



Academic Article

***"Ram Phat Cha"* (รำพัดชา), the Trace of Indian Dance in the Siamese Royal Elephant Sacred Ceremony**

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Abstract

The sacred *"Phat Cha"* or *"Ram Phat Cha"* (รำพัดชา), is the most important part of the *"Phraratchaphiti thot chuak-dam chuak"* (พระราชพิธีทอดเชือกตามเชือก), or royal elephant ropes inspection ceremony. This ceremony is part of the elephant handling section *"Gajakarma"*¹ (คชกรรม) of the *"Phraratchaphithi khot-cha-kam"* (พระราชพิธีคชกรรม), or royal elephant ceremony. *Gajakarma* is the art of handling the royal elephants, as commissioned by the Siamese royal court. This art was passed down through a lineage traceable for more than a millennium back to the Indian *"Vaishnavist"* Brahmins. These Brahmins, who came to *"Suvarnabhumi"* (สุวรรณภูมิ), or Indo-China region of Asia, through the ancient Khmer empire, and then to the kingdom of Siam, which is present day Thailand.

Unfortunately, this cultural heritage is now lost, as there is no living inheritor, nor does a complete record of the dance remain.

Nevertheless, the only remaining document which vaguely describes the dance, as written by the late Arkom Sayakom, the National Artist of Thailand. From these descriptions, a comparative dance experiment was conducted by the author and Awassada Klinsukhon. The record shows that the dance is similar to classical Indian dance, particularly the *"Bharatnatyam."* Consistent with

¹ *Gajakarma* refers to the Thai word "คชกรรม" (Kot-cha-kam): It was romanised based on the Sanskrit language; Gaja means an elephant and karma means deed or work.



the Indian classical dance tradition, the dance is part of a narrative, the legend of “*Phra Na-rai Prap Chang Ekadanta*” (พระนารายณ์ปราบช้างเอகันต์). This legend tells how the Hindu God “Vishnu” subdued the elephant, “Ekadanta”. This unique version of Vishnu as an “avatar” (อวตาร), a manifestation of God, appears only in Siam and Suvarnabhumi. As one of the oldest performing arts in Suvarnabhumi, inherited from Indian settlers, the *phat cha* dance is an important cultural heritage. It should be preserved consistent with H.M. King Maha Vajiralongkorn Rama X’s royal decree to “preserve, inherit, and add value.” Its historical, aesthetic, spiritual, and scientific aspects should be carefully examined. The author hopes to encourage scholars in related fields to study the dance, not to reinstate the ritual formally but to revitalise it as part of Thai cultural heritage.

Keywords: *phat cha* dance, *thot chuak – dam chuak* royal ceremony, Devakarma, Ekadanta

Introduction

The “*Tamra Kotchasat*” (ตำราศสตร์) is a textbook from the early Ayutthaya period describing the royal elephant ceremony. In this book there is a “*mantra*” (มนตร์), a sacred chanting spell, which indicates that the royal *Gajakarma*, or the art of elephant handling, must have been practised in the ancient Khmer “Angkor” period. The Angkorian then passed on this knowledge to the Siamese royal court around the 14th century. (Department of Fine Arts, 2002). Besides being one of the oldest dances, it was a crucial part of “*Phraratchaphithi thot chuak – dam chuak*” (พระราชพิธีทอดเชือก – ตามเชือก), the inspection and repairing of elephant robes ceremony. The ceremony was performed only in a designated enclosed area which was shielded from observers. “*Phat Cha*” is one of the most sacred Siamese classical dances. As this ceremony was a vital part of the *Gajakarma* royal ceremony, in a time when domesticated elephants were still used by the palace in peace and war, the objective of the dance was not entertainment. Whereas the officers of the royal “*Gajapala*” (คชบาล) or elephant care department performed physical duties such as caring for and training the royal elephants, the royal elephant sacred ceremonies were responsibility of the royal “*Brueshtipasha*” Brahmins (พราหมณ์พฤติบาท). Ceremonies and activities concerning royal elephants were, naturally, discontinued when modern vehicles and machines replaced the elephants. Eventually, the royal elephant department was dissolved after the Siamese democratic revolution in 1932 led to the disappearance of the *Brueshtipasha* brahmin party. Only a small fraction of the once glorious *Gajakarma* ceremony for the royal elephants is maintained in the present days.



