

**Research Article**

## **Nora Bead Crafting in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand: A Cultural Reproduction for Sustainability**

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### **Abstract**

The Nora show started in 1820, using Nora beads to decorate the Nora costumes. Today, Nora beads are created as crafts for ornament in response to the needs of society and consumers. However, due to the changes affecting the social and economic aspects, the preservation and maintenance of crafts like Nora are crucial for sustainability. This article, which is part of a larger study on “Nora Bead Crafting: Cultural Capital and Creative Folklore”, is designed as analytical descriptive research with qualitative data analysis. The data for this study was collected using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions participated by Nora bead crafters in Muang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. The findings revealed that Nora, a local performing art of the Southern part of Thailand, preserved and maintained the Nora identity and numerous belief systems. The crafters designed their products by changing the colours, shapes, and patterns and using the materials in stringing or embroidering the beads. The creation of the Nora beads in these new ways is considered a reproduction of culture in four aspects— production, dissemination, consumption, and reproduction.

**Keywords:** Crafting, Beads, Nora, Cultural Reproduction

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## **Introduction**

Nora is a type of dance-drama originating in southern Thailand and is played in northern Malaysia and the southern provinces of Thailand. Dance by the main character and dance with the prayer is made by the slow movements of the legs, arms, and fingers; the dramatic performance of Nora is amazing (Southern Region Local Database, 2018). Nora was listed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on December 15, 2021. "Nora" is the third UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Thailand.

Nora is a local art embodying the identity of the people in South Thailand. According to Petchkaew (2016, p.6), Nora is widely accepted as a dancing art representing the Southern Thai people and is considered part of ancient culture. Performing Nora requires the use of the body as a communication tool, and the body movement follows rhythmic patterns. There is also a relationship between the thought and the spirit of the musicians. The dance movements and the accompanying songs are not only performing art but also relate to ways of life and represent human identity.

Besides being a local art, the significance of Nora is in its being a ritual ceremony of the people in Southern Thailand. For instance, the ritual of Nora Rong Khru pays respect to the Nora ancestral spirits, offerings, and medical treatment. Also, various components of Nora are integrated into certain beliefs, such as spiritual teachers called Khru Mor, ritual ceremonies, performing steps, music, dancing posture, and costume.

The costume is an interesting component reflecting the Nora identity as the Department of Culture Promotion, Ministry of Culture (2016, p. 71) states, "the most outstanding aspect that differentiates Nora from other local art is the costume that is considered the principal component of Nora". For example, "Surd", the headdress, is considered sacred, and "the decorative bead is set", which is made from small colour beads strung in patterns, is considered a craft that needs considerable delicateness and neatness.

At this moment, society has changed economically, socially, and culturally by absorbing foreign cultures enormously. This has resulted in changes in the traditional Nora art. It decreased in popularity and is at risk of possible disappearance. Hence, modification of the art has been introduced to win back its popularity and update the art for the changing time. As a result, Nora bead crafters modified their products by using the beads to decorate the costumes and used the beads to make ornaments such as key chains, earrings, and necklaces. Designing the products follows the preferences of the local people in the area. For instance, using the local materials in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, Southern Thailand, has made the work more interesting. It has also increased the identity of the people in the area. However, such social change has reduced the significance of the original Nora art form. Recently, artists and the Nora bead crafters adapted the preservation, maintenance, and reproduction of the Nora beads in novel ways using the conceptual framework of cultural reproduction by Raymond Williams (Williams, 2004). Through cultural reproduction processes, social cultures are reproduced by a variety of social factors, both social and economic. In this framework, the meaning and value of Nora bead crafting are determined by considering the use of local wisdom as the cultural capital to construct creative folklore. This article, therefore, aims to present the modification of the Nora bead craft as the cultural reproduction for Nora's sustainability.

Through cultural reproduction processes, social cultures are reproduced by a variety of social factors, both social and economic.

## **Objective**

To study the reproduction of Nora beads and adaptation into modern handicrafts.

