

Gisa Jähnichen

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# Studies on Music and Dance Cultures in Laos



Lao | Khmu | Hmong | Katu | Brau | Kado | Alak | Tarieng |  
Ta Oi | Nghe | Xek | Katang | Bru | Jahoen | Lue | Pray

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Edited by Kongdeuane Nettavong

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# Studies on Music and Dance Cultures in Laos

ການສຶກສາກ່ຽວກັບວັດທະນະທຳດົນຕີ ແລະ ການຟ້ອນໃນປະເທດລາວ

ຄຳນຳ

## Kongdeuane Nettavong

ການສຶກສາ 12 ຫົວຂໍ້ ຊຶ່ງໄດ້ຖືກນຳມາຈັດພິມໃນປຶ້ມເຫຼັ້ມນີ້ ເປັນການດຳເນີນການສຶກສາໃນໄລຍະ 10 ປີທີ່ຜ່ານມາ. ຈຳນວນໜຶ່ງໄດ້ຖືກນຳສະເໜີໃນກອງປະຊຸມວິຊາການຫຼາຍຄັ້ງ ແລະ ສະເໜີໃນຫຼາຍພາສາທີ່ແຕກຕ່າງກັນມາແລ້ວ. ຕໍ່ໄປ ການສຶກສາເຫຼົ່ານີ້ຈະຖືກຂະຫຍາຍຕໍ່ຍອດ ແລະ ມີການປັບປຸງໃຫ້ມີຄວາມອຸດົມສົມບູນຕາມສະຖານະພາບຂອງຄວາມຮູ້ໃນປະຈຸບັນ.

*ພະລັກ ແລະ ພະລາມ* ໃນລະຄອນຟ້ອນເລື່ອງ *ຮາມາຢານາ (ລາມມະກຽນ)* ຂອງນະຄອນຫຼວງວຽງຈັນ ຄົ້ນຄວ້າລັກສະນະຕົ້ນຕໍຂອງ ພະລັກ ແລະ ພະລາມ ຂອງນະຄອນຫຼວງວຽງຈັນໃນລະຄອນຟ້ອນເລື່ອງ ລາມມະກຽນ. ບັນຫາສຳຄັນຈຳນວນໜຶ່ງທີ່ນຳມາສົນທະນາແມ່ນບັນຫາກ່ຽວກັບ ບົດບາດຍິງ-ຊາຍ ໃນການສະແດງບົດບາດຕົ້ນຕໍຂອງ (ພະລາມ ແລະ ພະລັກ) ແລະ ໜ້າທີ່ຂອງດົນຕີໃນການອະທິບາຍພາລະບົດບາດດັ່ງກ່າວ.

ເພງກ່ອມເດັກຂອງຜູ້ຊາຍ ເປັນການສຶກສາເພງກ່ອມເດັກສຳລັບຂັບກ່ອມເດັກນ້ອຍໆ ໂດຍຜູ້ຊາຍເທົ່ານັ້ນ ທີ່ພົບເຫັນຢູ່ບາງຊຸມຊົນໃນທົ່ວປະເທດລາວ. ຜົນການສຶກສາພົບວ່າ ການແບ່ງຄວາມຮັບຜິດຊອບຂຶ້ນ ກັບປະເພດຂອງການຜະລິດກະສິກຳຢູ່ພາຍໃນຊຸມຊົນ ຊຶ່ງມັນອາດຈະເປັນເຫດຜົນສຳລັບປະກົດການທີ່ພົບເຫັນເຊັ່ນນີ້. ການສຶກສາຫົວຂໍ້ດັ່ງກ່າວຍັງຊ່ວຍໃຫ້ຮູ້ເຖິງ ການເອົາຊະນະຄວາມອະຄະຕິ ທີ່ມີຜົນມາຈາກຄວາມເຂົ້າໃຈຜິດ ກ່ຽວກັບຄວາມກ້າວໜ້າທາງສັງຄົມ.

ການເສບດົນຕີປະສານກັນເປັນວົງ ໃນພິທີກຳຂອງແຂວງຈຳປາສັກ ເປັນການສຶກສາກ່ຽວກັບປະຫວັດຄວາມເປັນມາ ແລະ ສະຖານະພາບ ປັດຈຸບັນຂອງການເສບດົນຕີ

ປະສານກັນ ໃນພິທີກຳຂອງແຂວງຈຳປາສັກ ຊຶ່ງຖືກນຳມາໃຊ້ເປັນຕົ້ນຕໍຢູ່ໃນງານ ບຸນມະໂຫລານທາງພຸດທະສາສະໜາ ທີ່ວັດພູ. ບັນຫາກ່ຽວກັບການປົກປັກຮັກສາ ແລະ ສ້າງປະເພນີຄືນໃໝ່ ເຊັ່ນດຽວກັນກັບບາງບັນຫາໃນຄວາມເຂົ້າໃຈກ່ຽວກັບ ມໍລະດົກທີ່ບໍ່ເປັນວັດຖຸ ທີ່ໄດ້ຮັບການສົນທະນາກັນ.

ກອງວັດ ໃນພາກເໜືອຂອງປະເທດລາວ ເປັນເຕັກນິກວິທະຍາຊຶ່ງແບ່ງອອກເປັນ 2 ປະເພດຫຼັກ ຄື: ປະເພດພື້ນເມືອງລາວ ແລະ ປະເພດພື້ນເມືອງຈີນ. ການສຶກສານີ້ ເປັນການສຳຫຼວດປະຫວັດຄວາມເປັນມາ ແລະ ແນວຄິດຂອງປະກົດການດັ່ງກ່າວ ດ້ວຍວິທີການປຸງບທຽບ.

ທຳນອງເພງຂອງຊົນເຜົ່າມົ້ງ ເປັນບົດຄວາມກ່ຽວກັບ ຄວາມຫຼາກຫຼາຍ ຂອງທຳນອງເພງຂອງ ຊົນເຜົ່າມົ້ງ. ການເກັບຮວບຮວມຂໍ້ມູນ ຂອງທ້ອງສຳເນົາ ດົນຕີພື້ນເມືອງໃນປະເທດລາວ (Archives of Traditional Music in Laos - ATML) ເປັນການຖອດຫຼີຈິດກ່າຍ ແລະ ການວິເຄາະລາຍລະອຽດ ເພື່ອຈັດແບ່ງຊະນິດ ແລະ ປະເພດຂອງທຳນອງເພງດັ່ງກ່າວ.

