การดันด้วยปฏิบัติภายในศิลปะการลำสาพันตอนของลาวใต้: กระบวนการฝึกฝนอบรม

Improvisation in Lam Siphandhon Performing Arts of Southern Laos: A Training Process

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Abstract

The objective of this qualitative study was to examine the training process of lam siphandon performing arts of Southern Laos. The results of the study showed that there were four steps in the training process. These included: 1) the preparation of the involved persons—student, parents, and teacher. 2) The parents handed in the student to the lam teacher, and the student would stay in the teacher’s house, helping teacher on various household jobs. 3) Training period, while living in the teacher’s house, the teacher would assign the student the lam lessons—observing and memorizing the lam customs, such as procedure of lam performance, dances, costumes, contents in lam singing, characteristics of lam poetry, lam singing style, lam and khaen interaction, and lam improvisation—basic and advanced levels. 4) Evaluation, teacher would evaluate the student’s skills two times—firstly, during training process and after the training process. During the training process the teacher would test the student’s performance by assigning the student to sing with short lam poem passages on behalf of his/her teacher during the performance of the teacher; secondly, after the training process, partly or wholly of the performance as an apprenticeship.

Keywords: Lam Siphandon, improvisation, performing arts, Southern Laos, training process
บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้เป็นการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ มีความมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษากระบวนการฝึกฝนอบรมของลาวใต้ ผลการวิจัยพบว่ากระบวนการฝึกฝนอบรมแบ่งได้เป็น 4 ขั้นตอน คือ 1) ขั้นเตรียมการของผู้มีส่วนเกี่ยวข้อง ซึ่งได้แก่ผู้เรียน บิดามารดา และครู 2) ขั้นมอบตัวนักเรียน ผู้ปกครองนำผู้เรียนไปมอบตัวแก่ครู และผู้เรียนพักอาศัยอยู่ที่บ้านของครู ซ้ายทำงานบ้านต่าง ๆ ให้ครู 3) ขั้นดำเนินการฝึกฝนอบรม ขณะที่ผู้เรียนพักอยู่ที่บ้านครู ครูจะมอบหมายบทเรียนต่าง ๆ ให้ลูกศิษย์ได้ปฏิบัติ คือ การสังเกตและจดจำขั้นตอนการฝึกฝนในกลุ่ม เช่น ขั้นตอนในการแสดง การพิทักษ์การ แสดงที่บ้าน เมื่อใดการฝึกฝนอบรม ลักษณะของกลุ่มเวลาล้อหรือล้อของท่านลงลำปั้นพันธ์ระหว่างเสียงลำปั้นเสียงแคน และการดันลำตัวปฏิบัติการ ทั้งระดับต้นและระดับสูง 4) ขั้นประเมินผล ครูจะประเมินทักษะของผู้เรียนเป็นสองระยะ คือการประเมินในขณะที่กำลังฝึกฝนอบรม และการประเมินหลังจากการฝึกฝนอบรม การประเมินระหว่างการฝึกฝนอบรม นั่น ครูจะทดสอบนักเรียนบางเว้นที่ด้วยการให้ผู้เรียนแสดงบทสั้น ๆ แทนครู เป็นครั้งคราว ส่วนการประเมินหลังจากการฝึกฝนอบรมแล้ว เป็นการที่ครูมอบหมายให้ผู้เรียนไปลำต้นหรือไปลำแทนในงานลำปั้นเสีย เน้นลักษณะของการฝึกฝน

คำสำคัญ ล้อศิลป์พันธ์ กำลังฝึกฝน หัวเรียน กระบวนการแสดง การฝึกฝนอบรม

Introduction.

