The Reconstruction of Fon Long Nan Thai folk dance

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Abstract
This research was aimed to study the history and characteristics of the Fon Long Nan dance, as well as factors related to its renovation to become the cultural dance at Nan, Thailand. The study used data from printed documents, in-depth interviews, video clips, theatrical performances, and participant observation in which the researcher was trained to perform the dance by the dance expert.

The results showed that the dance was discovered in 1359, on an oar which was used by a king and his citizen for their migration from the Woranakhon City to the Nan City. The dance was performed for relaxation. Later on, it was renovated due to four factors. First, the dance performed on an oar by either ordinary people or those in the royal palace was supported by Buddhist and political events. Next, the dance performed in the northern royal palaces was influenced by Chiang Mai dances and the national administration authorities from Bangkok. Furthermore, the dance was widespread outside the palaces owing to cultural borrowing, the national policy, and the transformed ceremony of oar races. Last, the reconstruction of Fon Long Nan dance in 2008 was supported by the government sectors in order to set the standard of dance positions and promote cultural tourism, as well. The dance has been also listed in a curriculum for students and any people interested to practice. Consequently, Fon Long Nan has become a well-known, desirable dance all over the Nan province nowadays.
Introduction

The term “fon” is a word in the northern Thai dialect, referring to any natural or artistic performing gesture. Thus, any set of dancing procedures has been called “fon”.

Fon Long Nan has long been a local northern performance of the population in Nan Province. It reflects the way of life along the Nan River which is the main source of consumption supplies and utilities. Commuting and transportation along the river between people in different locations resulted in various activities and customs such as oar races. Building and decorating an oar requires fine arts, handicrafts, music and dance. Afterwards, the term Fon Long Nan was created to refer to a dance performed on an oar wandering on the Nan River. At present, Fon Long Nan is a famous local performing art which is visible both on an oar and on land and which is performed by both men and women. However, the vital role of Fon Long Nan dance has been gradually reduced by certain extrinsic impacts. Hence, the researcher aimed to study the history of this performance and analyze the factors that initiated the reconstruction of this traditional dance of the locals in Nan, a province in northern Thailand.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research study. The data was collected from documents obtained from the National Archives of Thailand in the Ministry of Fine Arts, official records, announcement, orders, books, related research, in-depth interviews, observations from photos, videos, and actual theatrical performances, as well as participant observation of ongoing Fon Long Nan dance trained by an expert. In fact, the data collection consisted of two procedures - document gathering and fieldwork – which can be described in detail, as follows.

Documents were gathered in order to find concepts and theories related to the developmental history of the Fon Long Nan dance, concepts and theories of cultural dispersion and methods and procedures of cultural spreading from one society to another, as well as local performance development. These concepts and theories were subsequently used in the analysis of factors pertinent to the variation of Fon Long Nan dance. In the documentary study, the researcher gathered primary documents, i.e. official records announcement, orders, and photos from the National Archives of Thailand in the Ministry of Fine Arts, then gathered secondary documents, i.e. books, printed documents, and related literature, and analyzed historical data, respectively.

Fieldwork included 4 parts, as follows. First, the researcher interviewed participants who had the knowledge and experience about the Fon Long Nan dance. Second, the researcher took notes, made video recordings, and took photos of Fon Long Nan performances in various events such as oar races, food offering parades, ceremonies of Salakaphat (ceremonies of presenting object and monetary offerings to the Buddhist monks at the end of the Buddhist Lent), and official guest welcoming ceremonies. Last, in participant observation, the observer participated in the Fon Long Nan dance trained by a skilled Fon Long Nan professional who inherited the performance from her ancestors and trainers.