ເຄື່ອງດົນຕີທີ່ໃຊ້ປາກຂອງຊົນເຜົ່າມົ້ງ ໃນແຂວງຫົວພັນ ແລະ ແຂວງຊຽງຂວາງ ດ້ວຍຄວາມມັກ ໃນການຫຼິ້ນເຄື່ອງດົນຕີທີ່ໃຊ້ປາກ ມີຈຳນວນຫຼວງຫຼາຍ ຂອງປະຊາ ຊົນເຜົ່າມົ້ງ ໃນສອງແຂວງເຫຼົ່ານີ້ ຂອງປະເທດລາວ. ການສຶກສາຄັ້ງນີ້ ອີງໃສ່ຂໍ້ມູນຈາກການ ເຮັດວຽກໃນພາກສະໜາມ ໃນປີ 1999 - 2001 ທີ່ມີຄວາມອຸດົມສົມບູນ.

ເພງຊຸ່່ຍຂອງຊົນເຜົ່າກຶມມຸ ເພງຊຸ່່ຍຂອງຊົນເຜົ່າກຶມມຸ ເປັນປະເພດພິເສດ ຊຶ່ງເປັນທີ່ມາຂອງ ການເບົາ ແລະ ການຮ້ອງໃນເວລາດຽວກັນ. ເປັນການສຶກສາ ສຳຫຼວດພູມຫຼັງ ທາງວັດທະນະທຳ ແລະ ຄວາມໝາຍຂອງເພງຊຸ່່ຍ ຂອງ ຊົນເຜົ່າກຶມມຸ ແລະ ການສົນທະນາກ່ຽວກັບອະນາຄົດ ຂອງການ ຝຶກປະຕິບັດດົນຕີ ທີ່ມີລັກສະນະພິເສດນີ້.

ພ້ອມແບບຊົນເຜົ່າ ແລະ ສີ່ລະດັບຂອງການສຶກສາ ວັດທະນະທຳຊົນເຜົ່າໃນລາວ ເປັນການອຸທິດຕົນເພື່ອເປັນຕົວແທນ ທາງວັດທະນະທຳ ຂອງຊົນເຜົ່າກຸ່ມນ້ອຍ

ຢູ່ໃນເຫດການທົ່ວໄປໃນລະດັບຊາດ ຂອງ ສ. ປ. ປ. ລາວ ແລະ ອົງການຈັດຕັ້ງ ຂອງລັດ ແລະ ສະທ້ອນໃຫ້ເຫັນ ເຖິງຄວາມຕ້ອງການລະດັບຊາດ ໃນວັດທະນະທຳ ດັ່ງເດີມ.

ເຄື່ອງດົນຕີທີ່ນຳໃຊ້ເຂົ້າໃນພິທີກຳ ຂອງຊົນເຜົ່າອາລັກ ໃນແຂວງເຊກອງ ແລະ ແຂວງສາລະວັນ ເປັນຫົວຂໍ້ຂອງເອກະສານສະບັບນີ້. ໄດ້ວິເຄາະຈັດແບ່ງປະເພດ ເຄື່ອງດົນຕີ ແລະ ການປ່ຽນແປງ ໃນການດຳເນີນພິທີກຳ ທີ່ດົນຕີມີສ່ວນກ່ຽວຂ້ອງ.

ການຫຼິ້ນແບັງບ່ອງ ຂອງປະຊາຊົນເຜົ່າເບີຣາ ໃນພາກໃຕ້ຂອງປະເທດລາວ ເປັນວັດທະນະທຳ ທີ່ມີລັກສະນະພິເສດ ຊຶ່ງວິເຄາະໃນລາຍລະອຽດ ແລະ ສະພາບຕົວຈິງ. ເນັ້ນໜັກໃສ່ຄວາມຫຼາກຫຼາຍ ຂອງໂຄງສ້າງສຽງ ທີ່ສ້າງຜ່ານ ລະບົບ ຂອງເຕັກນິກການຫຼິ້ນ.

ການໄຫວ້ຂອງປະຊາຊົນ ໃນງານບຸນມະໂຫລານດົນຕີ ໃນໄລຍະປີໃໝ່ ປະກອບດ້ວຍ ອຸດຂອງການຫຼິ້ນບັ້ງໄມ້ໄຜ່ ຊຶ່ງຕັ້ງລຽງລາຍ ຕາມເງື່ອນໄຂ ສະພາບແວດລ້ອມ ທີ່ພົບເຫັນອ້ອມຮອບບ້ານ. ຂະບວນການຂອງການຕັດ ແລະ ການຕັ້ງສຽງ ຫຼື ປັບສຽງ ກໍເຊັ່ນດຽວກັນກັບ ຄວາມໝາຍຂອງການຫຼິ້ນດົນຕີ ທີ່ຖືກນຳມາສົນທະນາປຶກສາຫາລື ໃນລາຍລະອຽດ.

ບຸນນະມັດສະການພະທາດຫຼວງ ແລະ ມາດຕະຖານຄວາມຊຶ່ງຈຳ ທາງວັດທະນະທຳ ໃນປະຈຸບັນ ຂອງ ສ. ປ. ປ. ລາວ ແມ່ນຫົວຂໍ້ຂອງການຮ່ວມກັນກັບ ທ່ານ ນາງ ທອງບາງ ຫອມສິມບັດ. ໄດ້ນຳສະເໜີຫຼາຍພາກທີ່ແຕກຕ່າງກັນ ຂອງບຸນນະມັດ ສະການພະທາດຫຼວງ ຈາກກຸ່ມມອງຂອງການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມຂອງດົນຕີ. ບັນຫາ ຂອງການເປັນຕົວແທນ ທາງວັດທະນະທຳ ແລະ ການຕໍ່ລອງທາງສັງຄົມ ເປັນການສົນທະນາ ຊຶ່ງອາດຈະຊ່ວຍໃຫ້ເຂົ້າໃຈ ການພັດທະນາວັດທະນະທຳດົນຕີ ທີ່ພົບເຫັນໃນ ສ. ປ. ປ. ລາວ.

ສາສະດາຈານ ດຣ. **Gisa Jähnichen** ປະຈຸບັນ ເປັນອາຈານສອນ ແລະ ເປັນນັກຄົ້ນຄ້ວາ ປະຈຳມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລ Putra ປະເທດມາເລເຊຍ. ທ່ານໄດ້

ສຶກສາຄົ້ນຄ້ວາໂຄງການ ແລະ ສະໜັບສະໜູນ ການປົກປັກຮັກສາສິລະປະ ການສະແດງ ໃນອາຊີຕາເວັນອອກສ່ຽງໃຕ້ ມານານກວ່າ 25 ປີແລ້ວ.

# ***Phalak* and *Phalam* in the *Ramayana* Dance Drama of Vientiane**

[Revised and extended version of: Re-Designing the Role of *Phalak* and *Phalam* in Modern Lao *Ramayana*. *Wacana Seni, Journal of Arts Discourse*, 6, 1-42.]

