

# DANCING FOR SPIRITS: LAKHON CHATRI PERFORMERS FROM PHETCHABURI PROVINCE

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## Introduction

*Lakhon chatri* is one of Thailand's oldest extant forms of dance-drama. During the Ayudhya era (1351-1776) and early Ratanakosin period (1782-present) *lakhon chatri* performers maintained close associations with the Southern dance-drama tradition known as *manora*. Hence, in these early years the dance-drama was commonly referred to as *nora chatri* (Mattani 1978:70; Nicholas 1927:87; Sopha 1986:28). Visual representations of *nora chatri* dancers are depicted on the doors of the main chapel at Wat Yai Suwannaram, a Phetchaburi temple constructed some time in the early years of the Ayudhya kingdom. Invocations transmitted for generations from dance-drama masters to aspiring performers bear testimony that the dance-drama was originally presented as a spirit offering by patrons wishing to placate the beneficial and protective powers of the spirit world.

Today in Phetchaburi province, the site of my recent fieldwork, *lakhon chatri* continues to be performed as a spirit offering. Here performances highlight the ritual practice of *kae bon*, in which supplicants ask a spirit for divine intercession in accomplishing a particular task, and then pledge a

dance-drama offering to the spirit if their boon is granted. Supplicants who reap the beneficial power of a spirit must commission a dance-drama promptly to avoid incurring misfortune from a spirit who has not been thanked with the promised offering. Hence, *kae bon* participants believe their revered spirits, many of whom belong to the higher *deva* realms of the Buddhist cosmology, have a dual nature. On the one hand, if placated with ceremony they can enhance the livelihood of the supplicant; on the other hand, if ignored or insulted, spirits can create economic hardship, ill health, or other unfortunate circumstances in the lives of their supplicants.

Although *lakhon chatri* dancers are Theravada Buddhist, as individuals who are involved in the performance of a spirit offering, they maintain close associations with Hindu-Brahman ritual expertise. Not only is Hindu-Brahmanism (*sasana Phram*) an essential part of their *kae bon* spirit invocation, but it is central to their dance-drama tradition. Integrating their ritual expertise and performing skill into the lives of people practicing Buddhism, *lakhon chatri* performers belong to what scholars have identified as the Folk Brahman tradition (Kirsch 1977).<sup>1</sup>

In ancient times all *lakhon chatri* troupes were composed of male performers. This gender composition was influenced greatly by two factors: Firstly, *kae bon* spirit propitiation was the domain of the Folk Brahman practitioner, and as such this expertise was traditionally male dominated. Secondly, the Palatine Law, the *Kot Monthian Ban*, issued by the Siamese court in the late 15th century, maintained that only the Siamese monarch could own a Royal Female Dance-Drama troupe, the *Lakhon Phuying Khong Luang* (Mattani 1983:24).<sup>2</sup> Within the palace walls this *lakhon* developed an elegance and mystery that was associated with divine kingship. In costume the troupe of female dancers not only resembled the beautiful celestials of Indian mythology, the divine *gandhara* and *kinnari*, but both on- and off-stage they were strictly the property of the monarch, as legislation forbade

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anyone else from cultivating or training a female dance-drama troupe.

Following a Royal Dance-Drama Edict, issued at the command of King Rama IV (1851-1868) in 1861, this gender restriction was abolished, and women were encouraged to perform dance-drama (Damrong 1964:170-195). Today in Phetchaburi province the majority of *lakhon chatri* performers are women; moreover, in contrast to former times, almost all troupe leaders are women. As such they have become custodians of a great store of cultural knowledge that plays a vital role in the lives of *lakhon chatri* patrons. This knowledge not only includes a repertoire of dance-drama stories, songs and dances, but also occult expertise. By combining historical and ethnographic data I will explore how women rose to prominence in the *lakhon chatri* tradition, how they influenced the artistic dimensions of the dance-drama, and strengthened the occult mystique which surrounds *lakhon chatri* performers today.

