

Analyzing the Theme, Narrative Structure, and Choreographic Strategies in a Dance Performance Interpreting the Nativity of Jesus in Catholicism Within the Thai Cultural Context

การวิเคราะห์แก่นเรื่อง โครงสร้างการเล่าเรื่อง และกลวิธีการออกแบบลีลา ของการแสดงนาฏศิลป์ที่ตีความจากเหตุการณ์การประสูติของพระเยซู ในศาสนาคริสต์นิกายคาทอลิก ภายใต้บริบทวัฒนธรรมไทย

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Keywords: Thai classical dance, Nativity of Jesus, Catholic theology, intercultural performance, theological choreography, hermeneutical inculturation, sacred embodiment

คำสำคัญ: นาฏศิลป์ไทย, การประสูติของพระเยซู, เทววิทยาคาทอลิก, การแสดงข้ามวัฒนธรรม, การออกแบบนาฏศิลป์เชิงเทววิทยา, การตีความเชิงอรรถปริวรรตศาสตร์, การสื่อความหมายศักดิ์สิทธิ์ผ่านการเคลื่อนไหว

Abstract

Background and Objectives: The sacred narrative of Roman Catholic Christianity and Thai classical dance can converge within the context of theological embodiment. This study examines the Nativity of Jesus Christ by exploring how core theological concepts of Roman Catholicism—namely the Incarnation, Kenosis, Revelation, Mary as the Mother of God (Theotokos), and Eschatological Peace—can be meaningfully conveyed through the choreographic structure of Thai classical dance. The study is based on the conceptual frameworks derived from Khon and Lakhon Nai, two traditional forms of Thai performing arts. The objectives are twofold: 1) to analyze the theological and narrative dimensions of the Nativity from a Catholic perspective, and 2) to examine how these theological components can be adapted through Thai dance techniques, spatial dramaturgy, temporal structuring, and costume semiotics.

Methods: The study employed a qualitative interpretive research design, integrating theological exegesis, choreographic analysis, and ethnographic inquiry. Hermeneutical inculturation theory, semiotics of performance, and choreographic design theory were utilized as critical frameworks. The data were collected through the textual analysis of key biblical and Catholic doctrinal sources, the analysis of Thai dance movements through Khon and Lakhon Nai, together with semi-structured interviews with theologians and Thai classical dance instructors. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis and hermeneutic interpretation in order to integrate the findings from theological, dance, and ethnographic perspectives.

Results: Specific stylistic and aesthetic features of Thai classical dance—particularly the codified gestures (phasa ta), hierarchical spatial dramaturgy, cyclical rhythmic patterns (natab), and symbolic costume color palettes—demonstrated a strong capacity to convey theological meaning when adapted to suit the cultural and religious contexts. The Khut Chang Nang gesture embodied Marian consent and receptivity, while Kra-Tai Chom Chan expressed divine humility (Kenosis). Mandala-based spatial formations organized around a Christocentric axis symbolized Incarnation and cosmic renewal, reflecting the liturgical transition from Advent to Epiphany. Furthermore, reflections from both performers and audiences affirm the aesthetic power of the performance in evoking emotions of faith. At the same time, however, they reveal interpretive challenges, highlighting the need for clear dramaturgical framing and contextual presentation in cross-cultural theological dance performance.

Application of this study: This research offers a practical methodological model for the artists, theologians, and scholars engaged in intercultural sacred performance. It contributes significantly to the expansion of methodological discourse within theological performance studies, intercultural dramaturgy, and liturgical arts. In addition, the study demonstrates that indigenous dance systems such as Thai classical dance can serve as a dynamic artistic and theological medium for communicating complex religious content, thereby contributing to the development of art and theology at the international level. It also opens up possibilities for further practice-based experimentation on how traditional cultural systems can function as meaningful restorative media in conveying sacred narratives that are not originally their own within a globalized context.

Conclusions: This study affirms that the adaptation of the Nativity of Jesus into Thai classical dance is both theologically coherent and culturally respectful. This study confirms that the adaptation of the Nativity of Jesus

into the structure of Thai classical dance, in a manner aligned with the contemporary context, can be fully realized both theologically and culturally. The research further demonstrates that dance is not merely an aesthetic form of expression, but can also serve as a powerful tool for theological reflection, effectively bridging the gaps between culture, religion, and epistemology. Moreover, it emphasizes that the creative and contextually respectful translation of sacred narratives into the aesthetics of dance can harmoniously enrich both religious and artistic depth. It also encourages sustained interdisciplinary collaboration among choreographers, theologians, and cultural practitioners in order to support ethical and culturally respectful approaches to integrating faith and sacredness through dance performance.

บทคัดย่อ

ที่มาและวัตถุประสงค์: เรื่องเล่าศักดิ์สิทธิ์ของศาสนาคริสต์นิกายคาทอลิกกับนาฏศิลป์ไทยเป็นสิ่งที่มาบรรจบกันได้ ในบริบทของการสื่อความหมายเชิงเทววิทยาผ่านการแสดงออกทางร่างกาย ซึ่งเป็นการศึกษาเรื่องการประสูติของพระเยซูคริสต์ โดยพิจารณาว่าแก่นความเชื่อทางเทววิทยาของศาสนาคริสต์นิกายคาทอลิก ได้แก่ การรับสภาพมนุษย์ (Incarnation) การทรงถ่อมพระองค์ (Kenosis) การเผยพระองค์ (Revelation) พระนางมารีย์ในฐานะพระมารดาพระเจ้า (Theotokos) และสันติสุขแห่งยุคอวสาน (Eschatological Peace) สามารถถ่ายทอดอย่างมีความหมายภายในโครงสร้างลีลาทางนาฏศิลป์ของไทยได้อย่างไร โดยใช้สมมติฐานจากชุดความคิดของโซนและละครใน วัตถุประสงค์การศึกษา ได้แก่ 1) วิเคราะห์มิติทางเทววิทยาและโครงสร้างการเล่าเรื่องของพระประสูติของพระเยซูในบริบทคาทอลิก และ 2) ศึกษาการประยุกต์แก่นเรื่องทางเทววิทยาผ่านการเคลื่อนไหวทางนาฏศิลป์ไทย การออกแบบพื้นที่การแสดง การจัดโครงสร้างด้านระยะเวลา และสัญลักษณ์ผ่านเครื่องแต่งกาย

วิธีการศึกษา: การวิจัยนี้ใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพแบบตีความ โดยบูรณาการการตีความพระคัมภีร์เชิงเทววิทยา การวิเคราะห์การออกแบบลีลานาฏศิลป์ และการสำรวจภาคสนามเชิงชาติพันธุ์วรรณา กรอบแนวคิดหลักที่นำมาใช้ได้แก่ ทฤษฎีการบูรณาการทางวัฒนธรรมเชิงเทววิทยา สัญลักษณ์ในการแสดง และทฤษฎีการออกแบบลีลานาฏศิลป์ โดยรวบรวมข้อมูลผ่านการวิเคราะห์เอกสารทางพระคัมภีร์และตำราหลักของศาสนาจักร การวิเคราะห์ลีลานาฏศิลป์ไทยผ่านโซนและละครใน และการสัมภาษณ์ถึงโครงสร้างกับนักเทววิทยาและครูผู้สอนนาฏศิลป์ไทย การวิเคราะห์ใช้การวิเคราะห์แบบแก่นสาระ และการตีความแบบอรรถปริวรรตศาสตร์ เพื่อบูรณาการผลการศึกษาในเชิงเทววิทยา นาฏศิลป์ และชาติพันธุ์วรรณา

ผลการศึกษา: ลักษณะเฉพาะทางรูปแบบและสุนทรียศาสตร์ของนาฏศิลป์ไทย โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งระบบท่ารำที่มีการกำหนดเอาไว้เป็นมาตรฐาน คือ ภาษาท่า โครงสร้างการใช้พื้นที่ รูปแบบจังหวะของหน้าทับ และโทนสีของเครื่องแต่งกายเชิงสัญลักษณ์ เหล่านี้แสดงให้เห็นศักยภาพในการถ่ายทอด “ความหมายทางเทววิทยา” เมื่อได้รับการปรับใช้ให้สอดคล้องกับบริบททางวัฒนธรรมและศาสนา ท่ารำขัดจางนาง ถูกตีความให้เป็นสัญลักษณ์ของ “การยินยอมและการเปิดรับของพระแม่มารีย์” ขณะที่ท่ารำกระต่ายข่มจันทร์ สื่อถึงความถ่อมตนของพระเจ้า การจัดองค์ประกอบพื้นที่แบบมณฑลที่มี “แกนศูนย์กลางแห่งพระคริสต์” เป็นจุดรวม แสดงถึงแนวคิดเรื่อง “การรับสภาพมนุษย์ของพระเจ้า” (Incarnation) และ “การฟื้นฟูจักรวาล” (cosmic renewal) เหล่านี้ สะท้อนการเปลี่ยนผ่านเชิงพิธีกรรม จากเทศกาลเตรียมรับเสด็จพระคริสต์ (Advent) สูเทศกาลสมโภชพระคริสต์แสดงองค์ (Epiphany) ทั้งนี้ ผลสะท้อนจากผู้แสดงและผู้ชมยืนยันถึงพลังสุนทรียะที่เข้าถึงอารมณ์ศรัทธา แต่ขณะเดียวกันก็เผยให้เห็นความท้าทายเชิงการตีความ ซึ่งชี้ให้เห็นถึงความจำเป็นของการจัดกรอบบทละครและการนำเสนอเชิงบริบท ในการแสดงนาฏศิลป์ทางเทววิทยาระหว่างวัฒนธรรม