*Lam siphandon*, a type of folk performing arts of Lao P.D.R., has been popular among the Lao people since the old days until the present time, especially, in Champasak province of Southern Laos. The components of *lam siphandon* performance included a *klonlam* text, a *lam* tune, and a *khaen* accompaniment. In *lam* performance in Laos,
a skillful molam singer can improvise, based on his/her teacher’s model, without preparation in advance. The model for improvisation is a klonlam text and a lam tune. Because the majority of Lao people could not read and write, they learned lam singing through memorizations and observations. (Murray, 2013: 46-48)

Klon is a generic term which molam apply to any type of verse they compose and sing. The majority of traditional Lao literature was composed in a poetic form known as klon an (verse to be read), written on palm-leaf manuscripts, to be read aloud to a listening audience. Klon an is also the basis of klon lam composed and sung by molam singers. (Chapman, 2003: 98,106)

According to Maha Sila (Veeravong, 1980: 11-13), klon lam was classified into two types --- klon tat and klon nyoen. Klon tat, also called klon kap, each line consisted of 7-13 syllables, dividing into two halves. The final syllable of former line is to be rhymed with a syllable of the first half of the followed line. The number of lines is not limited. Here is an example of a klon tat verse:

\[
\text{Fang doe jao} \quad \text{bao lian in khian} \\
\text{Phi ma wian} \quad \text{jon thang pen sok} \\
\text{Thiao khuen khok} \quad \text{jon hua kho khon} \\
\text{Nap tae thiao ma won} \quad \text{ma nom ma niao}
\]

Klon nyoen is written in the same form as klon an. One stanza consists of 4 lines, each line contains between 7-12 syllables. There are words with tone marks, mai ek and mai tho, and with rhymes, internal and external, at the given positions as shown below:
Chapman, in his article, “A Crow Jumps on Rocks”: Indigenous Approaches to Composing and Performing Text in Lao Vocal Music, pointed out that in lam siphandon, texts did not strictly follow the four line pattern. Molam usually sung pairs of lines, line 1 with line 2,
and line 3 with line 4. Lexical tones was a significant factor in determining the melodic line. *Molam* created a melody by manipulating a combination of elements: the structure of *klon an*, the relevant musical scale and conventionalized melodic motifs. (Chapman, 2003: 102-102)

Improvisation, a kind of music creativity, is regarded as a branch of sciences. That is, one who wants to be able to improvise has to learn through a systematic training process—observing, memorizing, and practicing. Improvisations in many cultures had developed from the massive oral traditions. (Briggs, 1986: 60-68)

Improvisation in lam performing arts was equally important as lam singing from memory. In the old days, Lao people liked to listen to lam singing contest in the manner of “question and answer.” The content of the questions included many aspects of knowledge—worldly or religiously. It was an amazing event that a *molam* singer will improvise on the spot, describing what he/she was seeing at the moment without prior preparation. If a *molam* singer was skillful in lam improvisation, he/she had very little chance to be a failure in the contest. Lam training in Northeast Thailand preferred memorization from written text, while lam training in Laos, students had to observe, memorize, and practice from the live performances. Therefore the lam training process in Laos gave better foundation for lam improvisation than lam training process in Northeast Thailand. (Chonpairot, 1983: 1-23)

Concerning improvisation, Miller, in his Ph.D. dissertation, concluded that there was rarely any improvisation. Molam could
improvise short passages of poetry with less quality. Improvisation was more common in *lam jot* (question and answer) style. (Miller, 1976: 136-137)

However, from a research work on *lam* singing in Northeast Thailand, Thongklom mentioned that *Molam* Thongmak Chanthalue, a former National Artist of Thailand, specialized in *lam* improvisation at the high level, called “*taek lam*”. He could improvise on the spot, describing about what he was seeing, and hearing, as long as he liked to sing. (Thong Klom, 1993: 157-158) So there were/are still some experienced *molam* performers in *lam* improvisation in Northeast Thailand, depending on individual training, practicing, and knowledge acquiring experiences.

*Lam* improvisation in Laos, in the past or present, could be found in Middle and Southern regions---*lam mahasai, lam bansok, lam khon sawan*, and *lam siphandon*. To the audience, *lam* improvisation was very amazing and impressive. *Lam siphandon* improvisation was very unique among other types of *lam* singing in Laos. It was sung in fast speed and its length was rather long, and the improvisation, on the content in poetic form, had to be created instantly. To be able to do this a *molam* needed to have a very high skill level and had been through a laborious training process (Chonpairot, 1990: 112-120)

Chapman, summarized from his interview on improvisation with *Molam* Vanna Keophilom, the most famous *molam* in Southern Laos. The result was that those *molam* who had been performing for five years or less had to memorize everything, acquiring enough knowledge and experiences in *lam* performance until they did not have to think
at all. They just saw things with their eyes, listened with their ears, and then they were able to make it up on spot (Chapman, 2003: 117)