## Lakhon Chatri Performers Prior to the Edict of King Rama IV

By the 1800's, prior to King Rama IV's Dance-Drama Edict, *lakhon chatri* troupes were well established in Phetchaburi province. These troupes, composed of male performers, presented dance-dramas as spirit offerings, and they also performed for other occasions, such as Buddhist ordinations, funerals, top-knot ceremonies and soul-calling rituals. Troupe leaders played an important role in the local community as they trained dancers in a repertoire of stories associated with the *Paññāsa Jātaka* and attended to the details of ritual practice. These details often focused upon spirit invocation, and included knowledge concerning which invocations were most effective with particular spirits, which musical accompaniments were necessary, which food offerings (*sinbon*) supplicants needed to prepare, and which days were most auspicious for the ritual occasion.

While spirit invocation was an essential prelude to any *kae bon* ritual featuring a *lakhon chatri* performance, it was also important in soul-calling rituals involving the *khwan*. The Thai scholar Phya Anuman Rajadhon (1962) explains *khwan* as being multiple souls that reside in each person.<sup>3</sup> Because *khwan* have the tendency to leave the body, or become disintegrated, whereby the individuals suffer a variety of symptoms diminishing their health and well-being, a ritual specialist is called to restore the *khwan* to the individual and reintegrate these entities in the body.

*Lakhon chatri* performers skilled in *khwan* ritual often combined their activities with *kae bon*. This occurred whenever supplicants promised *lakhon chatri* dance-drama offerings to spirits to whom they had asked to heal the individual who was identified as needing a soul-calling ritual. Hence, performers were able to combine their artistic training and ritual expertise, thereby creating a service that was valued in the general population. Although the majority of *lakhon chatri*

performances are currently presented by patrons who appeal to particular spirits for economic assistance, in the past, prior to the advent of modern medicine, healing was a significant motivating factor in *kae bon* supplication, and it was connected to *lakhon chatri* ritual expertise. Healing as a ritual specialty has not died out completely in the *lakhon chatri* tradition, a point I will return to.

Within Thai Buddhist culture knowledge is highly regarded, and notions of power (*saksit*) are associated with the acquisition of knowledge, particularly that which is transmitted over time through an unbroken lineage of teachers, or *khru*. *Lakhon chatri* performers trace their *khru* back to the *rusi* ("sages" or more literally "seers"), who according to ancient Vedic and Brahmanic tradition are regarded as the originators of all knowledge. Each branch of knowledge has a *khru*, a teacher or master, who not only transmits knowledge to an apprentice or disciple (*luk sit*), but ideally reveals the power inherent in knowledge. *Khru* are not only actual living masters who impart knowledge, but also guardian spirits who are respected and venerated with ceremony.

The ultimate power of the *rusi* concerns transformation, and the disciple's acquisition of knowledge from a master is deeply interconnected with this aspect. While all disciples respect their lineage *khru* and the *rusi*, in Thailand specific groups of individuals are particularly devoted to their teachers. These include performers, musicians, artists, craftsmen, spirit mediums, herbalists, midwives, and ritual officiants. All of these people in some way or another are involved in activities that require the knowledge and expertise to change a particular substance or condition into something else. Movement becomes dance, sound becomes music, illness becomes health, plants become medicine. By the same token, the transformation can move in the opposite direction, as with black magic. These practitioners not only revere and guard knowledge they have learned from their teachers, but they strongly believe that the power of their *khru* lineage is essential if they are to heal, to divine, or to perform. This power is activated through devotional songs and sacred recitations each time a practitioner is called upon to perform his or her services. Efficacy is therefore a matter of securing a powerful blessing as well as technical expertise.

All *lakhon chatri* performers received *khatha* from their teachers. These sacred mantras or utterances were believed to empower both the dancers and a variety of objects central to their performance. Although the exact formula of *khatha* was secret, generally syllables were a combination of Pali-Sanskrit or Khorm, both languages having a religious significance which further contributed to the *khatha's* power.<sup>4</sup> Prior to each performance dancers recited *khatha* to promote their artistic skill in dance-drama and to encourage audience members to like them.

