

The Appearances of Beliefs and Rituals in Performing Arts¹

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Abstract

The objectives of this paper are to study the strategy and the creativity of performing arts related to rituals and beliefs whose contents have reflected the social, environmental and political situations at that time. This paper has applied the communication approach of “Roman Jacobson’s Communication Model”, Semiology Model and Fine Arts Creativity Model.

After studying, it is found that the most important elements to express the ritual and belief through performing arts are body movements, music, playwright, costumes and setting. The second important elements are space occupying, actor casting, and stage lighting. However, the performing arts, related to rituals all over the world, have been originated from local belief which has been repeatedly practiced for ages. Consequently, the people believed its sacredness and they had been obliged to hold the holy ritual regularly in the belief that there would be good fortunes fall upon them and their society in return.

Keywords: Dance; Performing Arts; Ritual; Society and Culture

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Introduction

Humans have lived in a society embraced with symbolism which can be learnt to create similar background, understanding and interrelationship among each other. Until now, humans have carried out the contents of ritual and belief through the symbolism in the forms of performing arts: body movement and music like gospel. This is correlated to Levison & Ember's research (1996) who stated that the pattern of the performance has been related to belief, religion, ritual, martial arts, local play, symbolism and entertainment by the people in the community.

Ritual is a component that enables all kinds of performances interesting and arouses the audiences' attentions significantly because ritual is unique and cannot be seen in daily life. The graceful movement and powerful music in the rituals are so specific that the audiences would get the feeling of the sacredness. As well as this, the costumes are different than the other performances.

There have been several of performing arts examples related to the ritual. Veraphol et al. (2016) have given an example of local ritual performing arts named "Pop Pee Fah" from the Northeastern of Thailand. The local people have believed that "Pop Pee Fah" is a good spirit who, solely, can give treatment to the sick. Moreover, Hamza (2015) has presented the relationship between ritual of Eagle Dance by Bajau Laut, the indigenous in Malaysia, and family bond. The family members had to do "Eagle Dance" in order to please their ancestors who would feel satisfied of their descendants' being. Additionally, Sarapee (2014) has also added some points of views from the local ritual dances in Europe, USA, and Africa that most of rituals have been relevant to the nature as the local tribes believed that only gods can generate the abundance on the land. Therefore, it is important to arrange the ritual dances to satisfy the gods.

We can see that ritual and belief have correlated to the performing arts, and the contents are revolved around the lifestyles of human at that time. This might be because performing arts are among the easiest forms to convey the meaning through body movements by the group of actors

or solo performers.

From the past, although there have been numbers of technological improvements, we can perceive several rituals through the performing arts in both auspicious and inauspicious events. The objective is to express the performers' feelings and the inner emotion which signify ritual content through elegant body gestures.

The benefits of this study are to learn and understand the differences among cultures, lifestyles, rituals and beliefs expressed through the performing arts. Another benefit is to obtain the strategies of dance creative techniques based on the real rituals.

Meaning of Ritual and Belief

Until now, ritual has been accepted by the people in the society and to hold the ritual ceremonies is counted as a belief of the society. This can be assumed that the longer they practice the ritual ceremonies, the more sacred of the ritual will become. Nowadays, some rituals have influenced lifestyles of the people as the belief in the ritual has been rooted in the people's minds. In the old time, people held the rituals in the places like temples or churches which were situated in the center of the towns or the villages. The master of ceremony could be priests, monks, village leaders or other persons assigned by the members of the society. The objectives of rituals managed both inside and outside the royal court are different.