Results
According to the legend of Nan, dance on an oar was first recorded in the Phaya Bhukha Dynasty. It was stated that in 1902 King Karnmueang made all of his people migrate from Woranakorn town, currently Pua District, into Bhuphiang town. In the emigration process, there was a caravan of oars carrying royal officials and citizens, together with equipment, utensils, and musical instruments traveling on the Nan River. During the trip, the passengers were exhausted and needed to relax. In addition, the music was so pleasurable that some men started dancing in a free style, following the music (Aphichayakul, 2009, p. 2). Interestingly, there were only men dancing (P. Insaeng, personal communication, July 18, 2014). Women could not dance because of the northern belief stipulating that women should not stand tall while men were seated. Also, there was a limited space on an oar; dancing while standing on the oar was at a high risk of accidents. Thus, only a few short steps of dancing were possible (Aphichayakul, 2009, p. 8). Subsequently, the dance on the oar was developed. The development was divided into four stages: 1. the origin of dance on a racing oar, 2. the development of Fon Nan in the royal palace, 3. the dispersion of Fon Long Nan out of the royal palace, and 4. the standardization of Fon Long Nan by the Office of the Nan Culture.

Stage I The origin of dance on a racing oar

Dance on a racing oar originated from transporting people and objects to join a Buddhist ceremony in which people could send merits to the deceased. The ceremonial period started on the first day after the Lent, and it lasted for a month. (S. na Nan, personal communication, September 7, 2014). During the time period, the river had plenty of rapidly flowing water, and many people from various villages travelled and commuted. Therefore, they often had either a friendship party or a celebration party after accomplishing work by arranging an oar racing contest. At each oar racing competition, the winners naturally stood up and danced on the oar. It was possible that dance on a racing oar racing competitions occurred simultaneously. Nonetheless, the exact date when oar racing began were not specified. Yet, any antique oars in various villages showed the construction date, and the oldest one was Sue Thao Tha Lo, which was built in 1816 or approximately 200 years ago.

Oar Racing Management

There were two kinds of handling oar races: one arranged by the ordinary people, and the other managed by the royal palace.

Oar racing managed by ordinary people was held after the oar racing challenge held by the royal palace immediately after the completion of the Salakaphat ceremony. The male winners of the competition would beautifully perform the Fon Lai Ngam (Lanna traditional male dance), however, those who did not know how to perform Fon Lai Ngam would raise their hands and began their freestyle dance with pleasure. However, they could make just a few footsteps in order to prevent the oar from sinking. The dance is shown in the Figure 1, below.
On the other hand, oar racing under the management of the royal palace was held in two occasions. Firstly, it was held after the completion of the Buddhist ceremony of Salakhat - robe donation lottery- at the Klang Wiang royal temple or the Chang Kham Maha Viharn temple. It was originally a game held after a Buddhist ceremony. This oar racing differed from the one organized by ordinary people in that the winners would receive a reward or have the town master or ruler dance in their oar. (P. Payaphrom, personal communication, February 15, 2015). A royal oar racing competition was also held in other specific occasions. For example, Jao - the town ruler (Duke, henceforth) - Suriyapansa Phalitdej demanded oar racing in May, 1817, in order to welcome Duke Nakorn Sawan Voraphinij for an official visit in Nan Province (Jittakasem, 2011, p. 33). Furthermore, in a certain year when there were not frequent rainfalls in the rainy season, resulting in draught and inadequate supplies and utilities. Wishing for rainfalls, the royal palace arranged oar racing without the Buddhist ceremony of robe offerings, under the assumption that Naga came to play with water, causing the rain to fall (Polsantikul, 2013, p. 56)