The Origin of Gajashastra, the Knowledge of Handling Elephants, in Suvarnabhumi

Prior to the arrival of Indian settlers, the natives of Suvarnabhumi may have already had knowledge about elephants. However, the important part of the elephant handling knowledge, or "Gajashastra" (คชศาสตร์), along with other important knowledge and wisdom, was probably taught to the natives by the Indian settlers. That the term is written in Sanskrit supports this conclusion, and Asian elephants are commonly found both in India and the Suvarnabhumi region. This knowledge ranges from capturing, domesticating, training and even breeding elephants for various heavy duties, including transportation, construction, delivery, and battle. As suggested by Emeritus Professor Apinat Kitiphan, an expert in religious, spiritual, and ritual ceremonies in Thailand, the "*guui*" (กูย) people in Surin province of Thailand, whose everyday language is part of the Austroasiatic language group (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, 2033), also inherited the "*pasa pa*" (ภาษาป่า) or "forest language," containing elements of the "Tamil" language of south India. The Guuis is widely acknowledged in Thailand for their expertise in handling elephants, and they use *pasa pa* only while engaged in their elephant sacred rites. The Guis, nevertheless, is unaware of its Indian origin, and use it only as a ceremonial language.²

The Legend of Vishnu Subduing the Mythical Elephant Ekadanta, and the Emergence of Devakarma, the Uniquely Siamese Avatar of Vishnu

Evidence suggesting that Indians taught Gajashastra to native Suvarnabhumi disciples can be found in the local legend of "Vishnu subduing Ekadanta" and "The Creation of Devakarma." This story is found only in the Siamese Gajashastra textbook and tells the story of "Ekadanta", the elephant born of "*Ishvara Vamsa*" (อิศวรพงศ์), God Shiva's creation family. Ekadanta has broad black skin and a single tusk protruding out of his palate. The elephant was fierce and could not be tamed, so he could not live near human habitations. Since Ekadanta was so powerful, he could kill people, animals, and other creatures simply by piercing their shadows with his tusk; he is usually depicted roaming alone in the wild (Department of Fine Arts, 2002).

Because Ekadanta caused so much fear and death to human beings and other creatures in their habitat, the villagers prayed to Shiva to save them from the animal. Shiva summoned Vishnu and lent Vishnu his "*Trishula*" (ตรีศูล), or trident, with which Vishnu went in search of Ekadanta. Along the way, he met four villagers, three men and a woman, and asked about Ekadanta's whereabouts. He then had the villagers follow him by boat across a river to Ekadanta's inhabitant so they might

² Interview with Emeritus Professor Dr. Apinat Kitipan on the 20th of May 2019. Ban Shivauphab, Yasotorn.



observe Vishnu's elephant-capturing method. Upon spotting the elephant, Vishnu created an *avatar*, a separate manifestation of himself, in the figure of a man with an elephant face known as "Devakarma." He then chanted a *mantra* that forced Ekadanta to approach him. Getting a terrible headache from his efforts to resist the *mantra*, Ekadanta became angry and ran furiously towards Vishnu. The god wrestled Ekadanta, then pierced his shadow with the handle of Trishula, Shiva's celestial weapon, immobilising the elephant. Vishnu, as the *avatar* Devakarma, then used "*Nakapasha*" (นาคบาศ), a serpent noose, to catch one of the elephant's rear feet and tie him to the Trishula. This made the elephant submit to Vishnu. These events established the Gajashastra, or knowledge of elephant handling, for the world. Vishnu passed on Gajashastra to that party of four he had met, making them his first human disciples in the art of handling elephants. These four became the "*Padmaguru Patiyaya*" (ปัทมคุรุ ปฏียายะ), or original teachers of elephant handling in Suvarnabhumi.

As part of the legend, the trident eventually became a bale tree and since the leaf of bale tree is in the shape of Shiva's Trishula (trident). The Siamese Brahmins used the bale leaf for blessings in royal sacred ceremonies.

