การด้นด้วยปฏิภาณในศิลปะการลำสีพันดอนของลาวใต้ : กระบวนการฝึกฝนอบรม
Improvisation in Lam Siphandon 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 มีความมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษาขบวนการ ฝึกฝนอบรมศิลปะการลำสีพันดอนของลาวใต้ ผลการวิจัยพบว่ากระบวนการฝึกฝน อบรมแบ่งได้เป็น 4 ขั้นตอน คือ 1) ขั้นเตรียมการของผู้มีส่วนเกี่ยวข้อง ซึ่งได้แก่ ผู้เรียน บิดามารดา และครู 2) ขั้นมอบตัวนักเรียน ผู้ปกครองนำผู้เรียนไปมอบตัวแก่ ครู และผู้เรียนพักอาศัยอยู่ที่บ้านของครู ช่วยทำงานบ้านต่าง ๆ ให้ครู 3) ขั้นดำเนิน การฝึกฝนอบรม ขณะที่ผู้เรียนพักอยู่ที่บ้านครู ครูจะมอบหมายบทเรียนต่าง ๆ ให้ลูกศิษย์ได้ปฏิบัติ คือ การสังเกตและจดจำขนบธรรมเนียมในการลำ เช่น ขั้นตอน ในการแสดง การฟ้อนรำ การแต่งกาย เนื้อหาในการลำ ลักษณะของกลอนลำ วาดลำหรือลีลาของทำนองลำ ปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างเสียงลำกับเสียงแคน และการด้น ลำด้วยปฏิภาณ ทั้งระดับต้นและระดับสูง 4) ขั้นประเมินผล ครูจะประเมินทักษะ ของผู้เรียนเป็นสองระยะ คือการประเมินในขณะที่กำลังฝึกฝนอบรม และการ ประเมินหลังจากการฝึกฝนอบรม การประเมินระหว่างการฝึกฝนอบรม นั้น ครูจะ ทดสอบนักเรียนบนเวทีด้วยการให้ผู้เรียนได้ลำบทสั้นๆ แทนครู เป็นครั้งคราว ส่วนการประเมินหลังจากผ่านการฝึกฝนอบรมแล้ว เป็นการที่ครูมอบหมายให้ผู้เรียน ไปลำคั่นหรือไปลำแทนในงานลำอาชีพ ในลักษณะของการฝึกงาน

คำสำคัญ ลำสีพันดอน การด้นด้วยปฏิภาณ ศิลปะการแสดง ลาวใต้ กระบวนการ ฝึกฝนอบรม

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:

Fang doe jao   bao lian in khian

Phi ma wian   jon thang pen sok

Thiao khuen khok   jon hua khao khon

Nap tae thiao ma won   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:

First Stanza

Line 1 Liao boeng niu   ngam sing thian sing

O   O¹   O²   O   O¹   O   O

Line 2 Ni lano naeo nying   no pha in ong nyong

O O O   O   O   O¹ O O O   O²

Line 3. Kho klom pong   song ta lai lian

O   O   O²   O   O O O¹

Line 4. Pho pan khian khit wai   nai paen phaen thong

O   O   O   O¹ O²   O   O²   O¹   O

Second Stanza

Line 1. Song fai kaem   uan suan nuan jan

O   O¹   O²   O   O¹   O   O

Line 2. Ok pen man nyi nyap   ngaek ma hua nyam

O   O   O   O   O   O¹   O   O   O²

Line 3. Suai ngam lon   koen khon lok lum

O   O   O²   O   O   O   O¹

Line 4. Sum phuak hao mu ni   bo mi siao tho khon

O   O   O   O¹ O²   O O   O² O¹   O

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)
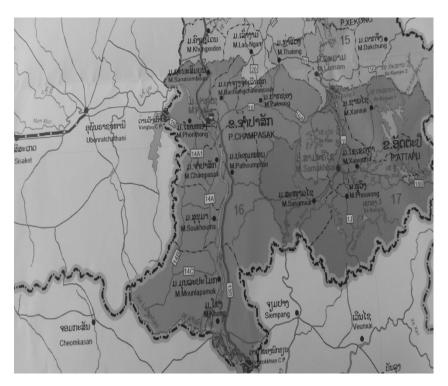
Chapman, summarized from his interview on improvisation with *Molam* Vanna Keophilom, the most famous *molam* in Southern Laos. The result was that those *molam* who had been performing for five years or less had to memorize everything, acquiring enough knowledge and experiences in *lam* performance 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 an 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

Figure 2. Molam Thongbang Keosuvan,
and **Figure 3.** Molam Duangphaeng Hanmanee

Figure 4. Molam Nalee Malalee;
and **Figure 5.** Molam Bunthong Keobuala

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.)

ມີ້ນີ້ | ກິ້ອ່າໂຊຄ | ໄດ້ພໍ້ | ພໍ່ຮູບຫລໍ່ | ຢູ່ເມືອງແມບ

ອ່າແມ່ນມາ | ແຕ່ເມືອງແຖນ | ຈາກມື້ງແມບ | ເມືອງຟ້າ

ບັດຮ່ານມາ | ເຫິບແລ້ວ | ສັ້ງມາດີ | ຮອດຄ່ອງ

ໄດ້ເຈອະພອກ | ພີ່ນ້ອງ | ມາພີ້ | ໄດ້ນັ່ງນ່າ

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

Prefixed Word	1st beat	2nd beat	3rd beat	4th beat	Suffixed Word
ມີ້ນີ້	ກິ້ອ່າໂຊຄ	ໄດ້ພໍ້	ພໍ່ຮູບຫລໍ່	ຢູ່ເມືອງແມບ	
	ອ່າແມ່ນມາ	ແຕ່ເມືອງແຖນ	ຈາກມື້ງແມບ	ເມືອງຟ້າ	
	ບັດຮ່ານມາ	ເຫິບແລ້ວ	ສັ້ງມາດີ	ຮອດຄ່ອງ	
	ໄດ້ເຈອະພອກ	ພີ່ນ້ອງ	ມາພີ້	ໄດ້ນັ່ງນ່າ	

The structure of of *klon lam* poetry,in Lao script,

showing number of beats within each line

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

The structure of *klon lam* poetry, in Romanized version,

Showing number beats within each line

First Line

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

o o | o o o¹ | o o² | o o o¹ | o o o |

Second Line

wamaen ma tae mueang thaen jak ming maen mueang fa

o o o | o o o | o o¹ o | o o² |

Third Line

bat ha ma henlaeo sang madee sot khong

o o o o o² o o o o o¹

Fourth Line

dai joe phuak phi nong ma phi dai nang nam

o o o | o¹ o² | o o² | o o¹ o |
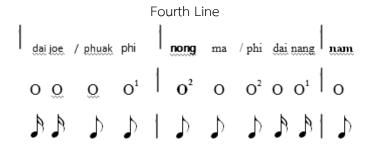
The poetic formula and a melodic formula, in full stanza, of a *lam* poetry could be notated into Western rhythmic pattern, as follow:

First Line

Second Line

Third Line

Fourth Line

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* perform-ances; 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* perform-ances. The teacher might let the student take part in some sessions of the *lam* performance. Some times 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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