Generally, in teaching and learning music, sequencing the teaching of concepts and skills was accomplished by using three important strategies: preparation, presentation, and practice. (Boshkoff, 1991: 31) To be an accomplished musician or singer, according to Suzuki philosophy, student had to build up the following abilities: 1) ability to listen; 2) ability to observe and imitate; 3) ability to memorize; 4) ability to concentrate; 5) ability to perform; 6) ability to be disciplined; 7) ability to persevere; and 8) abilities of the heart (Luedke, 1995: 63)

Concerning the relationship between improvisation and music learning theory, it is found that listening helps students learn and understand. When one understands more, he/she will feel more appreciated. The important elements of music theory are the engagement in listening to musical tonal system and rhythmic patterns. Improvisation means each one understands the music principles and is able to present his/her music ideas instantly. The following steps yield improvisation as the result of the process: 1) Listening to music with critical mind; 2) develop an awareness of learning and aesthetic appreciation through listening, improvising, and performing; 3) develop the ability to communicate idea, feeling, and emotion, through improvisation, composing, and performing; and 4) listen to and engage in performances at different levels of understanding, in accordance with individual gift, success, and interest. (Azzara, 1991: 106-109)
Research Methodology

The researcher had gathered written document and field data. The field data were obtained through interviews and observations with 7 key-informants, 10 casual informants, and 20 general informants, in Vientiane the Capital, and Champasak Province---Mueang Phonthong, Mueang Pakse, Mueang Khong, and Mueang Sukhuma Districts, between February 2013 and January 2014, as shown in the map below:

Map of Champasak Province
The main key-informants included: Kongduean Nettavong, Thongkham Onmaneesone, *Molam* Vanna keophilom, *Molam* Thongbang Keosuwan, *Molam* Duangphaeng Hanmanee, *Molam* Nalee Malalee, and *Molam* Bunthong Keobuala. The data were checked for their accountability with triangulation technique, categorized, and analyzed in accordance with the given objectives. The results of the study were presented in descriptive analysis form.

**Results**

Training process in *lam siphandon* improvisation consisted of 4 steps: 1) the preparation; 2) bringing in the student to teacher; 3) training; and 4) evaluation, as discussed in details below:

1. Preparation Period.

The preparation period involved student, parents, and teacher.

1.1) Student Preparation. In rural Lao society, after rainy season, there are many celebration ceremonies, such as *bun ok phansa* (ending the Lent retreat), *bun kathin* (robe offering), *bun jaek khao* (final rite for the dead). The host family liked to hire a *molam* performance to celebrate the event and it was free for the general public. This gave the opportunity for villagers to see and hear lam performances closely.

Some audience like to hear lam singing, some like to listen to *khaen* playing. *Molam* artists became the center of the interest of the audience. Young boys and girls were motivated by lam performances. After their school years, boys and girls had absorbed
tradition of *lam* singing through *lam* performance attending. Some of them wanted to become *molam* singers, being known and accepted by the society. Many of them were able to memorize many *lam* songs through attending various performances.

1.2) **Parents Preparation.** The majority of parents were also very fond of *lam* performances. But they themselves could not have a chance to become *molam* singers, this might due to many reasons: not having good memory, not having good voice, nor good looking. Then these parents would try to persuade their children to become *molam* singers. Many parents were rather poor, if their children could become *molam*, their children could make money to support their families.

1.3) **Finding a Teacher.** After parents and child were agreed upon to let the child to learn *lam* singing. The next step was to find a *molam* teacher. Parents would choose a *molam* teacher with fame, ethics, and morality. In the old days, the teachers were regarded as the second parents of students. In fact they already had in mind on who should be the best *molam* teacher for their child. The matter was whether that teacher would accept their child to be his/her *lam* student. Therefore the parent had to go to see the *lam* teacher and ask him if he would accept the child as his/her *lam* student. Usually before accepting any *lam* student, teacher always checked whether the child was qualified, in terms of voice, intelligence, patient, and love, or not. In most cases the teacher agreed to accept.
2. Parents bring in student to teacher.

