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The Significance of “Phithī Wāi Khrū Nattasilp” in Thai Traditional Dance

Vipada Petchot

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of Performing Arts,
Pondicherry University, Puducherry.

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Abstract:

Phithī Wāi Khrū Nātasilp is a rite of paying homage to teachers of Thai classical dance (Khōn and Lakorn). It is considered as a sacred ceremony which is influenced by spirit worship, Buddhist and Brahmin rituals. This ceremony is symbolized as student’s respect and gratefulness to their teacher. Moreover, it signifies apology for student’s misbehavior whether it is by speech, thought or action. Generally, it is held on any full moon Thursday, otherwise on Sunday is a second option. The procedure of ceremony is held in two days and involves three stages, namely Phithī Song, paying homage and sacrifice, and Krōp Khrū. The participants, thus strongly believe that attending such ceremony is propitious, further makes them providential, advantageous and authoritative in the field of arts and professional career. Hence, this paper tries to explore the significance of Phithī Wāi Khrū Nātasilp in Thai traditional dance.

Keywords: Thai Classical Dance, Paying homage, Wāi Khrū, Nattasilp, Khōn, Lakorn.

Thailand has been blessed with a beautiful traditional culture for a long time. According to Thai culture, young generation has to be modest, respectful to the elders, and being grateful and reciprocal with ardent loyalty to their parents and benefactors. 13th April is celebrated as Songkran day, and on 14th April is considered as family day. All family members ritually make it a point to return to their hometown and spend some quality time with them. During the celebration, the children give respect to their parents or predecessors by offering bathing ceremony and washing their feet to get blessing from them. It is considered to be very auspicious for their respective lives.

In school or university, before the beginning and finishing of the classes, the students offer their gratitude to their gurus by salutation. Beside, there is a homage ceremony to teachers in every first semester of academic year of all scholastic institution. Thai people have been taught that teacher is regarded as a second parent. Teacher salutation ceremony or “Phithī

Wāi Khrū” in Thai word is Thai traditional culture, which has been followed since 1957. Initially, Wāi Khrū day was found on 16th January 1957 by conception of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram, 3rd Prime Minister of Thailand.

In accordance with dance students, there is Phithī Wāi Khrū Nātilp, a rite of paying homage to teachers of Thai classical dance (Khōn and Lakorn) that is considered as a sacred ceremony. It is a different in process and conducted separately from the ordinary Phithī Wāi Khrū. There are evidences that the royal Phithī Wāi Khrū Nātilp has been started during King Rama IV of the Rattanakosin era in the year 1885 (The Fine Arts Department 6). The word “Phithī” rooted from “Vidhi” in Pali and Sanskrit, which means a way of method. “Khrū” is rooted from “Garu” in Pali and “Guru” in Sanskrit. “Wāi” denotes salutation, thus, “Wāi Khrū” indicates that we respect the person who provides knowledge to us. “Nātilp [Naad-Ta-Sin]” means the art of drama or dance that includes Thai classical mask theatre, Khōn, and Thai Classical Drama, “Lakorn”. According to Royal Institute Dictionary, “Naad”, “Nāta”, and “Naad-Ta” signify a dancing girl or an actress. These terms are very similar to “Natya” in Indian dance, likewise, “Silp” in Thai is based on “Sippa” in Pali and “Śilpa” in Sanskrit.

The process and ritualistic elements of Phithī Wāi Khrū Nātilp are more complicated and permeated through magical power that is mixed with ghost worshipping, Buddhist and Brahmin rituals. It is very much influenced by Hinduism belief and thought. The ceremony is held on Thursday or “Pha-Reu-Hat-Sa-Bo-Dī” in Thai language that is rooted from Bṛhaspati of Sanskrit. In hymns of the Ṛig Veda, Bṛhaspati is the priest of the Vedic gods, hence Thursday is respected as the “Teacher’s Day” and an auspicious day for learning initiation. If it is unavailable on Thursday, Sunday can be considered. In addition to, the ceremony is preferred to conducted on a full moon day and the month of even number or 9th month of the year. The number “9” is the Thai’s propitious number which is pronounced as “Kāo” in Thai, and it is also similar to the word meaning “progress.”