Devakarma, Vishnu's avatar in the form of a man with an elephant's head, is not found in India. He is likely the Indian settlers' invention. As the subject involves elephants, the ancient Brahmins of Suvarnabhumi probably borrowed the iconography of the Hindu god "Ganesh" (พระคเณศ), the god with an elephant's head, a son of Shiva, to connect Vishnu to the knowledge and skill related to elephants.

Devakarma: Ganesh, or an Avatar of Vishnu?

Since Devakarma resembles Ganesh (พระคเณศวร์), people naturally confuse them. For instance, the theology scholar Komkrit Uitengkeng referred to Devakarma as a form of "Genesh which is unknown to the Indians" ("พระพิฆเนศวร์" ที่อินเดียไม่รู้จัก), and that "Devakarma is just another name or form of *Genesha* worshipped in Siam" (Uitengkeng, 2016). This idea is supported by Thanjika Manapi in her thesis, "the study of the meaning of and beliefs about Devakarma that appeared in Thailand from the 19th century B.E. to the present". She concluded that Devakarma is the same deity as Ganesh (Manapi, 2010).

Although Devakarma in Sanskrit means "deed" or "work" of God or of the Divine (deva = divine/god, and *karma* = deed/work), Komkrit states that Devakarma may have resulted from the merging of native animistic gurus and Indian Hindu theology related to the theme of elephant handling. Komkrit suggests that the name Devakarma may have been the merging of "*deva*" (เทพ), divine in Sanskrit, and "*phi pakam*" (ผีปะกำ), the ghosts of native gurus that reside in the elephant ropes known as "*chuak pakam*" (เชือกปะกำ) in the ethnic *Guui* (กูย) language. For this reason, the name



Devakarma likely stems from the assimilation of Indian Brahman beliefs with aboriginal animism. The author points out this is also a way to promote a native ghost to a Hindu god.

In the story of Vishnu subduing Ekadanta, Vishnu transformed himself into a man with an elephant face (Bundhitpattanasilpa Institute of Fine Arts, 2017). This was described by King Rama V and appears in Arkom's record on the *phat cha* dance. That Devakarma and Ganesha are different deities is indicated in the legend itself, in which, as part of his preparatory process, Vishnu summoned "Agni" (พระอัคนี), the God of Fire, to produce two ritual bonfires. Vishnu then summoned Ganesha to straddle the bonfire on his right. He then summoned Devakarma out of his "yagnopavita/upanayana" (ยัชโญปวีต), the sacred shoulder string of a Brahmin, to straddle the bonfire on his left (Department of Fine Arts, 2002).

In addition, at the viceroy's palace (วังหน้า - พระบรมราชวัง), in the west chamber of the cross-shaped Bowornsathan Sutthawas temple (วัดบวรสถานสุทธารวาส), Vishnu's *avatars* are depicted in a painting on the window panels. One shows Vishnu in human form, in pale purple skin, capturing the elephant, Ekadanta. Those panels in the southern wing depict a man in green skin with an elephant face dancing in front of an offering table.

In Southern Indian culture, as seen in the "Kathakali" performance, *avatars* of Vishnu such as "Rama" and "Krishna" have green skin. Since Kathakali is the likely origin of the Siamese "*khon*" (masked play) performance, as well as the designated skin colours of some major characters in Ramakien (รามเกียรติ์) (the Siamese version of "Ramayana") for Thai mural painting, Rama's skin must also be green. This indicates that the painter must have known this rule and painted Devakarma green to identify him as an *avatar* of Vishnu. Thus, this distinguishes him from Ganesh, whose skin, according to the "*Phong Nai Ramakien*" (พงศ์ไนรามเกียรติ์) (*Ramakirati Vamsa* in Sanskrit/ Ramayana family' lines) description in Amorn Sripochanart's "*Chitakram Thai*" (จิตรกรรมไทย) (Thai Painting) handbook, is painted in "*Samrit*" (dark brown) colour (Sripochanart, unknown date).