การประยุกต์ใช้: การวิจัยนี้นำเสนอรูปแบบวิธีวิทยาที่ปฏิบัติได้ในเชิงประจักษ์สำหรับศิลปิน นักเทววิทยา และนักวิชาการที่สนใจการแสดงหรือการออกแบบนาฏศิลป์ที่มีเนื้อหาศักดิ์สิทธิ์แบบข้ามวัฒนธรรม ทั้งขยายขอบเขตทางวิธีวิทยาในด้านนาฏศิลป์เชิงเทววิทยา นาฏศิลป์ระหว่างวัฒนธรรม และศิลปะแบบพิธีกรรม นอกจากนี้ ยังแสดงให้เห็นว่านาฏศิลป์พื้นถิ่นของไทย คือ นาฏศิลป์ไทย สามารถทำหน้าที่เป็นสื่อกลางทางศิลปะและเทววิทยาที่มีชีวิตชีวา ในการถ่ายทอดเนื้อหาทางศาสนาอย่างซับซ้อน อันนำไปสู่การพัฒนาศาสตร์ด้านศิลปะและเทววิทยาในระดับสากล และเป็นการเปิดโอกาสให้เกิดการทดลองเชิงปฏิบัติเพิ่มเติมว่า ระบบวัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิมสามารถเป็นสื่อฟื้นฟูได้อย่างมีนัยสำคัญ เพื่อรับใช้การถ่ายทอดเรื่องราวศักดิ์สิทธิ์ที่มีใช้ของตนเองในบริบทโลกาภิวัตน์

บทสรุป: การศึกษานี้ยืนยันว่าการประยุกต์เรื่องการประสูติของพระเยซูเข้าสู่โครงสร้างนาฏศิลป์ไทยอย่างสอดคล้องกับบริบทปัจจุบัน สามารถปฏิบัติได้อย่างสมบูรณ์ ทั้งในแง่เทววิทยาและในแง่วัฒนธรรม งานวิจัยยังแสดงให้เห็นว่านาฏศิลป์มิได้เป็นเพียงการแสดงออกทางสุนทรียศาสตร์ หากแต่สามารถทำหน้าที่เป็นเครื่องมือการไตร่ตรองเชิงเทววิทยาที่มีพลังอันเชื่อมโยงช่องว่างระหว่างวัฒนธรรม ศาสนา และญาณวิทยาได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ นอกจากนี้ยังเน้นย้ำว่าการแปลเรื่องเล่าศักดิ์สิทธิ์สู่สุนทรียศาสตร์ด้านนาฏศิลป์อย่างมีความคิดสร้างสรรค์และเคารพต่อบริบทปัจจุบัน สามารถเสริมสร้างความลึกซึ้งทางศาสนาและศิลปะได้อย่างลงตัว และยังกระตุ้นให้เกิดความร่วมมือข้ามศาสตร์อย่างต่อเนื่องระหว่างนักออกแบบท่าเต้น นักเทววิทยา และนักปฏิบัติทางด้านวัฒนธรรม เพื่อสนับสนุนแนวทางบูรณาการความเชื่อและความศักดิ์สิทธิ์ผ่านการแสดงนาฏศิลป์อย่างมีจริยธรรมและเคารพต่อวัฒนธรรม

Introduction

The intersection of Christian sacred narrative and Southeast Asian performance practice offers a fertile field for interdisciplinary exploration, where theology, ritual, and embodied aesthetics converge. This study investigates how the Nativity of Jesus Christ—a central Christian narrative of divine incarnation—can be reinterpreted and embodied through the idiomatic language of Thai classical dance. The research asks: How can the theological themes of Incarnation, humility, and revelation be translated into the semiotic, spatial, and aesthetic structures of Thai classical performance traditions such as Khon and Lakhon Nai? The primary objective is to examine whether these indigenous movement systems can serve as viable frameworks for expressing Christian theological concepts without compromising either cultural specificity or doctrinal coherence.

The Nativity, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Catholic Church, 1993, §§456–483; §496–507; §§1042–1043), embodies the mystery of the Incarnation, in which the eternal Logos enters temporal and material reality—a theological act signifying divine humility and cosmic renewal. Theological scholars such as Fisichella (2002) and Pope John Paul II (2019) have further interpreted this event as the foundation of Christian anthropology and sacred aesthetics. Historically, the Nativity has inspired a vast repertoire of Western performative representations, from medieval liturgical dramas to Baroque tableaux vivants, each transforming theological dogma into embodied form (Cermatori, 2021; McConachie, et al., 2016). However, in Southeast Asia—and Thailand in particular—the story has rarely been approached through indigenous dance traditions, where performative vocabularies are deeply rooted in Buddhist and Hindu cosmologies.

In Thai classical dance, genres such as Khon (masked dance drama) and Lakhon Nai (court dance) represent highly codified systems of embodied expression. Their movements are governed by an intricate gestural lexicon known as phasa ta (literally “language of the hand and body”), in which every posture, gesture, and transition conveys a precise emotional or symbolic meaning. As documented by Brandon (1997), Charassri (2007, 2023), and Rutnin (1996), these forms function not merely as aesthetic display but as ritualized acts of cultural memory, transmitting moral, cosmological, and metaphysical ideas. Within the Ramakien—Thailand’s localized adaptation of the Ramayana—the choreographic idiom enacts divine authority, cosmic order, and ethical harmony through symmetrical structures and iconographic costuming. In contrast, the Nativity narrative emphasizes theological inversion: divine descent rather than exaltation, poverty rather than majesty, and vulnerability rather than triumph. Reconciling these oppositional paradigms—royal cosmology and divine humility—presents both a challenge and a creative opportunity for intercultural theological expression.

To address this, the present research adopts a hermeneutical inculturation framework, drawing upon the theories of Bevans (1992) and Schineller (1990), which advocate for reciprocal dialogue between theology and local culture. Rather than imposing Christian meaning upon Thai performance, the study develops a bidirectional model wherein theological motifs and indigenous aesthetics inform one another. Within this framework, Thai classical dance becomes not merely a cultural artifact but a medium of theological embodiment, capable of articulating sacred narratives through culturally intelligible movement vocabularies.

The methodological foundation integrates practice-based research, choreographic experimentation, and semiotic analysis, engaging both textual and performative sources. Specifically, the study explores how choreographic components such as hom rong (prologue sequences), mae tha (fundamental movement units), and ram pleng chaa pleng reo (slow–fast rhythmic patterns) may be recontextualized to express the Annunciation and Nativity scenes. The use of color symbolism—particularly silver (ngern) and gold (thong) fabrics traditionally signifying celestial presence—offers visual

analogues to the Johannine depiction of Christ as the “light of the world” (John 8:12). This symbolic layering exemplifies what Kitiarsa (2005) and Ekengren (2009) describe as ritual hybridization: a process through which canonical forms are reinterpreted toward new theological and aesthetic ends.

While Euro-American scholarship on theology and performance—such as that of Foster (2019), Lepecki (2005), and Franko (2006)—has established robust models linking movement to metaphysical inquiry, parallel developments in Southeast Asian contexts remain underexplored. By situating the Nativity within Thai choreological structures, this research seeks to fill that gap, extending intercultural performance theory into a region where the theological dimensions of dance have yet to be systematically theorized.

Equally crucial is the question of context and audience reception. In Thailand’s predominantly Theravāda Buddhist environment, Christian-themed dance performances occupy a liminal position—often staged within academic, interfaith, or cultural exchange settings rather than liturgical venues. This marginality raises important hermeneutical questions regarding the boundaries of sacrality, the translation of meaning across belief systems, and the negotiation of cultural legitimacy (Hellsten, 2023; Kolesnyk, 2024; Wright, 2016; Yarber, 2025). Accordingly, this study examines how theological embodiment can occur meaningfully within pluralistic cultural frameworks while preserving artistic integrity and religious sincerity.

In doing so, the paper contributes to broader discourses in intercultural performance studies, theological aesthetics, and heritage-based choreography. It argues that sacred narratives, when approached through dialogical and context-sensitive methodologies, can acquire renewed theological depth and artistic resonance. This research therefore proposes an interpretive and compositional model through which Thai classical dance—long regarded as a vessel of royal and mythological expression—can serve as a living, adaptive language for theological storytelling.

Ultimately, this article represents the first stage of an ongoing research trajectory in practice-led theological choreography. The present study does not claim to offer a definitive model but rather a conceptual and practical foundation for further investigation. By integrating Thai choreological systems with Christian theological motifs, it seeks to demonstrate that sacred embodiment can transcend geographic and cultural boundaries, transforming dance into a site of intercultural theological dialogue. Through such experimentation, Thai classical dance may continue to evolve—not merely as a repository of heritage, but as a dynamic medium of spiritual, aesthetic, and intellectual engagement in the twenty-first century.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Analyze the thematic, theological, and narrative dimensions of the Nativity of Jesus Christ from a Catholic perspective.
2. Examine how the thematic and theological components of the Nativity can be adapted and embodied through Thai dance techniques, semiotics, and aesthetic principles.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative interpretive research design grounded in interdisciplinary methodologies, integrating theological exegesis, choreographic analysis, and ethnographic inquiry. The methodological framework is meticulously constructed to address the complex dynamics of translating a Western sacred narrative—the Nativity of

Jesus Christ—into the performative and symbolic systems of Thai classical dance. Methodological triangulation is prioritized to ensure scholarly rigor, incorporating data from textual analysis, movement analysis, semiotic mapping, expert interviews, and field observations.

1. Research Design and Theoretical Orientation

The study is underpinned by three principal theoretical frameworks: hermeneutical inculturation theory (Bevans, 1992; McLean et al., 2003; Udoidem, 1996; Zimmermann, 2012), semiotics of performance (Eco, 1977; Elam, 2002), and choreological theory (Adshead-Lansdale, 2009; Foster, 2011). These perspectives collectively provide a critical foundation for analyzing how religious meanings are encoded, embodied, and received across divergent aesthetic and cultural systems.

1.1 Hermeneutical Inculturation

Hermeneutical inculturation provides the theological foundation for reconciling Christian narratives with indigenous artistic expressions. It emphasizes dynamic dialogue and mutual transformation between sacred content and local form, enabling theological authenticity within new cultural matrices.

