The Regional Folk Dances of Thailand

MOM DUSDI PARIBATRA NA AYUTHYA
TRANSLATED BY M.R. SUPRABHADA KASHEMSANT
ILLUSTRATED BY CHOOMPOL TRIKRUTHBANDHU

The culture of Thailand differs somewhat from region to region, as different ethnic or tribal groups provide differing traditions and patterns of living. Thai folk dances reflect these basic regional differences, and therefore an account of the dances arranges itself naturally according to geographic regions. Beginning with the north, which is represented by three dances, next four dances from the northeast, then three from the central provinces, and finally three from the far south.

Although in some respects these dances resemble each other, each region has its typical and distinctive characteristics. The dances of the north are marked by a special hand movement, in which the dancer holds her wrists together and swivels her hands in a circular motion without separating the wrists. The northeastern dancers' hands move actively, but without the touched wrists of the north, and torso bends and sways in a circular motion. In central Thailand the dancing is strongly influenced by the stylized movements of the classical dance, and so body, hand, and finger movements are in the classical style, graceful and slow. Southern dances call for more movements of the hips and feet than do those of other regions, and are of faster tempo. Their musical accompaniment tends toward the European style and the dances themselves at times seem to use European steps.

Instruments used in the various regions include the xylophone, the *kaen* (a reed mouth organ), gong, cymbals, rhythm sticks, and several kinds of drums.

For a number of years the author has been working to foster an interest in Thailand's regional dances, some of which have been virtually unknown in Bangkok and are in danger of dying out. She found that nothing at all had been published about these dances, and the compilation of this material was undertaken to fill the gap. Most of the information has been obtained from school teachers in all parts of the country. For their invaluable and painstaking research the author wishes to express her deep gratitude and appreciation. She is especially grateful for the interest and support of the America Charities Fund, which sponsored the project and has contributed 15,200 baht for publication costs. She wishes also to thank the committee for editorial assistance in producing the English version of the text. Special thanks are due to M.R. Suprabhada Kashemsant, who wrote the text in English.

The North

North Thailand, much of which formed the ancient kingdom of Chiengmai, is rich in folk dances (called *fawns* in the north) of various types. To name a few, there are the *Finger Nail Fawn*, the *Candle Fawn*, the *Ngiew Fawn*, the *Witch Doctor* or *Spirit Fawn*, and many hill tribe dances. All these dances, whether native to Chiengmai or introduced from neighboring countries, owe their popularity to Prince Kaew Navarathana, a ruling prince of Chiengmai about a century ago, and Princess Dara Rasmi one of the consorts of King Chulalongkorn. They commanded the chief court dancers to introduce new movements and steps based on those of traditional court ballet. These stylized versions of traditional *fawn* were danced before state visitors. Since that time, the northern *fawn* dances have been used not only for their original purpose, to celebrate festivals and religions ceremonies, but also for the entertainment of honored guests.

The musical instruments used originally were the pipe and drum, to which Prince Kaew added the xylophone, the gong and cymbals.

The Finger Nail Fawn

Perhaps the best known of a northern dances are the *Finger Nail Fawn* and the closely related *Candle Fawn*. In these dances the tempo and movements are slow, with eight to ten steps being taken to one movement. The torso is held fairly still, with emphasis on arm and finger movement. A frequently recurring dance figure is the rotation of the hands in opposite directions by swiveling them on a base formed by joining the wrists together. These fawn are closely connected with Buddhist religious observances, especially with merit-making customs. Every Buddhist merit-making occasion, such as a temple celebration, has a *fawn* to go with it, and to participate in the *fawn* is itself a form of merit-making.