Interestingly, whilst the western chamber exhibits *avatars* of Vishnu, the opposite eastern chamber exhibits manifestations of Shiva. Similarly, in the southern chamber, Ganesh appears on the window panels of Shiva's end section opposite to those of Devakarma which are in Vishnu's section. This is consistent with the story in which Vishnu summons Ganesh and Devakarma to straddle *agni*'s bonfires situated opposite to each other.

Figure 1 Mural Painting of Devakarma: (Left) and Ganesh (Right) were painted on window panel opposite to each other in Bowornsathan Sutthawas Temple



Noted. From Songkiat Hepiyasawas, *Chitrakam Tawaraban*, Wat Bowornsathan Sutthawas Phrakaew Wangna, 2002.

The *Bruethipasha* Brahmins (พราหมณ์พฤติปาศ)

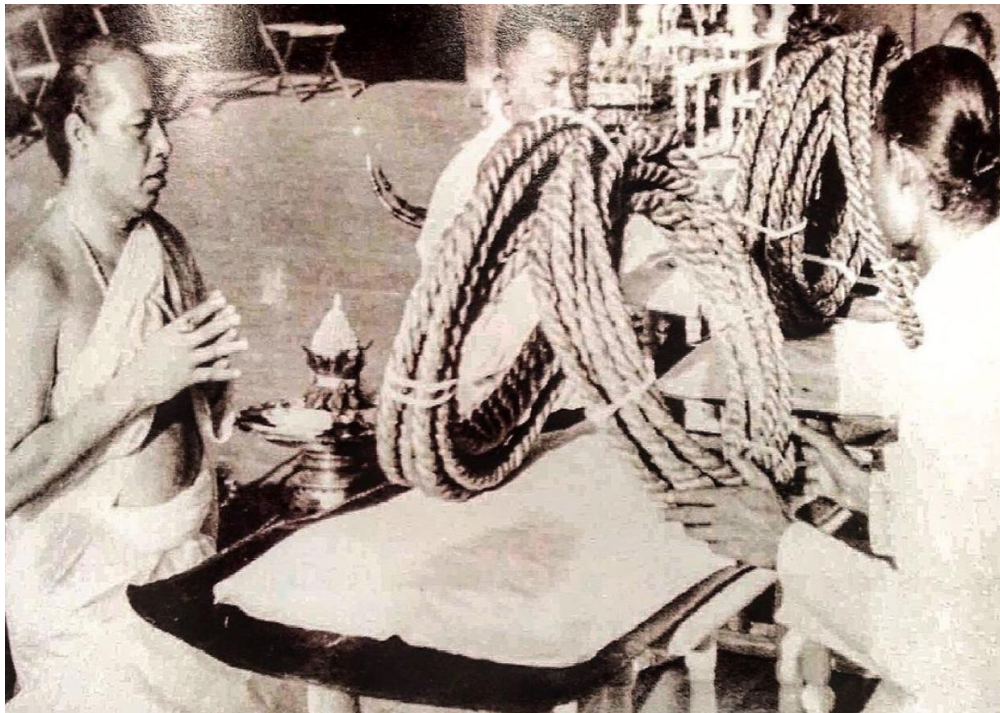
Brahmin Trun Buranasiri of the royal Brahmin Chapel (เทวสถานโบสถ์พราหมณ์), explained that the *Brudhipasha* Brahmin party was not initially listed in the King's service. Instead, they belonged to the viceroy, or Vice King's, service. This practice was inherited from the *Ayutthaya* period, in which an important duty of the viceroy was to administer the "Gajapala," (คชบาล) or elephant caring department. For example, King Pedaraja (สมเด็จพระเพทราชา) was the minister of the Gajapala department during the reign of King Narai the Great (สมเด็จพระนารายณ์มหาราช) in the late *Ayutthaya* period.³ This custom was carried on to the present Rattanakosin period, when in the reign of King Rama V, the viceroy position was discontinued. The Gajapala department, and the party of the *Bruethipasha* Brahmins, were transferred into the King's royal administration. The royal elephant ceremonies, including the ropes inspection ceremony, had been under the auspices of the grand palace ever since.⁴

³ Interview with Brahmin Trun Buranasiri on the 3rd of June 2018 at the Royal Brahmin Chapel

⁴ Ibid.