## **Research Methodology**

This study takes the idea of cultural reproduction of Williams (2004), which suggests that cultural reproduction is a concept that arises from the beliefs and values accepted by members of the community. To build up the relationship between cultures, other components in cultural production should include production, dissemination, consumption, and reproduction. This would also explain the cultural reproduction, the meaning of the traditional Nora beads, and the transformation of Thai society today.

### **Setting and Participants**

The participants of the study were the Nora bead crafters and sellers in Muang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, Thailand. Nakhon Si Thammarat is one of the provinces in Thailand located in the southern part of the country. The province is known for its Nora bead crafters, who produced Nora bead handicrafts that embody the unique culture and tradition of the Thai people in the south.

There were two groups of informants for this study. The first group consists of the Traditional Nora Bead Makers: Nora Artists and Nora Bead Makers. They were interviewed to know the origin, value, and belief of traditional Nora beads. The second group was the Nora bead handicraft product sellers. They were interviewed to know the patterns and factors of modifying the Nora beads into new products.

### **Data gathering procedure**

Prior to conducting the study, the researcher sought the approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee of her institution. It was given the approval number WU-EC-LI-2-010-63. When approved, the researcher visited the Nora beads production sites for the interviews and participatory observations. The interview was conducted in the Thai language and lasted between one and two hours. The interview, which was recorded, was conducted according to the participants' most convenient time.

Lastly, the collected data was analyzed according to the social production theory to obtain the objectives of the research.

### **Results**

Stringing the Nora beads in Nakhon Si Thammarat is local knowledge and wisdom passed on to generations of the Nora families. Additionally, there have been beliefs about "Khru Mor" in connection with the beads. Practices such as bead stringing, wearing, and caring have been passed on from one generation to the next.

Based on the interview, it is found that the beads are part of the Nora costume, which requires neatness and meticulousness in their embroidery. The beads used in traditional Nora costumes were made from bones called bone beads found in the South of Thailand. Chaisuwan and Wangsuk (2006) stated that the beads of the early periods were made from materials easily found in nature, such as animal bones and shells.

### **Nora Beads: Identity and Belief**

The Nora costume has many components. One outstanding element of the Nora costume is the beads, which are used as a blouse and named "the Nora set". It consists of baa, shoulders, ping kor, neck pendants, pan ok, and chest decorations. The beads are used in place of clothes. As Pongpaiboon (1986, p.1804) states, "The Nora bead set was embroidered with colourful beads, which are used as a blouse. It consists of five important pieces: "Baa" for the two shoulders, left and right (two pieces); ping kor for the front and the back hanging down from the neck (two pieces); and pan ok, a rectangular piece embroidered with beads used to tie around the body at the breast level. Some local regions named it pan krong, and in other areas, rob ok.

Besides, the beads are also used to decorate other parts of the costume, such as sai-sangwan, subsuang, paa-hoi, naa-paa, and hang-hong. This is to beautify the Nora costume and build the identity of Nora artists. Before the artists wear the Nora costume, they must enter the ceremony called "Krob-Serd" to pay respect to the teachers they learn from and to display their beliefs and faith.

Before wearing the costumes, the artists must ceremonially bow to show gratitude to the teachers for their fortune based on the belief that the Nora group's descendants must be well-behaved and ethical because Nora is sacred. At the end of the performance, the costumes must be cleaned, well-cared for, and kept on a shelf in the act of worshipping khru mor Nora.

At present, cultural adaptation occurs in many areas causing local art and culture to slowly disappear. What is interesting is that Nora is one of the local art forms of South Thailand that has adapted its format in acting, music, and costume. Nora beads have changed from just being part of the Nora costume to being stylish and useful ornaments such as key chains, earrings, and necklaces. Such an adaptation reduces the intensity of traditional beliefs but produces outstanding goods with identity. Undoubtedly, the changes caused by social and economic factors have had an impact on the way of life and sustainability of Nora until now.

### **Factors Leading to the Adaptation of Nora Beads to New and Stylish Crafts**

Thai society has evolved economically, socially, and culturally due to the increasing acceptance of foreign cultures. Thus, Nora is becoming less and less popular and at risk of possible disappearance due to the following factors:

#### **1. The social factor**

Currently, Thais give less importance to traditional art and culture because of the flow of external cultures such as beliefs, religion, and traditions. As a result, local art performances such as Nora, which used to be popular in the past, became less meaningful to the people. Hiring the Nora shows is subsequently on the decline.