*Lakhon chatri* troupes were custodians of a variety of ritual objects that were handed down from dance-drama master to disciple. This process generally occurred when a master, who was also a troupe leader, retired from the profession and gave his significant ritual objects to a dancer whom he selected to be his successor. These typically included the

crowns (*mongkut* and *chada*) and performance masks, the sheaf of performance weapons, costumes, musical instruments,<sup>5</sup> the *pha yan*, and the golden *Soet*. While these objects were annually blessed and empowered at *Phiti Wai Khru*, a ceremony paying tribute to the teachers of *lakhon chatri*, their power was also reactivated prior to each performance through a series of invocations performers recited to summon the power and protection of their dance-drama teachers or divine *khru*. The *pha yan*, a banner containing mystical diagrams and sacred mantras, was empowered through the *khatha* recitations of the troupe leader, who then placed the cloth above the performance area prior to further ritual invocations. This procedure, as well as the recitation of *khatha*, is still practiced by *lakhon chatri* troupe leaders today. The *pha yan* and the *khatha* were an important means of protecting the dance-drama troupe from negative spiritual forces, and were essential in warding off the curses of rival performers.<sup>6</sup> The golden *Soet* mentioned previously is the most sacred and powerful ritual object of a *lakhon chatri* troupe. Throughout the dance-drama tradition, the *Soet* has been regarded as the resting place of Phau Kae, the ancient Rasi Bharata, who is the patron saint of the tradition. The *Soet* not only highlights the altar *lakhon chatri* performers construct at each ritual performance, but it is revered and propitiated by the troupe leader who typically maintains a shrine at home, and carefully attends to the mask whenever the troupe is on the road. At the *Phiti Wai Khru* the *Soet* is held by a ritual specialist, who portrays the role of Phau Kae, and it is placed over each performer's head as a blessing is whispered by the ritual specialist. At this time the power of the *rusi* and the lineage *khru* is transferred to the performer.

In this extended discussion I wish to emphasize that the objects I have just mentioned collectively formed a constellation of power which distinguished the performers as being associated with the extraordinary force of the supernatural. While the performer's *khatha* were secret, and therefore unknown to others, by contrast the ritual objects used by a *lakhon chatri* troupe were tangible items that were revered and protected as if they had a life and power of their own. These objects could not be kept by anyone, but were the sole property of the *lakhon chatri* troupe leader who inherited them from a dance-drama master. While both performers and non-performers recognized that the power inherent in these objects could be benevolent if the objects were carefully attended to and propitiated by the appropriate people, that is, *lakhon chatri* performers, by the same token, if the crowns, *Soet*, and other objects fell into the hands of someone who was not a *lakhon chatri* performer, that individual or his or her family could suffer great misfortune.<sup>7</sup> Hence, as performers surrounded themselves with these objects, they strengthened their mysterious reputation in the local community, and this in turn enhanced their credibility as ritual specialists.

Within the *lakhon chatri* tradition ritual expertise and artistic performance were inseparable. Not only were the dance-dramas presented as spirit offerings, but even significant performance props were intertwined with ritual practice

and power. As performers relied upon the local community for patronage, it was important for a troupe to cultivate a loyal following by performing popular dance-drama stories and by extending their occult services which were a part of the Folk Brahman tradition.<sup>8</sup>

## The Rise of Women Lakhon Chatri Performers

Following King Mongkut's Royal Dance-Drama Edict of 1861, women were permitted to train in the dance-drama tradition; and except for the *Lakhon Phuying Khong Luang*, this tradition was dominated by male performers. In Phetchaburi this royal legislation was significant, for it began a transformation in the local dance-drama tradition. Here dance-drama artists created their own unique performance style by combining the most outstanding characteristics of three popular contemporary dance-dramas. These included: 1) the dance movements (*tha ram mae bot*) from the *Lakhon Luang*, 2) the ribald humor (*len sanuk-sanan*) from the *lakhon nok*, and 3) the didactic stories of the *Paññāsa Jātaka* from the *manora*.<sup>9</sup> This new dance-drama, called *Lakhon Phet*, not only reached a high level of acclaim and popularity throughout southern and central Thailand because the genre was inventive and entertaining, but moreover, because the troupe featured Mom Muang, a female dancer of exceptional beauty and artistic talent.

