

## The Art of *Khon Lakhon* Costumes

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Received: June 9, 2014 Accepted: July 18, 2014 Online Published: September 22, 2014

doi:10.5539/ach.v7n1p97

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ach.v7n1p97>

### Abstract

This qualitative research aims to explain the steps for putting on traditional *Khon Lakhon* performance costumes and to make suggestions that will minimise the negative effect of these steps on costume fabric. Data was collected by document study, photographic analysis, interview and focus group discussion with national artists, designers and experts in traditional Thai theatrical costumes. The results show that there are four multi-step procedures for donning *Khon Lakhon* costume depending on the role of the performer, hero, heroine, ogre and monkey. The traditional methods used to apply the costumes have an effect on the durability of the fabric, particularly temporary stitching, which causes the fabric to deteriorate through excessive wear. If the embroidery methods are slightly altered and traditional storage practices are followed, the costumes will last longer.

**Keywords:** traditional embroidery, storage, traditional dress, theatrical costumes, performance art

### 1. Introduction

*Khon Lakhon* costumes are used in the traditional performances of Thailand and have been developed from the morals, beliefs and values of Thai people as part of the Thai identity (The National Identity Office, 2000). The costumes are created to be suitable for the performance and according to the imagination of the designer (Jantawit, 1978). The costumes are designed to be beautiful in the eyes of the Thai people. The *Khon Lakhon* costumes are one form of traditional creative art (Yupo, 1951). There are three types of *Khon* costume, which are *Siraporn* (head accessories), *Patraporn* (clothing) and *Tanimpimpaporn* (worn accessories).

After World War Two, the materials used to create *Khon Lakhon* costumes became increasingly difficult to find and more expensive because they were imported from abroad (Kurowat, 1997). The number of traditional skilled costume artists and budgets also decreased, so new, large patterns had to be created for ease and speed of creation (Bagnam, 2007). At this time, the costumes used during the reign of Rama VI (1910-1925) became the standard for costumes created at educational institutes. The resources came from Europe and India, including the characteristics of embroidery and the dress used in the real lives of the royalty (Chaengchaya, 1990). The largest modern producer of raw materials for the *Khon Lakhon* costumes is Surat in India. However, there is a similar relationship between the costumes from Europe, India and Thailand in terms of materials, styles and embroidery.

One thing that made the costumes suffer in the past was the popularity of hiring contractors for their creation. The contractors that offered work at the cheapest prices were hired but this meant that they were unskilled and had little knowledge in the creation of costumes. The costume designers would also only create in styles that they had previously seen and had little or no understanding in the styles of the ancient past. These factors caused the diminishing beauty of the *Khon Lakhon* costumes. Now, there remain only two or three traditional embroidery techniques used in the creation of costumes and it is extremely disappointing that in 2007 maintenance of the National Theatre led to the disposal of many deteriorated costumes, including some that dated back to the start of the Rattanakosin period in 1782. These precious costumes have been sold or thrown away, causing the traditional art culture of Thailand to be thrown away with them.

The creation of *Khon Lakhon* clothing is a work of art but so is putting the costumes on. Costume artists and performers must dedicate their intelligence, time, effort and money to the creation process. The traditional methods are still used for putting the *Khon Lakhon* costumes on but these have an effect on the durability of the fabrics used (Thepsiri, 1996). For this reason, the researchers saw the need to study traditional knowledge in

wearing and storing *Khon Lakhon* costumes as a way to maintain fine art, handicraft and *Khon Lakhon* performance. This also supports the work of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit in promoting the beauty of past *Khon Lakhon* costumes as a national treasure of Thailand.