A frequent form of village merit-making is the repairing of the village temple after the rainy season. The completion of repairs is marked by a temple festival, one of whose principal features is the dancing of the *fawn*. Gifts for the priests are collected, such as medicine, water containers, brooms, robes and money. On festival day these are borne in procession to the temple on splendidly decorated wagons, which are often converted

THE PU THAI FAWN

THE MO-LAM

THE THRESHING POLE DANCE

into mobile picture galleries depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha or from literature. The gift-bearing procession is preceded by a troupe of eight or ten girls dancing the *Finger Nail Fawn*. At cross roads or at densely populated places the procession stops so that the dancers can execute the more intricate steps of the dance. At the temple another troupe of dancers is on hand to welcome the procession. The two troupes then unite, lead the procession through the gate of the temple grounds, and dance around the temple itself. The distribution of gifts is last on the program, after the dancers have stopped.

The required costume for a *Finger Nail Fawn* dancer is an upswept hairdo, a flower behind the ear, a long-sleeved jacket, a long, straight skirt with horizontal stripes, and eight-inch-long false finger nails. Each pair of dancers wears the same color dress. Booming long drums beat out the rhythm for the performers.

The Candle Fawn differs from the *Finger Nail Fawn* only in some of the hand and finger movements. The dancers carry lighted candles between their third and fourth fingers and do not wear false finger nails. This dance is usually performed at night when the lighted candles are most effective.

Learning to dance the *fawn* is a time-honored tradition in the north for all young girls. When they reach the age of fourteen or fifteen, their mothers customarily take them to the courtyard of the temple, where the women take turns teaching them the art of the dance for a few hours at a time. On moonlit nights, drums resound throughout the temple grounds. Young boys dance and sing to the beat of the drums and young girls practice the *fawn* while the older members of their families look on. A pretty girls who becomes a good *fawn* dancer is honored by being chosen as a temple dancer. Come festival time, she has the chance to display her face and figure as well as her dancing abilities, and thus attract potential suitors. The ranks of the temple dancers constantly have to be refilled, for a *fawn* dancer usually performs only one or two seasons before marrying. It is evident that learning to dance the *fawn* has both a religious and a social purpose.

The Ngiew Fawn

The *Ngiew Fawn* is one the least known of northern dances, but nevertheless perhaps the gayest, though not as graceful as the *Finger Nail Fawn*. The *Ngiew* are a people who came originally from the Shan States in Burma, bringing with them a style of dancing which was carefree and masculine. Their *fawn* was originally danced only by men, but was modified to suit the court ladies of King Chulalongkorn's day. Thus what is known now as the traditional *Ngiew Fawn* is actually a happy combination of feminine grace with the free masculine movements of the original dance. The dance movements are still considered more suitable for men, however, because they include swaying and flexing of the upper torso and shoulders, and the dancing alternates with jumping. The dance aims at producing a comical effect.

In the original masculine version, the men's costume was trousers and no shirt, with a turban tied on one side of the head into a half bow. In the modified version, women dancers who participate keep the turban but wear long-sleeved blouses, and skirts wrapped between the legs to resemble trousers but ending in a bustle. Blouses and trousers are in bright, contrasting colors.

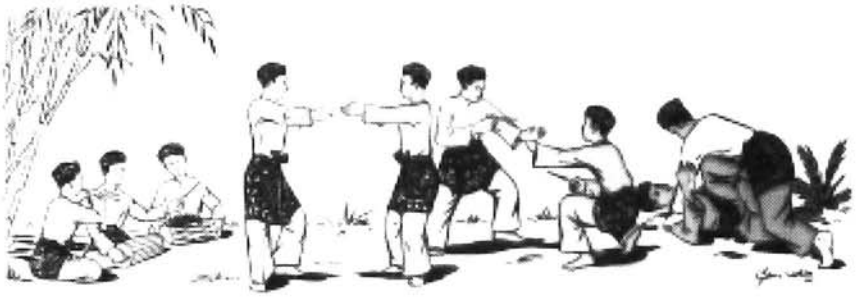
Instruments used are the xylophone, gong, drums, and cymbals.