Figure 2 Phra Rajguru Vam Devmuni (Sawarng Bhramanakul) performs "thot chuak dam chuak" royal ceremony, (พระราชพิธีทอดเชือก-ตามเชือก) as part of the Royal Elephant Ropes Inspection Ceremony



Noted. From "Chang Ton Sat Mongkhon Haeng Phra Chakhraphat issue1", Department of Fine Arts, 1992, p.369.

"Thot Chuak Dam Chuak" (พระราชพิธีตามเชือก - ทอดเชือก) the Royal Elephant Ropes Inspection Ceremony

Prince Narissara Nuwattiwongsa explained the following to his brother, Prince Damrong Rajanubhap that:

Thot chuak, to my understanding, describes the action of uncoiling the length of ropes and stretching them out for inspection. "*dam chuak*" (reinforcing ropes) does not need to be translated, as the term clearly explains itself. This ceremony must have once been arranged prior to the capturing of wild elephants. But since that activity is discontinued, the ceremony then turned to the sacred elephant hook dance ceremony. (Mahidol College of Music, 2009, pp. 379 –384)

The elephant ropes are important, as the Brahmin *Trun Buranasiri* explained, when handling either common or royal elephants. The ceremony was meant to make certain that those elephant ropes were strong enough for commissioning. If the ropes were damaged or deteriorated, they would be repaired. The ropes were so important that a large royal elephant ropes hall was built in front of



the grand palace although removed sometime after. In the present, a small shrine with a coil of old elephant rope which represents the “*pakam*” (ปะกำ) spirit, the teacher of elephant taming can still be seen in front of the head office of the Department of Fine Arts near the former location where the Elephant Rope Hall once was⁵.

Since elephant ropes have to be durable, and able to resist the elephants’ enormous pulling power, they were usually spun from the hides of cows and water buffaloes. Tiger hides, Apinat Kitipan added, may also have been used to give the ropes the power of the tiger spirit to help suppress elephants.⁶

Phat Cha Dance

The term “*Phat Cha*” has no significance for the royal *Gajakarma* ceremony. However, allowing for language erosion, common in the Thai language, the term *phat cha* likely derived from the Sanskrit term “*Baddha Gaja*” (พันธชวา) which means the capturing of an elephant. This meaning correlates with the end of the performance, in which the performer captures an elephant by swinging above his head the elephant rope, called the “*chuak pakam*” (เชือกปะกำ), during the sacred song “*Ruk Ron*” (รุกรุ่น).

Because the *Natya Shastra* (นาฏยศาสตร์), the knowledge of dance, belonged only to the higher castes—including the Brahmins, or priests, and *Kshatriya* (กษัตริย์), the monarchs—only the Hindu Brahmins could perform the dance in ritual ceremonies in India. However, as the Brahmins of Suvarnabhumi became disconnected from their Indian origins, responsibility for the performance of the *phat cha* dance was transferred from the *Bruethipasa* Brahmins to the chief of the *Gajapala* department (เจ้ากรมคชบาล).

Indian Dance in Phat Cha Dance

Arkorn Sakyakorn’s record refers to two interesting Indian “*mudras*” (hand gestures) used throughout the *phat cha* dance: “*mue chang*” (มือช้าง) or elephant hand, and “*mue narai*” (มือนารายณ์), or Vishnu’s hand.

According to Arkorn, the performer makes the elephant hand by gathering all five fingers together while lifting the tip of the pointing finger. The hand gesture is not only similar to the hand gesture representing the elephant in Thai classical dance, but is also similar to ‘Dola’, the *mudra* resembling an elephant’s trunk used in classical Indian dance. As for Vishnu’s hand, as used in the *phat cha* dance, the performer folds the tip of the middle finger with the tip of the thumb, in which

⁵ Interview with Brahmin Trun Buranasiri on the 3rd of June 2018 at the the royal Brahmin chapel.