## 2. Methodology

The two aims of this paper are to explain the steps for putting on traditional *Khon Lakhon* performance costumes and to make suggestions that will minimise the negative effect of these steps on costume fabric. The research population consisted of three groups: key informants, casual informants and general informants. The key informant group consisted of people who study information and knowledge of fine arts, fabric, clothing and *Khon Lakhon* costumes, including national artists, designers and experts. These people were Jakapan Posyakit, Suwane Chalankoh, Weeratam Drakun-Ngeunthai, Peeramon Chomtawat, Orrapin Isarangkun Na Ayutthaya, Somsak Tadt and Sudsakon Chaisen. The casual informants were the people who directly created costumes, such as contractors, embroiderers, independent artists who embroidered fine art and performers who wore the *Khon Lakhon* costumes. The general informants were people related to the *Khon Lakhon* performances, such as audiences, students, institutes and government departments.

This was a qualitative research. Information was gathered by document study of basic principles and research related to the investigation. The researchers then examined costumes throughout the ages of *Khon Lakhon* performance and took photographs in order to compare them in terms of size, patterns, material, method of creation and embroidery in order to see the development of costume characteristics. Next, the researchers conducted structured and non-structured interviews with experts of *Khon Lakhon* and classical dance. The researchers observed the creation process of costumes in different places and the use of costumes by performers. Finally, the researchers conducted a focus-group discussion.

Data was analyzed from documents, photographs and materials and categorized as follows: historical background of *Khon Lakhon* costume creations, fine arts embroidery in Europe and Asia, pattern design theories, related fine arts work, size, standards, beauty, patterns, method and materials. Related information from the interviews was sorted into topics. Information from the focus group discussion was divided into suggestions, perspectives and concepts and related information was analyzed. Information from the observation was categorized in groups by method of creation, pattern design, and material, method of embroidery, combination and use. The results of the study are here presented as a descriptive analysis.

## 3. Results & discussion

The traditional costumes of *Khon Lakhon* are hero, heroine, ogre and monkey and they each have different characteristics. The two groups of clothing are male (hero, ogre and monkey) and female (heroine). The male costumes are similar to each other but certain items differ according to the character identity of the performer. The principal components are *sanab plao* (trousers), *pa pawk* (a piece of cloth wrapped around the hips and knotted at the front), *pa nung* (a piece of cloth wrapped around the waist and knotted at the front), *hoy na* (a piece of cloth draped from the front of the waist), *hoy kang* (a piece of cloth draped from the side of the waist), *radsa-aw* (a cloth belt), shirt, *krong kaw* (a flat cloth placed over the head and rested on the shoulders), *inthorn-tanu* (protrusions at the shoulders, shoulder pads), *siraporn* (headgear), *pa-hom nang* (a cloak-style garment, for heroines), *bid-gon* (a cloth draped at the rear, for ogres and monkeys) and monkey tail (for monkeys only).

### 3.1 Dressing the Hero

Step One: The *pa nung* is crimped (Figure 1). Heroes use a 3-4 m long golden silk cloth that is about 1 m wide. The fabric is folded in about 2 inches at the edges in 6-7 crimps. The cloth is ironed and the crimps are hand-stitched in place.



Figure 1. Crimping of the *pa nung*

Step Two: The actor puts on *sanab plao* with the arched curves at the bottom hem in the centre of the shin, just below the knee. Ankle bracelets are worn and accompanying ankle rings worn below them (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2. The hero wearing *sanab plao*, ankle bracelets and ankle rings

Step Three: The *pa pawk* is tied around the performer to accentuate his hips and make the male performers seem closer in stature to traditional Thai sculptures (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The hero wearing the *pa pawk*

Step Four: The pre-stitched *pa nung* is wrapped around the performer by a costume artist. The artist will triple-pleat the *pa nung* at the back of the performer, wrap the excess fabric around the front and draw it through the performer's legs to the back again, where it will be worn like a loincloth. The actor must also help during this process by holding the fabric tightly in place while it is being crimped and pulled. A piece of plain fabric will be used as a belt to hold the *pa nung* in place. This fabric is also known as a tail fastener because the *pa nung* is draped down to create a tail at the back of the performer. If the fabric belt is not fully expanded, it will hurt the hips of the performer. The *pa nung* is arranged neatly by the costume artist and the belt tied at the front of the performer (Figure 4).