The Northeast

Northeasterners are not natural *fawn* dancers as are the northerners, but they are talented in poetry and music. Thus northeastern dances are usually accompanied by singing in the native *aew* style, a chanting of verses with drawn out vocalization at the beginning and end of each verse. Instruments used are also more varied than those of the north, for in addition to drums, cymbals, and gongs, northeasterners also often use the *kaen* (a type of reed mouth organ), a stringed instrument called the *soong*, which is plucked, and rhythm sticks.

There are four distinctive regional dances: the *Mo-Lam*, the Threshing Pole Dance, the *Pu-Thai Fawn*, and the Ton Drum Dance, or *Ram Ton*. The basic movements of all these

THE RAM TON



THE DAGGER DANCE

THE RONG NGENG

dances consist of bending and swaying the torso in a circular motion, waving the arms in front of the body without the finger movements of the classical dances, and forward steps accented by emphatic thrusts of the body, jerking of the legs, and wriggling of the waist and shoulders. The delicate grace of the northern *fawn* dancers is missing, but it is replaced by an air of simple fun and gaiety.

The dances are usually performed at an annual festival called *Boon Bong Fi*, which accompanies a rain-making ceremony. The signal for the festival to begin is the lighting of a bamboo rocket (the *Bong Fi*). Then the musicians begin to play and the dancers get into step. The ceremony is concluded with a fireworks display.

The Ram Ton

Although the origin of the *Ram Ton* or Ton Drum Dance is not definitely known, it is generally believed to come from Nakorn Rajasima (Korat), one of the principal cities of the northeast. The *ton* drum is usually made of baked clay, and has a cow hide or a snake skin stretched over one end. As the *ton* drums beat out the rhythm, aided by cymbals and rhythm sticks, dancers in pairs move slowly around a wide circle, swaying as they move. The dancers do not touch their partners, but use their eyes in a kind of stylized flirtation or courtship. The dancing couples often break out of the circle and dance to the homes of friends and acquaintances.

Men dancers wear trousers and shirt in contrasting color, augmented by a brilliant sash about the waist. Women wear the usual long, straight skirt and long-sleeved blouse, also in contrasting shades, plus a colorful scarf draped over one shoulder. A flower behind the ear completes the costume.

In former times there was no singing to accompany the *Ram Ton* as there is today. Then the dance came to be used at gatherings of young men and women where popular songs and lyrics specially composed for these occasions were sung. The present day *Ram Wong*, as introduced by the Fine Arts Department, is a refinement of the *Ram Ton*.

The Threshing Pole Dance

A traditional dance at festivals in the northeast province of Surin is the *Ten Sag* or Threshing Pole Dance. Equipment for the dance consists of four wooden poles used in threshing rice, two of the poles measuring two and one half meters in length, and the other two being only one and one half meters long. The shorter poles serve as cross-wise rests for the longer poles, which are clapped together in time to the music by two seated rhythm beaters. The dancers, in couples, dance in a circle around the clapping poles till their turn comes to approach the clappers. They must then step into the space between the poles at the precise moment the rhythm beaters move the poles apart, then dance out before the poles are clapped together. Anyone who misses the beat will be clapped on the ankles by the poles. At times the dancers perform some steps between the poles while the rhythm beaters raise and lower the poles on their cross rests instead of clapping them together.

This dance gives opportunity for competitive skill and quite a lot of teasing. The two rhythm beaters, usually men, are very careful with the female dancers. It one of them misses a beat, the blow she receives from the clapping poles is rarely hard enough to bruise her ankles, whereas an error on the part of a male dancer is punished with a hard knock which causes much merriment.

The steps of the dance are very simple, but the tempo varies. The slower the beat, the more difficult it is to dance to; the fast tempo is the most popular. The dance is usually brought to an end by a skilled male dancer who delights the audience by clowning as he performs the steps.

The accompanying instruments are a pipe and two *ton* drums, which provide the beat for the clapping poles.

The dancers wear costumes similar to those worn for the *Ram Ton*. Besides the sash the men also loosely drape a stole from one shoulder across the chest to the other shoulder. The women secure the scarf in a fold at the waist.