Ritual definitions have been given differently. For example, The Royal Institute (1999) defined ritual as a ceremony held according to the belief or culture. These aim to raise the sacredness of the belief which will give good fortunes to the attendees. Furthermore, ritual has been practiced repeatedly since the ancient time as appeared in Manop's study (2011) ritual was formed on the belief which gave an impact to the various behaviors of the people. This has been originated from the power of belief in the society which will, consequently, create the certain patterns of the ritual. However, the appearance of various behaviors can be argued since if the humans maintain similar belief, the behavior expressed should be

the same. Solomon et al. (2012) have stated that ritual is a basic activity which the community members can learn moral and this will bring about the birth of culture. The ritual attendees will be accepted as a part of community and the ritual will assign the duty of each other. Interestingly, ritual can partially create culture, but it could be doubtful that humans can learn ethic through rituals. This might be because there are no clear cut about the points of ethic that people can learn. In another word, ritual is an important sacrifice between humans and their environment. Through this relationship, ritual will become culture based on the acceptance among each other (The Thailand Research Fund, 2003).

From the various definitions of ritual, it can be compiled that ritual is a specific set of activities aligned with the ancient belief. Ritual also reflects the lifestyles, belief and the conception of each generation. Some ritual has been done to encourage human's being while some have been arranged to discourage the enemies' feeling. As well as this, some people believed that some ritual will make them more appeal to the others. Hence, ritual has been organized and practiced from time to time to hold people's belief. Sometimes, ritual has been applied as a strategy to enhance harmony among people in the community. This will create the society of sharing and strong belief in a similar thing. When humans have strongly believed in the same thing, they will initiate several persuasive approaches of ritual to support their belief. This can be implied that ritual and belief have maintained their powerful relationship from time to time like the parallel lines stretching endlessly.

The appearance of rituals in performing arts

Western performing arts have been commenced during Ancient Greek and Roman times. They had created the performance about Dionysus, the deity of fruitfulness. This performance was held annually during God Festival in March. The content of the performance was to satisfy the god by dancing with the belief that if the god felt delighted, he would make the land abundant supply of the vegetation in return. The Roman Empire, then, had adapted the ritual pattern from an ancient Greek, but

they had included some emotional dances which were developed into stage play thereafter. Until now, it seemed that western performing arts have been created from the belief.

1. The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre de Printemps) performed by Ballets Russes, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky on 29th November 1913 at Theatre des Champs Elysees, Paris, French. This was the dance by a group of girls who had to sacrifice themselves to the god of Spring. Initially, the show depicted the aged local Russian ritual which was about choosing the girls to be an offering object to the god. Then, there were series of dances around the fire by the girls before ending up their lives to the god. The feedbacks of four round shows from the audiences were unpleasant because there were a lot of audiences walking out of the theatre before the end of the show. However, this show was the product of the cooperation of the famous artists at that time, Stravinsky (the composer), Bakst (the costume designer), Nijinsky (the choreographer) and M. Diaghilev (the producer).



Figure 1 The Rite of Spring

(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rite_of_Spring)

From the feedback, Ivan (2013) had given critique that the ritual was based their story on the reality. Women had been viewed as useless, and they were passively treated by men. The reasons of the walkout might

be the rejection of the truth from the audiences who felt that the ritual was too cruel to human. Naraphong (2005) had also supported this claim that Vaslav Nijinsky intended to present the history and real situation of Russian culture through the barbarous but humble performance without any luxurious elements applied.

2. The Rite of Spring performed on 3rd December 1975 at Opera House Wuppertal, Germany. This show has been choreographed by Pina Bausch who had added a theme of sexual discrimination in the society through the ritual.



Figure 2 The Rite of Spring

(Source: <http://pinabausch.blogspot.com/>)

The feedbacks of this show were more positive than the show in 1913. This might be because of the development of the social change. As a result, the audiences felt accepted the ritual and the story was based on the ancient local true belief. Moreover, the producer had applied the theme of inequality of the people in the society. This could trigger the sexual revolution that should not be overlooked. As can be seen from the last scene of the show, there was no body care for the crying from the girl

chosen to sacrifice her life to the god. The men let this situation along the ritual pattern without any argument. Sathasai (2016) has also commented on the show by Pina Bausch that the real reason of choosing girls is not to sacrifice the god, but to respond the inner feeling of the men who filled themselves the hatred of women. Also implied the theme of the show that Pina Bausch had ended up the show with the grimy girls after committing the ritual and no men cared for their existences. The people in the real society, likewise, showed their prejudice to the others who were of different social levels.