The oar racing contest administered by the royal palace reflected the unity of the local society and the royal society for the winners would earn a reward and honorably have the town ruler dance on their oar. According to the photos in which Duke Maha Bhromsuradata dancing on a racing oar in the welcoming ceremony for a visit of Duke Nakorn Sawan Voraphinij in 1913, the town ruler’s dancing position with one foot in the water at the bottom of the oar and the other on the oar edge as his body weight support was similar to the dance position called Ka Tak Peek - a crow spreading wings. In actual fact, this dance position was part of a dance called Fon Lai Ngam. It can be concluded that both the dance of the winners in an oar racing contest arranged by the locals and the dance of a town ruler on the winner oar were taken from dance positions of Fon Lai Ngam. In reality, Fon Lai Ngam in Nan Province was inherited from the Tai Lue people in Sip Song Panna in China, who continually immigrated into Nan Province a long while ago. There were 12 dance positions of Fon Lai Ngam found in this study: 1. Wai - Worshipping, 2. Bid Bua Ban – Picking a blooming lotus flower, 3. Bua Ban Lo – Lotus blossom, 4. San Kiewklaw-Hairstyling, 5. Chang Kham Thung – Elephant crossing, 6. Jarakhe Wad Hang – Crocodile kicking, 7. Ka Tak Peek – Crow spreading wings, 8. Muan Mai Tai Sok –
Factors influencing dance on the oar
The study found four factors that had an impact on the dance on the oar, as described below.

The first factor was the way of life. In the past, almost all the locals of Nan Province were farmers. After the harvesting period and after the rainy season, the farmers were free from work, and they could attend any activities that needed plenty of people and time. Accordingly, the oar racing competition and the dance on the oar occurred during these periods.

The second factor related to dance on the oar was Buddhism. The Lanna locals believed that any Buddhist charity activities could assist them to easily reach nirvanas. Most people in Nan were advocates for charity and making merits, hence, an oar became a crucial vehicle for transporting people and donated objects to the Buddhist religious activities. Consequently, oar racing and dancing on an oar originated.

Another factor that triggered oar racing was the regimes and the royal palace. The Buddhist charity cooperated by both the locals and those from the royal palace helped create a close relationship between them and cause an oar racing competition. The fact that the town ruler danced on the oar of the winners also helped bring self-pride and faith in the governing system to the winning team.
The last impact that activated oar racing was a ceremony arranged by the town ruler for a visit of welcoming a royal family member from Bangkok. The ceremony was a symbol of respect and modesty set for the central government, and this seemed to be the beginning of Siamese cultural renovation.

Stage II The development of Fon Nan in the royal palace

The legend began with Boonyok Song Mueang Gan or Jao Noi Boonyok, a dance performer in Nan royal palace who danced in the royal palace and welcomed all masters who visited the town of Nan. In 1926 he followed Duke Maha Bhromsuradatta to welcome King Rama the Seventh and his queen in Chiang Mai where he could observe the standardized dance in the royal palace of Chiang Mai. This dance was adapted from the dance in the royal palace in Bangkok. Since his return to Nan, the Duke appointed him to train his children, male and female, in order to welcome superior masters, town guests and to celebrate any charity event, in lieu of the non-standardized dance called Mon Sued Sueng, which was performed in the food offerings. This dance was named Fon Nan - Nan dance - after the name of the town, and applied the footstep of the Fon Lai Ngam male dance, in which each of the feet was raised high, to better fit with female dancers. According to line arrangements, rhythmic counts and standardized dance forms, the dance had 6 standard positions: 1. Wai – Worshipping, 2. Bang Wan or Kerng Na – Sun Preventing, 3. Bid Bua Ban – Picking a blooming lotus flower, 4. Kiewklaw - Hairstyling, 5. Ka Tak Peek Crow spreading wings, and 6. Son Ton Son Plai – Rolling threads (S. Songmuenggan, personal communication, August 22, 2014). See Figure 3.

Figure 3: A demonstration of the standardized 6-position Fon Nan
Source: Photo taken by the author
Factors contributing to Fon Nan in the royal palace

There were four factors that triggered Fon Nan in the royal palace, the influence of the cultural reform in the royal administration system in Bangkok spread to Nan via Chiang Mai. Next, dancing performance helped support the town master’s prestige and the people’s civilization and happiness. Furthermore, the dance performed by the town master indicated respect and modesty given to the town guest as if he were part of the family. Finally, the belief in Buddhism made the Lanna locals attend any charity event and prepared the best dance they could afford.