In the modern version of this dance

THE SAPIN DANCE

THE NGIEW FAWN

THE FINGERNAIL FAWN

practiced in the central provinces, three principal changes are found. A lighter bamboo pole replaces the heavy threshing pole; the simple steps of the classical dance are used instead of the free movement of the Northeast, and the clown ending of the dance is eliminated.

The Pu-Thai Fawn

The *Pu-Thai* are former Laotian tribes who settled in the northeast, mainly in the provinces of Nakorn Panom, Sakolnakorn, and Udorn. The *fawn* is performed in the larger villages of these provinces to welcome honored guests. The dancers sing blessing and dance alternately. Customarily this *fawn* is performed by a large troupe of dancers preceded by a file of drummers. The drums vary in size from the largest, which must be carried by special bearers, to the smallest, which can be thrown like a ball. The drummer strikes the drum in a variety of ways, with his knees, elbows, fists, or heels, as well as with his palms. Large and small cymbal, a gong, and rhythm sticks are also used. The *kaen* (mouth organ) carries the melody from beginning to end.

The movements of the dance are those described in the introduction to this section, along with an up and down movement of the torso peculiar to this dance. Long false finger nails ten to twelve inches in length with bright colored pom poms at the tips emphasize the swaying movements of the arms and torso.

The *Pu-Thai* of each province have different costumes and hair styles. *Pu-Thai* women from Nakorn Panom cover their hair with turbans, while those from Sakolnakorn and Udorn pile their hair high and use flowers as ornaments. But all wear a similar blouse, which is invariably long-sleeved and black in color. With these the women wear silver necklaces and buttons made of silver coins. Their skirts, also black, are worn long and end in a wide bond of embroidery stitched in silver thread.

The Mo-lam

The *Mo-lam* is a popular form of song-dance typical of the rural villages of the northeast. It is actually a style of singing to which the dancing is incidental. It originated from the ancient practice of singing the stories of the various incarnations of the Buddha, later the music of the *kaen* was added as an accompaniment, and other stories and legends and rhymed debates were added to the song repertoire. The singing eventually became a form of courting, and dance movements were included.

The dance movements are very simple. The participants usually sway their torsos and arms in time to the music but confine their foot movements to one spot. It is not an active dance, the main emphasis being on the song. As the *Mo-lam* is now basically a courting song, only young unmarried people participate. A typical Laotian style costume is worn for the *Mo-lam*, with the women wearing the traditional long-sleeved black blouse. The long skirts are usually pulled up high at the sides. Hair may be worn in a high chignon ornamented with flowers, or hanging loose with a flower behind the ear.

The Central Provinces

The Central Provinces have very few folk dances of their own, due perhaps to the great development of the classical dance in this area. Such folk dances as there are seem to have been adapted from the dances of other regions, with the adaptation essentially a beautifying and sophistication of the bodily movements. Thus the Ton Drum dance became Bangkok's *Ram Wong*, and another northeastern dance, the Threshing Pole Dance, became the central provinces' Bamboo Pole Dance. Although there are several traditional dances, their movements are of the classical type, and they can thus not be considered true folk dances.

The Long Drum Dance

The *terd terng* or long drum is thought to have originated with the Mons, an ancient people some of whose descendants still live in eastern Burma and western Thailand. The Burmese adopted this instrumnet from the Mons and in turn introduced it into Thailand seventy or eighty years ago, in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Today the drum is used in Thailand for dances having Burmese characteristics and for certain festivals, such as

THE CANDLE FAWN

THE SWORD DANCE

THE LONG DRUM DANCE

harvest, homage to Buddha (*kathin*), and ordination.

A long drum is made from a whole tree trunk carved into the required shape. Cow or goat hide is stretched over one end and is held in place by leather thongs. The drum is then decorated by gaily colored pleated and frilled cloth. A strap is provided for the drummer, who slings it across his right shoulder so that the drum slants upward and can be manipulated easily. The drummers use their elbows and knees as well as their hands to beat their instruments, and vie with the cymbalists in producing the accompaniment for a lively dance is vigorous and free, with some modifications in the classical style. The tempo and the free movement of the dance are very popular and new dances are being created for the long drum constantly.