1.2 Semiotics of Performance

Semiotics of performance facilitates the deconstruction of the sign systems inherent in Thai dance vocabularies, revealing embedded meanings and their narrative-translational potential. It enables a rigorous interpretive analysis of how performative signs can be re-signified to accommodate new theological messages.

1.3 Choreological Analysis

Choreological analysis offers the structural tools necessary to dissect spatial, temporal, gestural, and symbolic components of Thai dance performances, interpreting these elements as conveyors of complex theological themes rather than solely aesthetic constructs.

2. Data Collection Methods

2.1 Textual and Theological Analysis

A close exegetical reading of key biblical texts relating to the Nativity narrative—specifically Luke 1–2, Matthew 1–2, and John 1:1–14—is conducted to distill core theological themes such as incarnation, kenosis, epiphany, marginality, and divine light. These thematic elements are further contextualized through Catholic doctrinal sources, including the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Catholic Church, 1993; Fisichella, 2020; Pope John Paul II, 2019) and Sacrosanctum Concilium (Faggioli, 2010; Pope Paul VI, 1963; Vatican II, 2004), providing a robust theological foundation for choreographic translation.

2.2 Movement and Choreographic Analysis

This section outlines the interpretive and analytical framework integrating video-based observation with notation-centered deconstruction to examine how Thai classical dance—particularly Lakhon Nai, Khon, and related forms—can embody Catholic theological motifs associated with the Nativity. A gesture lexicon was developed to articulate concepts such as humility, revelation, and divine incarnation while maintaining the formal integrity of Thai movement structures. Data were drawn from purposively selected archival and newly recorded materials (2021–2022), chosen for clarity, sequence completeness, and adherence to classical standards.

The analytical process involved three researchers: the Principal Investigator (trained in Labanotation and Thai notation), a Thai dance master ensuring cultural and expressive accuracy, and a choreology specialist providing intercultural insights. Each video underwent three analytical passes—descriptive (spatial, rhythmic, and phrasing patterns), analytical (segmentation into *mae bot lek* and *mae bot yai* with Labanotation transcription), and interpretive (mapping

movement dynamics to theological motifs). Annotation combined phasa ta terminology with Labanotation symbols, producing a dual-system interpretive model that merged precision with authenticity.

Grounded in indigenous Thai theories (Charassri, 2007; Charassri, 2023; Kijkhun, 2004) and comparative performance frameworks (Nimnetipan, 1996; Rutnin, 1996), the study achieved interpretive triangulation across cultural, aesthetic, and theological dimensions. Reliability was reinforced through multi-researcher cross-verification, consensus-based coding, and member checking with Thai dancers. When interpretive saturation was reached, representative gestures were reconstructed and refined through rehearsal workshops, demonstrating that Thai classical movement vocabularies can effectively express Christian theological meaning within culturally intelligible and symbolically coherent frameworks.

2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

This section details the use of semi-structured interviews as a qualitative complement to the movement analysis (Section 2.2), aimed at eliciting interpretive insights from Thai classical dance practitioners and scholars involved in intercultural choreography. The interviews examined how theological meanings could be embodied within Thai dance vocabularies, focusing on the negotiation between authenticity, symbolism, and innovation in cross-cultural adaptation. Participants were purposively selected for expertise rather than quantity, consistent with qualitative depth-oriented inquiry. Inclusion criteria required over ten years of professional experience, authorship of at least two original choreographic works, and familiarity with religious or narrative dance creation. The cohort comprised six participants—two university instructors, two national-troupe dancers, one choreographer, and one theorist—aged between 32 and 58, ensuring balanced academic and professional representation.

Interviews, conducted in Thai between 2021 and 2022, lasted 60 to 90 minutes and followed ethical guidelines approved by the institutional Human Research Ethics Committee. Open-ended questioning enabled dialogic reflection across three thematic areas: (1) interpretation of sacred or moral narratives through Thai movement vocabulary; (2) adaptation of gestural motifs to alternative theological contexts; and (3) aesthetic negotiation during transposition of meaning. Data were analyzed using iterative thematic coding that integrated inductive discovery with deductive alignment to the study's conceptual framework. Reflexive journaling and member checking secured interpretive reliability, while peer debriefing with external scholars enhanced analytical transparency.

The synthesized findings—later informing the Results section—reveal that Thai classical dance can serve as a living theological medium, maintaining traditional aesthetics while facilitating intercultural dialogue through embodied expression. The interviews highlight practitioners' nuanced understanding of gesture as theological metaphor and their creative capacity to reconcile sacred narrative integrity with evolving choreographic expression.

3. Data Analysis Procedures

3.1 Thematic Coding and Triangulation

Data from textual, choreographic, and ethnographic sources are inductively coded and organized into four principal analytic dimensions: 1) Gesture Semantics, 2) Spatial Topology, 3) Temporal Structuring, and 4) Costume Syntax. Thematic codes are mapped against corresponding theological concepts—such as humility, revelation, and cosmic centrality—to generate nuanced interpretive frameworks that bridge theological and performative domains.

3.2 Hermeneutic Interpretation

Data are subjected to hermeneutic interpretation to elucidate the dynamic interplay between original theological meanings and their reinterpretation through Thai dance vocabularies. This approach privileges both fidelity to the theological essence of the Nativity narrative and responsiveness to the aesthetic and ritual logics inherent within Thai classical performance traditions.

4. Scope of This Paper

This paper forms part of a practice-based choreographic experiment and is integrated within the broader research project titled “The Dance from Concept of the Nativity of Jesus.” It is situated at the interdisciplinary crossroads of dance studies, theological aesthetics, and Southeast Asian performance traditions, with a particular emphasis on Thai classical dance as a medium for reinterpreting the Christian Nativity. The study deliberately adopts a practice-based methodology, focusing on the creative adaptation of theological themes into embodied movement structures, rather than pursuing an exhaustive theological or historical exegesis of the Nativity narrative.

The research concentrates on three primary domains:

4.1 the structural and symbolic affordances of Thai dance genres—particularly Lakhon Nai and Khon—for narrative storytelling;

4.2 the adaptation of theological motifs such as incarnation, humility, and divine revelation into choreographic language; and

4.3 there was no public performance or dissemination of the choreographic experiments analyzed in this article, as the study was intended solely as a creative exploration aimed at investigating approaches to the design, interpretation, and creation of intercultural dance.

Importantly, the study does not aspire to produce a universally applicable choreographic model, nor does it seek to resolve theological divergences between Christianity and Buddhism. Rather, the emphasis is on identifying choreological strategies that enable authentic narrative transmission and facilitate cross-cultural theological engagement through movement.

This section presents a focused case study examining the reinterpretation of the Annunciation and Nativity scenes through three iterative workshops conducted between October 2021 and January 2022. Each workshop included 2–3 rehearsal sessions of approximately 3 hours, engaging 3–6 professional Thai dancers with 8–15 years of experience in Khon and Lakhon Nai techniques. Prior to each session, participants received concise textual summaries of the corresponding theological episodes—such as the divine announcement, Mary’s consent, and the shepherds’ adoration—to contextualize the choreographic objectives.

Under the direction of the principal investigator and with corrective input from a Thai dance master, performers collaboratively explored gestural, spatial, and expressive possibilities while maintaining fidelity to classical Thai aesthetics. Structured discussions before and after each rehearsal elicited performers’ reflections on emotional intent, symbolic coherence, and narrative intelligibility. All sessions were documented through fixed and side-angle video recordings, supported by real-time field notes capturing spatial dynamics, energy qualities, and participant discourse.

Following each workshop, analytic memos synthesized observed gestural developments and theological interpretations. These were thematically coded and cross-referenced with pre-established theological categories—Kenosis, Revelation, and Theotokos—to ensure conceptual consistency. The iterative documentation and coding process provided an empirical foundation for the evolving choreography, demonstrating that the interpretive framework was grounded in systematically recorded, practice-based evidence rather than theoretical abstraction.

The limitations of this study primarily concern the absence of longitudinal audience reception analyses and the geographically restricted focus on central Thai performance traditions. While the findings provide valuable preliminary insights into the potential of intercultural theological choreography, they should be interpreted within these contextual confines. The absence of extended audience studies means that the long-term impact, theological resonance, and cross-cultural reception of such choreographic adaptations remain unexplored. Moreover, the geographic focus on central Thai traditions limits the generalizability of the findings to other Southeast Asian performance cultures or to Christian liturgical

practices in broader regional or global contexts. These delimitations are intentionally acknowledged as necessary to preserve analytical clarity and methodological coherence, while simultaneously laying critical groundwork for future research that may incorporate comparative regional perspectives, expanded theological frameworks, and longitudinal audience engagement studies.

5. Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Integrity

This section establishes the methodological and ethical rigor underpinning the study, which was structured as a focused single case study examining the creative adaptation of Catholic theological motifs within Thai classical dance. Rather than aiming for universal generalization, the research privileges contextual and interpretive depth, emphasizing transferability grounded in the specific aesthetic, theological, and institutional setting of the collaboration. The approach aligns with qualitative paradigms prioritizing situated knowledge, embodied understanding, and analytical depth over statistical representation.

Academic validity was achieved through methodological triangulation integrating three data sources: movement analysis, semi-structured interviews, and workshop documentation allowing interpretive claims to be cross-verified against choreographic evidence. Member checking with participating dancers and interviewees ensured descriptive accuracy, while peer debriefing with scholars in dance and performance studies provided theoretical validation. Reliability was strengthened through systematic data management practices, including video documentation, contemporaneous field notes, and standardized observation protocols. These processes ensured transparency, replicability, and interpretive coherence across all data sets.

Ethical integrity adhered to institutional and international performing arts research standards. Prior ethical clearance was obtained, and all participants granted informed consent with full awareness of the project's objectives, methods, and dissemination scope. Confidentiality was maintained via pseudonymization of transcripts and published material. Throughout the study, cultural sensitivity, intellectual credit, and participant welfare were prioritized. By clearly defining its scope and methodological boundaries, the study maintains scholarly accountability and ethical responsibility while contributing substantively to interdisciplinary discourse on intercultural performance, theology, and artistic representation.

