

Reinterpreting Religious and Ethnic Music in Thailand

Surasak Jamnongsarn¹

¹Faculty of Fine Arts, Srinakharinwirot University

¹surasakja@g.swu.ac.th

ABSTRACT

Thailand is a society where different religious beliefs coexist peacefully. The main religions recognized by the Thai government are Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Brahmin-Hinduism, and Sikhism. Each of these different religions does not make each religion teach people to behave differently, but it is well accepted that all religions teach us all to be good people. Traditional Thai Music (*Dontri Thai*) is diverse, reflecting a nation that people, culture, and history have shaped. Most Thai Muslims are of Malay descent, reflecting the common cultural heritage between Thailand's southern provinces shared with Malaysia. Thailand and Indonesia, the latter being popularly known by the former as *chawa* (Java), are two nations with long relationships since the traditional state era. Dvaravati, as The Mon Culture, was an ancient Mon kingdom from the 7th century to the 11th century, located in the region now known as central Thailand. Wai Khru ritual is a mixture of animistic, Brahmanist, and Buddhist rituals.

Keywords : religious, ethnic music, Thailand

I. Introduction

The Multicultural Society of Thailand is a society made up of diverse groups of people. There are social and cultural differences, be it religion, language, cultures, etc. Each group of people has different beliefs, religions, cultures, and also music. All citizens have freedom of religion making Thai society look like "Religious pluralism". Thailand is a society where different religious beliefs coexist peacefully. The main religions recognized by the Thai government are Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Brahmin-Hinduism, and Sikhism. Also, other religions can be found, such as Taoism, Confucianism, and Judaism. Although different religions have different forms and beliefs, for example, believing that there is only one God, believing that there are many gods, or believing in the truth or Master. Each of these different religions does not make each religion teach people to behave differently, but it is well accepted that all religions teach us all to be good people.

Religions in Thailand consist of approximately the following numbers: Buddhism, about 63 million people, or 93.4%; Islam, about 3.6 million people, or 5.4%; Christianity, about 760,000 people, or 1.1%; Hindu and Sikh religions, about 200,000 people; Confucianism and other religions, about 190,000 people; Irreligious, about 150,000 people; and 4,000 of unknown religion.

In addition to religious diversity, Ethnicity is what indicates the ethnographic qualities that are different in each social group in Thailand as well. Anthropologists have tried to suggest the use of the term ethnic group instead of race, the idea that the importance of multicultural society from multiculturalism, and human rights and indigenouness, making the Thai government has established an agency responsible for ending racial discrimination, skin color, or ethnic that found 36 ethnic groups consisting 5 language families: Tai-Kadai language family; Austroasiatic language family; Sino-Tibetan language family; Austronesian language family; Hmong-Mien language family.

It consists of many subgroups such as Thai (Siamese) – c. 53–56.5 million, Central Thai – c. 25 million, Isan (Thai-Lao; Thai Isan; Isan Lao) – c. 18.5–20 million, Yuan (Thai Yuan; Lanna) – c. 6–7 million, Southern Thai (Thai Pak Tai) – c. 5.5 million, Chinese (primarily Teochew) – c. 6–9 million, assimilated Sino-Thai (Luk Chin) – > 4.5 million, non-assimilated Chinese – c. 1.4 million, Malays – 2–4 million, Khmer – > 1.2 million, Karen – c. 1 million, Phu Thai – 470,000, Kuy – 400,000, Hmong - 250,070, Lao – 222,000, Phuan – 200,000, Mon – 114,500, Lahu – 100,000, Shan (Thai Yai)– 95,000, Lue (Thai Lü) – 83,000, Sô – 70,000, Nyaw – 50,000, Tai Ya – 50,000, Lua – 48,000, Lisu – 40,000, Yao – 40,000, Bru – 25,000, Akha – c. 20,000, Phai – 20,000, Vietnamese – 17,662, Lawa – 17,000, Saek – 11,000, Khmu – 10,000, Khun (Thai Khun) – 6,280, Palaung (De'ang) – 5,000, Cham – 4,000, Urak Lawoi – 3,000, Moken – c. 2,000, Nyahkur (Nyah Kur, Chao-bon) – 1,500, Tai Dam (Black Tai) – 700, Chong – less than 500, Pear – less than 500, Sa'och – less than 500, Mlabri – less than 400, Mani (Negrito) – 300, and Lolo (Yi) – unknown.