Mom Muang was the daughter of Luang Aphai, who established the renowned troupe of *Lakhon Phet*. Their prestigious titles of *Mom* and *Luang* were granted by King Rama IV, and they are evidence of the high status both father and daughter achieved as a result of their performance expertise. Mom Muang, who was born in Phetchaburi, cultivated a loyal following of young people whom she trained in the *lakhon* (Nuanlaong and Jintana 1983:11-12). Following her marriage to the Governor of Phetchaburi, Phya Suraphan Phisut, a gesture which again enhanced both her reputation and the reputation of her dance-drama troupe, Mom Muang brought her dancers to the governor's mansion where they entertained a variety of local and national dignitaries. She also performed with these dancers for Kings Rama IV and V at their summer palaces in Phetchaburi.<sup>10</sup> Impressed by both Mom Muang's artistic talent and the enthusiasm of her dancers, King Rama IV gave them a land grant where a performance pavilion was constructed.

Phetchaburi dance-drama performers, influenced by Mom Muang's performance style, emulated the slow and elegant dance movements of the *Lakhon Phuying Khong Luang*. Further imitating this royal tradition, local troupes began to feature women in both the roles of dance-drama hero and heroine.<sup>11</sup> Thus, women began to assume leading positions in dance-drama troupes, a trend patrons supported because it duplicated the artistic standards set by the court (Figure 1). In Phetchaburi, patrons were generally merchants, land owners, and members of the aristocracy who served as local



Fig. 1. Women performers from Phetchaburi province stage a battle between the forces of good and evil. Their choreography is patterned after the court tradition. Photographs courtesy of the author.



Fig. 2. The role of the joker in *lakhon chatri* continues to be played by men.

bureaucrats. By commissioning dance-drama performers, particularly those trained in the style of *Lakhon Phet*, patrons enhanced their own standing within the community, while at the same time enhancing the social and economic status of Phetchaburi dance-drama performers. The fact that *lakhon* families permanently settled on land near the royal palace of Phra Nakorn Khiri and the prominent temple of Wat Maha That, provides further evidence that at least some performers economically benefited from the extensive patronage Phetchaburi troupes experienced at the turn of the century.

As women trained in dance-drama they were initiated into the *lakhon* tradition by participating in the *Phithi Wai Khru*. Hence, they received knowledge from a lineage of empowered teachers. Likewise, they were given *khatha* and also learned the ritual invocations essential to their performance tradition. Dancers could not perform without the blessing of their teachers, nor could they simply train in the artistic dimensions of music, dance, and vocal recitation. In Phetchaburi province many dance-drama troupes performed both *lakhon*, characteristic of the *Lakhon Phet*, and *lakhon chatri*. While patrons generally commissioned *lakhon* for entertainment purposes, and even hired troupes who could display elaborate scenery and lighting,<sup>12</sup> *lakhon chatri* performances were only presented for ritual occasions, many of which focused upon spirit propitiation.

During these early years, as women began to perform *lakhon chatri*, it was still common for men to be dance-drama troupe leaders; and as such, they were called upon to perform the ritual duties patrons expected when they needed a soul-calling ritual or a *kae bon* invocation. But the wives, daughters, and other female relatives of the troupe leader were encouraged to train in dance-drama, for only women could reproduce the aesthetic courtly standards patrons admired. While men, particularly troupe leaders, continued to perform in some of the major roles, gradually this trend diminished as female performers perfected their artistic skill and gained popularity with many local patrons. Only the joker roles (*tua talok*) in the *lakhon chatri* tradition continued to be played by men (Figure 2). This was in keeping with the fact that jokers, who performed ribald scenarios often containing sexual puns and overtures, maintained strong ties with the *lakhon nok* tradition; and moreover, both performers and patrons felt that if women played the joker roles their actions might be misconstrued as being obscene rather than funny.<sup>13</sup>

The rise of women in the Phetchaburi *lakhon chatri* tradition was extensive. Temple records at Wat Maha That, the site of many performances, indicate that the majority of performers since the 1920's have been women, a report confirmed by elderly local *lakhon chatri* performers and patrons. These data, when combined with my contemporary research, reveal that women not only became prominent in the *lakhon chatri* tradition, but moreover, they established themselves as troupe leaders, a trend prevalent in Phetchaburi today.