⁶ Interview with Emeritus Professor Apinat Kitipan on the 20th of May 2018 at Shivanubhab Ashram, Yasothorn Province



the nail of the middle finger touches the inside of the thumb, while the rest of the fingers are stretched out. In Indian iconography, if one should fold both middle finger *and* ring finger in the same manner, it is known as "*Karanmudra*", which represents the compassion of the deities for their worshippers (Mudras of India, 2011). Should *karanmudra* be formed with both hands and attached together, spreading out the thumbs and touching the tips of the index and middle fingers and the thumbs, this is called "*Gajaramudra*" (คชรูปมูทรา) or elephant hand in the Thai Brahmanistic rites. *Gajamudra* is used when praying to Ganesh in rituals, as described to the author by Brahmin Trun Buranasiri.⁷

In the "*Yuen Song Waen*" (เย็นส่องแว่น) section of the *phat cha* dance, the left-hand forms "Vishnu's hand" while the right is a fist with the pointing index finger. There are several explanations for the stomping motion, the movement of both hands and the head, as well as the accompanying sacred song "*Chup*" (ชูป). In Thai dance this represents Vishnu, with the magnifying glass in his left hand when he discovers Ekadanta, and his right hand points out the elephant to his disciples. In Indian dance, the left hand in the "*Simhamukha*" gesture represents Ekadanta, who is ahead of Vishnu. In Indian dance, the right fist with the pointing finger known as "*suchi*", or needle, represents a pointed tool used in pursuing the elephant (Mudras of India, 2011).

Observably, the exact gesture of Vishnu's hand in Thai dance symbolizes the "*Rakshasas*" (รากษส), "*Asuras*" (อสูร) and "*Yakshas*" (ยักษ์) (ogres, titans, or giants) and is indicative of their character. Although this *mudra* does not appear in the Indian *Bharatnatyam* dance, it appears in the "Odissi" dance in an identical form. As for the squatting position in the *phat cha* dance, it cannot be found in any classical Thai dance. It is however a common position in Indian dance.

The above examples suggest that *phat cha* dance is more closely related to Indian classical dance than to Thai classical dance.

Additionally, there are mural paintings of Devakarma on the two window panels in the Bowornsathan Sutthawas temple. These paintings depict, on the left, a green man with an elephant face swinging a noose in a circle above his head. On the right, the same man kneels before the altar with both hands lifted parallel to his chest, with his left hand in the *mudra* known as "*Sarpashirsha*," or serpent head, which is found in classical Indian dance. *Sarpashirsha* is the sixteenth of twenty-eight "*asmayukta hastras*," or single hand gestures in classical Indian dance (Mudras of India, 2011). Additionally, "*Natyashastra*" (นาฏยศาสตร์), which means knowledge of Indian drama, explains that this hand gesture, according to myth, was originated by Vishnu as the avatar of "*Vamana*"

⁷ Interview with Brahmin Trun Buranasiri on the 3rd of June 2018 at the the royal Brahmin chapel.

(วามนาวตาร), or a dwarf brahmin, who protected all *devas* (celestial beings) from the Asura (อสูร) or Tiatan lord “*Phali*” (ท้าวกรุงพลี).

In his right hand he holds a broken tusk, symbolised in classical Indian dance as well as in yoga practice by pointing the index finger up while folding the rest of the fingers in a fist. This mudra is known as “*suchi*,” or needle, and represents Ganesh’s tusk and the object of a pointed tip. The same hand gesture is also found in the record of the *phat cha* dance by Arkom (Bundhitpattanasilpa Institute of Fine Arts, 2017). The foregoing indicates that the images on the window panels of a green man with an elephant face, depict *Devakarma* performing the *phat cha* dance.

Figure 3 (Left) *Devakarma* on window panels of “Bowornsathan Sutthawas” Temple

(Right) Chief of the Royal Elephant Department performed *Phat Cha* dance in the role of Vishnu subduing *Ekadanta* elephant.