The rite is not only representing student’s respect and gratefulness to a teacher, but also a way of apology for student’s misbehavior. Whether it is by speech, thought or action. It is believed that attending of the ceremony, the attendees will be flourishing and be successful in arts and their professional career. The belief is, in accordance with Sawatdichiwin’s research, in which the participants believe that after attending the ceremony, they would be protected and succeed in their performance by supporting of masters’ spirits and gods. They also

believe that students who do not participate the ceremony, they would be unprotected. (Sawatdichiwin 74).

Generally, the rite of Wāi Khrū Nātilp is held in two days and divided into three parts. They are Phithī Song, paying homage and sacrifice, and Krôp Khrū and Rap Møp. Phithī Song is the Buddhist ceremony. “Song” means a monk that rooted from “Sangha” in Pali and Sanskrit. This rite is divided into two parts. The first part is engaged on Wednesday evening. Masters and disciples mingle at the ceremony to worship Buddha. After chanting, a monk sprinkles holy water to participants and surrounds the place with sacrosanct thread to protect themselves from devils. On Thursday morning, the second part is conducted. The participants provide food to the monk afterwards the monk chants Buddha’s prayers and sprinkles holy water to participants which is the sign of ending of Buddhist ritual.

The paying homage procedure is mostly based on Hinduism. The students or followers mingle at the venue of the ceremony with their personal offerings such as flower, candle and three incenses. Everyone should wear red loincloth in “Jong Kraben” style. It is believed that “Jong Kraben” style of dressing is influenced by Indian style like Dhoti. The process of paying homage and sacrifice is as follows:

Worshiping of the Triple Gem

The entire of the ceremony is based on Indian thought and belief. However, the first part of the ceremony follows Buddhism. A chairman lights candles and three incenses for worshiping the Triple Gem: Buddha, Buddha’s teachings (Dharma), and monk. The right candle of Buddha statue is symbolized the Buddha’s teachings and the left candle signifies a religious precept. The three incenses indicate virtues of purity, wisdom and mercy. While the ritual process of lighting candles and incenses, “Pīphāt”, Thai orchestra, performs the song “Sadhukarn”. It is a particular song that demonstrates respectful invitation to Buddha. Essentially, the legend of the song Sadhukarn also related with Indian Gods. During Buddha era, Lord Shiva and Buddha showed their supernatural power by playing hide-and-seek. Lord Shiva disguised as dust, and hide under Kshir Sagar. Buddha found him at last. When it came to Buddha’s turn, he also transformed himself to dust, and hide inside God Shiva’s topknot of his hair. He could not find Buddha. For this reason, Buddha requested to Lord Shiva to present the Sadhukarn song for his coming down.

Worshiping of gods and dance masters

In the process of worshipping of gods and dance masters, Hindu belief and thought are applied here. The main action is the invitation of gods and the spirits of dance masters, and giving sacrifices and offering to them. An officiant, who connects the participants with Gods, hermits and the spirits of Khōn and Lakorn teachers, is represented as Brahmin. He must wear a full white dress with a long sleeve shirt and shawl which is called “Pan Tha Nam” style. And wear a loincloth in the style of “Dong Ta Phat” (Boonyachai 170). The officiant enters the ritual marquee by dancing and carrying a conch shell in hand. Simultaneously the musicians of Pīphāt perform the song “Damnoēn Phrām”, which means Brahmin is walking. Later, the chairman lights auspicious candles and incenses for the purpose of worshipping Hindu gods and the spirits of dance masters.

The officiant chants salutation of the Triple Gem and makes holy water, later that pays homage to spirits of Khōn and Lakorn teachers. Khōn teachers are assigned to four categories based on the characters of “Ramakian”, Ramayana in Thai version, and Khōn students are assigned to practice in one category of them as well. The characters are “Phra”, a refined male human or divine being, like Phra Ram or Rama. “Nang” means female human with divine attributes, for example, Nang Sīdā. “Yak” is a robust demon, such as Thosakan or Ravana, and “Ling” is a monkey, particularly Hanuman. The physical appearance and particular talent suitable for each role are the major criteria in the assigning of the characters. Additionally, he chants the sacred prayer to bless the participants and to invite Hindu gods like Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma. Moreover, gods of music and spirits of dance masters like Vishwakarma, Phra PraKhōnthap, Phra Naradmuni and Phra Panchasikhora; Bhairava, divinities and deceased dance masters are invited to the ceremony. Afterwards, he and senior followers sprinkle holy water to the god’s statues of Shiva and Ganesh by using a conch, and invites all gods, devas and spirits of dance teachers to dwell at their places.