Parts of the story of *Phalak* and *Phalam* (Lakshman and Rama of the classical *Ramayana*) are the inspiration of dance traditions in past and present Laos. In the past 25 years, special local styles and their varying understanding of different roles were replaced by a uniformed frame of dance performances. Nevertheless, dancers and musicians from families with a long tradition in dancing and teaching classical dance and its music were fighting against the displacement of local styles.

In Vientiane, the capital of Laos, special complementary aesthetics were re-designed at the National Academy for Dance and Music. The main male roles *Phalak* and *Phalam* emerge in a female interpretation. They are not only performed by female dancers, but they are associated with contemporary female appearances. The understanding of these roles requires obviously a gender opposing performance, thus female dancers seem to be the most appropriate due to special physical and emotional demands of the dance drama. In Vientiane, female dancers in these two important traditional roles became a vital part of modern cultural self-understanding that underlines differences with other local cultures in Laos.

The revitalization of dance traditions in Vientiane was to a great extent supported by the “Archives of Traditional Music in Laos” at the National Library in Vientiane. Re-researching

historical sources, which help to understand local adaptations of seemingly well known literature, and creating audiovisual teaching material were further outcomes of joint efforts, which were undertaken since 1999.

## ***Phalak Phalam***

*Phalak Phalam* is the Lao name of the traditional dance drama *Ramayana*. *Phalak* and *Phalam* are the two young men who play the main male roles. As the only male characters who do not wear masks in that drama, they are responsible for expressing the most established and desired characters of men in any imaginable society.

In Vientiane, the capital of Laos, as well as in some other parts of Southeast Asia, *Phalak* and *Phalam* are represented by female dancers. The tradition of distinctiveness in the appearance of *Phalak* and *Phalam* emphasizes special social skills such as controlling peace and conflict among people, infallibility of decisions, generosity and wisdom, vigour and determination, which are articulated in countless paintings, sculptures, and woodcarvings. On the other hand, male dancers are specialised in performing ghosts like *Totsakan*, animals like *Hanuman* and social outsiders such as the lonely monk *Phaleunxy*.

What does it mean in terms of their social self-perception? What does it say about their gender construction expressed in music and motion? How did the Lao society change due to increasing urbanisation, and how do these changes evidently influence cultural representations of local traditions in public dance performances? Did the characters change or did the present view on these characters change compared to social reality?

The following article aims to throw light on these questions within the frame of our contemporary understanding of the *Ramayana*. Furthermore, local and historical differences can become clearer by unravelling the close relationship between social changes and cultural perspectives on character ideals represented in dance movements and music. This article starts with a closer view on literary sources. Then, the relevant part, from which the dance drama is created, will be summarized. The following discussion will outline some preconditions of the performance, its structure and local variety, as well as the importance of music in order to understand the roles.

## **Literary Sources**

The modern version of the Lao *Ramayana* is one of the best known literatures of this small inland country. Sachchidanand Sahai describes in the introduction to his Lao edition: “I have chosen to publish the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* first, primarily because, far from being simply the translation of a foreign narrative into the Lao language, it constitutes one of the finest examples of Lao literature (Joshi 1981: 21-28). In the course of an audience graciously granted to me, His Majesty King Sri Savang Vatthana described this work as a ‘moment of Lao literature executed in the purest Lao style’.” (Sahai 1973: XVII). The mentioned audience was granted on the 26th September 1972. The Lao *Ramayana* is inseparably connected with the classical dance drama of the Lao majority and it is understood in many local variations, from which the *Phalak-Phalam* of Vientiane is one of the most remarkable interpretations.

*Phalak Phalam* refers to Lakshman and Rama. Sachchidanand Sahai remarks, “The name of Phra Lam [*Phalam*] is invariably preceded by his younger brother’s, Phra Lak [*Phalak*]; because this combination produces a

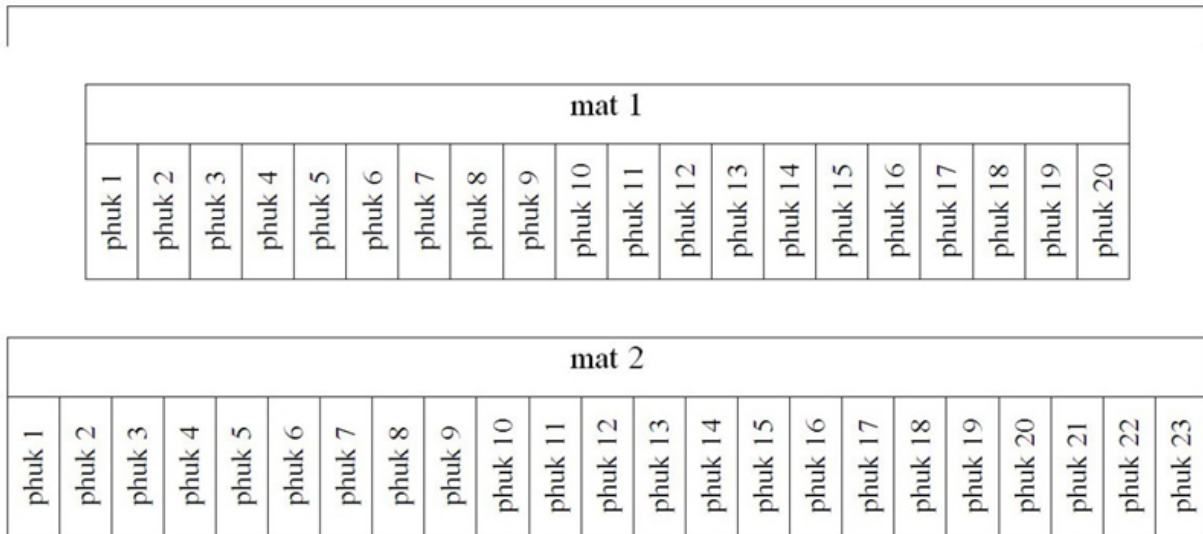


rhythmic effect” (Sahai 1973: XXIV). Sahai’s explanation was confirmed by most linguists, although there were further suggestions of giving this order another cultural sense. To some, *Phalak* is supposed to be brave due to the voluntariness of his deeds, whereas *Phalam* as the King never had alternatives to demonstrate his prowess. This explanation was provided by elder dancers and teachers at the National Academy for Dance and Music who were familiar with the anonymous manuscript of the village *Ban Naxon Tay*, which was completed approximately in 1933.