Noted. From Mural painting photo taken by Author, 19th June 2019, *Phat Cha* dance performing photo from Department of Fine Arts, *Chang Ton Sat Mongkhon Haeng Phra Chakhraphar* issue1 (1992)



The Inheritance of the *Phat Cha* Dance

Prince Naris's statement in "*San Somdet*" (สาส์นสมเด็จพระเจ้า) (Letter of Princes), says that Prince Prabporapak (M.C. Kajorn Malakul) (มจ.ขจร มาลากุล), who administered the Royal Elephant Department during the reign of King Rama V could have performed *Phat Cha* dance. The statement is as follows:

This ceremony, as understood, is the preparation for capturing wild elephants. But it is not known by its name which turns out to be the ceremonial elephant hook dance. In the past, it was organised at the elephant ropes hall in the royal field. After the hall was demolished, Prince Prab (Prince Prabporapak) would perform this piece in Prince Krom Somdet's royal mansion. I recall observing this, but it was long time ago. (Mahidol College of Music, 2009 pp. 379 – 384)

M.L. Sutthichai Jayankura, a history scholar, informed the author that the Prince "*Krom Somdet*," mentioned in Prince Naris's statement must have been "Prince Mahamala Kromphraya Bumrabporapak (Chaofa Chai Klang)", the father of Prince Prab Porapak⁸ commanded the royal elephant department during the reigns of King Rama IV and King Rama V. The prince very likely knew how to perform the *Phat cha* dance, and passed the knowledge on to his son, Prince Prab Porapak. For this reason, Apinat Kitipan explained, the inheritance of the *phat cha* dance was passed on through positional duty in the royal elephant department rather than by bloodline or royal titles⁹.

Secondly, as informed by Prameth Boonyachai that "Rajawangmueang (Oai Gajajeeva) who inherited the *phat cha* dance was a *yaksha* performer in the royal *khon* troupe of King Rama VI. The man occasionally performed the role of Indrajit (อินทรีชิต), the *Rakshasa* prince of Lanka".

Prameth's statement can be supported by Prince Naris record that the performing of *phat cha* dance he witnessed appeared to have danced in powerful manner of those *yaksha* performers in the *khon* performance (Mahidol College of Music and Arts, 2009).

More interestingly, according to Ekpasith Pajarakusolpong (Dej Kong-Im), an expert in Thai classical music and sacred songs of Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University, he was told by a Thai classical music grandmaster and his teacher, Pinij Chaisuwan (National Artist of Thailand) that the royal palace police (ตำรวจหลวง) and Rong Bhakti, National Artist of Thailand (Jian Jarujarana) who inherited the "*Ongphra Phirap*" (องค์พระพิราพ) (Virabhadra) dance and performed for the first

⁸ Interviewed with M.L. Sutthichai Jayankura, Old Chiang Mai Cafe, Chiang Mai, 10th April 2020.

⁹ Interview with Emeritus Professor Dr. Apinat Kitipan on the 20th May 2019. Ban Shivahuphab, Yasotorn.



time in the royal white elephant celebration ceremony in 1930 also inherited the *phat cha* dance. Ekpasith was informed by Pinij that once Arkom Sayakom commissioned Sompong Jaengjarus, a drum maker and student of Luang Praditpairor (Sorn Silpabanleng), to make a *pakam* rope (elephant rope) for Jian to teach the *phat cha* dance to him. However, the rope that Sompong made was too heavy for Jian to carry and *Jian* refused to use the rope, Arkom's plan to learn the dance with Jian was revoked.¹⁰

Adding to this, Phra Siriphan Attathammo as known as Siriphan Attavajra, *khon* master of the author also provided a statement that around 1983, he was approached by the royal Brahmin Uragindra Viriyaburana with an offer to exchange his knowledge in the "elephant capture dance" with Siriphan's *Ong Phra Phirap* (Virabhadra Dance) dance. However, *Siriphan* did not accept the offer, and the Brahmin's knowledge of the dance has not been known to have been inherited by anyone.¹¹

The Disappearance of the *Phat Cha* Dance Suite

As of today, there are no living eyewitnesses to the *phat cha* dance, as performed in the royal rope inspection ceremony, nor is there any evidence that the dance has been inherited by anyone. Moreover, the *phat cha* dance, due to the lack of an inheritor, and the overly conservative thought of those who had inherited the dance in the past, seems to be another permanently lost element of Siamese heritage.