3. Classical Ballet “Les Noces” by Diaghilev’s Company, choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska. This show was firstly performed on 13th June 1923 at Theatre Da La Gaite, Paris, French. This show was about the arranged marriage among local Russian peasants.



Figure 3 Les Noces

(Source: <https://arteescenicas.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/noces.jpeg>)

The audiences felt convinced and admired the show as it had made them recall the custom of marriage in the past. They also admitted the tragedy of the marriage couples. The reason of the acceptance might be the costume and music which distracted the audiences’ depressed feelings. Hence, there were not many people talking about the content of the ritual at all. Nonetheless, some praised “Les Noces” as the monument of 20th

century dance because the producer had carefully implied the content of the ritual through the appropriate symbolism in the show. He also looked into details of the real sense of ritual that expressed the desperate emotion of the attendees and the compassion among social members. Naraphong (2016) has also supported this claim that “*Les Noces*” has depicted the real story of ancient Russian peasants because it had portrayed the arranged marriage ritual which had been inherited for a long time.

From the western performances, it can be concluded as followed:

1. The ritual, expressed through performances, is created from the acceptance of the belief, inherited from the ancients. Although some ritual is not practical, the descendants still practice those rituals regularly.
2. The western ritual was ignited from the worship of the gods or sacred objects. Despite of the hardship or in-appropriation of ritual practice, the worshipers still committed those rituals to satisfy the gods.
3. Some western ritual has obviously discriminated people in terms of sex and social levels. This has reflected the inequality situations in the old time.

While the western rituals have been developed, it is undeniable that the eastern world has also kept practicing their rituals related to their belief and religion. Similarly, the eastern locals worshipped the god of nature and ancestors who were believed as their guardians as well.

1. *Narai Avatara* show, directed and choreographed by Naraphong Charassri, the pioneer of Thailand modern dance. This show had been performed 4 rounds at Thailand Cultural Center, Bangkok, from 2nd-4th February 2003. This show was extracted from *Ramayana Epic* adapted by Phra Phutthayotfa Chulalok the Great, the first king of the reigning House of Chakri of Siam. There were three acts: the defeat of Nontawith, *Narai Avatara*, and *Longka and Ayodya*. Somchai (2010) also added the fact about the ritual appeared in *Narai Avatara* that it can be found in the first act depicting prayer by the five hermits to the gods asking for the king’s descendants in Ayodaya.

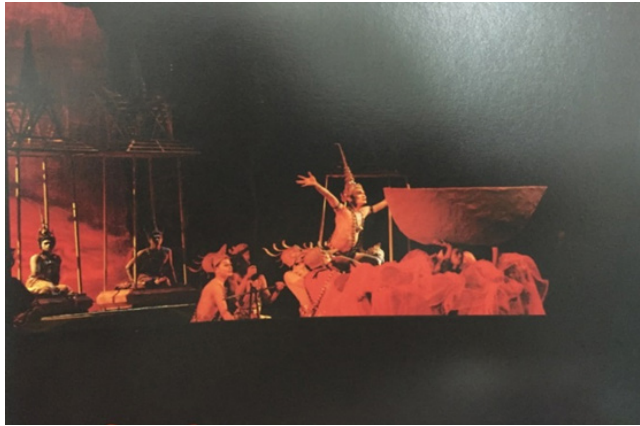


Figure 4 Narai Avatara

(Source: Narai Avatara Performing The Thai Ramayana In The Modern World)

The audiences appreciated this show significantly and there were numerous of critics and further research revolving about the show. This could be because this show had maintained Thainess through contemporary dance and had simplified the real traditional belief associated with the lifestyle and the way of thinking of the people. Despite the fact that these different elements had been put together, the show was still performed smoothly (Chutika, 2013). From the interview with Jirayuth (2016), the team worker, who gave his opinion about the show that this performance had been frequently presented in wide variety forms with different teams since this ritual was closely connected with humans' life. However, this current ritual had taken place in the royal court.