The dance drama in Vientiane is based on *The Phra Lak Phra Lam or The Phra Lam Sadok*<sup>1</sup> (see [appendix 1](#)) that differs significantly from other models in the region and has its roots in written sources at least from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century found in various monasteries and villages from *Roi Et* in North Eastern Thailand, the temple *Wat Phra Keo* in Vientiane and the temple *Wat Kang Tha* in the village *Ban Bo O*. Further manuscripts discovered by unknown monks originate from the villages of *Ban Naxon Tay*, *Ban Hom* and the temple *Wat Nong Bon*.

Fig. 1: The structure of the manuscript of *Roi Et* is shown below:

Complete work (manuscript of *Roi Et*)



Some basic manuscripts of the modern version of the *Ramayana* which are available include those found in:

*Roi Et* in North Eastern Thailand, which consists of two parts called *mat*. As shown in the scheme below, the first *mat* consists of twenty sections called *phuk* while the second comprises 23 *phuks*. One *phuk* is a bundle of palm leaves with engraved Pali or Lao text. One leaf carries approximately ten sentences of any kind of prose. The text is continuously written without regard on the leaf's format. Only the whole *phuk* is considered to be a definite unit of the story. The manuscript of *Roi Et* does not indicate any date (Puri and Sarahiran 1949). At present it is preserved in the Thai National Library, Bangkok.

Fig. 2: The traditional way of collecting literature: Cabinets with their *mat* sections, in which the *phuks* are placed covered by white cotton bags. It is important to keep the exact order of *phuks* per *mat*. On the right side there is an ancient book shrine, which normally consists of eight *mats*.



*Wat Phra Keo in Vientiane*, which originally consisted of 43 *phuks*, but one half of the manuscript is *missing*. The remainder was preserved in the Lao Ministry of Cults in Vientiane and is presently kept in the Ministry of Culture and Information.

*Wat Kang Tha in Ban Bo O*, which consists of 44 *phuks*, divided into four *mats*, each comprising 11 *phuks*. Some of them are missing. The manuscript was copied in the year 2476 according to the Buddhist calendar (1933).

*Ban Naxon Tay*, which contains a complete text and is carefully preserved in the monastery of *Ban Naxon Tay*, 40 km southward from Vientiane. It consists of 43 *phuks*

divided into four *mats*. In the first part there are 10 *phuks*, and in each of the remaining three there are 11 *phuks*.

The manuscript of *Ban Hom* belongs to Mr. Chan Kam of *Ban Hom*, presenting another complete and well-preserved text. The second *mat* of the manuscripts from Ban Naxon Tay and *Ban Hom* contains several dates. Although the text is easily readable, it is not clear, how many *phuks* of the four *mats* have been counted due to the fact that some *phuk* binders are broken thus many palm leaves are separated from their *phuk*-cover. Later Sachchidanand Sahai added (Sahai 1973: XLV), "Mr. Chan Kam, the owner of the manuscript informed me that his maternal grandfather, Phraya Ratsombat, an elephant merchant, had it reproduced from a manuscript which he had borrowed from a monastery at Ubon against a monetary security. Due to his great age, Mr. Chan Kam does not remember the name of the monastery, though he himself stayed there for some time. He recollects only that it was a very big monastery on the banks of the Mun river in Ubon".

A manuscript of *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, identical to the manuscript of *Wat Phra Keo*, appears to be preserved in *Phnom Penh*. This manuscript is probably of Southern Lao origin, which cannot be confirmed due to its restricted access.

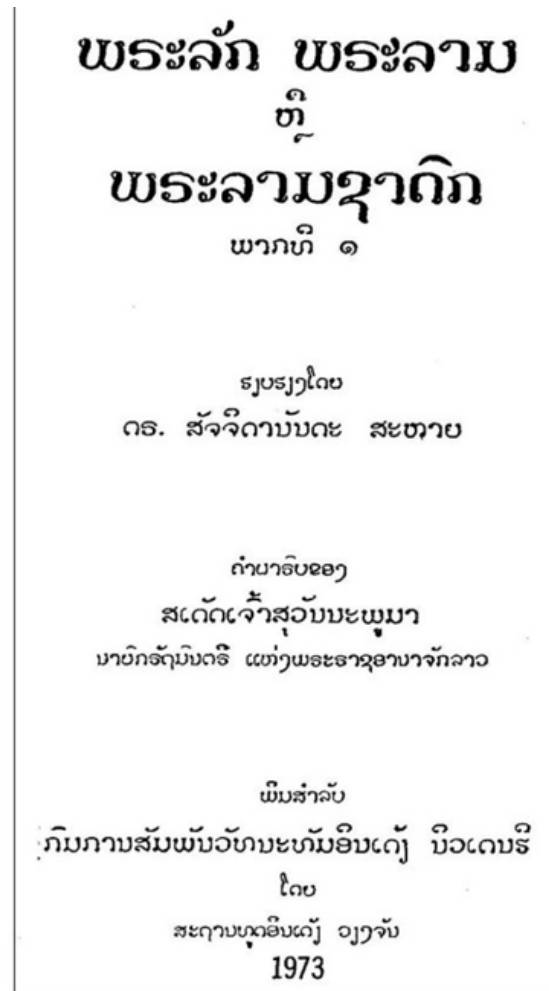
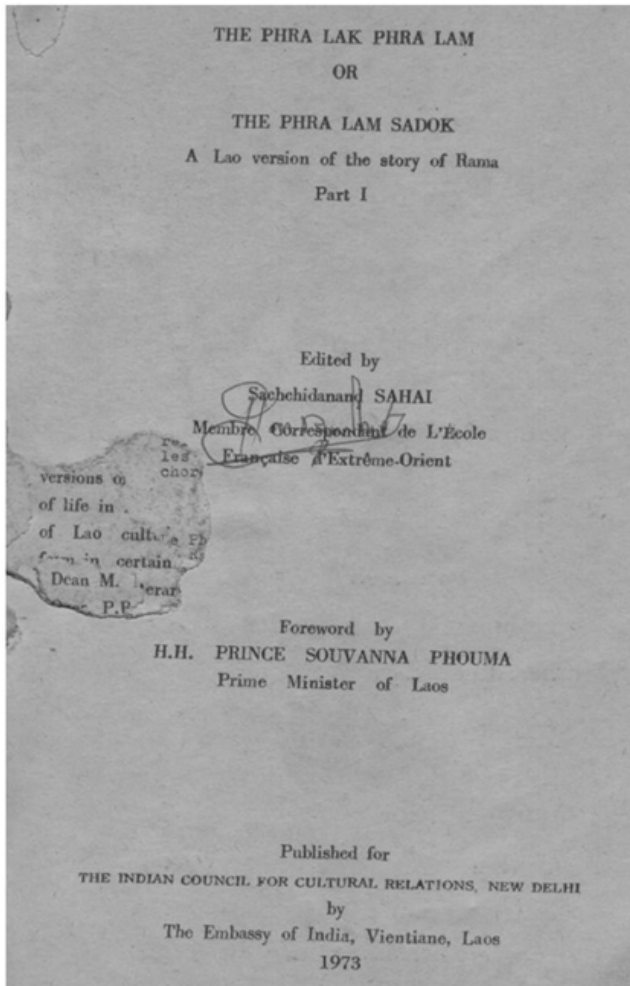
The manuscript of *Wat Nong Bon* is incomplete and does not contain any date. Only the first, second and fourth *mat* of this manuscript are traceable.