Most students of lam siphandon performing arts were about 12 years old, or after they finished their elementary school. Since a lam training took a long period of time, student needed to stay at the teacher’s house. The teacher would have enough time to teach both lam singing and codes of conduct. The student had to help teacher on various household jobs. At night time, the teacher would teach students aurally and orally, phrase by phrase. In the old days lam students could not read nor write; they could do only listening, imitating, memorizing, and practicing. But because of their loves, their perseverance, and patience, eventually, many of students succeeded and became famous molam.

There was no charge when parents brought in a student to teacher, because parents were rice famers and poor. But the student had to do a household work for teacher in exchange for knowledge. At this stage a student had to take a khai or, a magic formula, from teacher. In lam siphandon tradition, it has been believed that a khai or rian lam (a magic formula taken at the initiation rite for lam learning) and a khai or lam (magic formula used for lam performance), were the rites that had been practicing for lam siphandon since the old days.

A khai or set comprised: a lady skirt, a piece of cloth, two pairs of one bath weighed candles, a set of khan ha (a tray containing 5 pieces of flowers and small candles), a set of khan paet (a tray of 8 pieces of flowers and small candles), a pair of gold ear rings, a silver belt, face powder, a comb, and a mirror. (Molam Nalee. Interview, 2013)
The initiating rite has been regarded as the bond between teacher and student; the student had to have gratitude toward teacher and all holy beings. To a student, a khai or gave confident, concentration, and wisdom in learning and performing. Besides, a khai or ritual was a kind of spiritual support for his/her success in lam learning through a laborious training process from his/her teacher.

3. Training period. While the student was living in the teacher’s house, the teacher would assign him/her the lam lessons. These included 1) observing and memorizing the lam customs, such as procedure of lam performance, dances, costumes; 2) observing and memorizing the content of lam singing and the structure of lam poetry, lam melodic formula, and khaen music interaction; and 4) lam improvisation techniques, from the basic toward advanced levels.

Only few senior poetic text writers, performers, and improvisers of lam siphandon performing arts are still living. These include Molam Vanna Keophilam, Molam Thongbang Keosuvan, Molam Duangphaeng Hanmanee, Molam Nalee Malalee, and Molam Bunthong Keobuala, as their photographs shown below:

Figure 1: Molam Vanna Keophilom National Artist
In terms of observation and memorization, the student had to focus on his/her teacher’s part, “eye looking, ear listening, and brain analyzing”, paying attention to every aspects and every moment of good manners in lam performance, such as the costume, sitting up, standing, walking, sitting, going up to the stage, going down from the stage, greeting the audience, being in friendly gestures at all times. (Vanna, 2014: Interview.)
Regarding the most important skill the student had to obtain during the lam training process was that he/she had to understand the structure and the melodic formula of a klon lam poetry. A student had to listen, observe, memorize, and analyze, and then stored them at the back of his/her head. In fact there was only one a poetic formula and one melodic formula that the student had to remember and stores them in his/her head and were ready to be used which was similar to ordinary speech in daily life. Here is an example of a poetic and a melodic formula of a lam poetic text in full stanza (4 lines.)

An example of a full stanza of klon lam poetry in Lao scripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefixed Word</th>
<th>1st beat</th>
<th>2nd beat</th>
<th>3rd beat</th>
<th>4th beat</th>
<th>Suffixed Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>มีบี้</td>
<td>หูง่ายใส่</td>
<td>ก้ม</td>
<td>ผู้สุขต์สร้อย</td>
<td>ยู่เมืองบาล</td>
<td>วัน</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ส่งม่วงมา</td>
<td>แต่เมืองทะลุ</td>
<td>อาจมี่ตี้มะ</td>
<td>มือกุ้ก</td>
<td>มีบี้</td>
<td>การะผู้มี</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>บัลลังมา</td>
<td>เทิมเฉียว</td>
<td>ยั้งมาดี</td>
<td>ทดสอบ</td>
<td>นั่น</td>
<td>ได้บุญบาน</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>แก่จะเผาผลา</td>
<td>ผีบุญ</td>
<td>แม่นี</td>
<td>ได้บุญบาน</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The structure of of klon lam poetry, in Lao script, showing number of beats within each line
### The structure of *klon lam* poetry, in Romanized version,
### Showing number beats within each line