Stage III The spread of Fon Long Nan out of the royal palace

Fon Nan dance started to spread out of the royal palace in 1931 after the death of the town master and the absolute monarchy in which the town administration was run by a town master was transformed to democracy. The status of Nan changed from a town to be a province. The town palace became part of the national property. The children of the deceased town master moved to live elsewhere. Thus, the locals began to learn and practice Fon Nan from what they had observed. The dance performed by the locals became popular in a charity event, oar racing ceremony, welcoming ceremony, and any other traditional ceremonies. In 1956, women began to dance on a racing oar. Therefore, Fon Nan in the royal palace was first named as Fon Long Nan. However, later on the dance was also performed on land, and it was still called Fon Long Nan.

Subsequently, the demand of Fon Long Nan drastically increased, resulting in a dance competition between communities, adaptation, renovation, and reform of the dance. Thus, Fon Long Nan in different communities obviously varied. According to the results, the researcher could categorize Fon Long Nan variants into three types according to the dominant origins.

The first type of Fon Long Nan that was influenced by Fon Nan in the royal palace. The leading guru who taught this type of Fon Nan to the locals outside the palace was Prasert Khruehanon. Mr. Khruehanon observed and memorized the performance of Jao Noi Boonyok Songmueanggan and subsequently trained the locals and villager scouts in the Phyaphoo community in order to dance in special occasions such as democracy celebration, New Year celebration, Buddhist Krathin ceremony, temple ceremony, and oar racing ceremony. The dance positions included 1. Wai - Worshiping, 2. Bua Plad – Changing Lotus, 3. Pla Liam Had – Fish on the riverbank, 4. Ka Tak Peek – Crow spreading wings, 5. Kiew Klaw – Hairstyling, and 6. Haeng Peek Hak – Pent eagle with broken wings. This type of Fon Long Nan slightly differed from the original but it still maintained the same step pattern - rising each of the feet up high while stepping without moving forward, as shown in Figure 4.
Another type of *Fon Long Nan* was influenced by the belief and way of life. The dance was renovated in 1956 by Mueandee Thepprasit, the foremost respectful teacher, with the design that fit for female dancers. Teacher Thepprasit who resided in Don Than Village in Wiang Sa District located next to the Nan River, giving him chances to observe oarsmen’s dancing and continually practice on his own. *Fon Long Nan* was first performed by women in Don Mai Village, with tender dance style created under the inspiration from a monk ordination ceremony. This type of dance had 5 positions including 1. *Wai* – Worshiping, 2. *Mae Thoranee Rood Muay Phom* – Worshiping Mother Earth, 3. *Bok Boi Thewada* – Worshiping angels, 4. *Plian Pha* – Changing attire to become a monk, and 5. *Kep Dok Bua Thawai Phra* – Collecting lotus flowers for a newly-ordained monk. See the dance demonstration in Figure 5.
Figure 5: A demonstration of the *Fon Long Nan* dance of Ban Don Mai Village  
Source: Photo taken by the author

The third type of *Fon Long Nan* was initiated due to the impact of the national standardized dance patterns by the Department of Fine Arts spreading into the Nan Province. The significant foundation of this dispersion was the nationalism policy established by Major General Plaek Phibunsongkram, the Prime Minister during World War II (1938 – 1945). This basis led to standardization of the natural *Tone* dance (a circle dance) by adding certain standard dance positions from Thai classical dance of the Ministry of Fine Arts support of Thai dance education which was provided to soldiers, students, general teachers and teachers of Thai dances, as well as general people. In 1969, the government arranged training and camping sessions for villager scouts. The training also included *Fon Long Nan* trained by duty teachers of dancing performance. The training and camp participation helped make members loyal to the nation, religion, the monarch, and democracy and prevent the influence of communism. In 1993, the Nan Municipal Office requested for a winning award of the oars’ beauty contest from Her Royal Highness Princes Chularbhorn, resulting in the first serious competition of females’ *Fon Long Nan* on the oar. This also brought about the improvement of *Fon Long Nan* by adding standard Thai classical dance positions such as *Sod Soi Mala Peng* – Wearing a body decorating chain, *Phrom See Na* - Four-faced Brahma, *Bua Choo Fak* – Flourishing lotus. See the demonstration in Figure 6.
In addition, the Jeep position - touching the thumb and index finger – was applied and the low rise of each foot while stepping was used, instead of the original high rise. This reformed dance was popular in the year 1952 owing to several factors, as follows.