I propose that many factors contributed to this gender change in troupe leadership. Firstly, as I have mentioned previously, the aesthetic beauty and performance style of the female performer was preferred by patrons commissioning

dance-drama. Secondly, the fact that Mom Muang and her dancers rose to public acclaim and were honored by the royal court further encouraged dance-drama performers to maintain a particular artistic standard that revolved around the female performer. Thirdly, as *lakhon* performers established permanent residence in Phetchaburi, male performers sought additional employment outside of the performance sector. Men who wished to maintain a steady family income simply could not rely upon a patronage whose taste was changing. From an economic standpoint, many *lakhon* families continued to train both male and female members in the dance-drama tradition, but men more often than women tended to earn money in other ways. Interestingly, men who remained committed to performing usually worked additional jobs that were flexible and remained available if a family or troupe secured a lucrative dance-drama commission. In Phetchaburi women from prominent dance-drama families not only continued to perfect their artistic skill, but they also began to secure commissions from patrons and handle the financial arrangements of the troupe.<sup>14</sup>

But *lakhon chatri* was, and continues to be, a tradition associated with ritual expertise. And while changes regarding the artistic achievement of female dancers took place, thereby enhancing the marketability of troupes featuring female performers, changes for women also took place within the realms of ritual practice, for it was impossible for them to become troupe leaders without developing the appropriate ritual skill.

As women assumed the leadership of *lakhon chatri* troupes they became custodians of the ritual objects that were a part of their dance-drama tradition. They not only learned the standard invocations which summoned the blessing and protective power of their *khru* lineage prior to each performance, but they also received from their dance-drama teachers the more esoteric invocations and *khatha* they needed to perform at *kae bon* rituals.

At the time I conducted research in Phetchaburi I not only met many *lakhon chatri* troupe leaders who were women well versed in *kae bon* ritual expertise, but also several who were locally recognized specialists in soul-calling ritual. These women were known as *mo su khwan*, "soul-tying doctors," an identification usually reserved for Folk Brahman practitioners who are male. The ceremonies conducted by women are comparable with those I attended featuring a male ritual specialist. The only difference I must emphasize is a comment offered to me by a patron who commissioned a female practitioner to perform the *khwan* ritual. This patron clearly stated that the woman was much more adept in poetic oratory, and therefore more efficacious in ritual expertise, than any of the male practitioners in the province. While this could be interpreted to suggest male Folk Brahman practitioners are dying out in Phetchaburi, and I cannot confirm this, it moreover highlights the fact that some female *lakhon chatri* troupe leaders are conducting *khwan* rituals, and apparently their services are appreciated by patrons.

## Conclusion

Scholars writing about Thai ritual practice (cf. Kirsch 1977; Tambiah 1970; Terwiel 1975) generally have emphasized that while men are ritual specialists in both Buddhism and Folk Brahman traditions, by contrast, women are usually ritual specialists in animist tradition which focuses upon placating spirits. The male Folk Brahman specialist is said to have acquired his knowledge from an empowered teacher, and generally has been a member of the *Sangha*, where again he gains further ritual knowledge (Kirsch 1977:257). Unlike women ritual specialists, who tend to be identified with animism, male Folk Brahman practitioners are said to be well respected in their communities because their tradition is compatible with Buddhism (1977:259); that is, the specialist demonstrates qualities revered in Buddhism, such as mindfulness, restraint, and piety. A. Thomas Kirsch (1977), who explores the ritual expertise of Buddhist, Folk Brahman and animist specialists, writes the following:

Taking on a Buddhist or Folk Brahman role typically involves some measure of learning chants, techniques, or other lore; by contrast, popular belief has it that the spirit brings all necessary skills to a spirit doctor, so no learning is involved on her part (1977:259).

Here Kirsch is referring to female spirit mediums (*mo phi*) who communicate to their clients in a state of trance, and do not cultivate ritual expertise, but rather rely upon the visitation of a spirit to direct their activities.