Krôp Khrū and Rap Mop

After finishing of paying homage, “Krôp Khrū” and “Rap Mop” are processed in respectively. The students who join Krop Khrū, can be allowed to learn higher level of the sacred dances. Rap Mop is a ritual step to acknowledge students who have adequate knowledge and experience to be a teacher. That means after their Rap Mop attention, they are approved to teach dance to other people. Students and followers have to bring a bowl that is filled with flower, incenses, candle, white handkerchief and 12 Baht or 24 Baht of Thai currency to the officiant. He covers their heads one by one with the three vital masks such as

- The first, “Bharat Muni”, who recorded Shiva’s dance and composed Natya Shastra. The second, “Bhairava”, the avatar of Lord Shiva, and the third is “Therd”, the headgear of “Nohra”, the first Thai classical drama. It is a belief that students would be protected, getting encouragement and confidence by teachers’ spirits while they perform. Finally, he provides the auspicious things to the students like showering holy water, applying powder on participants’ forehead, giving holy thread and auspicious leaf. The auspicious leaf consists of Bermuda grass and eggplant’s flower that are rolled with golden leaf. It implies that Bermuda grass and eggplant’s flower are easy to plant and can grow anywhere similarly student’s intellect which can flourish anytime and anywhere. Furthermore, the symbolic meaning of the bending down of eggplant’s flower is here implying of humility. The final strategy of Rap Møp is different from Krôp Khrū that is the officiant gives weapons such as scepter, spear, and arrow to the students. They have to carry the weapons overhead and leave the place. It means that they have achieved the acquired knowledge and are ready to transfer their knowledge to others.

After finishing of Krôp Khrū and Rap Møp, students/followers are required to perform some dance to the officiant who at this moment represents as Bharata Muni. He approaches to the middle of the ritual marquee and blesses the participants. Later, he leaves the character of Bharat Muni and removes the Bharata Muni’s mask. All participants dance by scattering the popped rice and flowers to the altar and dance to express their accomplishment. At the same time, gods and all spirits return to their own places, which symbolizes the completion of the holy ceremony.

The essential elements of Phithī Wāi Khrū Nātasilp

The officiant is the medium who connects the participants with Gods, hermits and the spirits of Khōn and Lakorn teachers by leading the Thai and Pali prayers. He is considered to be a dignified, prominent and authoritative personality for conducting the ceremony as Brahmin and Bharat Muni who is called “Phø Kaē” by Thai people. The qualifications of the officiant are given below:

1. According to Phithī Wāi Khrū Nattasilp tradition, the officiant who leads in the homage and functions of the actual initiation done by a man. It is believed that female touching will not contribute success to an initiation: no more and no less misfortune will befall either the initiated or the initiator or even both (Yupho 7).

2. The age should be above 30 years old.

3. One should complete the Buddhist ordination. Even if the officiant roles as Brahmin, but one of the presidential teacher’s main qualifications is complete with Buddhist ordination.

