

MUSIC OF THE LAO ETHNIC IN THE CHAO PRAYA RIVER BASIN

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ABSTRACT

This research entitled; Music of the Lao Ethnic in the Chao Praya River Basin is a Ethnomusicology Qualitative research study with the aim to 1) Study the history and origin of Lao ethnics in the Chao Praya river basin, 2) To study the musical livelihood of Lao ethnics in the Chao Praya river basin and 3) To study the social changes in music and culture of Lao ethnics in the Chao Praya river basin. Lao ethnics in the Chao Praya river basins have origins in Laos in which they were relocated and resettled during war period from two major Laotian cities of Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Currently the remaining Lao ethnics that live in the Chao Praya River basin include the Loa Song or Tai Dam and Lao Kruhng. Surviving musical culture of the Lao ethnics is the Kaen instrument and monophonic texture melodies of iterative songs and maw lam singing. Currently there are many Lao ethnics that have moved into the city to find work. Laotians are now more open to modern media and foreign culture have gained acceptance. The acceptance of foreign culture by Loa ethnics, especially youths through the environment of Thai society and modern schooling in central Thai language have caused Laotians to feel that they have more in common with the social community in central Thailand than their own background. The acceptance of foreign culture by youths has affected the musical culture of Lao ethnics in the community and they have had to adjust and adapt to keep up with the social changes and for survival. The indigenous music in each of the Lao communities was affected and indigenous ensembles and folk musical bands saw a decrease in performances. Swift changes had to be made for the survival of the bands and so they started to innovate such as include the Pong Lang (Log Xylophone) with Maw Lum singing and adjust the melody to be more modern and related to current social trends and styles.

INTRODUCTION

Music is an art form that is closely related and inseparable from humans. Every individual within a society is confronted by music one way or the other, since birth to death. Music can always be heard somewhere in society and comes in many formats and varieties. Music is used to provide social services and accompany rituals that are a part of our daily lives and is a material object with spiritual results. The value of music depends on the audience and is different for everyone and is important element to the 4 essence materials of life. Music is an important foundation to the culture of society and plays a significant part in creating the identity of the social group through a unified value and is a tool to convey and communicate the feelings that can create understanding between different social origins. Music of every ethnic group is a natural phenomena (Leesomboonphol, 2003 : 31). The study of music in the livelihood of any ethnic group is a delicate process because the musical culture of a society reflects the group's cultural identity, beliefs, rituals and activities of the social group.

Thailand is country in Southeast Asia with many ethnic groups. Each ethnic group has their own cultural traditions and identity which has been passed down through the generations. Throughout the course of history many ethnic groups in Thailand have adapted to Thai society and have increased in pace due to modernization. Many social and cultural identities of many ethnics have had to adapt for survival. This is especially true for Lao ethnics living in Thailand. The Lao ethnic have a long historical origin and is a culture rich in customs, language, food, clothing, beliefs and music.

RESEARCH AREA AND METHODOLOGY

This research is an Ethnomusicology Qualitative Research. The research was conducted through interviews, observations, workgroup seminars and field research. Other tools include documentation and recording data. The data analysis was done primarily through document analysis. The research was conducted between September 2010 and October 2011. Research data were checked for their accountability with triangulation technique, analyzed according to the given objectives, and the results of the study were presented in descriptive analysis format.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Lao ethnics are the largest group of people who are constantly relocating throughout Thailand. Their origin is in Laos or Laos Peoples Democratic Republic. The first major relocation started in 2310 during the Thonburi era where many Laotians were forcibly relocated from their homes due to warfare and most came from 2 cities in Laos at Muang Vientiane and Muang Luang Prabang. Currently the Lao ethnics that have maintained their cultural identity in the Chao Praya river basin are the Lao Vien ethnic, Lao Song or Tai Dam and the Lao Kruhng ethnic.

Lao Vienne or Tai Vienne is Laotians that were originally force from the city of Vientiane about 200 years ago due to war policy. Laotians that have settled in Isan or northeast Thailand were not forcibly relocated but were political refugees given refuge by the Thai government.

The music livelihood of the Lao ethnic in the Chao Praya river basin has a monophonic texture where the melody is iterative. The social changes of Laotians living in central Thailand from past to present has gone through many changes where adaptations and innovations are common and a necessity for the survival of their cultural heritage. Most Laotians are still farmers, raise animals and supplement their income through weaving and handicrafts. Many Laotians still continue to grow bamboo and utilize it in making tools, handicrafts and utensils used in their daily life and used in rituals such as pillows, baskets and harnesses.