2. "Chang Nam", performed by BU Theatre Company, department of Performing Arts, Bangkok University. This show was performed at the open space of Bangkok Art and Culture Centre during the first time of "IF International Performing Festival" on 1st October 2014. It was directed by Professor Phansak Sukhee, BU Theatre Company Art Director and was lasted 1 hour. This show was about the worship to the Triple Gems (the three highest Buddhist Gods), Chang Nam and the Blessing for those who

contributed their great effort to the country. “Chang Nam”, itself, was derived from the Thai traditional literacy called “Lilit Ong Karn Chang Nam”. Although this “Lilit Ong Karn Chang Nam” lasts a few pages, there have been a large number of critics commenting of its theme. This is because its story is about the ritual about the cursed water which was drunk by the noble who sworn an oath of loyalty to the king.



Figure 5 Chang Nam

(Source: <http://www.butheatrecompany.com>)

The feedback of the show was overwhelming as it was traditional ritual which was known and understood by a few groups of people. Therefore, this show had aroused the attentions of the audiences about the sacred ritual in the past. This also reflected the relationship between the king and his people who remained strongly loyal to their king (Chavaphon, 2016). Another audience who had studied the story of “Lilit Ong Karn Chang Nam” commented that this ritual belonged to the town who bounded their belief to the black magic, and this had been carried out as a ritual in the royal court in the old time. It is believed that this ritual would drive the hardship out of the country (Pintip, 2016).

3. “Dorasa Bea La Dance” was portrayed the Javanese ritual, Indonesia. It was performed in November 2014 by Sathasai Ponghirun, D.F.A. candidate. He had adapted the story of “Dorasa Bea La” from “Enau”,

the story of the Javanese hero. This had been performed at an open space on the first floor of Faculty of Fine Arts, Chulalongkorn University. He had also mainly presented the feeling of the woman who was framed by the norm of the Paternalism and carefully inserted the story of suicidal committing of a lady named “Dorasa” who had to jump into the fire after the death of her husband with the reasons of loyalty and love.



Figure 6 Dorasa Bea La Dance

The feedbacks were various as the show did not include the scene of suicidal committing, but the director had altered the story by presenting the scene of decision making by Dorasa. This show had left the quests about the ritual to the society whether the social members need to be obliged the social norm or not. The director also presented the belief of suicidal committing by dagger for showing the loyalty and love from the wife to her dearest husband. However, this show had ended by letting Dorasa make her own will. Chavaphon (2016) had commented that the social norm, dominated and assigned by men, influenced to the ritual which limited choices of living for women.

When we compared the rituals from the western and the eastern sides of the world, we found that:

1. Both eastern and western rituals, expressed through performing arts, have been originated from the belief of their ancients who had regularly practiced for a long period of time.

2. Eastern rituals have been taken place in the royal court rather than in the local place whereas the western rituals have been related to the local lifestyle.

Conclusion

Finally, it can be concluded that ritual and belief have played important roles in both western and eastern performing arts. However, there have been some similar and different points between them. The content of the ritual has affected to the audiences' perceptions because this has been communicated through an elegant performance and meaningful culture. By those elements, the audiences can better understand and learn the diversity of the culture. Ritual and belief, expressed through performing arts, can be counted as an interesting phenomenon as this performance has reflected the social situation of the locals at that time. Moreover, some might exhibit their critiques or emphasize the social norm from the performances. Some ritual and belief in performances can be altered according to the social change. Therefore, it is crucial for us to prepare ourselves for the social shift. For example, some ritual had been performed in the part of tourism to show the local cultures to the visitors. In the near future, these performing arts can become a cultural invention showing the social identity and could add value to the economy of the country. Finally, the content of those performances is the product of aesthetic creativity and the product of the society which indicates the nationalism of the people in the country.

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