The Nora group were hired to perform at various festivals, but by 2020, Nora performances were replaced by bands and concerts as these performances became popular with the younger generation. Besides, there are now more modern media to enjoy, such as TV soap operas, movies, and the internet.

These changes affect the Nora performer and artists. They turned to other occupations or found other supplementary jobs. At this moment, children of the Nora groups have studied higher education to enter government services for income security. This is greatly affecting the preservation and maintenance of the Nora art, and a considerable effort must be made to ensure its sustainability.

Recently, Thai society has changed to pick up the “nostalgia fever” by reviving the traditional local wisdom to create meaning and origin for something. Kittiarisa (2003, p.10) says, “Yearning for the past is a significant social phenomenon, a foundation of a complex process of demolishing, building, redefining or making cultural invention.”

There are plenty of examples of “nostalgia fever”. For instance, in the past, tourism, floating markets, and cultural consumer products employed the creation of meaning and identity for the goods and products based on the consumers’ interest and needs for originality. Because of this, Nora beads crafters have modified the traditional Nora beads. They tried to produce a new style of craft that reflected the identity of the community following the current social fever.

#### **2. The economic factor**

Based on the social factor, the employment rate of the Nora groups is low, leading to reduced income for the Nora artists. This is primarily due to fewer orders for Nora's costume because of its costliness. The Nora bead crafters need to change, adapt, create, design, and make new products to change the target buyers from the traditional consumers consisting of Nora artists and Nora myth believers to people in general. The goal is to design and create modern and interesting products to respond to the needs of all ages of consumers, such as children, adolescents, working people, and the elderly, who are interested in products that reflect local knowledge and wisdom.

Based on the above-mentioned factors that reduce the traditional values and beliefs, young generation consumers have constructed a different perception of the Nora identity. This is because new perceptions are formed based on the meanings derived from emerging new products and goods. The producers, however, continue to preserve Nora's identity, such as colours and unique appearances.

### **Nora Bead Creations: Ways of Traditional Beliefs and Adaptations**

The Nora beads symbolize the Southerner's identity through colours, beautiful patterns, and neatness in creating the pieces of artwork that are part of the Nora costume. The outstanding Nora identity brings about changes from the traditional Nora bead embroidery to the application of beads used to produce products or craftwork in the new style as mentioned below:

#### **1. Colours of the Nora beads**

The bead colours are created by stringing colourful beads together in patterns that appear beautiful. Different colour articles are white, yellow, blue, red, black, purple, and orange. There are criteria in selecting the colours for use 1) Personal preferences of the crafters based on their experience and imagination, 2) Beliefs about colours. For example, some colours have symbolic meanings, and others are considered auspicious colours, and 3) the Needs of the owners of the work and appropriateness with the occasions (Changsaan, 2000: 55).

However, beliefs about colours and Nora's bead stringing have changed. Historically, since 1820, black beads have not been used in Nora's costumes because it was believed that black is the colour of bad

luck. However, some dresses were embroidered with black beads of Sonora to highlight patterns. In the Nora bead craftwork, black beads are used to make the products more beautiful. Nuu Kaew (2020, interview) states:

“At the beginning, black beads were not popular for the Nora costume because it was believed to be an unlucky colour. In the present time, colourful beads have become popular, making black a major colour for the Nora costume. Many Nora artists confirm that without black on the Nora costume, it will not stand out.”



**Figure 1** Nora Costumes  
source: Kamlangkuea, 2020

Using colourful beads is popular in craftwork to create beauty and uniqueness for each piece of craftwork. Products using beads are things for various purposes and ornaments, such as necklaces, bracelets, earrings, rings, and key chains.



**Figure 2** Nora Bead Craft  
source: Kamlangkuea, 2020

In other areas, Nora bead craft is also creating useful and decorative house pieces such as bags and table lamps in interesting combinations with local materials.