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefixed word</th>
<th>1st Beat</th>
<th>2nd beat</th>
<th>3rd beat</th>
<th>4th beat</th>
<th>Suffixed word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mue ni Thuewa sok Dai pho Pho rup lo</td>
<td>yu mueang maen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wa maenma Tae mueang thaen Jak mingmaen mueangfa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bat ha ma henlaeo sangmadee sotkhong</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daijoe phuak phinong Ma phi Dai nang nam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First Line

```
Mue ni thuewa sok dai pho pho rup lo yu mueang maen
```

Second Line

```
wamaen ma tae mueang thaen jak ming maen mueang fa
```

Third Line

```
bat ha ma henlaeo sang madee sot khong
```

Fourth Line

```
daijoe phuak phi nong ma phi dai nang nam
```
The poetic formula and a melodic formula, in full stanza, of a lam poetry could be notated into Western rhythmic pattern, as follow:

First Line

```
Mue   ni thuewa / sok dai   pho pho rup / lo yu mueang   maen
      0   0   0   0   0   O^1   0   0   0   0   0   0   0   0
```

2/4

Second Line

```
wamaen / ma tae mueang   thaen jak ming / maen mueang   fa
      0   0   0   0   0   0   O^1   0   0   0   0   0   O^2
```

Third Line

```
bat ha / ma hen   laeo sang ma / dee sot   khong
      0   0   0   0   0   O^2   0   0   0   0   0   0   O^1
```
4. Evaluation.

Regarding the evaluation of a lam siphandon training, teacher would evaluate the student’s skills two times---firstly, during training process, and secondly, after the training process.

The scopes to be evaluated included 4 aspects: 1) the content of lam texts; 2) the structure of klon lam poetry---overall form and internal form; 3) melodic patterns in lam siphandon performances; and 4) lam improvisation and instant problem solving.

On the content of lam text, the student had to learn various types of knowledge, such as language and literature, folk tales, history and geography, agriculture, courting, customs, traditions, rituals and beliefs, Buddhism, and codes of conducts.

Evaluations were divided into 2 periods---during training process and after training process.

4.1) The evaluation during the training process. During the performance, student was sitting near his/her teacher on stage. After the student had observed and acquired some basic knowledge, the teacher might assign the student to make a short improvisation through answering or questioning, and judge on how well the student could do.
4.2) The evaluation after the training process. The teacher might take the student along to observe the teacher’s lam performances. The teacher might let the student take part in some sessions of the lam performance. Sometimes the teacher could not go to perform and asked the student to substitute him/her. In this case the audience would be the judge whether that student’s performance satisfy the audience at which level—excellent or fair.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

Due to the changes of technology and its effect upon the ways of life of the people in the cities as well as in the villages. It is very difficult to maintain a lam siphandon training tradition as it was used to be in the old days. Because lam siphandon training process takes longer time than other types of lam performing arts in many aspects. In lam mahasai, lam bansok, or lam khonsawan performing arts, molam singers have more time to prepare their content, either from their memories or improvisation, for their lam singing while they are on stage. They can do it because after each molam sings a few verses of klon lam poetry, the singer will take a break and let the khaen player play alone as an interlude. After a while the singer will start singing again. The speed of singing in other type of lam, comparing to lam siphandon, is rather slow. The two molam, male and female, will always shift back and forth within few minutes round. They have enough time for rest and thinking, whereas lam siphandon training takes longer time and hard working process to cope with long improvisation on stage, especially in “question and answer” session. Because of the
value and the importance of the arts of the improvisation in lam siphandon performance upon the people in Southern Laos, Molam Vanna Keophilom, a Lao National Artist in lam performing arts, had presented the idea to the Lao government administrators that the government should make lam performing arts as National Agenda by raising a special fund, nationally and internationally, to support senior Molam teachers for the transmission and promotion of regional styles lam performing arts in Southern Laos to the younger generations.

Now Molam Vanna Keophilom has been awarded grant from an international organization to start a project on lam transmission and promotion at Bajiang National Park in Pakse Province. The project includes the establishment of a cultural center for promotion of arts and culture—handicrafts, music, musical instruments, lam, and other kinds of arts and culture of Southern Laos.

Although the social environment has been changed, the arts of lam siphandon improvisation should be restored, transmitted, continued, and prosperous as it used to be in the past.

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**Interviews:**