Rituals, Beliefs, Forbidden Subjects in Ritual Ceremony and Connection with the "*Phra Phirap*", (พระพิราพ) (Virabhadra/Bhairava) Sacred Dance

An excerpt from the King Chulalongkorn Rama V's journal describes the *phat cha* dance in the royal ropes inspection ceremony as follows:

Due to the sacredness and omen of the dance, it is so strict that it is to be performed only by men, and while the dance is being conducted, the dancing space must be blind curtained with rounding up cloth. Even the orchestra must sit outside the cloth fence and only play whichever sacred songs called upon from those people within the blind curtain. (Bundhitpattanasilpa Institute of Fine Arts, 2017, p. 337)

¹⁰ Interviewed with Assistant Professor Ekasith Kusalabhongsa on the 2nd of January 2019 through Facebook Messenger

¹¹ Interviewed with Phra Siriphan Attadharmo (Attawatchara) on the 15th of Mayr 2019 at Buddhapuja Temple, Bangkok.



Observably, as a royal ceremonial dance spiritually performed as homage to God “Devakarma” (Vishnu), both the content and context of the *phat cha* dance are in line with the sacred “Ong Phra Phirap” (องค์พระพิราพ) (Virabhadra (พระวีรภักทร)/Bhairava (พระไภรเว)) dance. This dance is regarded by Thai classical performers as the most sacred dance, and is based on Shiva’s “daksha yugna” (ทักษะยัญจนะ), the elimination of Lord *Daksha* sacrificial ceremony by *Virabhadra*, a story from the *Shaivist* (ไศวะ) Hindu tradition. In fact, the two share some similarities:

1. Both are sacred ceremonial performing arts, performed only during the royal teacher homage-paying ceremonies.
2. Both consist of a suite of sacred songs accompanying the dance, and are to be performed in strict sequences that relay the meaning of the underlying stories.
3. Both stories refer to “subduing” inauspiciousness or evil caused by ignorance and arrogance. These are obstacles to any auspicious ceremonies and/or activities meant to bring about “knowledge”.
4. Both were evidently performed by the *khon* “yaksha” (ยักษ์), or titan character, performers.

Conclusion

As the text of the *Gajakarma* chant is believed to have been written in the Angkor period and passed on for over a thousand years to the *Siamese* kingdoms of *Ayutthaya* and *Rattanakosin*, the dance could be one of the oldest dances in *Siam* and the *Suvarnabhumi* region. The only remaining evidence of the *phat cha* dance forms was that recorded by Arkhom Sayakom. Based on these forms, the author and Awassada Klinsukhon attempted a recreation of the traditional dance. The *phat cha* dance appears to be closely associated with Indian classical dance, particularly *Bharatnatyam*. In relation to the royal “*Gajakarma*,” which refers to a ceremony of elephant-related activities, the dance was likely invented and performed by ancient Indian Hindu Brahmins of the *Vaishnavist* sect. These Brahmins were the predecessors of the *Brueshtipasha* Brahmin party. The contents, elements, and context of the *phat cha* dance are similar to those of the sacred *Phra Pirap* dance, which narrates Hindu-based mythology and is mainly performed during “*Wai Krue*,” the ceremony that pays homage to teachers. *Phat Cha* tells the story of Vishnu capturing *Ekadanta*, the mythological elephant. The dance was only performed by the chief of the royal elephant department, and to some extent by *khon* performers who play demons (Yakshas) making it the the performance of *thot chuak dam chuak* ceremony which is regarded as the *Wai Khrue* ceremony of the elephant tamers. Due to its sacredness, it was performed for a close circuit of people by male performers only. Most importantly, the dance

is one of the pieces of evidence of the Indian cultural heritage of Suvarnabhumi, which merged seamlessly with local culture and beliefs.

The above analysis suggests that the dance should be celebrated as one of the most precious intangible cultural heritages of Thailand and Southeast Asia. The dance consists of spiritual, historical, cultural, and socio-political as well as aesthetic and scientific values that merit further research in the light of education, reinvention, and conservation.

Figure 4 *The Authors and colleagues in an experimental reimagined Phat Cha performance accompanying a Dharma Talk: Gajaraja Utenadhiraj by Apinat Kitipan, organised by Payathai Palace Foundation in 2019 at Payathai Palace*



Noted. From Photo by Akarin Pongpandecha, 2019.



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