordingly to the different themes such as sea, mountains, flowers or jungle. The bottom of the backdrop, which is usually 12" high is made transparent enough so that the puppeteers can see their puppets, while performing. At the bottom of the backdrop, there are two entrances about 80 cm high and 60 cm wide, cut into the cloth and decorated as doors or entrances for the puppets.

The entrances of the doors are decorated with curtains so that the puppets can break into the scene. Most of the puppeteers in Bangkok come from the same troupe of artists but are often hired to perform in other troupes. Most of the puppeteers have backgrounds in performing arts and can puppeteer many characters. Puppeteers in rural areas only perform for their troupe and do not accept individual contracts. Most of the Hun Krabawk puppet troupes do not have their own music troupe and singer. Most of the time, when live music is requested by the sponsor, the troupes will contract music troupes and singers to perform with them. Musical troupes hired are mainly soft-mallet piphat ensemble or local indigenous music troupes. Performances that are popular include Thai literature such as Phra Apaimanee, Khun Chang Khun Paen and Laksanawong (Naritsaranuwattiwong, 1992). There are also new shows that are catered as a supplement to the shows available and for the sponsors to choose from. Traditional puppet heads were made from soft wood and would be passed on and repaired from generation to generation. New puppet heads are made from resin and are more decorative and detailed but break easily. The puppet's dresses are created by imitating life size dresses of traditional Thai dance performances.

The belief in Hun Krabawk puppet shows from all 8 troupes share the same characteristics. The belief is universal that the puppets must always be offered with offerings of food, desert, fruits and water. By offering the puppets with nourishments until they are full will provide the puppeteers and the troupe with prosperity. To invite fortune or induce sponsors to their troupe, the doors of the troupes house or office would be attached with Bonsai flowers for good luck. The belief in the puppets also include that the most senior or highest ranking puppet must enter the stage first and then the others can follow. Having the highest ranking puppet enter the stage first is considered good fortune and symbolizes respect. During the performances, the head of the puppet must not slip off which is considered dangerous and inauspicious to the performers. Puppets must not be allowed to be placed flat on the ground because the offender would be punished. Storing the puppets must allow follow proper procedures by having the highest ranking puppet on top of all the others. If the highest ranking puppet is stored misplaced, it will bring trouble and misfortune to the troupe. All puppets must also enter the stage through the doors or entrances in the backdrop in common belief that performers must only appear on stage through the proper entrances. At the end of the performance, all puppeteers must pay their respects or Wai to the musicians and fellow puppeteers in forgiveness because of the sometimes harsh language used during the performances. It is a custom that everyone within the troupe, ask for each other's forgiveness at the end of the show.

Rituals that the troupes perform include; Pitee Wai Kru or ceremony to pay respects to the teacher before the performances start. Pitee Wai Kru Dohntree or ceremony to pay respects to the music teacher before the performance start, annual ceremony to pay respects to the teachers of the puppet puppets and music teacher, flag placing ceremony to prevent rain, ceremony to sprinkle holy water around the puppet theater, ceremony to place mystic symbols, ceremony to sacrifice the puppet, ceremony to ask for permission and forgiveness to utilize the performance area and ritual to invite the audiences. All these rituals must be performed before the performances start. All of these rituals are mainly performed by Hun Krabawk puppet troupes that have been established for a long time while the newer troupes will only perform some of the rituals.

The livelihood of the puppet troupes is that in the past, revenues from their performance were enough to pay for their monthly expenses and provided the entire family with enough funds to use. But in modern times, the revenues from puppet performances cannot keep up with the family's expenses. Even, though there are fewer and fewer troupes each year, but the revenues are not enough

to support the entire family. Being a puppet puppeteer in the past could provide a good level of income, but currently the trends have changed. Hun Krabawk puppet shows are out of favor with the general public and have been replaced by modern forms of entertainment. Members of the troupe must find ways to supplement their income by being hired labor, commerce, growing crops, gardening or make handicrafts or souvenirs. Thailand's advancement in education has led many young adults to pursue other careers that are in trend and stable in government or private sectors. The revenue from performances in modern times cannot be considered an occupation and the livelihood of the puppeteers are in decline and face uncertainty.