Sticky rice or glutinous rice is the Lao ethnic's main staple and most dishes are spiced with pepper, chilies, salt, fermented fish and vegetables. Raised livestock include pigs, ducks, chickens and cows. Most Lao ethnics believe in Buddhism because Buddhism resembles a related resemblance to the spiritual in which Laotians are accustomed to and accepted the existence of deities and supernatural spirits. At first, many Laotians in the Chao Praya basin didn't know about Buddhism and were reluctant to join Buddhist ceremonies and rituals with the Thai community because they were afraid that the sacred spirits will feel betrayed. It was only through time and cultural diffusion that eventually the Lao community and individuals accepted and adapted to foreign rituals and beliefs which was not limited to Buddhism, but was a cultural combination between Hinduism, Buddhism and spiritual beliefs.

The Khaen also spelled Khene, Kaen and Khen, is a free reed wind instrument or mouth organ constructed in a raft shape with the wind pipes arranged in parallel pairs and classified according to the numbers of pairs. The Khaen is the most important instrument of Laos and Northeast Thailand and popular at all social events and festivities in Tai-Lao communities. The Khaen is also the prominent instrument in traditional Maw Lum singing (Northeast Thailand and Laotian Folk Opera). The Khaen has 4 major parts which are: The Khu Khaen (wind pipes), Lin (reed), Tao Khaen (wind chest or reservoir) and Kissot or Khisut (Trigona terminata, Melipona apicalis or stingless bee wax). The Khaen is a popular instrument in Asia and referred to by many names in the Mekong region (Chonpairot, 1998). The Khaen is an important instrument in conjunction with the development of society, culture and traditions of ethnic groups in the Mekong Region. The Khaen is more than 3,000 years old and it's origin is still shrouded with myths, legends, oral traditions and still being debated among scholars.

The Khaens found in Thailand received influence and technical knowledge from Lao origins. Khaen craftsmen at Tambon Si Kaeo, Amphoe Mueang received skills from Khaen craftsmen from Vientiane in Laos, while the craftsmen at Ban Tha Rua, Tambon Na Wa, Amphoe Mueang, received knowledge from Khaen craftsmen in 1927 from Savannakhet, Laos. Khaens found in Laos were influenced and received technical knowledge from Khaen craftsmen in Savannakhet province in Laos at Mueang Pin, Mueang Wang and also from Khammouane province at Ban That, Mueang Mahaxai and Mueang Tha Khak. Another group of Tai Dham ethnic in Houaphan and Lao Phueun in Xiangkhoang province inherited Khaen making knowledge from their ancestors who immigrated from the ancient settlement of Mueang Na Noi Oi Nu which is also referred to as Mueang Thaen/Than or the ancient settlement of Khwaen Sip Song Chu Thai which is currently known today as the areas of Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam.

The first groups are Khaens that were made to be compact, tapering and thin. This structure was chosen by Khaen craftsmen so that the palms of the hand could be firmly placed on the Tao Khaen (reservoir). The Tao Khaen itself was usually made from soft or hard wood with a flush mouthpiece which had a center orifice. The reservoir is carved hollow to house the Mai Khu Khaen (bamboo wind pipes). These groups of Khaens are popular in Northern Vietnam among Tai Khao ethnics of Ban Na Phon, Amphoe Mai Joa in Hoa Binh province and ethnic Tai Dham at Ban Tup Sa Chiang Khoi, Amphoe Chiang Dong, Sonla province and at Dien Bien Phu province. The Khaens are also popular among Tai Puan, Lao Puan ethnics in Xieng Khouang, Houaphan and Luang Prabang province. The second groups of Khaens are those that were constructed symmetrically and appropriately sized with the Tao Khaen which was usually made from the core root of Rosewood trees (*pterocarpus macrocarpus*). The mouthpiece of the Tao Khaen is carved inward towards the central orifice. The reservoir is hollowed and houses the wind pipes. The tail or opposite end of the mouthpiece of the reservoir is frequently decorated with artistic carvings as a decoration. The Khaens are mostly found and produced in Tai ethnic communities in Northeast Thailand at Ban Si Kaeo, Ban Nong Ta Kai, Ban Lao Kham in Tambon Si Kaeo, Amphoe Mueang in Roiet province. They are also popular at Ban Tha Ruela Tambon Na Wa Amphoe Na Wa in Nakhon Phanom province and at Ban Na Nong Thum Tambon

Na Nong Thum Ban Non Din Hom Tambon Lup Kha Amphoe Phoe Kaeng Khrong in Chaiyaphum province. These Khaens can also be found in central and southern Laos at Ban Hai Sok, Mueang Chan Tha Buri, Ban Saengsawang, Mueang Chai Chet Tha in Vientiane province and at Ban Tat, Mueang Mahaxai, Mueang Thakhek in Khammouane province and also at Mueang Wang and Mueang Pin in Savannakhet province and Champasak province.