II. Discussion

Traditional Thai Music and Court Music at a Glance

Traditional Thai Music (*Dontri Thai*) is diverse, reflecting a nation that people, culture, and history have shaped. Traditional Thai music concerned with royal courts and religious life is commonly referred to as Thai classical music. The worldview associated with Thai classical music articulated in ritual has been the subject of several scholarly studies. Traditional Thai music, which appears in its current form, is identical to the repertoire and ensemble royal palace style, centers in Central Thailand approximately 800 years ago. In the past, the ensembles are similar to Khmer music. It appears in its most basic formulation, and the traditional Thai music assemble is similar to Cambodian (*Khmer*) *Mahori* and also *Pinpeat* assemble.

It is also structurally similar to those found in other instrumentation gong-chime music culture which is widespread in Southeast Asia, such as Balinese and Javanese gamelan, which are probably likely to have the same root in the diffusion of Vietnamese bronze drum culture (DongSon) at the beginning of the first century. The music was very cosmopolitan, bringing the idea of the various cultures that surround it, especially Cambodia, Java, China, Burma, and so on. At that time, Thailand's musical expression is an expression of unique, absorbing, and developing musical ideas from different areas. Traditional Thai repertoire is anonymous and names unknown composers. He inherited it through an oral tradition show. However, since the beginning of the modern Bangkok period, around the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, many major composers have recorded their works in notation. Musicians imagine that the compositions and notations as generic forms are realized in full idiosyncratic variations and improvisations in the context of the performance. Luang Pradit Pairon (1881-1954) for example, used localized forms of the cipher (number) notation. Other composers, such as Montri Tramote (1908-1995), used standard Baroque notation. Thai music artists have influenced the dynamics of the development of traditional music in Thailand. They have a unique way of passing their musical traditions to the next generation. The method that is run and maintained up to now is to learn music from a teacher, be a loyal follower, and

play his/her composition. If a student has chosen to study with a teacher, a student should not be moved to another teacher's learning. The music teacher in Thailand is also a composer who has the particularity to be his style. Distinctiveness and style song of a teacher would be a "secret" along to their students as a strength to compensate for and offset by teachers and other groups. It then became a tradition of competition until now.



Figure 1
Piphat Ensemble
(Photo: Surasak, 2017)

Malay Muslim Music in Thailand

Most Thai Muslims are of Malay descent, reflecting the common cultural heritage between Thailand's southern provinces shared with Malaysia. Thai Malays or *Oré Nayu* or *Bangso Yawi* with officially recognized terms including 'Malayu-descended Thais' and 'Malay' is a term used to refer to ethnic Malay citizens of Thailand, the sixth-largest ethnic group in Thailand, and most Malays are concentrated in the Southern provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, Songkhla, and Satun. A sizeable community also exists in Thailand's capital Bangkok, having descended from migrants who were relocated from the South to Bangkok from the 13th century onwards.



Figure 2
Olek Nabi in Maulid Nabi Festival in Ayutthaya
(Photo: twitter.com/dejdanaisupa/status/1416029466057330690, 2022)

More than Ninety percent of Sunni and one percent of Shi'ite Thai Muslims enjoy emotional and financial support from His Majesty the King, who provided funds for translating the Koran into Thai. Each year the King or his representative also presides during a celebration commemorating the Maulid or Prophet Muhammad's birthday. Moreover, His Majesty appoints a respected Muslim religious leader as Chularajamontri, or State Counselor for Islamic affairs. The government also provides funds for building and renovating mosques.

Muslim musical performances are prevalent in the central part of the country and parts of Bangkok. Most performances involved *Rebana* or frame drums, and the players would sing praise to Prophet Muhammad by texts from the book of *al-Barzanji* consisting of *Olek Nabi* performance with *Sholawat Nabi* in the *Maulid Nabi* festival, *Dikir Reap*, *al Nasyid (Nasep)*, *Dikir Pantun*, etc. Also, Muslim contemporary or current music forms the western instruments being added to the ensemble of the Arab-Malay ensemble, or "Applied *al Nsyid*." Western harmony of *Applied al Nsyid* songs as a tool for transforming and survival of Muslim musicians and preserving their musical cultures for young generations.