In addition to the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* published by Sachchidanand Sahai, the following four versions are known to exist in Laos:

1. the *Pommachak* in *Tay Lu*, found in *Muong Sing*;

2. the *Lanka Noi*;
3. the *Hleuang Khvay Thorapi*, preserved in the Royal Palace of Luang Prabang, and written in *Nyuon* language;
4. and the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* published by the National Library, Vientiane, in 1971 based on a transcription of the manuscript from *Ban Naxon Tay*. It was executed by Vo Thu Tinh and criticized by Sachchidanand Sahai in some elements for its simplification (Sahai 1973: XLI).

Fig.3: Title sheets of the original and of the handmade copy in the National Library of Laos: The *Phra Lak Phra Lam* or *The Phra Lam Sadok* - A Lao Version of the Story of Rama, Part I. Edited by Sachchidanand Sahai, Membre Correspondant de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient. English Introduction XVII - XLV. Published for The Indian Council For Cultural Relations, New Delhi. The Embassy of India, Vientiane, Laos, 1973.



The classic literature preserved in monasteries, rewritten from memory and hence reflecting various versions, mostly consisting of 43 *phuks* in four *mats*, shows only the framework of the story, from which it was taken. Especially the third and the fourth *mat* have been prepared for the dance scenario.

**The Danced Story According to the Tradition of Vientiane**

In the past, before 1960, excellent dancers from Vientiane were mostly co-educated in classical Cambodian dance styles. They could take part in *Ramakien*<sup>2</sup> performances in the lowland provinces of Thailand and they were familiar

with versions from the Royal Court in Luang Prabang and other versions from Chiang Mai.

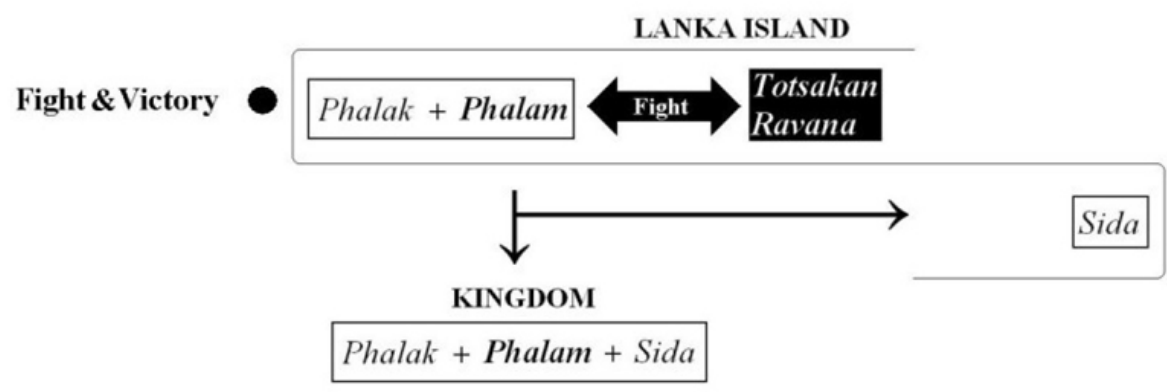
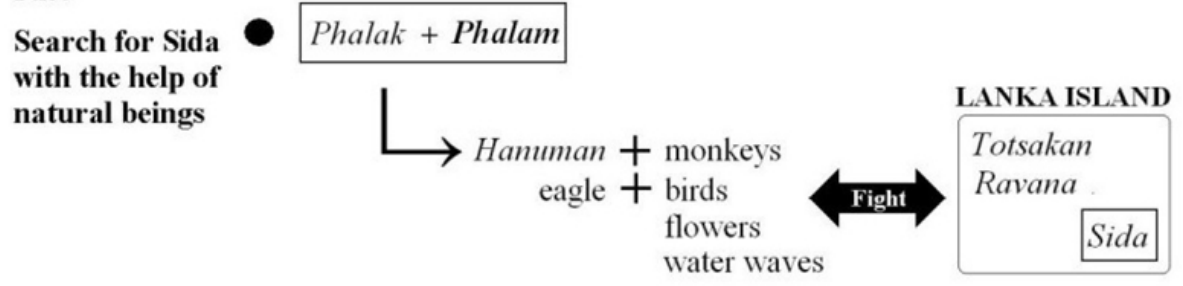
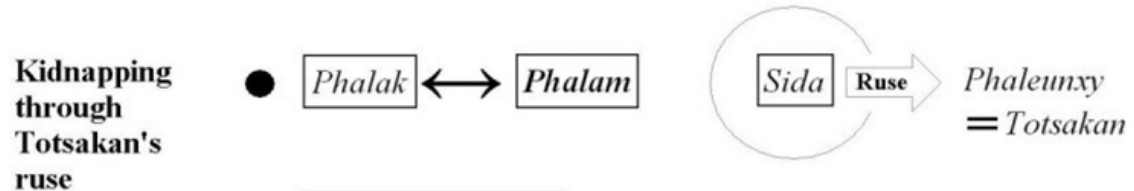
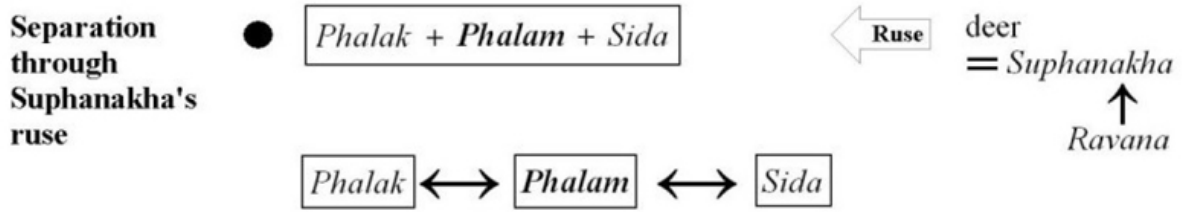
The current generation of teachers at the Academy for Dance and Music in Vientiane, is very much aware of the differences between other performances and its own version. Without doubt they are refining their dance tradition consciously and with a strong intellectual ambition.