Figure 4. A costume artist helping the performer wear the *pa nung*

Step Five: When the *pa nung* has been successfully put on, the *hoy kang* are attached to both sides of the performer. Once the *hoy kang* has been secured, the bottom half of the costume is complete (Figure 5).



Figure 5. The hero wearing the *hoy kang*

Step Six: The performers must wear padding to exaggerate their chest and more closely resemble Thai sculptures. The inner padding is placed over a vest or t-shirt and stitched under the performer's undershirt with thick zigzag stitching. The sleeves are also stitched while the performer wears the shirt (**Figure 6**).



Figure 6. Traditional embroidery to attach the inner shirt to the hero

Step Seven: As the outer Khon shirt does not have seams at the sides or the back, a temporary stitch is sewn from the waist to the shoulder so that it fits the performer.

Step Eight: The outer Khon shirt is put on the performer and stitched into place with 4-8 threads. The best thread for this task is the same colour as the outer shirt, although white thread is also used. The outer shirt is then pulled tightly into place. The threads used to sew the shirt together are not cut because they will be used again (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Stitching the outer shirt

Step Nine: The *radsa-aew* is stitched to the outfit around the waist using the excess thread attached to the shirt. The fabric is then arranged neatly on the performer and the *radsa-aew* is stitched into the tail piece (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Stitching the *radsa-aew* to the tail piece

Step Ten: The *hoy na* is attached to the front of the performer and must be longer than the *hoy kang*.

Step Eleven: The *inthorn-tanu* is sewn into place on the shoulders and under the armpits of the actor (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Stitching the *inthorn-tanu* into place

Step Twelve: The *krong kaw*, similar to an Egyptian usekh, is attached to decorate the performer's neck area.

Step Thirteen: Accessories are added to the costume. A pendant is worn around the neck, sitting in the centre of the chest. An ornamental belt is fastened around the waist, with its head in line with the pendant. Decorative vambraces are worn on the wrists, as are beaded bracelets and a bracelet of rings or *waen rawb* (Figure 10). A *sangwan* is then placed over the head of the performer. This is an ornamental set of crossed braces at the front and back. It is customary for the actor to make a *wai* gesture by placing their palms together in front of their head before wearing the *sangwan*.



Figure 10. Arm accessories for the hero

Step Fourteen: The final step is to wear the *siraporn* (Figure 11).



Figure 11. The fully dressed hero, front and back

### 3.2 Dressing the Heroine

The heroine has fewer items to wear than the hero and there are fewer steps involved in the dressing procedure.

Step One: The inner shirt is sewn on. It is popular for the heroine to wear a yellow coloured inner shirt. The shirt may be short or long-sleeved, although a short-sleeved shirt could expose the armpit and breast of the performer (Figure 12).

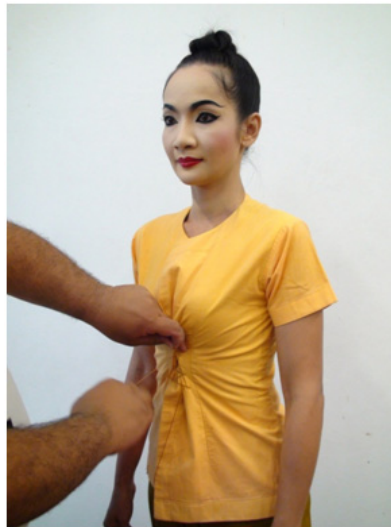


Figure 12. The inner shirt sewn onto the heroine

Step Two: A body necklace is added and commonly sewn to the inner shirt.

Step Three: The performer wears the *pa-hom nang* over her head.

Step Four: The *pa-hom nang* is stitched to the inner shirt behind the neck (Figure 13).





Figure 13. The *pa-hom nang* being stitched together at the back of the heroine

Step Five: The *pa-hom nang* is stitched to the inner shirt at the front of the performer (Figure 14).



Figure 14. The *pa-hom nang* being stitched together at the front of the heroine

Step Six: The *pa-hom nang* is crimped to make a v-shape at the front of the performer.