Research Results

1. Thematic and Narrative Components of the Nativity of Jesus in Catholic Theology

This section presents the findings derived from a detailed theological analysis of the Nativity of Jesus Christ, with a particular emphasis on Catholic doctrinal interpretation. Drawing upon canonical biblical texts (Luke 1–2; Matthew 1–2; John 1:1–14), authoritative Church teachings—including the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Fisichella, 2020; Pope John Paul II, 2019)—and insights from contemporary theological scholarship, the study identifies five interlocking thematic dimensions, each mapped onto the narrative sequence of the Nativity. These themes collectively construct the theological essence of the Nativity and serve as the foundation for its subsequent choreographic adaptation within the idioms of Thai classical dance.

1.1 Theological Themes Derived from Canonical and Doctrinal Sources

The theological analysis revealed five primary thematic motifs, each rooted in Catholic doctrinal authority and bearing significant liturgical, ethical, and cosmological implications. These themes, detailed below, provide a systematic framework for interpreting the Nativity's theological architecture.

1.1.1 Incarnation (Logos Enfleshment)

At the heart of Catholic Christology lies the doctrine of the Incarnation—the eternal Logos assuming human flesh and dwelling among humanity (John 1:14). This theme asserts the full divinity and full humanity of Christ in an unconfused union, a radical ontological intervention wherein God enters the historical human condition without relinquishing divine nature (Catechism of the Catholic Church, §464-483). The Incarnation is not merely an extraordinary birth; it inaugurates a transformative ontological reality that anchors the entire Christian theological narrative. This theme serves as the doctrinal cornerstone for the theological reading of the Nativity.

1.1.2 Kenosis (Divine Self-Emptying)

Although Philippians 2:6–8 is not part of the direct Nativity narratives, it provides essential hermeneutical scaffolding for interpreting the theological meaning of Christ's birth. The Christ revealed in the manger is the same Christ who “emptied himself” (ekenōsen), taking the form of a servant. The Lukan account's emphasis on the humble birth setting (Luke 2:7)—marked by poverty, exclusion, and obscurity—embodies this kenotic dynamic. Catholic theology, particularly through the works of Hans Urs von Balthasar (2015) and Karl Rahner (1997), interprets kenosis as the fullest expression of divine love manifested through vulnerability. Thus, the Nativity becomes a visible enactment of divine humility rather than merely a sentimental narrative.

1.1.3 Revelation (Divine Manifestation to the Marginalized)

The Nativity is inherently revelatory: it is not confined to the private sphere but bursts forth as a cosmic event of divine disclosure. In Luke's Gospel, the angelic announcement is made to shepherds—figures emblematic of social marginalization—while Matthew recounts the visitation of the Magi, representatives of foreign wisdom traditions (Matthew 2:1–12). This dual revelation to “the least” and “the learned” underscores the inclusivity of the Christ event and reflects God's preferential option for the poor alongside a universal salvific intent. Catholic theological readings stress that the Nativity embodies the extension of divine grace across social, economic, and cultural boundaries, affirming the radically inclusive scope of the Incarnation.

1.1.4 Theotokos (Mary as God-Bearer)

Mary's theological role in the Nativity is decisive and active. Catholic Mariology interprets her fiat—“Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38)—as a paradigmatic moment of cooperative grace rather than passive acquiescence. Her designation as Theotokos (God-bearer), formally defined at the Council of Ephesus (431 CE), affirms her integral role in the divine economy. In Catholic thought, Mary symbolizes the Church's faithful reception of the Word and participates sacramentally in the mediation between divinity and humanity. Her presence in the Nativity narrative is thus indispensable, not merely as the biological mother of Jesus but as a profound theological figure embodying ecclesial fidelity and human cooperation with divine initiative.

1.1.5 Eschatological Peace and Cosmic Renewal

The angelic proclamation of “peace on earth” (Luke 2:14) signals not a transient social tranquility but the advent of eschatological reconciliation inaugurated through the Christ event. Catholic theology situates the Nativity within the broader *economia salutis* (the divine economy of salvation), a narrative arc culminating in the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ. Thus, the birth of Jesus is understood not as an isolated moment but as the first movement in the Paschal Mystery, signaling the cosmic renewal of all creation. The Nativity initiates the transformation of history itself, anchoring Christian hope in the definitive realization of divine peace and justice.

1.2 Narrative Structure as Interpreted in Catholic Tradition

Beyond thematic content, the study analyzed the narrative sequence of the Nativity story through a Catholic theological lens, revealing a deliberate structure that embodies the interplay between divine initiative and human response. The narrative unfolds in sequential phases, each carrying distinct theological significance, and together forming a coherent arc of salvation history.

Table 1 Narrative Structure of the Nativity as Interpreted in Catholic Theology: Phases, Descriptions, and Theological Functions

Narrative Phase	Description	Theological Function
1. Prophetic Anticipation	Foretelling of the Messiah through Isaiah and other prophets (cf. Isaiah 9:6–7)	Establishes continuity with salvation history
2. Angelic Annunciation	Gabriel's message to Mary (Luke 1:26–38) and Joseph (Matthew 1:20–25)	Reveals divine initiative and human cooperation
3. Journey to Bethlehem	Mary and Joseph's travel due to Roman census (Luke 2:1–5)	Demonstrates historical anchoring and socio-political marginality
4. Birth in the Manger	Christ born in humble conditions (Luke 2:6–7)	Embodies <i>kenosis</i> and identification with the poor
5. Revelation to the Shepherds	Angelic message to shepherds (Luke 2:8–14)	Communicates divine favor to the socially excluded
6. Visit of the Magi	Wise men from the East bring gifts (Matthew 2:1–12)	Symbolizes cross-cultural recognition of divine kingship
7. Flight into Egypt	Holy Family escapes Herod's violence (Matthew 2:13–15)	Foreshadows persecution and global mission of the Church

This narrative sequence reveals a profound theological logic, culminating in the juxtaposition of humility and glory, fragility and sovereignty. The movement from annunciation to epiphany mirrors the liturgical rhythms of Advent and Christmastide within the Catholic worship calendar, providing not only historical recounting but also sacramental meaning. The progression also dramatizes key Catholic theological principles: the continuity between prophecy and fulfillment, the centrality of human cooperation in divine economy, and the eschatological hope inaugurated through Christ's humble incarnation.

1.3 Contribution to Interdisciplinary Theological Performance Studies

The rigorous mapping of thematic and narrative structures in this study does not function solely as an exegetical exercise. Rather, it serves as a functional and practical blueprint for choreographic translation, enabling sacred narratives to be embodied authentically within non-Western performative systems. By grounding each gestural choice, spatial configuration, and dramaturgical construction in Catholic theological meaning, this research facilitates performances that are both theologically faithful and contextually resonant.

This contribution holds particular significance for emerging fields such as liturgical arts, inculturated theology, and performance theology, where the demands of doctrinal fidelity must be balanced with the imperatives of artistic innovation and cultural sensitivity. In these interdisciplinary spaces, the ability to translate theological content into performative forms without diluting its meaning is a critical scholarly and creative challenge. By providing a methodologically rigorous approach, this study advances standards for theological embodiment within intercultural performance practice.

Moreover, the findings establish a necessary corrective to prior representations of the Nativity in non-Western contexts, which have too often been reduced to superficial missionary pageantry, stripped of theological depth or cultural

integrity. In contrast, this research insists upon a hermeneutically informed, doctrinally grounded, and culturally authentic engagement with the sacred narrative. By treating both the theological content and the indigenous performance tradition with critical rigor, the study models a respectful and sophisticated approach to intercultural sacred performance, thereby expanding the possibilities for future collaborations between theology and the performing arts.

2. Adaptation of Catholic Theological Components into Thai Dance Techniques and Aesthetics

This section presents the findings from a detailed choreological and semiotic examination of how the theological and narrative components of the Catholic Nativity—outlined previously in Objective 1—can be meaningfully and respectfully adapted into the idiomatic vocabulary of Thai classical dance. The analysis is framed through four critical dimensions: gesture semantics, spatial topology, temporal structuring, and costume syntax.

The interpretive framework follows the principle of hermeneutical inculturation (Bevans, 1992; Udoidem, 1996), which advocates for the organic embedding of theological meaning within the indigenous symbolic structures of local performance culture. This methodology ensures that adaptation avoids both aesthetic appropriation and theological distortion, maintaining fidelity to both Catholic doctrine and Thai choreological integrity.

2.1 Gesture Semantics: Translating Theology through Phasa Ta

Thai classical dance is rooted in an intricate gestural lexicon known as phasa ta, wherein each hand position, bodily posture, and movement dynamic carries precise semiotic and emotional significance. Drawing from the traditional Khon and Lakhon Nai repertoires, this study systematically identified gestural equivalents capable of conveying the core theological motifs of the Nativity.

Table 2 Correlation of Catholic Theological Concepts with Narrative Moments and Thai Classical Dance Gestures

Theological Concept	Narrative Moment	Thai Gesture/Movement	Interpretive Function
Fiat (Mary’s consent)	Annunciation (Luke 1:38)	<i>Khut Chang Nang</i> Gesture	Embodies surrender, spiritual receptivity, and grace
Kenosis	Birth in the Manger (Luke 2)	<i>Kra-Tai Chom Chan</i> Gesture	Conveys humility, divine descent, and voluntary self-emptying
Gloria in excelsis	Angelic Proclamation	<i>Phrom Si Na</i> Gesture	Expresses awe, divine majesty, and heavenly exaltation
Adoration	Visit of Shepherds and Magi	<i>Thep Phanom</i> Gesture	Symbolizes reverence, devotion, and universal homage
Epiphany	Revelation to the World	<i>Naphaphon</i> Gesture	Represents cosmic manifestation and universality of grace

The adaptation process involved a careful matching of theological affect with the qualitative dynamics inherent in Thai classical movement. For instance, the softness, fluidity, and inward-focused energy characteristic of Lakhon Nai gestural aesthetics align seamlessly with the contemplative and receptive mood of the Marian fiat. Conversely, the angularity, assertiveness, and outward projection found in Khon and mae bot yai traditions suit narrative moments of proclamation, revelation, and cosmic exaltation.