## 2. Appearances and patterns of the Nora beads

The Nora bead craft begins with stringing small, coloured beads with thread to make patterns. In the past, since the beginning of 1820, simple patterns have been used. There were also a few patterns in use, such as the fishbone pattern, plexiglass pattern, lotus flower pattern, and diamond pattern. In 2020, new patterns were designed. The designers modified the old patterns in the product design and used small details in the patterns to make new designs that also represent Nora's identity. Kerdkliang (2020) explains:

*“In the past, there were not many patterns of Nora bead stringing. Plexiglass pattern was the most popular. However, techniques of bead stringing vary. Modification of bead stringing techniques aims at the faster speed unclear! While the changing of the structure of the original patterns aims at creating novelty and uniqueness. New patterns are also designed by modeling nature and environment close to people, such as Lai Kanok (Thai drawing style), Lai Thai (Thai patterns), and Lai Dok Mai (the flower patterns).” (Kerdkliang, 2020).*



**Figure 3** Nora Bead Craft Embroidery  
source: Kamlangkuea, 2020

### 3. Materials and equipment in Nora bead embroidery

In the past, beads were made from animal bones which were strong and not easily broken. Moreover, the colours did not peel off easily. Nowadays, traditional beads are not used because of the costliness and scarcity of the original beads as well as their heavy weight. Thus, new style beads have been developed. Sales of coloured plastic beads in various shapes matching the needs and interests of the bead crafters are promoted. They are ordinary beads, Siam beads, Rome beads, and crystal beads. Most bead crafters turn to plastic beads because they are easy to find, colourful and light, much lighter than the traditional ones.

Also, the Nora beads have been used with other products, such as ropes and seashells. The use of the beads has been applied in making local products such as things for general use and ornaments. Indeed, this is the combination of local knowledge and wisdom. The cultural capital in the application and modification of the Nora beads is valuable cultural capital to make products with a unique identity. Suwannapakdi (2020) explains:

*“In the adaptation, other materials such as ropes and seashells are brought to use with the beads. This makes the beadwork more outstanding and interesting, appreciated by both the Thai and foreign customers.” (Suwannapakdi,2020).*



**Figure 4** Nora Bead Products  
source: Kamlangkuea, 2020

The creation of Nora bead craft begins with creativity and design using what is already available to respond to the needs of the people in the modern age. By displaying the identity of the people through the beauty of artwork to the creation of local handicrafts, it reflects the local knowledge and wisdom. This is clearly the use of Nora beads, the traditional cultural capital of the people of Nakhon Si Thammarat, to reproduce the Nora beads in goods and products to cater to the needs of present-day consumers.

### **The Nora Bead Craft and the Cultural Production**

The creation of the Nora bead craft is the use of cultural production to be reproduced in the present-day social context. Dittapan (2014, p.17) explains that cultural reproduction refers to the presentation of a selected culture for definition and value determination through ways of practice in the new context. Cultural reproduction leads to the implementation of a new culture with different objectives from before in response to the current situation to create a new definition. The process of the production and reproduction of the Nora bead culture has four components: production, dissemination, consumption, and reproduction.

#### **1. The production aspect**

Production and reproduction of the Nora bead craft originated from the belief and faith of our ancestors. Most craft producers are descendants of the Nora groups. Production of the craft can be learned from people with experience and those in the Nora families who are knowledgeable and skilful in the art. They pass on this knowledge of bead embroidery from one generation to another. Thus, some Nora artists can pick up Nora bead embroidery as a supplementary career for another income. This type of embroidery art requires skill, carefulness, and meticulousness. The producers still believe that Nora's art is sacred and can be used to create other products if the art is not downgraded.

Since the Nora art crafters put their love and faith into producing the art pieces, they embroider the Nora beads with special care. As a result, consumers are aware of the value and meaning of the products before they come to buy them. They realize that the Nora bead craft is a product of identity. If so, the application of cultural capital into making products for sale also attracts the attention of the consumers who continue to preserve and pass on local knowledge and wisdom. In brief, the Nora bead craft is created to continue their very own existence.