*Lakhon chatri* performers, particularly women, who through the course of time have risen to the position of dance-drama troupe leader, present another perspective of the ritual specialist, one which challenges, or at least questions, some of the categories in today's scholarship. While *lakhon chatri* performers propitiate spirits, they do this in a very prescribed manner which is totally dependent upon the sacred knowledge they have acquired from a lineage of empowered teachers. The spirits they propitiate for *kae bon* patrons are carefully selected from the upper levels of the Buddhist pantheon, and the spirits guiding the ritual expertise of the *lakhon chatri* performer include an entourage of deities and teachers from the Buddhist and Hindu-Brahman tradition.<sup>15</sup> The women troupe leaders in Phetchaburi who were my informants maintain a high level of respect in the local community not only because they teach a distinguished dance-drama tradition to aspiring students, the majority of whom are women, but moreover, because they are skilled in a ritual expertise most people associate with a high level of knowledge. While scholars focusing upon ritual practice in Thailand have generally discussed the Folk Brahman practitioner within the confines of male gender, I propose that women dance-drama performers who are skilled in ritual expertise are an interesting category of people who have responded and contributed to significant historical processes, and have carved out a niche for themselves which creatively embraces some of the most prestigious and respected characteristics of the Folk Brahman tradition.

While elderly women who are now troupe leaders have not participated in monastic education and rarely have attended more than several years of public school, they have received extensive training from their dance-drama teachers, and their educational experiences generally surpass those available to women in the same age category who are not associated with dance-drama. They are well versed in the literary classics they perform, and therefore knowledgeable about the great poets, musicians, and dancers of the *lakhon* tradition. They not only have training in a variety of ritual practices closely associated with *lakhon chatri*, but they also are experienced travelers who have insight into a socio-economic network that extends beyond the local sphere.

Mae Ying, an elderly troupe leader who has performed since she was four years old, talks about her career in the following ways:

I am now 57 years old. Although I have never been rich and never had a husband to care for me, I have had a good life. I have had many excellent teachers, one in particular who trained me very rigorously. She would make me practice for hours and humiliate me if I did not learn quickly. When we first learned the dances at her house she would count out the rhythm

by tapping a stick on the floor. All of us knew she would use this stick to discipline us if it became necessary. This may sound harsh, but that is how all dancers were trained. Laziness was never allowed by a good teacher; there were just too many things we needed to learn. I have great respect and love for this teacher. Without her guidance I would have remained ignorant. I would have been spending my life bent over in the rice fields.

Interviews I have collected from other troupe leaders, the majority of whom range from approximately 45 to 60 years old, reflect a similar perspective of their teachers and training. All women felt the dance-drama tradition offered them a learning opportunity that otherwise was unavailable to them. Because most women belong to families who had participated in dance-drama for several generations, they considered it foolish to abandon a tradition which had groomed their artistic talents and made them custodians of ritual knowledge. Although most women regretted they were not wealthy, and in fact, many now live from one commission to the next, they nevertheless recognized their life in the *lakhon* as personally rewarding, and at moments even a bit glamorous.

## NOTES

1 Within the Brahmanistic elements of Thai religion, Kirsch (1977) identifies two main components which he terms as "Folk Brahmanism" and "Court Brahmanism." Folk Brahmanism is integrated into the religious domain of common people, while Court Brahmanism is practiced in the royal court by an elite Brahman priesthood.

2 This dance-drama division is also referred to as *lakhon nai*, meaning it is the dance-drama of the Inner Court, the private domain of the Siamese monarch, his wives and consorts, all royal female children and pre-adolescent royal male children.

3 Depending upon whom you consult, the number of *khwan* varies. However, some 11-32 are thought to reside in the body. They are generally identified with specific parts of the body associated with a particular function. Hence, there are *khwan* of the eyes, *khwan* of the heart, and so forth. For a detailed discussion see, Phya Anuman Rajadhon (1962) "The Khwan and Its Ceremonies" (1962: 119-164); also see Jane Richardson Hanks (1964: 58-81) and Stanley J. Tambiah (1970: 223-51) for an analysis regarding the significance of *khwan* in Thai ritual.