The main characters of the *Phalak Phalam* dance drama of Vientiane are quite similar to the standard story:

- *Phalam [Rama]*, the King, living in the forest with his best friend and subsequent brother →
- *Phalak [Lakshman]*, and with →
- *Sida*, his wonderful wife, long-desired by →
- *Totsakan*, who changed for a moment his being into the lonely monk *Phaleunxy* luring *Sida* out of her safe home, and who supports →
- *Suphanakha*, who desires *Phalam* for his beauty and changed into a deer luring *Phalam* away from *Phalak* and *Sida*, and who is a relative of →
- *Ravana*, the humble demon of *Totsakan* who has to fight with →
- *Hanuman*, the eagle and the monkeys, who are on the side of *Phalak* and *Phalam*, supported by the forest's →
- Flowers, trees and water waves, who help *Phalam* to find *Sida*.

Fig. 4: Rough scheme of the danced story according to the Vientiane tradition, which is taken from the fourth *mat*; Separation, kidnapping, search, fight &

victory (white bold arrow = Ruse; black bold arrow = Fight; black slim arrow = Spatial movement. See also [Appendix 1](#)).



The danced story is mainly taken from the 4<sup>th</sup> *mat* with the scenes of the tricky separation of the three friends - *Sida*, *Phalam* and *Phalak*; the kidnapping of *Sida* by *Totsakan* and *Ravana*, the long journey through the forest to the coastline with a dramatic capture of Lanka Island in search for *Sida*; and finally the fight, won by the good heroes *Phalam*, *Phalak*, *Hanuman* and his army of monkeys. Finally *Phalam*



returns to the city with his wife and *Phalak* rules the kingdom. The rough scheme (Fig. 4) of the drama follows this well-known structure, from which various parts can be refined and largely elaborated.

## **Preconditions and Structure of the Performance**

It is always assumed that a part of the whole story is basic knowledge, for example, the first and the first four *phuks* of the second *mat*, which is the first and the end of the seventh *kanda* in the *Valmiki* version (see also [Appendix 1](#)). Therefore, it is not included in the dance acts, but it plays a role as the fundamental mood of the performance. It is a contextual precondition to understand the way of perception through the audience. The development scheme of the drama concerning the main persons *Phalak* and *Phalam* is based on these assumingly known topics. Hence, the audience is supposed to have certain knowledge of the second *mat* of the traditional literature, which consists of the following:

- *Phalam* and *Phalak* are brothers. Before they were born, their father had an unbalanced relationship with his wives. Poor victims of his thoughtless ambitions in the past cursed him to feel burdened with guilt;
- the birth of *Phalak* and *Phalam* and their circumstances as twins; although *Phalak* is the 'pathfinder', he is considered to be the younger brother, since *Phalam* was the child with the king's sign as the incarnation of God Vishnu;
- the safe life of *Phalak* and *Phalam* in comfort and luxury, well protected from danger and bad influences;

- their first challenge in early youth when *Phalam* was fighting against the demons of the forest and rescued the villagers, a deed, which was noticed with unease by *Totsakan* and *Ravana* in the distant Lanka island;
- the adulthood of the brothers and the marriage of *Phalam*, which was arranged with a special intention; *Phalam* used a sacred bow that represented Shiva in another appearance. Only the one who respects that bow in the right way, could win the decisive competition;
- The drama's key incident, which is rarely performed in any dance drama related to the *Ramayana* story, occurs prior to their birth. In this case, it refers to the obligation of *Phalam's* father who had to finally decide against *Phalam* as his successor to the throne due to the fact that he was provoking a weak moment among his wives when one was blackmailing him.
- *Phalam's* voluntary willingness to accept the consequences of his father's retribution; he settles in the forest with his most faithful friends: his wife *Sida* and his friend, brother and general *Phalak*.

All these details - mostly spread orally or through public reading in the monasteries - form the background of *Phalak's* and *Phalam's* reception and evaluation. These imaginations lead the knowing audience to follow the performance from a certain evaluative perspective. The audience interacts through its attention and considers historical preconditions of the story. Thus the infallibility of *Phalam's* and *Phalak's* father as well as the intelligence of *Sida* are questioned. Rather than acting as an independent and creative character, *Sida* (the only real female character) emphasizes the relationship of the two friends.

The real performance is structured from the above mentioned parts of the 4<sup>th</sup> *mat* as shown in [figure 4](#). Important elements in presenting the brave characters of *Phalak* and *Phalam* in the danced story are composed by developing the conflict and using an embedded story, which is merely a small part of the whole literary work and which is largely elaborated and enriched with individual interpretations. This embedded story is closely connected to the core story of the literary drama, culminating in blank despair, because of *Sida's* kidnapping as a result of her weakness, absence of consideration, short thinking and inexperience. In the process of solving this situation, *Phalak* and *Phalam* are benefiting from honors acquired in their early youth. Hence, they experience solidarity from animals and plants of the forest. They seek for a solution of the complex problem through their joint fight against the enemy. Despite earlier misunderstanding, they demonstrate that teamwork wins against lonely fights and a sage wins over an unforgiving character. More importantly is the lesson that a real hero is one who does not easily accept the role of a hero.

Due to the demonstration of good examples in education and noble mindedness, the emphasis on *Phalak's* and *Phalam's* characters was and is still addressed to the whole society, including the numerous female spectators. Therefore the aspect of attentive interaction deriving from background information is especially noteworthy.

The final conclusion of the core story is always open to further embedded stories and generates the conditions for the serial formation of the drama. In the past, various additional parts of the story were performed weekly to entertain the people over a period of months.

## Varying Contents in the Vientiane Version of the Story

The Vientiane version of the story differs from other literary models in various ways. Even the most widespread and simple versions of the *Valmiki Ramayana*, the so called standard-story (see [Appendix 1](#)), describes the birth of Rama and his brothers in this way: “In due course of time Rama [= *Phalam*] was born to Kausalya, Bharata to Kaikeyi, and Sumitra gave birth to two sons: Laxmana [= *Phalak*] and Shatrughna.” (Shah 1999).

The Lao version modifies the birth strongly: *Phalak* is the elder twin of *Phalam*. He cleaned up the way into the world for *Phalam*, the incarnation of God Vishnu. Another easily observed difference is the Lao version of *Suphankha's* goal: *Suphanakha* attacks *Sida*, but not the two brothers. She forgot the reason of her visit to help *Ravana* in conquering *Sida* and to decimate the fighting energy of the two men. She was too fascinated by *Phalam* and *Phalak* and therefore she acts jealously against *Sida*.