#### **2. The Dissemination aspect**

The Nora bead craft creates an identity for goods and products. For example, new patterns have been invented to be used with other types of craft. Incorporating local products with the Nora bead craft not only increases the value of the artwork but also disseminates local knowledge and wisdom. This makes it more popular and thus raises the product value.

Moreover, creating the Nora bead craft as a new style of craft matches the policy of the government in making use of the cultural capital to increase the product's economic and social value. As stated in the 12th National Social and Economic Development Plan B.E. 2560-2564, the strategy is to strengthen the economy for sustainable competitiveness by promoting the strength of the new economy (Office of the Commission of the National Economic and Social Development, Prime Minister Office, 2017). That policy enables the state to give importance to local goods and products to increase income for people in the community. Dissemination of the Nora bead craft from the cultural capital based on knowledge and local wisdom leads to the dissemination of culture for knowledge exchange through activities such as 1) allowing students to learn the process of production and creation of the Nora bead craft, 2) establishing a learning centre for people interested in art and craftwork as well as sales of products at shopping centres and product display at the exhibition fair 3) organizing fashion shows using the Nora bead products as part of the show to disseminate and advertise the local craft to the general public.

#### **3. The consumption aspect**

Creating the Nora bead craft enables more easy access to the products because the traditional costume is costly, so few people can afford to buy it. However, the Nora bead craft in the new style has tremendously reduced in price, so it is affordable for general people. Products from the Nora beads that are useful and ornamental have now, therefore, interested consumers of local craft and the youth group.

The increase in diverse consumer groups resulted in some consumers not knowing the traditional beliefs related to Nora. This is because the changing society has lessened people’s awareness of the original culture. Consumers may only know that Nora is a local performing art of South Thailand and may not deeply know the meaning and all the related beliefs innate to the products. In their perception, Nora may only be a valuable product that reflects the identity of the locality.

#### 4. The reproduction aspect

The reproduction of the Nora beads is a craft in the new style and reproduced in terms of value and identity. Reproduction of the art in various locations aims at getting the people of later generations to be aware of the knowledge and local wisdom that reflects culture. In so doing, they will appreciate the value of the art and preserve it for the future. There are stories to tell about the goods, history, and development. Thus, people will see the value of Nora through advertisements of the products on online channels such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and so on. Consumers of the products will know the stories about the products. Besides, advertising the products can be done through other channels, i.e., the introduction of the products at a fair and display of goods in the shopping centre to expand the customer groups.

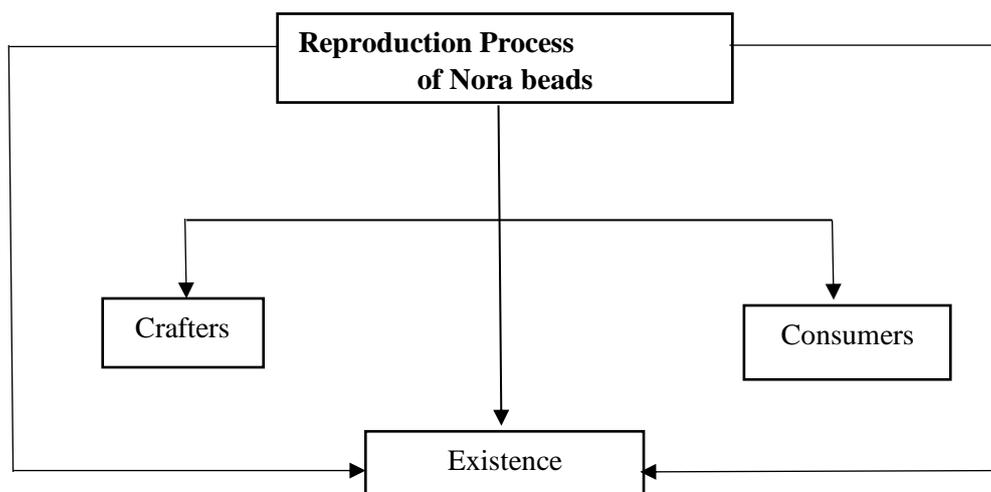
The Nora beads are a reproduction of culture by modifying the Nora beads, which are part of the Nora costume with great value and uniqueness. Crafters design and create artwork in a new style that is modern and matches the needs of the consumers.