Problematic conditions of Hun Krabawk puppet shows:

All puppet troupes are currently faced with similar problems and obstacles. The central Thai government does not give enough support to Hun Krabawk puppet shows. Currently, there is not enough support in the conservation, rehabilitation and development of local indigenous arts making Hun Krabawk puppet shows decline in numbers and art performances. Provincial government offices that are well aware of the importance of Hun Krabawk puppet shows lack budget to promote puppet shows and some provincial offices do not even know if they have puppet arts within their responsibility. Another factor which has contributed to the decline of Hun Krabawk puppet shows is that there are many modern types of entertainment available to the general public such as movies and modern musical performances. Many of these modern performances have outpaced puppet shows in popularity with exciting and promotional campaigns, which are new and in trend. The decline in puppet shows and performances has limited the public's exposure the local art. Many young adults have never heard of Hun Krabawk puppet shows. Many of the puppet shows are performed by aging puppeteers which lack innovation and is considered old fashioned, boring and not worth the time (Phongphaibun *et al.*, 2000). The newer generations of puppeteers lack experience and charge too high of a price for their wages. These problems are reflected in the puppet performances, which lack appreciation and craftsmanship. The lackluster performances have persuaded many sponsors to prefer other types of live performances for their parties, ceremony or festivals. Hun Krabawk puppet owners or managers are faced with labor problems. Managers who want the art to be passed on to the next generation are faced with the fact that new generations prefer other modern occupations. Finding new puppeteers to replace aging members is becoming more difficult. Many free agent puppeteers are expensive and the revenues and

cost are out of balance. The cost of free agents have forced managers and troupes to raise their performance costs making Hun Krabawk puppet shows more expensive than other form of folk arts.

Conservation of Hun Krabawk puppet shows: Teaching and learning of the arts of the puppet show should be included in the curriculum of schools and universities by the ministry of education. Promotion and encouraging knowledge of puppetry shows through modern media such as CD, VCD and DVD, where the content is complete and accurate to the arts. The media can be used to promote culture and provide entertainment and for children to study at all levels from elementary school and higher education levels to government offices across the country to create awareness of Hun Krabawk arts. Further promotion can be done by creating text books on the history, origin and arts of Hun Krabawk. The contents of the books should include a complete history of the origin of Hun Krabawk, include examples and pictures of live performances, have detailed information on the puppets, designed, stories performed and most important are the names and location of Hun Krabawk troupes in each province. These modern medias should be supported and make available for the general public to purchase at educational institutions and provincial cultural offices. Exhibitions and demonstrations on Hun Krabawk should be organized and included in art exhibitions throughout the country at least once a year. Promotion through web sites should be supported and created in multiple languages so that the knowledge and arts of Hun Krabawk is known throughout the world.

Development of Hun Krabawk puppet shows

Price agreement: Agreement on the price of the performance is important along with details on the date, time, location and show to be contracted so that both sides are in complete understanding.

Standard price:

- Funeral performances with live music = 25,000 Baht
- Night performance from 8 pm till midnight with live music = 40,000 Baht
- Hourly demonstrations with recorded music = 10,000 Baht h⁻¹
- Hourly demonstrations with live music = 20,000/h
- Two hours demonstrations with recorded music = 20,000 Baht
- Two hours demonstrations with live music = 25,000 Baht
- Selected demonstrations with narrations to recorded music = 5,000 Baht
- Selected demonstrations with narrations to live music = 10,000 Baht

Performance contract: A written contract on the performance is to drawn up, agreed upon and held up by both parties. The contract is used to ensure that the agreed performance will take place. Written contracts should be legal documents and adhere to guidelines approved by the government. The contracts can be purchased or created by the puppet manager. The contract should also include a down payment of at least 30-50%.

Preparing necessities: Performance tools, props and sets should be checked and make sure that all necessary items are available for the upcoming show. Puppets must be maintained and repaired so that they are fresh and always stunning. Other checks include backdrops, music, musicians, puppeteers, script and the most important are rehearsals of the performance, character queues, musical notes and songs.

Performance: On the day of the performance, the puppeteers and managers must first scope out the location of the show ahead of schedule to erect the theater, stage, lights, sounds, prep the puppets, tune the musical instruments, perform the ceremony to pay respect and gratitude to the teachers, perform other require rituals pre-test the lighting and music systems and last minute changes to the script and instructions to the puppeteers. Before, the show starts, the manager will appear in front of the audience and give a short speech about the troupe and short version of the show to be performed. When the performance has finished, the manager and all the puppeteers are to present themselves in front of the stage and thank the audience for coming to the show and continue to attend and hire them again in the future.