4 Khorm is the script of the ancient Khmer. The Khorm alphabet, also known as Mul writing, formerly was used to print Pali texts. The script is frequently used in the mystical drawings of sacred banners (*pha yan*,) and is also prevalent in the art of tattoo.

5 While musical instruments sometimes belong to the *lakhon chatrī* troupe leader, these days it is common for an orchestra master to own the instruments, or for individual musicians to own their own drums, *ranat*, and so forth. When a *lakhon chatrī* troupe is commissioned, the troupe leader contacts the musicians needed, and these people bring their instruments with them.

6 Performance troupes often competed with each other at temple fairs where multiple productions were staged simultaneously. Troupes securing the most audience members were awarded cash prizes and considerable prestige. Winning this kind of competition was an excellent way for a troupe to establish new patronage with

families who wanted to hire performance troupes for their household rituals. Both patrons and performers I interviewed claim competition was particularly fierce in Phetchaburi, and hence, troupe leaders used a variety of *khatha* and *pha yan* to secure protection and success during a performance. Likewise, some leaders also used *khatha* to curse their rivals.

7 Because the *rusi* mask of Phau Kae is regarded by people in Thailand as sacred, shops selling dance-drama merchandise usually display a sign stating they will not sell this mask to tourists or others who do not have legitimate connections to the dance-drama profession.

Another example of how people in Thailand regard these objects concerns the fact that masks, crowns, and similar performance items are left at Buddhist temples when they are either too worn for further use, or when a dance-drama master does not have a successor to carry on the tradition. The temple is recognized as the only safe repository where these ritual objects will maintain their neutral power. Collections of shadow play (*nang talung* and *nang yai*) figures are also found at temples, where a master leaves them if he does not have an apprentice who will use them in performance and venerate their spiritual power.

8 James Brandon (1967) has written that in ancient times *lakhon chatrī* performers were "sorcerers" (1967:61). I argue that this term is misleading not only because it has a strong negative connotation, but moreover, because it does not credit the performers as having a ritual expertise that was valued by the dominant patron community. While conducting my fieldwork in Phetchaburi, I asked many performers and patrons if *lakhon chatrī* performers were formerly connected to sorcery, and on all accounts people firmly associated the performing artist with the Hindu-Brahman or Folk Brahman tradition, and clearly did not see connections with sorcery or black magic. While performers certainly had the powers to curse others, and occasionally this happened, this was not a central part of their ritual training and practice. Patrons did not seek out the services of *lakhon chatrī* performers because they wished

to cultivate the "black arts," but rather, because they wished to cultivate the protective and beneficial power of spirits who often formed part of the Buddhist pantheon.

9 I wish to thank Acan Saman Soham from Phetchaburi Teacher Training College for sharing his insight with me concerning the development of *Lakhon Phet*.

10 King Rama IV built his palace complex of Phra Nakhon Khiri on Maha Sawan hill in the town of Phetchaburi. Several years later, King Rama V built his palace, Phra Ram Rajniwate, in the central part of the town along the banks of the Phetchaburi River.

11 The female dancers of the *Lakhon Phuying Khong Luang* played both male and female roles. Because many of these dancers maintained an intimate relationship with the monarch it was considered inappropriate for male performers to interact with these women during extensive rehearsals and performances. Gender segregation within the dance-drama tradition was upheld at court with many male performers participating in *khon*, a masked dance-drama featuring only me.

12 Performers and patrons refer to elaborate *lakhon* productions as *rong yai*, "large performance area," because a large space is needed to accommodate scenery, lighting, and many musicians. By contrast, they refer to *lakhon chatrī* as *rong lek*, "small performance area," because only a small space is required; generally, the size of two straw mats (10 ft. by 12 ft.).

13 For further discussion regarding the gender preference of joker roles in Thailand, see Mary L. Grow (1991).

14 For further information concerning the role of women in entrepreneurial or commercial activity, see A. Thomas Kirsch (1975).

15 In extended research (1991) focusing upon *lakhon chatrī* as a *kae bon* offering I explore how a supplicant's selection of a particular spirit and their ritual practice is interconnected to a larger culture of class (Grow 1991: 45-77).

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