Step Seven: The *krong kaw* is attached to decorate the performer's neck area. The female *krong kaw* is wider than the male version because the heroine does not wear *inthorn-tanu*.

Step Eight: The *pa nung* is put on the performer. The fabric is about one meter wide and three to four meters long. It is wrapped around the actress and folded in the *saipok* style, whereby the two ends of the sarong are folded and crimped. The folded part of the sarong is approximately two inches wide.

Step Nine: The sarong fold is taken to the right but must not be drawn too tightly or the performer's legs will be restricted. The other side of the sarong is pulled across to cover the point of the *pa-hom nang*.

Step Ten: A three-inch wide fold is made down the front length of the *pa nung*. The actress traps the fold between her legs while the costume artist arranges the sarong folds evenly. The edges of the folds are then tucked into the *pa nung* and secured with a piece of plain fabric wrapped around the waist and tied at the back. The crimps of the *pa nung* are then sewn into place (Figure 15).



Figure 15. A costume artist helping the heroine to wear the *pa nung*

Step Eleven: An ornamental belt is fastened around the waist, a pendant is worn around the neck and decorative vambraces, beaded bracelets and *waen rawb* are worn on the wrists in the same style as the hero.

Step Twelve: The *siraporn* is placed on the head of the performer to complete the costume (Figure 16).



Figure 16. The fully dressed heroine, front and back

### 3.3 Dressing the Ogre

The ogre is dressed in a very similar way to the hero. The differences are in the application of the sarong, *pa nung*, and the additional item *bid gon*. The method for applying the hero's sarong is called *hang hong*, while the method for applying the ogre's sarong is *nung gan baen*. The distinction is that the ogre's 'tail' is tucked into the *sanab plao*. The ogre's extra item of costume, the *bid gon*, is added after the *pa nung* and before the *hoy kang* (Figure 17).



Figure 17. Application of the ogre's *bid gon* and *hoy kang*

The ogre's *siraporn* includes a face mask (Figure 18).



Figure 18A-B. The dressed ogre, front and back

### 3.4 Dressing the Monkey

The monkey costume is similar to that of the ogre. However, the monkey does not wear *inthorn-tanu* and has an additional monkey's tail attached to the *bid gon* (Figure 19; Figure 20).



Figure 19. A costume artist attaching the monkey's tail



Figure 20. The dressed monkey

### 3.5 The Consequences of Using Traditional Embroidery Methods and Storage Techniques for Khon Lakhon Costumes

When the shirts are worn, there must be a long temporary stitch at the back to make the costume the right size for the performers and a temporary stitch at the front so that the item fits the body. Nowadays, large cotton threads are used, which are called *dai-tra-maprao* or *dai-cheug*. Large needles (golden-eye needles) are used to embroider threads in pairs so that the stitches are strong. However, large threads and needles ruin the fabric and some costume artists do not have the necessary expertise to stitch the shirt with minimal damage. In light of this, smaller sizes of thread and needle should be used. The thread should be firm and interview respondents recommend the use of jean, or denim thread.

The *inthorn-tanu* are rested on the shoulders and stitched in place under the armpits. The best quality *inthorn-tanu* are curved to match the body curves of the performer but, when they are stitched in place, the stitching is too tight, causing the *inthorn-tanu* to be pulled down and out of place. Care must be taken in the use of thread and needle so that the shape of the *inthorn-tanu* is not lost and that the stitching does not ruin the fabric. There must be extra care taken when sewing in frequently-stitched places because these parts of the costume deteriorate quickly.

The *krong kaw* is worn around the neck and there is a button to fix the *krong kaw* in place. If the button is not tightly fixed, the *krong kaw* will move during performance. If the *krong kaw* is too large, it must be pulled and

adjusted to fit the neck. If the *krong kaw* is too small, nothing can be done to help and it will squeeze the neck. To eliminate movement of the *krong kaw* during performance, stitching it in place would be most suitable.