Souvenirs: Souvenirs and handicrafts should be made available at Hun Krabawk puppet shows because, it will raise awareness of the local traditional art and create extra revenues for the troupe's livelihood. The souvenirs are should be promoted as a cultural conservation that will enable the art of Hun Krabawk puppet shows to thrive and be passed on to the next generations. Promoting the handicrafts can also be made by inserting the opportunity of the items into the script with humor and music.

Storage: Storage of all performance tools and utilities must be done with care to ensure that all items are stored properly and are protected from damage. The stage must be disassembled and properly tied up. Backdrops are to be nicely folded and stored. Puppets are to stored with extra care to ensure that all the characters are not damaged.

Evaluation: Every performance should be evaluated, which will help the troupe, manager and puppeteers to improve and adjust their performances. It is an effective measure that will help the troupe to determine faults, errors and develop their shows to satisfy their audience.

Creating added value to the performing arts of folk puppetry: Creating added value to show the art of puppetry is a way to provide the puppet puppeteers and owners with a better quality of life. The quality of life of puppetry increases as business revenues from the puppet show does. Increasing revenue can be done by adding the business of selling products and souvenirs such as shirts, hats bags, watches, dishes, spoons, miniature puppet dolls and candle holders. But the problem is that many of the troupes lack of knowledge and experience in creating the items. Only a few troupes have managed to have souvenirs for sale, but their revenues have been expanded and provided a better lifestyle for the troupe members. Items with local Hun Krabawk designs that can be created and contracted to enhance revenues to Hun Krabawk include; VCD's created should be made as an educational media that has the history, belief and origin of Hun Krabawk. Black leather briefcases or bags should be made for carrying documents and other items. Ceramic coffee cups in mixed colors for hot or cold drinks accompanied with saucer. Ceramic plates with puppetry design into a beautiful dish. Ceramic spoons with puppetry designs. Glass bottles for keeping spices, sugar or coffee. Water pitchers, puppetry clock, serving trays. Puppetry logo shirts. Puppetry backpacks. Hot water bottle. Puppetry books that combines the history of puppetry show, unique characteristics, beliefs, rituals and an example the numerous performances that can be catered to the sponsor.

CONCLUSION

Modernization has created a large variety of entertainment choices available to the general public. Old past times and traditional recreation and entertainment are being replaced by modern forms that are fashionable, exuberant and high tech. Many traditional art forms that the general public used to enjoy have vanished completely and remain only in museum displays. Hun Krabawk is a theater of Thailand's only remaining non-shadow-type puppets, which were influenced by Taiwanese marionette puppet shows. Those that still carry on the tradition of Hun Krabawk performances, do so because of their love of the theatre and the beauty of

the arts, which have been passed down to them from generations and from teachers and friends. Hun Krabawk troupes are slowly making a comeback by innovating new stories to their shows, selling souvenirs, using new techniques and materials to make their puppets, better public relations, more standardization of prices and networking with other traditional art performances. The driving force behind these comebacks are the puppeteers, troupe managers and new audiences who enjoy revisiting their ancestors favorite past time. The support and promotion from government agencies and educational institutions will help give Hun Krabawk troupes a better chance of survival against dominating technical cultures and keep the opportunity open for Thai youths to enjoy and carry on their traditional heritage.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Organizations and educational agencies including the Office of the National Culture Commission, city's and school's can apply the research as a collection of knowledge about the history of the identity, the ritual believe, the livelihood of local Thai puppetry or puppet troupes. The research results of this study can be used as an educational database and published to students to utilize as an academic reference.

Central Thailand's local puppet show is a unique central cultural and an important art of the Thai nation. The culture is extremely valuable and the preservation of the artistic and cultural inheritance should be seriously embraced by national institutions and relevant authorities. Educational institutions of both public and private should integrate the teaching of puppet show with other cultural courses to enrich the knowledge of cultural heritage.

The puppetry or puppet troupe should develop new shows and manage their programs to sustain and adapt to modern society. A network of puppet troupes should be created so that a standard rate of performances is created and adopted to ensure that each troupe can continue to perform and develop their shows and pass on their cultural arts to the next generation.

Provinces that have puppet shows should promote the traditional performances to enhance tourism and by arraigning performances in festivals and dinners. Local media such as newspapers, radio and television should make documentaries about puppetry and utilize the research results as a foundation of content to create educational programs. Puppetry learning programs in elementary education and secondary levels should be included into local schools to conserve and develop the

cultural art. Details of the performances such the intricate techniques of local puppeteer should be studied and documented for future generations.

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