The playing of the long drum is associated with a time of fun and gaiety. In former days it played a special part in the ordination ceremony. Long drums led the procession taking a candidate for the priesthood to the temple. They were beaten at their loudest at the moment the candidate stepped into the temple, thus drowning out the voices of any evil spirit who might try to tempt him away from joining the priesthood.

The Ram Song

The Song Dance or *Ram Song* has its roots in the Laotian province of Sam Neua, traditional home of the Song tribe. Like the *Pu-Thai*, the Song emigrated from Laos into northeastern and central Thailand when Vientiane fell to the Thai armies of King Rama I, nearly two hundred years ago. They are to be found today mainly in the provinces of Pijit, Saraburi, Petchaburi, and Rajaburi. The Songs of these provinces are known as the Black Song or *Lao Song Dahm*, wearers of black. (A tribe wearing red would be known as *Lao Song Dang*, wearers of red.)

The dress worn by the *Lao Song Dahm* resembles that worn by other Thai tribes of Laotian origin, such as the *Pu-Thai*. The women wear the long-sleeved black blouse and long skirt, but Song women wear their skirts gathered up high in front. They are fond of silver ornaments, such as bracelets, anklets, necklaces, and buttons of silver coins. The men wear jackets like the Chinese jacket, but tied with string instead of buttoned down the front. They wear trousers rather than *sarong* and on festive occasions wear a stole thrown across the shoulders. Teen-age girls wear their hair at shoulder length. At the age of twenty, a woman puts her hair up in a chignon twisted to one side, but with one coil of hair sticking out to show she is unmarried. A married woman knots her hair neatly.

At festival time, men and women gather to dance in a communal courtyard in the center of village. They dance in couples, their basic movements consisting of swaying their bodies and moving their hands and arms up and down. A soloist, sometimes male, sometimes female, sings lyrics in praise of love or beauty to the accompaniment of a *kaen*. There are no other instruments; the audience claps its hands to help the dancers maintain the rhythm. Sometimes a group of male and female singers sing courting songs and clap the rhythm while gently swaying in a standing position. When finished singing, they will dance about, then alternate the singing and dancing.

The Sword Dance or Art of Self Defense

A form of art that is uniquely Thai is that of self-defense. This comprises boxing and the use of the sabre and staff, as taught from generation to generation with few changes down to this day and age. Originating in the era when Sukhothai was the capital of Thailand, it was developed into a fine art when Ayuthya replaced Sukhothai as the seat of government. *Pra Chao Sua* (The Tiger King) appreciated it so much that command contests were often held for his pleasure. Again, history tells us of another golden age of the art in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Self-defense contestants would duel before the king on every possible occasion, including tonsure ceremonies and cremations. It was during the reign of this fifth king of the Bangkok era that several groups achieved prominence. From these, camė two outstanding teachers, *Kru* (teacher) *Sri* and *Kru Chid*. Lieutenant Commander Charoen Trairat studied under these two experts and afterwards set up his own group which he called Suan Anand. This group later

THE RAM SONG

became known as the Sri Trairat with headquarters at Tumbon Chang Lor, Dhonburi. This is the only group trained in the authentic traditions of the ancient art in the entire kingdom.

To get back to history and the origin of the art, it is necessary to point out the fact that it began as a means of preparing for war. In times of peace every able-bodied man, with no exception, was called upon to be as proficient as possible in the use of all known weapons. As practising was compulsory it was only natural for friendly duels and matches to be arranged that would bring out the champions who were judged by their beauty of movement as well as bravery. These tournaments also served as morale boosters apart from the pleasure they gave. It was specifically understood by the contestants the duels were of a friendly nature, therefore the choice of weapons was towards those that were not so likely to cause wounds, such as soft sabres, or padded swords. The modern age tends towards realism, hence swords of cane or steel, which provide for more thrills.