Factors contributing to the scattering of Fon Long Nan
The first factor that made the reformed Fon Long Nan well-known was the value of the dance itself. Common people realized that the dance was previously limited to the superior society. When it could be generally taught and performed by anyone, it became famous and quickly widespread. As a result, the dance positions differed increasingly, for the positions were neither written nor recorded.

Another aspect that supported the dispersion of Fon Long Nan was cultural transfer by teachers who went to study elsewhere and brought back the knowledge of standard dances, and hence used it to create Fon Long Nan and taught it to students and the locals nearby. This made the distribution of the standard Fon Long Nan.

The third impact was the government policy. That is, the Nationalism policy of Major General Plaek Phibunsongkram supported the standardization of Tone dance performance and the dance study, resulting in the revision of Fon Long Nan. In addition, the government managed trainings for villager scouts with help from the dance teachers who taught Fon Long Nan to dancers from generation to generation. Consequently, the reformed dance was rapidly circulated and cherished.
Finally, the modification of the oar racing ceremony by adding a beauty award from Her Royal Highness Princess Chulabhorn to an oar race competition helped stimulate the alterations of Fon Long Nan, the essential performance on any racing oar.

Thus far, Fon Long Nan was distributed out of the royal palace, but its pattern originated by Jao Noi Bunyok with an adaptation of Fon Lai Ngam was still commonly preserved, for example, the high rise of each foot while stepping without moving forward. Subsequently, the dance standards proposed by the Department of Fine Arts made Fon Long Nan vary village by village, teacher by teacher. The movements of feet and fingers, following the standard Thai dancing performance offered by the Department of Fine Arts yielded the extensive variations of Fon Long Nan.

**Stage IV The Standardization of Fon Long Nan by the Office of the Nan Culture**

The standardization of Fon Long Nan by the Office of the Nan Culture resulted from the popularity of Nan tourism. The provincial community agreed in consensus that a strategic plan to promote Nan tourism should be established. As tourists enjoyed the unique style of life in Nan, the “Old Town Life Presentation” was promoted. As a result, the Office of the Nan Culture was in charge of the preservation of Nan’s traditional culture and society. Additionally, because Thailand’s Educational Policy in 1999 allowed local curricula related to the area where a school was located, the local Nan curriculum, together with the Fon Long Nan dance, was created and has been utilized in schools since 2005. Outstandingly, the knowledge of Fon Long Nan has been taught in schools in the Educational Area I of the Nan Province.

Nonetheless, according to the National Policy in 2008, the Committee Board of the National Culture in the Ministry of Culture who were responsible for cultural renovation, promotion, and preservation required for the Nan Office of Culture to run a town project of Fon Long Nan knowledge transmission. In fact, this is administered under the desire of Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Sirindhorn who kindly helped the Nan people preserve their own culture. According to the field investigation, every village and district had a divergent pattern of Fon Long Nan. Therefore, the Provincial Office of Culture called for a meeting of experts in the local culture such as dance teachers from various schools and Fon Long Nan professional dancers from every area, in order to develop the shared standard of Fon Long Nan dance performance.

Some of the positions were adapted from the existing ones while others were created. The standard Fon Long Nan performance was recorded in a DVD form and written in books. Afterwards, the DVDs and books were broadcasted and distributed to schools in the elementary and secondary levels, as well as communities and villages all over the Nan Province for education and presentation purposes. In addition, the training of Fon Long Nan was also offered to representatives of local communities and educational office. There were approximately 120 trainees of the training, with 100 representatives from 10 schools, 10 representatives each, and about 20 representatives from the local communities. After the promotion of the aforementioned standard Fon Long Nan, 500 dance professionals from Nan Technical College, Nan Allied Technical College, and the dance professionals from various communities were recruited by the Provincial Office of Culture and performed the first standard Fon Long Nan to welcome HRH Crown Princess Sirindhorn at the Nan airport on February 23rd, 2009. This brought extraordinary pride to all the Nan population. Since then, the 9-position Fon Long Nan standardized by the Provincial Office of Culture has been highly approved and performed to welcome royal family members, town guests and in other crucial provincial events. Eventually, it turned to be the standard dance of the province nowadays.