Advertising goods to make them more known by using modern advertising media for easy public access can be considered completing cultural reproduction.

Because the crafters still maintain the identity and uniqueness of the traditional Nora art, the consumers are aware and realize the value of the products. Kaewdhep and Hinwiman (2008) say cultural reproduction is the protection and preservation of culture as it increases the culture of production in the society, which consists of crafters, content, advertising media, and those involved in the culture.

Cultural reproduction will only be completed when such reproduction is supported by a code, meaning, or some belief. Reproduction of the Nora beads is the application of knowledge and local wisdom of the Nora bead embroidery art, which is the cultural capital in the creation of various forms of craftwork. As a result, such products receive attention from consumers who are either Thai people who are aware of the traditional Nora art or foreigners who are interested in local Thai products.

The cultural reproduction of the Nora bead craft is evidence of adaptation to the changing society. Crafters have modified the Nora bead craft to make goods and products that respond to the needs of society and consumers. It is considered an act of preservation and maintenance of the Nora art, as shown in the following figure:



**Figure 5** The Process of Reproduction of Culture and Existence of the Nora Art  
source: Kamlangkuea, 2020

Reproduction of Nora's bead handicrafts in a new way has made it easier for consumers to access Nora from the former high things that were hard to reach by the public. It's also a high-priced item, making it difficult for people to buy, but with this new adaptation and reproduction of Nora, consumers can purchase Nora-related products at very affordable prices. It is also an item that can be used in daily life, beautiful and valuable, as well as preserving their local arts and culture.

Due to the reproduction of Nora handicrafts in a new way, sales of the products spread to many groups of consumers, resulting in an increased income for manufacturers and thus making people know more about Nora.

### **Conclusion**

Nora is a beautiful performing art and a significant identity of South Thailand because the Nora costume is outstanding and unique. The Nora bead craft is now reproduced in modern style. Adapting Nora beads to the situation can be achieved through cultural reproduction using local knowledge and wisdom of Nora bead weaving as a cultural capital in modern society. The culture of southern society is Nora, an ancient culture, so there is a cultural selection process for inheritance. Raymond Williams said that a complete cultural reproduction must include producers, cultural capital, raw materials, location, form, and method of media. It is used to achieve repeat results and for the cultural consumer (Williams, 2004), which Nora beads in new forms are a complete cultural reproduction.

The Nora bead set is used to decorate the Nora costume, which is used in place of clothing, a factor that makes Nora art outstanding. At present, creating the craft in the modern style (such as necklaces, bracelets, earrings, rings, and key chains) is done by transforming the original craftwork. For instance, colour, appearance, pattern, material, and equipment are used in bead embroidery. Now, Nora beads are used to create useful and ornamental products. Development and invention of contemporary Nora bead craft are considered cultural reproduction of the Nora beads in four aspects- production, dissemination, consumption, and reproduction.

The Nora bead craft and its application convey stories of the Nora beads with unique identity through goods and products in new forms. Based on the concept of cultural reproduction in applying Nora bead craft in the new context, if the creation of the Nora beads is considered, it is found that this is outstanding in terms of creative folklore. This is primarily due to the plentiful cultural capital in the current Thai society, where application, continuation, interpretation, and new conceptualization are made using creative folklore to add value or to build the local identity.

Adaptation of the Nora beads for use as craft in the new style involves cultural reproduction. Adaptation of the Nora beads is the creation of the craftwork to produce useful and ornamental products using the traditional cultural capital in the new context of modern society. It is worth noticing that such a change consists of the process of creating, continuing, and developing to sustain the culture of Nora art to be forever.

Nora is listed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, which has made it possible for people around the world to know more about Nora, including the Thai people themselves, who pay more attention to this issue. The reproduction of Nora handicrafts in a new way has made it easier for the public to get into Nora. Because the production of Nora bead handicrafts makes it accessible to many consumer groups, such as student groups and working-age groups, including those who preserve local arts and culture and are fond of these handicrafts. As a result, Nora bead handicraft manufacturers have more income and can spread the arts and culture about Nora to outsiders even more.

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