There are two types of *sanab plao*, *kranok* pattern and straight-hemmed. In the past, stitches were below the knee, yet nowadays it is popular to wear the trousers higher, so that the stitches are on or above the knee. If the costume artist is not highly-skilled, the *kranok* pattern will be joined incorrectly when stitched and the trouser design will suffer. When the performers are seated, they require wider trouser-legs for comfort. This causes the trouser design to lose its shape and beauty and can be easily remedied by wearing the *sanab plao* lower, as in the past.

The *hoy na* and *hoy kang* are not stitched to any other item of clothing, so extra care must be taken to attach them correctly and tightly to prevent movement during performance. The *hoy kang* must be about two inches shorter than the *hoy na*.

The *radsa-aew* is worn after the *hoy kang* to close the gap between the *pa nang* and shirt. There are two types of *radsa-aew*, straight and curved. The embroiderers do not have the necessary understanding in creating the curves, which causes the *radsa-aew* to be too tight. The straight form of *radsa-aew* should be preferred as tightness is not an issue.

The modern *pa-hom nang* has been made larger and longer than in the past. Nowadays the cloaks are stitched to the rest of the costume at the corners. The costume artists do not have the necessary expertise and make stitches that cause the *pa-hom nang* to be out of shape. It is recommended that the cloak be attached on the cloth rather than at the corners to reduce the risk of wear to the fabric and to retain the shape of the *pa-hom nang*.

The most important thing for maintaining the costumes, aside from the skill of the costume artists, is the care for the costumes by the performers. One factor that causes the deterioration of the costumes is the sweat of the performer, which turns the fabric green or black. When wearing the monkey or ogre costumes, the actors must move a lot in their performance, causing increased amounts of sweat and faster deterioration of costumes. It is important to care for and maintain the costumes as they have a high value. Care must first be taken with the stitching, so that it does not ruin the fabric. By wearing the clothing correctly, the performers will ensure that the costumes can be worn for longer. As sweat is the biggest problem, there must be appropriate cleaning and care methods for the costumes. They cannot be cleaned often, as with everyday clothing. There must therefore be special methods. The clothing must be left in the sun to dry thoroughly. Ideally, potassium cyanide would be used to clean the costumes by adding to water. This method is however very dangerous, so shampoo and a soft brush are sufficient. This method cannot be done often because the chemicals in the shampoo will affect the materials in the costume. The costumes must be stored in dry and well ventilated places. Importantly, the costumes must not be stored in sunlight as this is the primary cause for patterns fading. There must also be care to prevent cockroaches, ants, termites and rats. Regardless, the costumes are used for active performances, so there will inevitably be deterioration. The performers, designers and workers must therefore take special care of the costumes, for they are an important fine art.

#### 4. Suggestions

Nowadays, the restoration of *Khon Lakhon* costume embroidery is growing in popularity because higher education institutions have recognised the beauty of the traditional methods and incorporated them into the curriculum. However, there are still a number of areas that require further research. Firstly, investigation should be conducted into the effectiveness of embroidery instruction in the curriculum. Secondly, the traditional knowledge taught in the curriculum should be compared and aligned to the traditional knowledge used by professionals. Thirdly, further research should be focused on *Siraporn* (head accessories) and *Tanimpimpaporn* (worn accessories) because these were not covered in detail during the current investigation. Finally, although silk is the traditional material used to create *Khon Lakhon* costumes and its disuse would neglect traditional practices, it would be beneficial to study alternative materials that could be used to retain the style and increase the durability of performance dress. Aside from the specific technical points already highlighted for each clothing item, there is one more general recommendation for improving costume durability and quality without compromising the traditional heritage. The costume designers must be fully educated in the dressing process, especially the effects of embroidery on the fabric. This will allow them to create designs that are appropriate for each performer and enable them to create an instruction manual to ensure correct dressing methods are used for each individual costume.

## 5. Conclusion

There are four types of *Khon Lakhon* costume, hero, heroine, ogre and monkey. Each type has a different dressing method but all methods include the use of traditional embroidery. Temporary stitches made by costume artists with inadequate levels of expertise and experience cause the costume fabric to deteriorate. If the embroidery methods are slightly altered and traditional storage practices are followed, the costumes will last longer.

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