Factors contributing to the standardization of Fon Long Nan by the Nan Provincial Office of Culture
There are three factors that influenced the standardization of Fon Long Nan. The first influence was the strategic plan for tourism promotion resulting in the preservation of the old town society and the cultural project of the responsible office.
The second impact was the educational development by the Committee Board of Primary Education, resulting in the increment of local curricula in order for students to study local history of life-living, wisdoms, arts, and culture. Hence, *Fon Long Nan* was standardized and promoted by the Nan Office of Culture in order to reach the pedagogical goal.

The last stimulus of *Fon Long Nan* standardization was the inspiration of using the dance to welcome royal family members, thus, it was essential to raise the pride and value of the dance. With the kind support from HRH Crown Princess Sirindhorn, the locals gathered and helped preserve the culture in a long run.

Table 1: Summary of the development of the *Fon Long Nan* dance and supportive factors

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Year of reforms</th>
<th>Dance patterns</th>
<th>Supportive factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Period 1</td>
<td>The dance on the racing oar</td>
<td>810</td>
<td>- freestyle dance on the oar</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Since 1816</td>
<td>- freestyle dance on the racing oar</td>
<td>- the way of life during the high water rise period after the rainy season</td>
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<td>- <em>Fon Lai Ngam</em> integrated dance on the racing oar</td>
<td>- Buddhist events</td>
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<td>- the strategy of Nan’s royal administration office and the locals</td>
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<td>- the political tool used as respect and modesty paid to the central authorities</td>
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| Period 2 | The Royal Fon Nan | 1926 - 1931 | - dance with organized rhythm counts, procession, and dance positions, as well as stepping with high raised feet | - The spreading of royal palace in Bangkok dance to Nan’s royal palace via Chiang Mai |
| | | | | - the sovereign power of Nan’s ruler |
| | | | | - the tool for making friends with town guests |
| | | | | - Buddhist events |

<p>| Period 3 | Fon Nan outside the royal palace | 1937 - 1955 | - transformed dance positions, except foot stepping | - democracy replacing absolute monarch and town rulers |
| | 1956-2007 | Variations of the dance - dance in accordance with the local belief and way of life - dance in accordance with | - the locals’ high pride of the dance |
| | | | | - women were allowed to dance on the oar and changed the name to “Fon Long Nan” |
| | | | | - the government policies |</p>
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<td>the standard Thai classical dance by the Department of Fine Arts</td>
<td>such as Nationalism. - increment of the royal award of beauty in the oar racing contest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Period 4</td>
<td>Fon Long Nan standardized by the cultural office of Nan Province</td>
<td>2008 - present - 9 standardized positions proposed by the Provincial Office of Culture</td>
<td>- the national policy for Nan tourism promotion - the frequent visits of royal family members - the need for the standard dance used in school</td>
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In conclusion, *Fon Long Nan* has been part and parcel in the way of life of the Nan locals since the formation of the town. It is Nan’s identity. Recently, the Nan Province has been continually confronting with various factors that influence the dance reform, resulting in cultural integration. In addition, the original *Fon Long Nan* dance was not transferred to younger generations because only the standard 9-position *Fon Long Nan* has been recently promoted, taught, and performed. In contrast, chance of performing the original *Fon Long Nan* and its variants has been gradually decreasing, and the former revisions of *Fon Long Nan* are at a high risk of disappearing, eventually. Accordingly, everybody should help reserve, renovate, and promote the knowledge and performance of all types of *Fon Long Nan* - as desired by HRH Crown Princess Sirindhorn.
References


