



The Nora costume - khrueng song Nora [เครื่องทรงโนรา]

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Nora is a traditional southern Thai dance originally performed by male dancers. But as culture evolved women too started partaking in this artform. The dance as well as the costume of Nora are based on the mythological creature kinnari. This creature is half woman, half swan which plays an important part in Thai artistic tradition, e.g. Nora. Nora performances are a form of theater telling stories with its impactful dancing and most notable: the colorful costume. It consists of many different layers which add up to 15 or more kg. With women joining the traditional southern Thai art, the costume evolved from shirtless for male to a full beaded dress worn by both female and male dancers.

The first thing you notice about the costume, next to its colors, is the impressive headdress. It resembles a three-sided shield which is called “serd” (เทริด) and is the namesake for the traditional crown. It is also a royal symbol which indicates the arts closeness to the palace. The *serd* is made out of wood that must have promising meaning in it. Typically bamboo for the frame and some hardwood for the pointed tip is being used. As time went by and culture evolved, metal too was used as a material for the frame. It is decorated with precious stones, colored glass and *kra-chang* (lotus-like patterns), after being painted with lacquer and gold. Other details are a sacred thread on the top and a flower tucked in between the performer's ear and headdress.

The material used for the sacred decoration is very stiff and therefore one could say that many of them were most likely made especially for the dancers wearing it. But the performers don't just get the *serd* on their first day of training. They have to train for a long period and prove their ability to dance Nora. Only when they mastered the traditional southern Thai dance can they wear the crown and the whole costume.

The costume consists of many different elements next to the imposing *serd*, e.g. the beaded neck cover - ping kor (ปิ้งคอ) - whose colorful designs represent the feathers of the bird.

Another striking detail to create the picture of *pinnari* is the *Peek* (ปีก/wings) - also called hang (tail) or hang hong (swan tail). It traditionally consists of buffalo horn, metal or plastic covered in black paint. Attached to the wings you can see beads hanging down resembling the feathers of a bird.

Another key element of the nora costume are the *Leb plom* [เล็บปลอม]. These artificial fingernails are worn on all fingers except the thumb and create the illusion of inhumanly bent fingernails - resembling a kinnari's claw. Originally it was made of rattan but as time went by brass, silver or stainless steel are also commonly used materials for the *Leb plom*. The beaded extension is made out of rattan or white strings.

Different dancers of the Nora performance wear different sets of costumes. The main dancer *Nai Rong Yai* (นายโรงใหญ่) is -additionally to a colorful round-neck shirt made of beads, pants, long cross body chain and *Leb plom*- adorned by multiple arm bracelets, a striking pendant and colorful wings (ปีกนก آهن/ปีกหนัง).

Together they create the incredible picture of a kinnari, dancing to trance-like music combined with the main dancer singing along. This incorporates high discipline only few dancers - the Nora dancers - can accomplish. And like that this unique traditional southern Thai performance art captures its viewers for hundreds of years up to this day.



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