Before coming to grips, both parties perform a ritual dance to the accompaniment of a pipe and a drum. The first movement of the dance is the honoring of the teacher who taught the art (if performed before the king, he must be honored too, according to customs). A triple reason exists for the preliminary dance; one, to enable the opponents to assess each other's skill, another, to build up their courage, and lastly, it gives each man the opportunity to check up on the other to see that no protecting armour or padded quilt is worn. Presumably, one who is encumbered by such safety devices would not be a light dancer.

The accompaniment and the movements of the dance (called *Mai Rum*) differ according to the weapons used. The instruments used are the Javanese pipe, the Javanese drum and small cymbals to give the beat.

The South

Except for a dance called the *Manora*, forerunner of the well-known Thai classical dance, the only folk dances of southern Thailand are those of the Muslim Thai. These dances have come from other countries and their style shows western influence. The

performers use leg, foot, and arm movements similar to those used in European folk dances. The tempo of the music, unlike that of other parts of the country, is fast.

The Muslim Thai men wear a turban wrapped neatly about the head, along-sleeved, high collared jacket, pants and a short *sarong*. The women wear a colorfully patterned skirt and long-sleeved cutaway jacket. The materials and designs show Malayan or Indonesia characteristics.

The Rong Ngeng

The *Rong Ngeng* is a folk dance of the four southern, or Muslim, provinces of Thailand. It was brought from Indonesia by Malayan actors about seventy years ago. It is danced as an accompaniment to several different songs, each song having its own dance variation.

Originally, the *Rong Ngeng* was a popular Indonesian court dance. Beautiful court ladies were trained to dance it with guests at royal parties. The dance first appeared in south Thailand with a dance drama called *Ma Yong*, introduced by Malayan actors. The *Rong Ngeng* was danced during the intermissions of the drama, and members of the audience were invited to join in the dance. Finally it became so popular that it developed into one of the folk dances of the region.

The *Rong Ngeng* is danced to various folk songs whose basic rhythm rather resembles that of a samba. The melody is carried by a guitar or violin, with gongs and drums beating out the rhythm. The lyrics are usually sung in the Thai-Muslim dialect and each song has its own distinctive rhythm and dance steps. The basic steps were probably derived from the Portuguese, which accounts for a certain similarity to western dancing, especially in the foot and hip movements. The arm and hand movements are graceful but not stylized in the classical manner. Even though the male and female dancers sing a courting song while dancing together, they never touch each other. A modern variation of the dance permits the crossing of a single finger between a man and a woman as they perform the dance together.

The Sapin Dance

This dance of Arabian origin was brought to southern Thailand by Malayans who taught it to the Muslim Thai. It is not so popular as the *Rong Ngeng*, hence is performed only rarely. It may be performed at especially happy occasions, such as weddings. It is not considered a social dance for men and women as is the *Rong Ngeng*, and the dancers are usually men. They maintain an almost military bearing in the dance, with the torso held rigid and with very little arm movement.

The instruments vary with each locale. Sometimes the instruments, as well as the tunes and rhythms, are those of western Malaya. In Sungaikolog district the entire accompaniment is provided by a set of drums beating out the rhythm in unison.

The Dagger Dance

The Dagger Dance of the south takes the form of a mock duel using the Malayan *kris*, a two edged steel knife about eight inches long with a handle of ivory, wood, or horn. The dueler has the choice of using a single k*ris* in one hand or two *kris*, one in each hand. As in Thai boxing, the opponents begin with a warm-up dance and pay reverence to their instructors. The movements of the dance tend toward the Balinese style and simulate actual fighting. The tempo slows down or quickens according to the progress of the duel. Besides using their daggers, the opponents can bring their arms and legs in to play as they wish. The musical instruments used are an Indian flute, two Indian drums, and a gong.

This dance is performed only on special occasions, such as a royal command performance or a state visit.