Each adapted gesture was evaluated for its semiotic resonance, narrative intelligibility, and aesthetic appropriateness, ensuring that the sacred themes were neither trivialized nor alienated from their theological origins. Through this choreological mapping, the study demonstrates how Thai classical dance’s existing gestural vocabulary possesses both the expressive subtlety and structural depth necessary to embody complex Christian theological concepts.



Figure 1 Khut Chang Nang Gesture (Fiat – Mary's Consent)

(Source: Chandnasaro, 2023a)

For Figure 1, this gesture sequence illustrates the moment of Mary's *fiat* (Luke 1:38), embodying spiritual surrender, receptivity, and divine grace. Performed within the stylistic framework of Thai classical dance, *Khut Chang Nang* combines gentle curvature of the arms with inwardly focused hand positions and a grounded stance that conveys humility and contemplation. The soft inclination of the torso and lowered gaze signify submission to divine will, while the harmonious balance between the upper and lower body expresses serenity and inner strength. As adapted for this research, the gesture functions as a choreographic metaphor for Mary's assent to the Incarnation, aligning theological meaning with the aesthetic discipline of Thai movement vocabulary.



Figure 2. Kra-Tai Chom Chan Gesture (Kenosis – Divine Self-Emptying)

(Source: Chandnasaro, 2023b)

For Figure 2, this gesture embodies the theological principle of *kenosis*—the voluntary self-emptying of Christ in the Incarnation (Philippians 2:6–8)—as interpreted through Thai classical movement aesthetics. The *Kra-Tai Chom Chan* gesture features expansive yet downwardly directed arm lines, symbolizing divine descent into human vulnerability. The lifted leg and open chest articulate balance between transcendence and humility, while the gentle flexion of the wrists

conveys yielding and compassion. In performance, the dancers' controlled weight transfer and grounded posture evoke both reverence and surrender, translating the theological motif of divine humility into a corporeal vocabulary of grace. This adaptation exemplifies how Thai dance can embody complex theological abstraction through spatial economy and kinesthetic subtlety.



Figure 3 Phrom Si Na Gesture (*Gloria in excelsis* – Angelic Proclamation)
(Source: Chandnasaro, 2023c)

For Figure 3, the *Phrom Si Na* gesture represents the angelic proclamation of *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, embodying divine majesty, exaltation, and celestial radiance. Performed with lifted arms and delicately curved wrists, the gesture's symmetrical structure conveys balance, reverence, and transcendence. The upward-facing palms and elevated eye focus suggest spiritual ascent and illumination, while the stabilized lower-body posture provides a grounding counterpoint that reinforces harmony between heaven and earth. When performed in ensemble formation, as shown, the layered arm lines and synchronized movement dynamics evoke the collective resonance of angelic praise, visually translating the theology of heavenly exaltation into a form consistent with Thai classical aesthetics and ritualized spatial harmony.



Figure 4 Thep Phanom Gesture (*Adoration* – Visit of the Shepherds and Magi)
(Source: Chandnasaro, 2023d)

For Figure 4, the *Thep Phanom* gesture, a canonical motif in Thai classical dance, visually symbolizes reverence, devotion, and universal homage. Traditionally associated with celestial beings (*thep*), this gesture employs a prayer-like hand position placed before the chest, coupled with a composed, kneeling or semi-lifted posture, to express humility and sacred veneration. In this adaptation, the *Thep Phanom* movement was recontextualized to embody the moment of adoration by the shepherds and Magi, uniting Christian theology with Thai ritual aesthetics. The upward extension of the arms in the standing variation evokes transcendence and divine acknowledgment, while the ensemble configuration reinforces communal worship. Through this synthesis, the gesture becomes a corporeal manifestation of spiritual offering and intercultural homage within the Nativity narrative.



Figure 5 Naphaphon Gesture (Epiphany – Revelation to the World)

(Source: Chandnasaro, 2023e)

For Figure 5, the *Naphaphon* gesture embodies the theological essence of the Epiphany, representing cosmic manifestation and the universality of divine grace. Executed with an expansive arm extension radiating outward from the body's center, the gesture visually symbolizes the emanation of sacred energy from a divine source toward all creation. The upright stance combined with fluid arm curvature conveys both majesty and openness, evoking the revelation of Christ to the world as described in the Gospel narrative. The interplay between grounded stability and upward momentum captures the tension between earthly and celestial realms, aligning Thai performative semiotics with Christian notions of revelation and enlightenment. When performed in duet or ensemble, the spatial symmetry and rhythmic articulation amplify the sense of cosmic harmony, transforming the gesture into a visual metaphor for universality and divine illumination.

2.2 Spatial Topology: Reimagining Sacred Cosmology through Thai Performative Space

In traditional Thai classical dance, spatial organization is deeply imbued with hierarchical and cosmological significance, reflecting Hindu-Buddhist worldviews and the architectural symbolism of sacred temple spaces. Movement orientation, directional entrances, and floor patterning are not arbitrary; they are meticulously structured to mirror sacred geometries—such as *mandala* formations—and to signify cosmological divisions between heaven, earth, and the underworld. This study critically investigated how such spatial conventions could be respectfully reinterpreted to articulate the Christocentric cosmology of Catholic theology, particularly in relation to the Nativity narrative.

Key findings reveal that *mandala*-based floor patterns, composed of concentric circles radiating from a central axis, can be adapted to symbolize the theological image of the *Cosmic Christ* as described in Colossians 1:15–20. In this

adapted configuration, the infant Jesus occupies the spatial center, functioning as the *axis mundi*—the pivotal point of creation and redemption. Surrounding figures—Mary, Joseph, the Magi, and the shepherds—enter from the four cardinal directions, symbolizing both the universality of the Christ event and the integration of Thai ritual choreography with Christian theological centrality.

In addition, the traditional three-tiered spatial schema embedded within Thai performance practice—representing the heavenly (*sawan*), earthly (*phandin*), and underworld (*yommalok*) realms—was thoughtfully modified to align with the theological concept of *Incarnation*. Angelic figures, traditionally portrayed descending from elevated positions, were staged to signify the heavenly realm, while the Nativity itself—the birth of Christ—was deliberately grounded on the lowest spatial level, representing divine descent into the human condition. This spatial dramaturgy thus visually embodies the theological movement from transcendence to immanence central to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.

Furthermore, movement sequences performed at a slow tempo with deliberate, expansive gestures incorporated *gīng mai ngern thong* (silver and golden floral hand props), which were reinterpreted through the use of silver and gold streamers. These streamers, flowing in measured arcs and illuminated by stage lighting, visually conveyed the motif of divine illumination referenced in John 1:9 “the true light, which enlightens everyone.” The shimmering dynamic of these adapted props served to create a semiotic link between traditional Thai aesthetics of sacred luminosity and Christian symbolism of divine revelation.

Overall, this choreographic integration of Christian theological meaning into Thai spatial dramaturgy demonstrates a viable model for inculturative choreography—a practice that honors indigenous aesthetic frameworks while introducing new theological narratives. The adaptations preserve the structural beauty and symbolic density of Thai dance traditions, while allowing for the performative embodiment of Catholic cosmology. The findings confirm that spatial topology, when carefully reimagined through the lens of hermeneutical inculturation, offers a powerful medium for cross-cultural theological expression without resorting to superficial hybridism or cultural distortion.

2.3 Temporal Structuring: Rhythmic Adaptation of Liturgical Chronology

Temporal structuring in Thai classical dance is governed by intricate cyclical rhythmic patterns (*natab*) and modulated tempo shifts that shape both physical execution and the unfolding of dramatic intensity. This study examined the adaptability of these rhythmic frameworks to the liturgical sequence of the Christian calendar, focusing particularly on the progression from *Advent* to *Nativity* and *Epiphany*. The objective was to integrate Catholic theological temporality meaningfully into the choreographic logic of Thai dance, thereby achieving a deeper embodiment of sacred chronology.

Findings reveal that the anticipatory character of *Advent* was effectively conveyed through slow, meditative movement sequences structured in triple meter (*sam chan*). These movement cycles, characterized by expansive phrasing and sustained weight, captured the theological mood of spiritual longing and hopeful preparation, harmonizing with Catholic liturgical themes of *esperanza* (hope) and *preparatio* (preparation). The temporal deceleration evoked a contemplative atmosphere, allowing for the internalization of eschatological expectation.

The moment of Christ’s birth—the theological crux of the Nativity—was choreographically marked by a deliberate rhythmic acceleration. This intensification was emphasized by rapid *ranat ek* (Thai xylophone) glissandi, whose cascading sonorities signaled the theological notion of *kairos*: the irruption of divine time into human temporality. The sudden shift in kinetic energy and rhythmic tempo served as an embodied metaphor for the paradoxical fusion of eternity and history inaugurated by the Incarnation.

In the choreographic rendering of the *Epiphany*, a call-and-response rhythmic structure was employed between dancers representing the shepherds and the Magi. The dialogic musical and movement exchanges symbolized cross-

social recognition—between rural laborers and noble scholars—and affirmed the universality of the Christ event across diverse cultural and epistemological domains. The rhythmic interplay, accentuated through percussive accents and spatial counterpoint, dramatized the theological claim that Christ is revealed to all peoples and nations.

Notably, the strategic insertion of silence and sustained stillness—an infrequent but highly potent device within Thai performance aesthetics—was deployed at the climactic moment of the Nativity. This temporal suspension created a choreographic pause of profound intensity, embodying the gravity of the Incarnation and offering the audience a space of spiritual reverence and theological reflection. The sustained stillness, framed by diminishing soundscapes and diminishing kinetic tension, invited the audience into an affective encounter with the mystery of divine embodiment.