4. Possessing adequate knowledge of Thai Classical Dance in both theory and practical way.

5. Gaining adequate exposure of human hero characters of Khōn such as Rama.

6. He should be a prominent dance-figure and be respected by the mass.

7. He should be polite and possess desirable manner, maintain a harmonious relationship in public by all virtue.

8. He is allowed to inherit the title of officiant by King or by past officiant.

God’s masks, headgears and offerings are vital elements, and they must be placed at the correct position. The higher status has to be placed on top of the altar. The masks of good and evil symbol must be separated. It is believed that inauspicious event may occur if they do not separate the mask. The altar has multi-level with 3-4 levels of a grandstand and covered with white cloth that is edged with red fabric. The god’s masks and headgears are placed by respective priority. The first top level, the masks of Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma are placed. Lord Shiva is located at the middle, while Vishnu and Brahma are placed at the right and left respectively. These masks are the most important for taking part in the ceremony. Other gods’ mask can be omitted, but the masks of these gods are very significant. The second level is other Hindu god’s masks. Ganesh and Vishwakarma are situated at the middle. Phra Pañcasikha, Bhairava and Navagraha are set on the left. Indra, Phra Pra Khōn Thap, Bharata Muni and Kalaikot are on the right. The third low level is Khōn masks, headgears and respected props. This level is divided into three areas. At the right side of the altar is placed with “Ling” masks such as Vali, Sugriva, Angada, Humuman, and their followers. At the middle is settled with other headgears, animal masks such as Narasimha, Airavata, and weapon prop like spear, dagger. The masks of Ravana, king of Lanka, another ruler of rakshasas, alliances of Lanka and their followers are placed at left side of the altar.

The altar of offering is built as a grandstand border for the shelf of masks and headgears. Sacrifices and offerings are set according to the tradition of the Wāi Khrū ceremony in theatrical arts, which have been accounted in the royal treatises of several reigns. These include the documents written during the reign of King Rama IV and King Rama VI, and the Nāṭyaśāstra, an ancient treatise of Indian performing arts. (Pidokrajit 13). Offerings and

sacrifices are divided into three groups. Foods without meat which are offered to god and hermit for instance betel nut, betel leaf, tender coconut, cereal, etc. Moreover, the Thai traditional desserts those their names refer to good things are served such as “Foi Thong” that mentions golden thread. Raw and cooked foods such as pig head, duck, chicken, prawn, crab, fish, egg, etc. are offered to god, demon, animal and human. These foods are separated into two categories. The raw cuisines are placed at the left side of the altar, and the cooked foods are placed at the right side. The another is varieties of fruits which their names should refer to good meaning like “Durian” that “Rian” means studying, and Jackfruit is named “Kha- Nun” in Thai, which “Nun” means supporting. Fruit with the colour of black and purple are not allowed in the ceremony. (Pidokrajit 13)

Processing of Phithī Wāi Khrū Nātasilp, “Nā Phāt” repertoires are considered to be one of the vital elements performed by Pīphāt, Thai orchestra. In Khōn and Lakorn’s performance, they are performed in a supporting manner of characters and express feelings. During Phithī Wāi Khrū Nātasilp, they play Nā Phāt for narrating and demonstrating the actions of the officiant, gods and dance masters’ spirits. The Musicians of Pīphāt can be at any side of the stage enabling themselves visible to the activities of rituals and the officiants. There are varieties of collections of the ritual homage songs in which the officiant exercise his independent choice of the songs and in order follow his own master. Nā Phāt songs of Phithī Wāi Khrū Nattasilp are divided into three categories those are given below:

1. Inviting gods and divinities such as the song “Tra Narai Banthomsin” is played to invite Vishnu from Kshir Sagar.
2. Inviting the teachers of Phra, Nang and Ling’s spirits. For instance, “Samoē Khām Samut” is used for inviting the spirits of teacher whose character as Phra and Ling to come in a group form.
3. Inviting the teachers of Yak’s spirits, like the song “Samoē Marn” is performed to invite the spirits of high level of Yak masters.

In addition to, there are common songs. For example, “Nang Kin” is performed to invite all gods and spirits to sit and have the foods.

Conclusion

Phithī Wāi Khrū Nattasilp is a solemn ceremony which is the combination of Buddhism and Hinduism religion. The ceremony held on Thursday that is regarded as the Teacher’s Day, and it is also considered as an auspicious day for learning initiation for Thai

people. The officiant represents as Brahmin and Bharat muni. The essential elements are the masks of Hindu gods and Ramayana’s characters, headgears of Khōn and Lakorn, offerings and Nā Phāt songs. The ceremonial inheritors believed that Thai dance is initiated by Nāṭyaśāstra.

It is significant to conduct Phithī Wāi Khrū Nattasilp because it reinforces love and faith in student’s professional life. Recently, the ceremony is not only arranged at the government dance academy, but it participated in a private academy, film and theatrical circle as well. They strongly believe that attending such ceremony is propitious which makes them providential, advantageous and authoritative in the field of arts and career.

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