A few other surprises refer to the interpretation of *Totsakan's* and *Ravana's* roles. In particular, *Totsakan's* and *Ravana's* fates are narrated from a different viewpoint. In doing so, they give detailed information about the reason of their tragic characters. They are regarded as disrespecting social order and conservative thoughts. The story allows a more differentiated access to their individual backgrounds, marked by injustice against them, despair and revenge. These characteristics are always kept in mind when dancing the story and playing the accompanying music, although the prehistory of *Totsakan* is not the subject of the dance drama. Seen from the perspective of the local audience, some sympathy with these two characters always exists,

which is not found in the version of other regions (Bolland and Singh 2006).

Furthermore, *Hanuman* is considered as the son of *Rama*. He takes on the form of a monkey for three years after having eaten a special fruit called *nikhot*. He lived together with *Nang Phengsi*, the daughter of a sage who deliberately transformed herself into a monkey after the consumption of *nikhot*. The loyalty of *Hanuman* is based on relationship with the two young men rather than on pure sympathy. Thus he is not seen as a representative of the creatures living in the forest or as a symbol of *Phalam's* and *Phalak's* touch with nature. To clarify this point, the forest's nature is kept in a neutral distance to the roles. Other interpretations of *Phalam's* and *Phalak's* attitude towards nature (Sarkar 1983: 210-220) such as their supposed fraternization with all creatures in ideal harmony as a sign of true nobility seem to be quite extreme modernizations.

The most distinguishing feature of the Vientiane version is the emphasis of the uncovered core attributes of the two main characters *Phalam* and *Phalak* resulting with the nearly impossible task of choosing male couples as dancers for these roles, although the classical tradition of surrounding cultures in Thailand, China and Myanmar describe an exclusive cast of male dancers. Similar mixed gender performances are only known in Cambodia (Jacob 1986), where female dancers are trained in male roles as well, although enough male dancers are available. Another interesting resemblance is found in the specific repertoire of gestures and dance movements in Malay shadow theatre practices.

**“Females are the Better Males”**

Searching for a deeper reason regarding this matter of female dancers playing main male roles, I was working with the Vientiane dance ensemble and the lecturers of the Academy for Dance and Music. Mrs. Ladda Phommalath, one of the choreographers, made the following remark on this issue:

In the past, we've already seen that boys cannot dance in the same beautiful manner as girls. Therefore, we teach girls to dance male roles as well. The movement patterns of girls are worked out much more artistically. If we observe a boy dancing this role in the same style as we need it in the drama, he always looks like a homosexual ...

Mr. Metkham Sengkham, a musician playing the spike fiddle *sò* in the *Phalak Phalam* orchestra, added the following:

Girls are soft, springy. Boys are somehow stiff, unpolished, with angular movements, not nice at all. Of course, you may observe boys dancing the roles of *Phalak* and *Phalam*; in Thailand they do so, but we don't have such 'boys' here; you cannot find appropriate boys who are able to perform the dance accordingly. <sup>3</sup>

In fact, in the past at the court of Luang Prabang, the role of *Phalak* and *Phalam* were often played by transgender or homosexual dancers who knew male socialization consciously by reflecting their permanent anti-male acting although at the present very rarely in Laos. Those artists were specialists in performing *Phalak* and *Phalam*. As far as the dancers are completely covered by their masks (see [figures 5a](#) and [5b](#)), it was not a problem to continue acting as a male dancer even after 1975, when the newly proclaimed order of Lao civilization avoided the supposed

decadence of homosexuality as it was observed in Luang Prabang or in the *Thai Khon* dance drama, where transsexual dancers were not viewed as unusual.

Fig. 5a and 5b: Masks of the *Phalak Phalam* of Luang Prabang, workshop close to Wat Xiengthong. The green face is the face of king *Phalam*.



Mrs. Nouth Phouthavongsa, choreographer and lecturer, does not exclude male dancers from the role of *Phalak* and *Phalam*, but in her opinion:

Boys are not nice because of their dance movements. They always appear somewhat fearful, uncomfortable, and clumsy. It requires a lot of time to shape their movements. Have a look at our students; they should move elegantly and easily, just beautifully. We could have male dancers in these roles but it would take a very long time to train them properly.

Despite some of these more or less practical suggestions resulting from the actual situation among the students in Vientiane, there were other ideas as well. Supposedly, I agree with Thongbang Homsombat and Kongdeuane Nettavong, both involved in researching traditional dance as well as basic literature at the National Library that the

reason does not really lie in the doubtful dancing skills of male dancers or in their body quality. It is rather the question if the further development in the changing environment of the growing capital Vientiane modifies male socialization (Homsombat and Nettavong 2005).

In Laos, we can observe contradictory cultural directions which embrace an opening towards regional development through modern media on the one hand and social isolation from certain economic changes on the other. It is well known that in such a prospering environment, manliness is highly propagated by advertisements for Western products as well as by character schemes from television soaps following the modern Euro-American way of life. In relation to “manliness” and the global discussion of gender reception in societies such as Laos, young boys (especially in Vientiane, where access to electricity and media became standard in the late 1990s) change their movements according to their entire motional<sup>4</sup> repertoire. They obviously cannot switch back into the traditional mode of conservative adaptation and humility in their gestures and steps. While representing the movements, they are afraid of coming too close to the modern ‘femaleness’, which changed accordingly from the shy and humble shadows of men in the past to the self-confident, softly moving but firm beings who demand respect in all spheres of life today.

In other words, conservative male heroes such as the king and his best friend, brother and general, embody motional characters of contemporary female appearances. They are of a special “third” gender which seems to be slightly different from transgender or homosexuality. It is moreover a historical reflection of continuity and traditional stability through a complex expression of humankind in its ideal imagination. This imagination has to be demonstrated by *Phalak* and *Phalam* in its contemporary understanding.



## Music and the Changing Role of *Phalak* and *Phalam*

In the dance drama, music plays a very important role, particularly at times of actual disorientation, due to the fact that music is keeping the link to a safe continuity of traditional values. Music also verifies the individuality of the main roles of *Phalak* and *Phalam*.

Music is a significant part of demonstrating the named core attributes of *Phalak* and *Phalam*: “truth, simplicity, love, and worship of God“. The use of different parts of the repertoire, integrating popular melodies and combining different ensemble constellations controls the stability of the role and its incorporated gender.