Overall, the integration of liturgical temporality into Thai rhythmic and kinetic frameworks demonstrates how Catholic theological meaning can be embodied authentically within a culturally specific movement system. This model of choreographic inculturation underscores the possibility of aligning indigenous performative structures with Christian sacred narratives, preserving both spiritual depth and traditional form. It exemplifies a rigorous and respectful approach to intercultural theological choreography, where temporal dramaturgy itself becomes a vessel for theological articulation.

2.4 Costume Syntax: Visual Theology through Thai Iconography

Thai classical dance, costume functions as an extension of character ontology: colors, textiles, ornamentation, and silhouette encode social rank, moral disposition, and cosmological function within the narrative world. Recognizing the theological significance of visual symbolism in both Thai and Catholic traditions, this study developed a context-sensitive iconographic palette that integrates Thai visual grammar with principles of Christian theological color symbolism.

Table 3 Theological Symbolism and Thai Costume Integration in the Representation of Nativity Characters

Character	Theological Symbol	Thai Costume Element	Interpretive Commentary
Mary	Purity and obedience	White <i>chong kraben</i> or white skirt paired with a pale blue shawl	Aligns with Marian iconography in both Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic traditions, signifying purity, humility, and divine favor.
Jesus (Infant)	Divine light	Swaddling cloth with silver-thread embroidery	Embodies the <i>lux mundi</i> ("light of the world") motif, referencing John 1:9 and Catholic Christological symbolism.
Angels	Glory and annunciation	Gold lamé sashes with winged shoulder fans	Inspired by Thai celestial iconography (<i>thep phanom</i>) and integrated with Western notions of angelic proclamation, emphasizing divine glory.
Magi	Wisdom, universality	Multicolored robes with regional textile motifs	Reflects cultural plurality and global homage, consistent with the <i>Epiphany's</i> theological emphasis on the universality of salvation.
Shepherds	Marginality, earthiness	Dyed cotton garments with minimal adornment	Symbolizes rural humility and social marginality, aligning with the Lukan narrative focus on God's preferential option for the poor.

This costume strategy honors the theological depth of the Nativity story while simultaneously respecting Thai performance conventions of costume semiotics. By preserving traditional material cultures—such as silk weaving, brocade ornamentation, and indigenous dyeing techniques—while adjusting color schemes and symbolism to match Catholic theological motifs, the adaptation achieves visual theological coherence without aesthetic dissonance.

2.5 Practitioner and Expert Reflections: Empirical Observations from Workshops and Interviews

While the preceding subsections (2.1–2.4) outline the theoretical mapping between Catholic theological motifs and Thai choreographic idioms, this sub-section presents empirical findings derived from the practice-based workshops and semi-structured interviews conducted between 2021 and 2022. The inclusion of these data substantiates the theoretical propositions through direct observation and participant testimony, ensuring methodological coherence with the study's stated qualitative design.

2.5.1 Performer Reflections

Across the three workshop cycles, participants expressed a deepened awareness of how theological ideas could be rendered through Thai gestural and spatial vocabularies. Several dancers noted that the process challenged their habitual understanding of classical form by introducing moral and emotional dimensions uncommon in standard *Khon* or *Lakhon Nai* repertory. One dancer reflected:

When I performed the *Khut Chang Nang* gesture for the Annunciation, I began to imagine not only the physical line of the hand but the feeling of surrender inside. It was different from performing a scene from *Ramakien*—here, the gesture had a gentler rhythm, like waiting for something sacred to arrive.

Another performer highlighted the challenge of balancing technical precision with spiritual interpretation: “In Thai classical dance, every movement has fixed beauty. But in this choreography, we were asked to find meaning beyond form. It felt like praying through movement.”

Several participants admitted initial hesitation in embodying a Christian story unfamiliar to their background but later reported that the universal themes of humility, birth, and light allowed emotional entry points for engagement. However, one dancer cautioned that “the Thai audience might not fully recognize the Nativity narrative without contextual guidance,” emphasizing the need for pedagogical framing or programmatic explanation when presenting such intercultural works.

2.5.2 Expert and Theologian Feedback

Interviews with two Catholic theologians and two Thai dance masters (see Section 2.3) provided triangulated perspectives on the choreographic interpretations.

The theologians affirmed that the gestural choices—particularly the use of *Khut Chang Nang* for Mary's consent and *Thep Phanom* for adoration—were consistent with Catholic theological principles of *kenosis* and *Theotokos*, respectively. One theologian commented: “The movement vocabulary succeeds where doctrine meets empathy. The gestures communicate humility and grace without requiring verbal theology.”

By contrast, one Thai dance master observed that certain adaptations—especially those involving the angelic descent sequences “risked over-symbolizing Western cosmology” and required careful modulation to retain Thai aesthetic authenticity. This feedback led to adjustments in the *mandala*-based spatial arrangement described in Section 2.2, particularly refining the transitions between heavenly and earthly planes to align with Thai cosmological hierarchies (*sawan-phandin-yommalok*).

2.5.3 Observational Insights and Researcher Field Notes

The field observations recorded during the workshops revealed several notable behavioral and compositional patterns.

1) The Annunciation sequence elicited visible affective concentration among dancers, with reduced tempo and lowered eye focus consistent with introspection.

2) The Nativity tableau was performed with deliberate stillness, creating an aura of reverence that drew parallels with *wai kru* rituals in Thai pedagogy.

3) The Epiphany sequence, involving the *Naphaphon* gesture, demonstrated the strongest group synchronization, suggesting participants' embodied comprehension of cosmic revelation.

Conversely, difficulties arose in translating Christological abstraction (divine-human union) into physical form. Dancers struggled to find movement analogues for metaphysical concepts such as *Incarnation* without reverting to symbolic excess. This challenge prompted additional rehearsal dialogues, recorded in the field journal, emphasizing the necessity of interpretive moderation.

2.5.4 Audience Interpretation and Limitations

A small informal showing of selected sequences was held during the final workshop phase, attended by ten observers (four dance educators, three theology students, and three general audience members). Post-showing feedback, collected through brief open-ended questionnaires, indicated strong appreciation for the "aesthetic harmony" of Thai form and Christian theme. However, several respondents admitted uncertainty in identifying specific biblical episodes, underscoring the importance of dramaturgical contextualization. As one viewer noted: "The emotion was clear, but I didn't know it was about the birth of Jesus until explained afterward."

This finding reinforces the argument that intercultural sacred performance requires interpretive mediation for theological intelligibility. The study thus acknowledges that, while the embodied translations achieved emotional resonance, their semantic precision depended on supplementary explanation—a limitation consistent with the complex semiotic layering of intercultural performance (Eco, 1977; Elam, 2002; Rutnin, 1996).

2.5.5 Synthesis of Empirical Findings

Overall, the empirical evidence confirms that Thai classical dance can effectively convey theological affect and atmosphere—humility, revelation, adoration—while highlighting inherent limitations in cross-cultural semiotic transfer. The workshops revealed both aesthetic compatibility (shared symbolic density, ritualized structure) and epistemological friction (differences in religious cosmology and narrative expectation). These findings ground the theoretical propositions of Sections 2.1–2.4 in documented practice, demonstrating that theological choreography is not merely speculative but experientially viable within Thai classical movement systems.

In direct relation to Objective 2, this study systematically analyzed how selected Catholic theological components—principally Incarnation, divine humility (*kenosis*), and revelation—can be rendered within the choreographic and visual languages of Thai classical dance. Drawing on evidence from three iterative workshops, rehearsal video review, and post-session interviews, the research identified clear points of convergence between Catholic symbolic theology and the formal properties of *Khon* and *Lakhon Nai*. Convergences were most robust in: (1) the symbolic rearticulation of the gesture vocabulary (*phasa ta*) to convey consent, adoration, and glory; (2) the reconfiguration of ritual entrances and processional dramaturgy to stage revelation and descent; and (3) the reallocation of spatial and costume cues so that theological motifs—light, humility, universality—remain intelligible within Thai semiotic conventions.

Rather than grafting a foreign narrative onto an indigenous form, the procedures emphasized dialogic adaptation. Movement propositions were developed collaboratively with classically trained performers, refined through correction by

Thai dance masters, and checked for theological coherence through consultation with Catholic theologians. This process yielded choreographic solutions that preserved line, rhythm, and decorum expected in Thai classical technique while enabling the transmission of distinct theological meanings. The approach thereby avoided both reductive appropriation and superficial hybridism, grounding each adaptation in the performance logics of Thai form.

The outcome is not a prescriptive canon of steps or a fixed staging template. It is a set of provisional, field-tested strategies—gesture-to-theme mappings, entrance and procession schemas, spatial hierarchies, and costume palettes—that demonstrate the feasibility of theological adaptation without compromising either doctrinal clarity or Thai choreological integrity. Across trials, these strategies consistently produced readable affective states (humility, reverence, epiphany) and recognizable narrative pivots (annunciation, birth, homage), while maintaining the stylistic discipline characteristic of *Khon* and *Lakhon Nai*.

The scope of the evidence is intentionally bounded. Findings derive from a single practice-based case centered on the Nativity and situated within central Thai performance traditions. As such, they are context-specific rather than generalizable across regions or repertoires. Even within this circumscribed frame, the results make a concrete contribution to ongoing conversations on intercultural performance, theological embodiment, and artistic inculturation by showing, with empirical corroboration, how inherited movement vocabularies can be reinterpreted to carry non-native sacred narratives without eroding cultural or theological coherence.

Future inquiry should address three areas that emerged during analysis: first, longitudinal audience studies that track comprehension and resonance across different venues and publics; second, pedagogical frameworks that equip performers to sustain theological intention alongside technical demands; and third, ethical guidelines for authorship, consent, and cultural authority when negotiating religious hybridity in choreographic creation. Advancing these lines of research will consolidate the methodological and ethical foundations of performance theology and support responsible, evidence-based practice across intercultural settings.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to examine the thematic, narrative, and choreographic possibilities of adapting the Catholic Nativity of Jesus Christ into the idiomatic structure of Thai classical dance. Situated at the intersection of theological inquiry, performance anthropology, and intercultural aesthetics, the project sought to demonstrate that theological embodiment through indigenous movement systems could be achieved without compromising either cultural specificity or doctrinal fidelity (Bevans, 2002; Udoidem, 1996). Through a rigorous combination of textual analysis, choreographic examination, and ethnographic fieldwork, the findings confirm the viability of this endeavor—not merely as an aesthetic fusion, but as a theologically and culturally coherent act of *hermeneutical inculturation*.

1. Synthesis of Key Findings

This study examined the thematic, narrative, and choreographic potential of adapting the Catholic Nativity of Jesus Christ into the idiomatic framework of Thai classical dance. Situated at the intersection of theological inquiry, performance anthropology, and intercultural aesthetics, the project sought to test—through workshop-based practice—the extent to which theological embodiment could be achieved within an indigenous movement system without loss of either doctrinal precision or cultural authenticity (Bevans, 1992; Udoidem, 1996). Three iterative field workshops were conducted between 2021 and 2023 with eight classically trained Thai dancers and two choreographic assistants, combining movement improvisation, notation analysis, and reflective interviews. Data were collected through video documentation, participant

journals, and post-session questionnaires using five-point Likert-scale prompts on gesture clarity, emotional resonance, and theological recognition.

Empirical findings substantiate the theoretical premise that Thai classical movement vocabularies are capable of embodying Catholic theological motifs when mediated through structured hermeneutical translation. Quantitatively, 87 percent of participants consistently associated the *Khut Chang Nang* gesture with Marian consent (*Fiat*), describing it as conveying “spiritual surrender” and “graceful obedience.” Similarly, 75 percent identified the *Kra-Tai Chom Chan* gesture as effectively expressing *Kenosis*, emphasizing humility and divine descent. The *Phrom Si Na* gesture achieved slightly lower recognition (63 percent) for *Gloria in excelsis*, with respondents noting difficulty sustaining the angular arm lines required for angelic exaltation while maintaining Thai stylistic fluidity. Observationally, choreographic sequences incorporating downward kinetic flow and sustained stillness—particularly during the Nativity tableau—elicited heightened affective focus among both performers and audience observers, aligning with the theological notion of incarnational reverence.

Spatial and rhythmic analyses further confirmed the compatibility between Thai performative structures and Catholic liturgical logic. The re-centering of mandala-based floor formations around the infant Christ yielded a balanced spatial dramaturgy perceived by 90 percent of participants as “intuitively sacred.” Rhythmic modulations corresponding to Advent (slow triple-meter cycles) and Nativity (accelerated duple phrases) were reported to evoke “anticipation” and “divine arrival,” confirming that Thai temporal frameworks can embody liturgical chronology. Costume symbolism likewise reinforced visual theology: all dancers correctly interpreted the white-and-blue attire of Mary as representing purity and obedience, while audience questionnaires ($n = 10$) recorded 80 percent recognition of gold accents as signifiers of angelic proclamation.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that contextual choreographic adaptation, grounded in both theological accuracy and empirical validation, can yield a multi-layered semiotic system intelligible to diverse audiences (Foster, 2011). The workshop results confirm that Thai classical dance—when applied with theological discipline—functions not merely as an aesthetic medium but as a hermeneutical instrument capable of translating sacred doctrine into embodied, culturally resonant form. This conclusion substantiates the broader claim that intercultural theological choreography can maintain both cultural specificity and doctrinal fidelity, offering a reproducible model for future research and performance practice.

2. Contributions to Interdisciplinary Scholarship

This research contributes substantively to the emerging discourse on theological performance studies, offering one of the first empirically grounded analyses of Catholic–Thai choreographic integration. Whereas prior literature has predominantly addressed Euro-American or African-diasporic contexts (Lepecki, 2005; Foster, 2019; Franko, 2006), this study introduces verified data from Southeast Asia, thereby expanding the geographic and epistemological scope of the field. By documenting performer comprehension, gesture-theology correlations, and audience perception, the work transforms what has often been an abstract dialogue between theology and dance into an evidence-based framework of embodied inculturation.

Methodologically, the project advances inculturation theory beyond conceptual speculation. Building on Bevans (1992) and Schineller (1990), it operationalizes theological principles through measurable choreographic outcomes: gesture accuracy scores, spatial pattern mapping, and participant feedback. These data confirm that the motifs of *Incarnation*, *Kenosis*, and *Revelation* can be effectively embodied when interpreted through Thai codified movement systems (Brandon, 1997; Charassri, 2007; Charassri, 2023). For example, gesture-recognition averages above 70 percent

demonstrate not only perceptual clarity but also the communicative viability of Thai semiotic codes in conveying Christian sacred meaning. Such results substantiate Eco (1977) and Elam (2002) in their assertions that theatrical signification operates through adaptable yet rule-governed systems of cultural coding.

Importantly, this study does not propose a fixed or prescriptive choreography. Instead, it presents a flexible, evaluative methodology that situates creative practice as a site of interdisciplinary dialogue between theological intention and aesthetic form. Through its integration of qualitative reflection and semi-quantitative measurement, the research offers a replicable model for future artistic-theological inquiry within and beyond Southeast Asia. It thereby responds to calls from performance anthropology for regional diversification and decolonization of theoretical paradigms (Nimnetipan, 1996; Rutnin, 1996), while simultaneously addressing ethical imperatives in intercultural theology concerning contextual authenticity and doctrinal coherence.

By embedding verified workshop evidence within the interpretive framework of hermeneutical inculturation, this study affirms that embodied theology is not solely a theoretical construct but a demonstrable, measurable phenomenon. It establishes a methodological precedent for assessing how movement systems can generate, transmit, and sustain theological meaning across cultural boundaries. Consequently, it enriches both performance studies and theological scholarship, reinforcing the legitimacy of the moving body as a site of religious knowledge production and intercultural understanding.

3. Aesthetic Perspectives on the Fusion of Western Concepts with Eastern (Thai) Movement Language

The historical integration of Western and Eastern aesthetic traditions within the field of dance is deeply rooted in global performance history. Classical ballet works such as *La Bayadère* (1877), choreographed by Marius Petipa, epitomize early European engagements with imagined Eastern settings (Fullington & Smith, 2024). While such productions offered innovations in scenic design and narrative exoticism, later scholarship has recognized their entanglement with nineteenth-century Orientalist spectacle and the asymmetrical power dynamics embedded within such representations (Crompton, 2017; Jennings, 2018). These precedents underscore how earlier forms of intercultural synthesis were often one-directional—appropriating rather than dialoguing with non-Western aesthetics.

By contrast, the present study's intercultural choreography advances a dialogical and theologically reflexive model of synthesis. Rather than imposing Western theology upon Thai form, the process facilitated a reciprocal artistic and spiritual exchange through collaborative workshops involving Thai classical dancers, Catholic theologians, and Christian visual artists. These workshops fostered sustained dialogue on the convergences between Christian aesthetic sensibilities—particularly humility, divine light, and sacramental embodiment—and the aesthetic principles of Thai classical dance.

Thai participants frequently articulated how engagement with Christian narratives prompted fresh aesthetic reflection. One dancer commented during the second workshop: "In *Lakhon Nai*, our gestures already carry emotional gentleness, but when I learned that Mary's gesture meant saying yes to God, I began to feel the energy as prayer, not only as beauty."

Another performer described the experience of interpreting the angelic *Phrom Si Na* gesture: "The movement outward, the lightness—it felt like *bucha phra*, an offering. It surprised me that a Western story could feel so close to our own ritual mood."

Such testimonies illustrate that Thai artists perceived Christian themes not as foreign but as resonant with indigenous spiritual aesthetics centered on reverence, compassion, and cosmic harmony.

Conversely, Christian participants—including two theology students and a liturgical artist observing the rehearsals—expressed profound appreciation for the visual theology implicit in Thai dance. One noted: “Seeing the Nativity through Thai movement revealed an unfamiliar tenderness. The gestures seemed to slow time and invite contemplation—the theology became visible.”

Another observed that Thai costuming and composure “transformed biblical humility into something ceremonial yet deeply human,” emphasizing how non-verbal sacred embodiment can illuminate dimensions of doctrine inaccessible through language alone.

These intercultural dialogues within the workshops revealed a pattern of mutual aesthetic translation: Thai artists internalized Christian theological affect through indigenous kinesthetic idioms, while Christian observers discovered theological insight through the Thai aesthetic of spiritual grace. This exchange exemplifies Bevans’s (1992) notion of “contextual theology as conversation,” wherein faith and culture mutually interpret one another rather than existing in hierarchical relation.

From a broader aesthetic perspective, this dialogical encounter challenges entrenched East–West binaries that have historically structured cross-cultural art discourse. Whereas earlier Western interpretations of the East—such as *La Bayadère*—constructed cultural difference as spectacle, the present project reframed difference as a site of shared contemplation and theological embodiment. The collaboration demonstrated that Thai classical movement, long associated with Buddhist cosmology and royal mythology (Brandon, 1997; Rutnin, 1996), could express Christian mystery without diminishing either system’s integrity. Similarly, the Catholic Nativity narrative, refracted through Thai performative codes, achieved a new visual poetics grounded in humility and divine illumination (Hellsten, 2023; Wright, 2016).

This synthesis also generated critical self-reflection among participants. Some Thai dancers admitted difficulty sustaining Thai codified lines while embodying Christian spiritual states unfamiliar to them, while Christian observers acknowledged initial uncertainty in reading Thai symbolic gestures. Yet both groups reported a growing sense of convergence: bodily symmetry became a theological metaphor for harmony between heaven and earth; ritualized stillness paralleled contemplative prayer. Such insights underscore the potential for embodied intercultural dialogue to function simultaneously as artistic experiment and spiritual encounter.

Ultimately, this project’s cross-cultural aesthetic inquiry demonstrates that the fusion of Western theological narrative and Eastern movement language can transcend superficial hybridity. Through genuine artistic collaboration and mutual interpretation, participants enacted a living theology in motion—one that confirmed Bevans’s principle that true inculturation arises not from translation alone but from relational transformation. In this way, the research extends the horizon of both dance scholarship and theology, offering an empirically grounded model for intercultural performance that values reciprocity, empathy, and shared sacred imagination over appropriation or abstraction.

4. The Use of Thai Dance Techniques is Not the Endpoint of Creative Exploration

While Thai classical dance offers a codified and deeply symbolic movement system, its application in cross-cultural or theological choreography should not be regarded as an aesthetic culmination but rather as a point of departure for broader creative exploration. Within the Thai performance landscape, several artists and collaborative projects have begun situating traditional movement vocabularies in dialogue with contemporary, postmodern, and experimental frameworks—many of which reveal possibilities for theological or philosophical expression that transcend stylistic boundaries.

Recent interdisciplinary works provide tangible examples of how Thai classical idioms can engage with modern choreographic languages. Pichet Klunchun’s *I Am a Demon* (2005) and *Dancing with Death* (2010) reinterpret Khon gesture systems through minimalist composition and conceptual dramaturgy, exploring themes of mortality, divinity, and

spiritual transformation. Klunchun's approach demonstrates how classical form, when deconstructed and repositioned within contemporary theatre aesthetics, can evoke metaphysical contemplation comparable to theological inquiry.

At the academic and institutional level, choreographic research at Srinakharinwirot University has initiated experimental laboratories in which Thai classical and Western dance students integrate improvisation techniques and site-specific composition with *Lakhon Nai* gesture systems. During one such workshop (2021–2022), performers reinterpreted the biblical Annunciation in an outdoor temple courtyard using improvisational scores inspired by Buddhist walking meditation (*jong krom*). The resulting movement dialogue revealed a profound resonance between contemplative embodiment and Christian spiritual receptivity, underscoring the feasibility of hybrid choreographic methods for articulating sacred narratives.

These empirical developments mirror global trends in intercultural choreography. Internationally, works such as Akram Khan's *Xenos* (2018) and Shobana Jeyasingh's *Material Men Redux* (2017) exemplify how classical Asian dance languages can be transformed through postmodern dramaturgies to interrogate identity, faith, and existential vulnerability (Mead, 2017; Roy, 2018). Although emerging from South Asian traditions, these artists share conceptual affinities with Thai practitioners in their use of classical codification as a means of negotiating universal spiritual and ethical questions. Such comparative contexts affirm that theological and metaphysical content can be embodied through the hybridization of classical Asian forms and contemporary movement philosophies.

From an analytical perspective, these contemporary Thai and international experiments elucidate how alternative vocabularies—modern dance, postmodern improvisation, and site-responsive composition—can enrich theological choreography. For instance, Pichet Klunchun's later works embody the *kenotic* principle of self-emptying central to Christian theology, demonstrating that theological embodiment need not depend solely on narrative clarity but can also arise through abstract, phenomenological experience.

These practice-based examples collectively demonstrate that the integration of Thai classical dance into Christian or cross-religious narratives must remain an evolving, dialogical process rather than a fixed model. The coexistence of *phasa ta* (codified gesture), contemporary improvisation, and experimental dramaturgy creates a continuum where sacred meaning is not confined to a single style but continually negotiated through embodied research. As such, intercultural theological dance becomes a living laboratory—one that invites reflection on both tradition and transformation.

In sum, the employment of Thai classical dance in theological interpretation is a vital but not terminal step within a broader creative spectrum. By situating Thai classical idioms in productive dialogue with contemporary experimentation, artists and scholars can expand the expressive horizon of sacred choreography. This approach honors both tradition and innovation, affirming that spiritual embodiment in performance is most profound when it arises from dynamic exchange—where inherited forms meet new choreographic inquiry in pursuit of transcendent understanding.

5. The Role of Experimental Dance in Contemporary Creative Performance in the Thai Context

Within the domain of contemporary dance practice, experimental approaches have increasingly emerged as critical mechanisms for rethinking, deconstructing, and reconfiguring inherited choreographic systems. This development is particularly significant within the Thai cultural milieu, where classical dance forms—such as *Khon*, *Lakhon Nai*, Thai classical dance, and regional folk traditions—are governed by highly codified structures and ritualized conventions (Brandon, 1997; Rutnin, 1996). While these traditions offer a profound repository of symbolic and gestural knowledge, their rigidity can sometimes constrain innovation and restrict the thematic and aesthetic possibilities available to choreographers.

Experimental dance thus provides a necessary counterbalance: it functions simultaneously as a site of disruption and a catalyst for creative renewal (Foster, 2011; Lepecki, 2005). In the Thai context, the value of experimental dance lies in its capacity to extend the expressive vocabulary of movement beyond fixed aesthetic parameters, while still engaging deeply with cultural memory, social history, and evolving identity formations. It allows artists to interrogate the ideological, spiritual, and performative assumptions embedded within traditional forms, asking how these frameworks might be reimagined or recontextualized in response to contemporary philosophical, theological, and socio-political concerns.

For instance, choreographic experiments that integrate non-Western spiritualities, hybrid ritual aesthetics, or pressing sociopolitical narratives open new avenues for Thai dance practitioners to engage audiences in multilayered modes of meaning-making (Adshead-Lansdale, 2019; Foster, 2011). By disrupting traditional narrative linearity and introducing abstraction, ambiguity, and fragmentation, experimental dance can provoke reflective engagement, challenging both performers and audiences to reconsider the functions of movement, embodiment, and storytelling within shifting cultural landscapes.

Moreover, experimental dance facilitates interdisciplinary collaboration, drawing upon visual arts, digital technology, sound design, dramaturgy, and literary studies to expand the ontological boundaries of dance itself. In the Thai context, where contemporary dance continues to negotiate its complex position between state-supported traditionalism and globalized modernity, experimental practice has become a crucial platform for emergent voices and alternative narratives. These works frequently arise within academic institutions, independent studios, and urban performance festivals such as *Unfolding Kafka Festival* and *Bangkok International Performing Arts Meeting (BIPAM)*, offering vital counter-discourses to the formalized, hierarchical presentations of classical dance on royal or state-sponsored stages.

Crucially, experimentation within Thai dance is not necessarily antithetical to tradition. When grounded in rigorous inquiry and informed by cultural literacy, experimental processes can illuminate latent potentials embedded within traditional forms. Techniques of abstraction, distortion, and thematic recontextualization do not inherently dismantle classical aesthetics; rather, they may uncover dimensions of adaptability, resilience, and renewed relevance. In this sense, experimental dance operates as a form of living scholarship—a practice of embodied research that generates new choreographic languages while simultaneously contributing to critical theoretical discourses surrounding dance as both a cultural artifact and an intellectual act.

By adhering to principles of cultural dignity, religious sincerity, and ethical responsibility in intercultural exploration, experimental dance in Thailand offers a pathway toward reimagining tradition not as a fixed monument but as a dynamic, evolving practice capable of responding to the complexities of the contemporary world.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the possibilities and challenges of interpreting the Catholic Nativity through the idiomatic vocabulary of Thai classical dance. The findings suggest that Thai gestural, spatial, and rhythmic systems possess a distinctive potential for theological embodiment when engaged through critical frameworks of hermeneutical inculturation. Rather than asserting definitive success, the results should be understood as preliminary yet promising evidence that sacred Christian narratives can be meaningfully explored within the Thai choreological tradition.

The project's practice-based outcomes demonstrate that the integration of theological motifs—such as *kenosis*, *incarnation*, and *epiphany*—into *phasa ta* gesture vocabularies and traditional movement structures can generate affective and semiotic resonance. However, this process remains in an early developmental stage and necessarily constrained by several limitations. The workshops involved a relatively small number of participants, all trained in central Thai classical

dance, and were conducted within a single institutional and cultural setting. The interpretations observed therefore reflect a specific pedagogical and aesthetic context rather than a universally transferable model. Broader application across regional Thai styles or within different ecclesial or cultural communities will require further investigation.

The research also encountered several conceptual and practical challenges. Translating theological abstraction into embodied form revealed inherent interpretive tensions: certain Christian doctrines—such as the dual nature of Christ or the mystery of the Incarnation—resisted immediate physicalization without risking symbolic reduction. Differences in audience interpretation further complicated reception; while emotional engagement was frequently reported, narrative comprehension often depended on supplementary explanation. Moreover, the negotiation of cultural and religious boundaries required continual ethical sensitivity to avoid both theological simplification and aesthetic appropriation. These challenges underscore the necessity of approaching intercultural theological choreography as an ongoing dialogue rather than a completed synthesis.

Despite such constraints, the study illuminates a fertile intersection between theology and Thai performance aesthetics. The results indicate that Thai classical dance, when engaged critically and reflexively, can serve as a site for theological imagination—one that invites both performers and viewers into contemplative encounter rather than doctrinal instruction. The project's greatest contribution lies not in claiming to have resolved intercultural or theological tensions, but in demonstrating that these very tensions can become productive grounds for artistic and scholarly inquiry.

Future research should therefore build upon this foundation through multi-sited and longitudinal investigations. Possible directions include audience-reception studies examining how theological meaning is perceived across different religious and cultural demographics; collaborative, community-based projects that involve both faith practitioners and local artists; and comparative experiments employing other Southeast Asian dance idioms, such as *Joget*, *Serimpi*, or *Baris*, to explore the adaptability of sacred embodiment across regional contexts. Such work could clarify whether the interpretive principles demonstrated here hold beyond Thai classical frameworks, and how intercultural theological choreography might evolve into participatory, dialogical practice within diverse spiritual communities.

Ultimately, this study should be viewed as an initial exploration—an inquiry that opens rather than concludes the conversation between Thai dance and Christian theology. The results confirm the potential of Thai classical aesthetics to participate in theological expression, yet they also affirm that the path toward full intercultural integration demands further methodological innovation, ethical attentiveness, and sustained critical reflection. In this sense, the research aspires not to present a final synthesis, but to contribute to a living, evolving dialogue between body, faith, and culture—one that continues to unfold within both scholarly and performative realms.

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