Figure 3
Dikir Pantun by Master Nak Chai Chimek
(Photo: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fv_mynhCV4E, by Anant, 2021)

Javanese and Sundanese Music in Thailand

Thailand and Indonesia, the latter being popularly known by the former as *chawa* (Java), are two nations with long relationships since the traditional state era. Some evidence showed the multi-faceted acquaintance of the Ayutthaya kingdom with Mataram territory, whose center was located at Kartasura on the Java Island. This included the purchase of horses from Java for Ayutthaya royal court uses (Dhiravat na Pombejra 2008, 65); establishment of diplomatic, friendly relations by the King *Phet Racha* of Ayutthaya with the Javanese Mataram territory, and exchange of state tributes and peppers with Jambi court, a settlement on Sumatra island under Kartasura's Mataram administration, in the reign of King *Narai* (Ricklefs 2001, 108). There were also traces of various cultural contacts, one of which was the introduction of *Inao*, a Javanese literature, to Thailand in the late Ayutthaya kingdom. With two known variants: *Inao Yai* (large or unabridged *Inao*) and *Inao lek* (small or abridged *Inao*), the novel would go on to become one of the most prominent Thai classical literature and theatrical plays (R.M. Soedarsono 2011, 341). *Inao* was even used as a relationship bridge during a conversation between Thai and Javanese royal members when, in 1945, HM King Chulalongkorn visited the Dutch East Indies, which is Indonesia today (His Majesty King Chulalongkorn 2555, 173).

Traditional Thai music experiencing growth through interaction with the inclusion of a variety of concepts and materials of music from other nations, such as China, Myanmar, Khmer, Eropa (*Barat*), and Jawa. Interaction between Thai and

Indonesian musical traditions has been proven by the inclusion of the musical instrument angklung from West Java by using the concept of Javanese gamelan. The existence of angklung by using the concept of gamelan in Thailand that has been played for more than a hundred years did not forget the origin of Java, so the music played by the angklung is called the "*Pleng Jawa* (Song of Java)".

Angklung and gamelan are important music in the relationship between Indonesia and Thailand, especially regarding cooperation between the two countries. Gamelan is learned on college campuses that have a tradition of music programs. In this case, Luang Pradit has greatly contributed to the popularity of Javanese music on college campuses in Thailand. Angklung in Thailand is currently very popular among young people, schools in Thailand, especially elementary school students, as well as government and private institutions. In addition to learning, angklung is also contested, recorded, and performed in various events. Development of angklung form has also been performed in a variety of shapes and how to play. All of it is an effort made by the people of Thailand to adjust the angklung music culture and tastes of the local community.



Figure 3
Pakubuwana X (military uniform) and King Chulalongkorn of Thailand, in the Journey to Java, 1896. (Photo: KITLV, in Journey to Java by a Siamese King, 2012)

For Javanese Gamelan, in 1929, a complete set of Javanese gamelan Surakarta Model, donated by Susuhunan (sultan) *Pakubawana X* (P.B. X) to H.M. King *Prajadhipok*, has arrived in

Thailand following the latter's return to Thailand (National Archives of Thailand 1929). Being the first gamelan to have imported to Thailand, The set contained instruments of two tuning systems: pelog and slendro. Later on this gamelan was separated into two groups because the Thais understood to have received two different sets of Javanese musical instruments (Amatyakul, personal comm). One of them used to be displayed in the National Museum, Phra Nakhon, but is now being stored elsewhere, while the other was in the custody of the Music Division, Fine Arts Department who used it occasionally to accompany Inao and perform various Javanese-accented pieces composed by Thai music masters.



Figure 4
A set of first gamelan in Thailand from P.B. X Surakarta at the Pra Nakhon National Museum, Bangkok
(Photo: Surasak, 2012)

A set of Javanese gamelan once displayed in the National Museum, Phra Nakhon, was treated merely as exhibition items, the set of Javanese gamelan under the custody of the Music Division, Fine Arts Department is being taken care of by Thai music masters and is more in playable condition than the other. The set has been re-tuned to match the tuning system of Thai music. This has enabled the instruments, as a representation of Java, to accompany Inao, a Thai court play, by playing Thai repertory along with Piphat ensemble (Phachoen Kongchok 2015, personal comm).