Whenever the two friends appear, the very slow *pheng phanya doen* is played with two leading melodic instruments such as the duct flute *khui* and the two-string spike fiddle *sò*. They are gently accompanied by the whole ensemble consisting of the xylophones *lanat-ek*, *lanat-thum*, the gong circle *khongvong*, the zither *khim*, the pair of cymbals *sing*, the double headed barrel drum *taphon*, the drum pair *kong that*; and the mouthorgan *khen* (Jähnichen 2001:184-196). The two melodic instruments are not played completely in unison as for example in other pieces. Thus, they create an unusual phrase splitting that supports each other (see [Fig. 6](#)). Similar melodic progressions are only found in various folk songs of the Vientiane area such as *Dok Buathong* or *Duang Champa* (Jähnichen 2001: 66-70). Therefore, the piece *Pheng phanya doen* reminds one of a peaceful rural culture, which underlines a particular traditionalism.

Fig. 6: Transcription of *khui* and *sò* in the piece *Pheng phanya doen* according to a recording made in March 2007 at the National School for Dance and Music in Vientiane.

♩ = 68

khui

sò

In this relation, it is worth mentioning that this seemingly important point is no more identified with an evident male life form. The question is if this exclusive music was ever identified with any clear male character, or if it symbolizes a real third gender that is reserved for divine beings such as kings, princes and other characters of extraordinary nobleness and goddess.

Bounmanh Yiengkang, the musician playing the leading xylophone *lanat ek* in the *Phalak Phalam* orchestra commented:

I have to know which one of the melodies we have to use for which character, and how to form the personal expression of the dancer. That is a very important point in creating an individual performance.

Bounthieng Sisakda, the player of the circle gong set *khong vong* added to the discussion:

The melodic basics are always different, for example, when *Sida* enters the stage you choose one pattern and when *Phalam* comes you choose another one, depending on the dance style. The different melodic basics are among others called *pheng doen*, *pheng he*, *pheng kao* and *pheng sok* for each role. While fighting you have to use *pheng soet* using the big drums, *Phalam* is going with *pheng kaonay Vientiane* and *pheng kaonay Luang Prabang*. *Phalam* needs the *pheng kaonok* or *pheng phathum*. While walking through the forest or in the palace the *pheng phanya doen* is the best for *Phalam* or in general for any movement types carried out by kings and queens.

The same musician reflected the special role of *Phalak* and *Phalam* in this way:

*Totsakan* is hiding his face behind his mask. You never know how he looks like in reality. But everybody connects his mask to a bad ghost, because his movements reveal that nature. *Hanuman's* - the general of the monkeys - movements express that he is a reliable animal. *Phalak* and *Phalam* do not hide their faces; they have to be true characters, and we have to emphasise these characters in the way we are playing their music.

The final decision to introduce female dancers for the main male roles in general results from Vientiane's tradition where the roles of *Phalak* and *Phalam* are played without masks. The blank faces in their true beauty have to be reflected in a special sophisticated musical repertoire.

### ***Phalak* and *Phalam* as Examples of Good Men**

The attributes of good men as *Phalak* and *Phalam* are named in this order: beautiful, peaceful, sage-like, intelligent, brave. They should be able to change their mind after re-thinking, to take life as a challenge and benefit from it, to protect the lives of others, to strive for a satisfied community, for the happiness of all people despite their social status or ethnic background. This is also a very remarkable point, as these characteristics are considered as conservative traditionalism. Compared to *Phalak* and *Phalam*, *Totsakan*<sup>5</sup> has a revolutionary character. He does not respect traditions as he makes use of his body power. At the same time he feels and shows his mentally powerless state. Therefore, he is inevitably forced to fight. *Totsakan* as well as *Ravana* are real men acting like earthy men in the story as well as on stage. Being caught in their determination, these men reflect human weaknesses and serve as a note of warning shown to male audiences and prospective mothers.

To personify the divine signs of the two main males *Phalak* and *Phalam*, it is necessary to show their faces, since beauty is the first important attribute. Therefore, the faces have to be beautiful, even in color and form, and without beard, with open minded eyes and a soft mouth.

They express their love of peace and their sage character by slowing down their steps in front of other beings. They are not running around and even in fighting scenes, they seem

to think before they act. The instrumental ensemble plays in moderate tempo, with higher sound intensity and rhythmically well accentuated. To represent their sage and intelligent nature, they are exploiting the whole repertoire of different gestures and facial expressions repeatedly, softly, and in slow motion thus they are watched and accepted with sympathy.

To some degree, female dancers took over the main male roles as there was a lack of traditional dancers with the spirit of the “third gender”. Periods of need also existed in the past when men were not available due to war or reconstruction work. Moreover, the female dancers in the role of *Phalak* and *Phalam* were educated as leaders of the dance troupe and equipped with more experiences and confidence than other female dancers.

The only non-hidden female face is that of *Sida*, the wife of *Phalam*. Her dramatic function is based on provoking a situation, in which the noble character of the couple *Phalak* and *Phalam* can be demonstrated. On the other side, she shows the difference between a male role that is carried out by a female dancer and an actual female role. It is most evident in the scene when *Phaleunxy*, the bad demon in the body of a lonely monk, lures *Sida* out of her hut by exploiting her religiosity. Her arm movements never go beyond the middle position of the body whereas men and ‘good men’ use the whole space around their heads to ‘speak’. As we may observe in Lao social practice, this motional pattern as well as small fast steps for women and long slow steps for men are still common consensus.

Male dancers play the parts of all the demons and the animals, except the deer which is mostly performed by a female dancer, because the deer does not cover its face. Nevertheless, all animals are males including the deer.

Female dancers play all roles without masks and the “abstract nature” as trees, flowers and water waves, with peaceful, quiet and sensitive dance patterns. The only aggressive female role of *Suphanakha* performs a bad example with a moralizing function. She acts for only one scene at the beginning delivering the necessary incident from which the continuing story is developed.

The main target of the drama, composed through all these necessary roles, is to show the ideal being embodied in *Phalak* and *Phalam*, although both are not equally seen regarding their characters by the audience. The educational background of the drama implies a definite individuality of *Phalak* and *Phalam*. They are different in their position hence they follow different rules and they lead to different expectations. In present practice, the Lao dance drama *Phalak Phalam* gains a great part of its popularity from exactly these differences and preferences, which are widely discussed after performances.

Our team from the National Library asked the two female dancers who play the main male roles, whether they would like to be married to *Phalak* or *Phalam*, if they were given a choice. Suksavan Sengaphay, who is performing both roles, answered surprisingly:

As a Lao woman, I think, I would like to have a husband like *Phalak*. *Phalam's* love is somehow exclusive; you would feel like an object he owns, watches over. You are always in danger of being suspected. You have to prove your love again and again. And the ghost *Totsakan* shows his love just because of his extraordinary body power. Therefore, the character of *Phalak* seems to be the best one.

Anulin Phakayson, dancer of *Phalam*, added: