

## **MUSIC IN THE KEAMROEY RITUALS OF SHADOW PUPPET: A CASE STUDY OF AJARN NARONG TALUNG BANDITH ENSEMBLE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The thesis entitled "Music used in the Keamroey Rituals of Shadow Puppet: A Case Study of Ajarn Narong Talung Bundit group is a research based on ethno musicological concepts with the objectives of 1) to study the components related to fulfillment of vow rituals (Keamroey) as performed by Ajarn Narong Talung Bandit group and 2) to study the music used in the fulfillment of vow rituals (Keamroey). Document analysis of related references were utilized together with interviews, notes, participatory observations and multimedia recordings which covered musical recordings and related factors of music used in the rituals by the shadow puppet ensemble. The findings revealed that the most instrumental person in performing the rituals is the puppeteer who is responsible for making a votive offering and preparation of all necessary materials to conduct the ritual, i.e. "Khrueng Berk Rong" (Opening offering) and a candle. The usual performance theme for the ritual is "Ramayana", episode of Lakasana searching for Sita. The music instruments used in the rituals include Thai oboe, Tab, Gong, Krub, Ching, Drum set, Tomba drum, Electric guitar, Bass guitar and keyboard. The members of the ensemble perform traditional Thai music which they have inherited through the generations. Some pieces of music can be traced back to through their titles and vice versa. A total of 21 pieces of music are popularly used in the rituals which are mostly traditional Thai music.

**Keywords:** Music, Keamroey, Ritual, Shadow Puppet, Votive

## INTRODUCTION

Belief is the reaction of trust that humans have towards the foundation of spiritual refuge in providing happiness or sorrow. If an individual's actions are in accordance to their beliefs, then happiness will occur. But if the actions contradict their beliefs, then sorrow and hardship will follow (Chikiwong, 2002: 147). The people of Thailand and beliefs have coexisted together for a very long time. These beliefs have been in existence with Thai communities since past generations. Such beliefs are such as believing in the supernatural, belief in sin and merit, belief in heaven and hell and belief in mythology. Traditional beliefs in Thailand have origins and are related to the supernatural and mythology. Many traditional beliefs are in contrast to the livelihood of modern communities which have shifted to belief in science where trust and understanding is rooted in factorial sources that can be observed, seen and consistent with cause and effect. Modern belief is the cause of the decline in understanding and contributes to the diminishing knowledge and dimensions of the sacredness in life.

Belief originated from the relationship that humans have with nature. When human life is lost and destroyed by nature, it led to the conclusion that nature was the reason behind their suffering and revelation that nature can grant either happiness or sorrow. Imagination and creativity guided humans to search for a spiritual refuge and actions related to each belief. Ancestral beliefs have been passed on from one generation to succeeding generation of Thai's up to present times. Thai's have numerous beliefs which are the origins of rituals, customs and tradition (Riapriang, 2006: 17-18).

Shadow puppet or *Nang Talung* is a cultural art of southern Thailand that stems from ancient times and plays a significant role in the livelihood of communities in southern Thailand. Shadow puppet performances are also a popular folk performance in Northeast Thailand but referred to as "Nang Pra Mo Thai" and perform similar stories based on "Ramayana" (Bamrunghoo, 2010: 408). Shadow puppet provides entertainment, transmission of knowledge and information through performances accompanied with comedy and intervened with imperative subject matter. Shadow puppet is an important factor in rituals associated with traditional belief creating a coexisting phenomenon with each other ever since. Occasions for performing shadow puppet are 1) for entertainment during social events such as annual temple festivals, exhibitions organized by government offices such as Red Cross exhibitions, Agricultural Exhibitions, Cultural Promotion Exhibitions, Monk Ordainment event and include even funerals. 2) Keamroey rituals or votive rituals, events to fulfill vows and pledges, performance to commemorate patrons or spiritual deities which have been pledge with the offerings of entertainment. The conductor of Keamroey rituals must be qualified and have professional experience in the process or the vows and pledges offered to the spirits will not be fulfilled (Pidokrat, 2007: 58)

Keamroey is an obligatory pledge, votive or vow offered to the supernatural such as ancestral spirits, spiritual patrons and deceased elders or instructors that provided knowledge and vocational skills, traditional medicine and arts. Keamroey is also performed for local deities for protection and well being from sickness and harm by pledging shadow puppet performances in return for their wishes and blessings. If wishes are granted, then entertainment activities or vowed actions will be organized to celebrate by preparing offerings, music and dances.

This research was based on ethno-musicological concepts with the aim to; 1) to study the components related to fulfillment of Keamroey or votive rituals as performed by Ajarn Narong Talung Bundit Ensemble. 2) to study the music used in the fulfillment of Keamroey rituals performed by Ajarn Narong Talung Bundit Ensemble.

## RESEARCH AREA and METHODOLOGY

The research was performed through document analysis of related references, texts, research papers, multimedia recordings, and collected research data through observations and interviews. The multimedia recordings included a study of related components and music used in the rituals by the shadow puppet ensemble.

The research area included shadow puppet performances and Keamroey rituals in the province of Nakhon Si Thammarat and Trang in southern Thailand. Research period was from October 2009 to April 2011.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### Puppeteer

The lead puppeteer is the most important individual and the instrumentalist in shadow puppet performances. Their responsibilities include the administration of the group as the leader who must convey the subject matter of the show, doctrine and entertainment to audiences. The puppeteer must therefore be an individual who has a good personality and the readiness to perform for the audience with full devotion. The puppeteer must also be one who is proficient all around such as be omniscient in literature, astrology, current events, have good reflexes and resourcefulness. These qualities are needed because the poetic verses that are performed are created live, melodic, graceful, resounding, must be sung and narrated with multiple pitches and the singer must promptly know how to resolve dilemmas and be prepared for every circumstances. These are important qualities that the puppeteer must have in order to be successful and lead the ensemble in accomplishing their duties to entertain the audience.

Additional qualifications that are also required when the ensemble is supporting the Keamroey ritual other than those already mentioned include 1) the lead puppeteer or conductor of the ritual must have been ordained as a Buddhist monk 2) Must receive permission and complete the ritual performed and conducted by a senior puppeteer or senior Keamroey ritual conductor 3) The puppeteer must be an expert in Keamroey rituals. These qualities are needed because the Keamroey rituals additionally involve matters of faith, belief, pledges and vows to the supernatural and the sacredness and procedures of the ritual. The lead puppeteer is therefore essential in completing the Keamroey ritual. These crucial qualities in performing the Keamroey ritual means that not all lead puppeteers are qualified to perform the ritual and therefore must invite a lead puppeteer or ritual conductor from outside the ensemble to conduct instead. Ajarn Narong is a qualified lead puppeteer and a Keamroey ritual conductor with expertise in providing quality entertainment and thorough Keamroey rituals.

### Materials for the Keamroey Ritual

Materials that are essential for Keamroey rituals include “Khrueng Berk Rong’ (Opening offering) and one candle. Other materials include a small knife, Shadow puppets, banana stalk, the stage or theatre stall and other stage components.

### Musical Instruments

Music is an important factor and driving force behind the puppeteer’s performance, maintain the audience in suspense, harmonize the human spirit with the sacredness and also create a faithful atmosphere and represent the morals of respect, homage towards patrons and the sacred. The musical instruments that accompany Ajarn Narong Talung Bandith’s Ensemble is traditionally called *Wong Piphat Chatri* (Chatri Thai Orchestra) which consists of the Thai Oboe, Tab, *Mong* (Gong), Krub and Ching (hand cymbal). There are also a number of modern western musical instruments that have been incorporated into Shadow puppet ensembles due to their popularity. The western instruments integrated into Ajarn Narong Talung Bandith’s Ensemble include the Drum Set, Tomba or Conga Drum, Electric Guitar, Bass Guitar and Electronic Keyboard.

**Pi or the Thai Oboe** is a Thai traditional woodwind instrument and is the rhythm maker made from hardwood that is durable such as the core of mango trees and the core of rosewood trees. The instrument’s body’s head and end is curved outwards while the middle is bulged. The reed is made from Palmyra leaf. The Pi is a very popular Thai instrument since ancient times and its popularity is carried over to modern times.

**Tab or Thab** is a goblet shaped single sided drum and is the most important instrument in providing or supporting the rhythm of the music. The Tab provides the signal the other instruments in the Ensemble. There are usually 2 Tab drums, one for bass and the other for treble. Both the drums are tethered together by a rope or cloth and the treble Tab is on the right and the bass Tab is on the left of the drummer. The treble Tab is the primary rhythm maker and the bass Tab provides support.

**Khong Mong\Mong or Gong** is a bossed gong used for directing the performance of the puppeteer. There are 2 Gongs used in the ensemble where one is for treble and the other for bass.

**Krub or Clapper** is an instrument made from a pair of hardwood sticks providing supporting rhythm and usually accompanies the *Khong Mong*. Both instruments are usually played by one musician where the right hand operates the *Khong Mong* while the *Krub* is played by the left. In Ajarn Narong Talung Bandith's Ensemble, only a solitary *Krub* is utilized instead of a pair.

**Ching or Hand Cymbals** is a pair of hand cymbals tied together or knotted at the ends with a rope. The Ching is used to mark the time and rhythm with the *Khong Mong*. An innovation of Ajarn Narong Talung Bandith's Ensemble is to use a rope and tied as a knot tied to the thread at the end of the Cymbals so that it is more convenient to perform.

**Drum Set** The drum set is a western instrument integrated into Shadow puppet performances and provides supporting rhythm for the ensemble. The use of an electric drum set is also sometimes used because of weather conditions.

**Tomba or Conga Drums** are another western instrument integrated into Shadow Puppet performances and helps to keep pace of the rhythm. In Ajarn Narong Talung Bandith's Ensemble, the Tomba drums are played by the same musician who plays the Gong or Tab.

**Electric Guitar** The Electric Guitar is very popular among musicians and audiences and has been integrated into many traditional Thai folk performances including Shadow Puppet. The electric guitar provides the primary progressive rhythm and interleave when other instruments are in progression.

**Bass Guitar** The Bass Guitar in Shadow Puppet performances provides the fundamental notes of the musical chord and maintains the tempo and backup the entire ensemble.

**Electronic Keyboard** The electronic keyboard performs its duty in the progress of the rhythm and sometimes used to imitate the Pi or Thai Oboe. The Electronic Keyboard also provides special sound effects which enhances the performance.

## DISCUSSION

Shadow puppet performances in the past were strict in regards to belief and tradition. But in the present, many of the past boundaries have been lessened from external influences such as the performance area which was traditionally setup in communities that were dispersed and not over crowded. In the past there was a spacious area large enough for the ensemble to erect a stage that faced the correct auspicious bearing according to ancient traditions that were passed down through the generations. The area for performing shadow puppets in modern times is in total contrast with the past because modern houses and communities are overcrowded and there is limited choice for erecting a stage that met traditional guidelines. Shadow puppet performance and Keamroey rituals have adjusted to the current limitations of space and performance areas to suit modern communities.

Musical instruments used for the ritual and accompany the performance of the shadow puppet traditionally used Thai orchestra consisting of five groups of wood and percussion instruments (*Wong Piphat Chatri*) which consists of the Thai Oboe, Tab, Gong, Krub and Ching (hand cymbal). External influence from foreign culture introduced western musical instruments which have become widely popular by both musicians and audiences and have been integrated into many Thai folk performances including shadow puppet. Modern shadow puppet musical instruments now include the Thai Oboe, Tab, Gong, Krub, Ching, Drum set, Tombo Drum, Electric Guitar, Bass Guitar and Electronic Keyboard. These changes and adaptations are necessary in order for the continued existence and development of folk entertainment and preservation of traditional rituals.

## **CONCLUSION**

The compositions performed by the shadow puppet musicians accompanying Keamroey rituals can be divided into 2 categories which are songs for entertainment and songs to accompany the ritual. Songs for entertainment include popular music of the era such as Thai country music and Thai folk music so that the combination will provide good entertainment that encompasses all generations of the audience as they watch the shadow puppet show. Keamroey ritual songs are fixed to the traditional songs passed down through the generations that the musicians have expertise through rigorous training and transfer of knowledge where one musician can play multiple instruments and can stand in for fellow musicians during vacancy.

The puppeteer is the most instrumental person in performing Keamroey rituals. They are also the host of the ritual and is responsible for pledging the vows and must prepare all the materials required for the rituals such as Khrueng Berk Rong (offerings to initiate the ritual) and a candle. Ramayana episode of “Laksana searching for Sida” is the chosen musical theme. The members of the ensemble perform traditional music which has been inherited through the generations. Several chapters of the music can be traced back to their origins via the titles and vice versa. There are a total of 21 musical chapters used in the rituals which are mostly traditional Thai music. Due to modernization and globalization, many forms of Thai folk entertainment along with Shadow puppet theatres and Nang Pra Mo Thai have been in decline due to adoption of foreign customs and numerous forms of modern entertainment available for consumers. The indigenous entertainment of local Thai communities is in danger of disappearing forever if there is no effort to promote, develop and conserve (Rattaporn, 1983: 64-65). To complete the task of revitalization and conservation, it is necessary that all aspects of folk entertainment such as the indigenous knowledge of the music and folk instruments accompanying the performances be studied, developed, revitalized and promoted as well. The conservation of cultural treasures inherited through generations is essential to the prosperous development of communities and is essential to the happiness of future generations.

## **SUGGESTIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS**

Comparative research studies should be carried out to study music that accompanies Keamroey rituals performed by other Ensembles. Government offices and private entities should support the development and continuation of Shadow puppet for youths to be able to express their artistic potential and gain practical development.

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