Figure 5
Javanese Gamelan Class at Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand
(Photo: Surasak, 2019)

Mon Music in Thailand

Dvaravati, as The Mon Culture, was an ancient Mon kingdom from the 7th century to the 11th century, located in the region now known as central Thailand. The oldest kingdom that makes up current Thailand is Dvaravati. This fascinating kingdom of Thailand is recognized as the earliest Buddhist culture, developed from the societies in the central part of Thailand and then spread to other parts of the country; The Dvaravati culture was created initially from prehistoric and early historical cultures and assimilated aspects of Indian culture.

The Piphat Mon is believed to derive from the Mon people, an ancient Mon-Khmerspeaking people, and uses special instruments such as an upright gong circle called *Khong Mon* that there are two sizes; a large Gong (*Khong Mon Wong Yai*) and a small gong (*Khong Mon Wong Lek*). The Piphat Mon ensemble is usually used in funerals, but it can also be used for other events. Wong Piphat Mon (in Thai) has several instruments consisting; Ranat Ek, Ranat Thum, Pi Mon - bass oboe with the horn-shaped end, Khong Mon wong yai - a set of bass gongs set in a vertical frame, Khong Mon wong lek, Tapon and Poengmang khok or khok poeng - Mon drums set in a cage-shaped frame, Ching, chap and khong mong.



Figure 6
Piphat Mon Ensemble
(Photo: Surasak, 2021)

Hinduism in Wai Khru Ritual

Wai Khru ritual is a mixture of animistic, Brahmanist, and Buddhist rituals where, in a broad sense, students initiate the learning of Thai music by presenting to their teacher a bunch of flowers, incense sticks, and candles to proclaim apprenticeship. Such practice is also observed in a regular school setting. Traditionally, a student performs this ritual on Thursday and starts learning the repertory later. In addition to that, there is a bigger, annual Wai Khru ritual. The grand Wai Khru was usually held on Thursday before it was changed to Sunday so that students could make themselves available. The change was done to meet changing social scenario.



Figure 7
Monks pray before the Wai Khru ritual
(Photo: Surasak, 2022)

Wai Khru ritual contains worship of different entities, including *Phraphum* (household god), *Chao Thi* (spiritual landlord), *Rukhathewada* (silvan spirit), and other guardian angels, all of which are remnants of ancient animism-derived performance. Later the diffusion of Hinduism and Brahmanism saw divine music teachers being named after Hindu deities such as Shiva (*Phra Isuan*), Vishnu (*Phra Narai*), Brahma (*Phra Prom*), Indra (*Phra In*), and Ganesha (*Phra Pikhaned*). The deities were based on Puranic literature of uncertain Brahman sect. However, it is believed that the Wai Khru ritual is a tradition of Shaivism because the Wai Khru incantation mentions Shiva and Vishnu, but not Brahma. Buddhism influences are equally evident in Wai Khru since the ritual is always preceded by the evening chant performed by Buddhist monks in the evening earlier and followed by food offerings to Buddhist monks in the early morning ahead of the ritual.



Figure 8
Wai Kru ritual
(Photo: Surasak, 2011)

Wai Khru is usually accompanied by a Piphat ensemble that performs a high repertory called naphat throughout the ritual's duration. Apart from pieces for Buddhist ritual and Brahmanist ritual, certain pieces of naphat repertory are specially designated for the divine teachers. These pieces are played only when summoned by an officiant, the leader of the ritual who is dressed entirely in white. A qualified officiant must strictly possess such attributes as being a male of thirty years of age or above, having been ordained as a monk, having undisputed moral conduct, having advanced musical knowledge and performance, and having trained a number of apprentices.

III. Closing

Reinterpreting in music has been imperative in current society. Many times we find ourselves ministering with respect to our Lordship that may be taken by others, both individuals and groups of people, as an example for expressing different religious views. The peace of mind in doing religious activities in each religion may be disturbed in the senses very easily in current society. The word Fatwa is sometimes mentioned in relation to Islamic music, contrary to the traditional knowledge of both leaders and followers. In the interpretation of the word sin and not sin in music, the details are quite profound. Music is, therefore, a tool to test or identify different religious states in diverse societies in ethnicity, religion, and adherence.

Music is music, bringing music as part of a religious ritual can create a new definition. Music is for various purposes: worship, commendation, honor of the nobility, and to entertain religious participants along with the dedication of the deceased as heirs representing their deceased ancestors. Music interpretation, therefore, requires the use of academic principles of music as well. Such as talking about drums, what kind of drum? or just a drum !!! or drums in someone's concept; there will be peace among musicians and everyone in our society.

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