DISCUSSION

The culture of Lao ethnics of the Chao Praya River basin is a combination of Thai and Lao culture. This is consistent with Piyabhan (1986 : 11) in which Laotians relocated to central Thailand during the Thonburi and Ratanakosin era through war fare and some voluntary. Most of the Laotians were Lao Vienne, Lao Song and Lao Pwuan. Laotians were relocated in many provinces in central Thailand at Changwat Nakhon Pathom, Changwat Ratchaburi, Changwat Phetchaburi, Changwat Kanchanaburi, Changwat Suphan Buri, Changwat Samut Sakhon, Changwat Chon Buri, Changwat Prachin Buri, Changwat Sa Kaeo, Changwat Kamphaeng Phet, Changwat Phetchabun, Changwat Sukhothai, Changwat Chachoengsao, Changwat Nakhon Nayok, Changwat Lopburi, Changwat Saraburi, Changwat Phichit, Changwat Phitsanulok, Changwat Nakhon Sawan, Changwat Sing Buri and Changwat Uthai Thani (Praemsairat, 1998).

There are also research studies in regards to the diffusion and cultural merge of Lao ethnics in the Chao Praya River basin by Udomsilp, (1996) in which Lao ethnics in communities throughout central Thailand continue to inherit their cultural heritage by adaptation and combination of central Thai culture. Many Lao ethnics can speak both Laotian and central Thai. Most cultural traditions are also similar to Thais such as Songkran festival, Buddhist Lent day, Merit making and others. There are also Lao ethnic cultural identities that are only practiced by Laotians such as Kum Fah, Kwan Kao and Lao spiritual rituals such as Pi Nang Dohng, Pi Nang Sakh, Pi Kala and Pi Ling Lohm. Lao ethnics of the Chao Praya river basin use music in their rituals and are a part of their daily livelihood. Music is used and performed in many occasions such as ancestral worship, religious celebrations and spiritual celebrations. The cultural conservation and inheritance of indigenous identity is because the Lao ethnics value their core heritage and through the benefits provided by rituals (Phonwatthana, 1997 : 281). The conservation of culture is related to change and is always in motion. Culture can not be developed if there are no changes and that most cultural changes lead to cultural progress. The culture of Lao ethnics in the Chao Praya river basin are a combination of innovative adaptations and merge of knowledge, society, value system and social standards to conform to the needs of the current social group. This cultural combination of different backgrounds creates understanding of the different livelihoods, values and opinions of other ethnics. The cultural identity of Lao ethnics living in central Thailand and in the Chao Praya river basin is a gentle combination of cultures that is always in constant change.

CONCLUSION

Currently there are many Lao ethnics that have moved into the city to find work. Laotians are now more open to modern media and foreign culture have gained acceptance. The acceptance of foreign culture by Lao ethnics, especially youths through the environment of Thai society and modern schooling in central Thai language have caused Laotians to feel that they have more in common with the social community in central Thailand than their own background. The acceptance of foreign culture by youths has affected the musical culture of Lao ethnics in the community and they have had to adjust and adapt to keep up with the social changes and for survival. The indigenous music in each of the Lao communities was affected and indigenous ensembles and folk musical bands saw a decrease in performances. Swift changes had to be made for the survival of the bands and so they started to innovate such as include the Pong Lang (Log

Xylophone) with Maw Lum singing and adjust the melody to be more modern and related to current social trends and styles. The social changes are the results of the diffusion and diffusion of culture. This is also consistent with Antrakun (1997) in the changes of occupations of farmers is also due to the diffusion and diffusion of culture within the community through communication and transfer of technology. This is also consistent with Sirivejkul (2003) where changes to indigenous folk performances of Nung Talung (shadow puppet) were modified to include more modern instruments such as the electric bass guitar, drum sets and electronic keyboard. The changes were needed to make the band more appealing to hosts and audiences and to keep their profession in trend with modern society.

At the same time, the music of the Khaen is a musical instrument that is of Lao origin since ancient times and continues to be used in social services and rituals such as engagements, rights, and spiritual services and in festivities. It is also notable that the Khaen is only used in auspicious events only. This indicates that even though that there are continuous changes to society and culture, but some things remain constant through social solidarity. Society and culture are always in motion and that the cultural identity of any ethnic will be changed or replaced if that particular identity does not meet the requirement of the ethnic group.

SUGGESTIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

The conservation of ethnic music is related to the cultural changes that are made to adapt to the changes in society. There are many type and forms of adaptations such as changes made to the format of performances, content of the music and story. These changes can occur at any moment and are always in motion. It is therefore necessary to accept the fact of a variety of cultures and at multi levels. Identities and cultures that are the core of each society remain intact through awareness and appropriate methods for each society. Future research topics should emphasize on the study of Lao music culture in other regions within and outside of Thailand and the study of the music of other ethnics should be supported.

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