

Development and Adaptation of Kmhmu Music of Lao People's Democratic Republic: A Case Study of Kieung Ensemble Ban Na Muang Houn in Oudomxay Province

¹Douangchamy Vouthisouk, ²Kantabhon Samdangdej and ³Pilanut Pusawisot

¹Research Institute of Northeastern Arts and Culture,
Mahasarakham University, Muang District, Mahasarakham 44000, Thailand

²Faculty of Education, Mahasarakham University,
Kantharawichai District, Mahasarakham 44150, Thailand

³Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalai University, Nakornrachasima Campus,
Muang District, Nakornrachasima 30000, Thailand

Abstract: The Kmhmu people have thrived in Southeast Asia since ancient times. Their ethnic group belongs to the Mon-Khmer family. The Kmhmu have deep roots in Animism and were expert hunters and gatherers. There are currently two Kmhmu groups living in Laos, which called Kmhmu Ou-Juang and Kmhmu Krong. The Kmhmu live at the foothills in mountainous areas. Modernization and Globalization have caused the Kmhmu's traditions and cultures to rapidly change. They mainly now grow rice crops and their natural food sources have dwindled. Their arts and customs have also been deeply affected. One of the most important cultural identity of the Kmhmu is their music. The heart of the Kmhmu's music is the Kieung Ensemble, which consists of 12 musical instruments. Eight instruments are percussions made from Bamboo of different lengths that produce their own unique rhythmic notes and sounds. The other instruments include Cymbals, Gong and Drums. The Kieung Ensemble is performed during rituals and celebrations in Kmhmu communities. The performance is also, used to visiting guests and also the Kieung Ensemble is displayed at national festivals to demonstrate the beauty of Kmhmu culture to others. Modern pop culture and western fashion is currently pushing traditional cultures of the Kmhmu towards extinction because many of the new generations view the ancestral treasures as out dated and useless. Urgent conservation and promotion of Kmhmu traditions and the Kieung Ensemble is underway to make sure that the valuable traditions are continued and be cherished for many generations to come. Standardized methods of teaching, projects to preserve bamboo forests and regular display of Kmhmu music during national festivals are currently being promoted.

Key words: Kmhmu, Kieung music, Laos, Muang Houn, Oudomxay

INTRODUCTION

The Kmhmu or Kha Mou ethnic tribe is one of many tribes living in the peoples democratic republic of Lao's (Iwata, 1964). Kmhmu language is classified as Astro-Asiatic belonging to the Mon-Khmer ethnic group. It is believed that in ancient times their existed Kmhmu Fiefdoms and kingdoms in province of Luang Prabang, which was known in the ancient past as Muang Chawa. Other Kmhmu Kingdoms, also exited at Chiengkvang, which used to be called Muang Prakan. From statistics in 2005 record 500,975 Kmhmu living in Laos, which amounts to 11% of total population. Ethnic Kmhmu communities build there villages at the foot hills of mountains and near streams. Villages are mostly located at altitudes of 700-3000 feet above sea level. Kwaeng Udomxay is a

province in Northern Laos that has a large community of Kmhmu tribal villages. The villages of Ban Na, Ban Somchai and Muang Hun are model examples of Kmhmu community that has preserved their traditional cultures.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research area: Lao people's democratic republic is a country with many ethnic groups that live together peacefully throughout the country. There are many multi-cultural ethnic groups with many music, arts and dances. This research has three main purposes. To investigate the historical background as well as the role of the traditional Kieung Ensemble of the Kmhmu ethnic group at Ban Na Village, Meuang Houns in the province of Oudomxay in Laos. The second purpose of this

research is to study the development and adaptation of the traditional Kieung Ensemble of the Kmhmu ethnic groups. The final goal of this research is to study the development of the Kmhmu music heritage based on traditional belief. Research data was collected from documents and related research studies. Primary data was collected from field research by methods of observation and interviews. Ninety nine individuals formed the sample group of study, which included knowledgeable people, professionals and Kmhmu ethnic elders who are professionals of the arts and the culture of Kmhmu ethnic tribe.

RESULTS

The Kmhmu: Kmhmu ethnic tribe is divided into two groups called Kmhmu Ou-Juang and Kmhmu Krong. Kmhmu Ou-Juang mostly live in Northern Laos, while Kmhmu Krong in the Northwest of Laos, Northern Laos and Isan (Northeastern Thailand). Kmhmu ethnic tribes are mostly Animists that worship spirits and ghosts. Deceased ancestors are regarded as sacred spirits that protect and uphold the peace in Kmhmu society. It is widely believed that ancestral spirits are the creators of religion and beliefs. Brahmanism beliefs and rituals have been incorporated into many Kmhmu rituals and ceremonies. Such as the custom of worshipping ghosts, spirits, ancestors, belief in the gods that dwell within the earth, burial rituals, the belief of sagas and the use of music, which accompanies all rituals. The Kmhmu have their own language classified as Astro-Asiatic and is similar in structure to the Laos alphabet, where there is no intonation marks. Their language is preserved through folk tales, fairy tales and poetic songs, which are called Klong Kueb Term. Klong Kueb Term are original Kmhmu folk songs of important historical events. Kmhmu ethnic folk songs also gave birth to Kmhmu instruments and music. Many villagers have strong beliefs that the many illnesses are the effects of supernatural influences such as spirits, ghosts and supernatural causes. To cure these illnesses the spirits and ghosts must be treated with respect so that they will aid in the healing and prevent further illness (Wanliphodom, 2000). Traditional Kmhmu beliefs are closely related to nature and the belief that humans and spirits live very similar and have the same needs. Spirits have needs such as they need homes and have spirit villages. Spirits also have the desire for entertainment and to relax. The Kmhmu ethnic tribe, therefore created musical instruments and songs to entertain humans, spirits and accompany rituals and ceremonies for both worlds.

History of Kieung music: During French colonial rule the Lao language, culture and local education was discouraged (Jumsai, 2000). The history of Kieung music has never been recorded in Lao text before. The study of Kieung Ensemble of the village of Ban Na in the province of Udomxay in Laos provides the fundamental data, which is a collective of knowledge passed down through the generations of Kieung musicians in the village and the Kmhmu communities. The origin of Kieung music has always been a part of Kmhmu lifestyles. The Kmhmu were traditionally hunters and gatherers but their current livelihood is agriculture and raising animals, which are frequently threatened by wild animals, which destroy crops, harvest and livestock. Kmhmu ancestors therefore, made use of bamboo trunks as devices to create reverberating sounds to drive away animals and to warn others of an emergency or danger. The shape of the Kieung has changed little since ancient times and is made of bamboo trunks beaten with a knocking stick.

Kieung music has been around since the Lan Chang kingdom. The earliest evidence of Kieung music is documented by the French during French colonial rule. During the annual celebration of Songkran festival at the city of Luang Prabang there was a parade with a display of Kieung Ensemble at the festival. The earliest recorded evidence of Kieung music at the village of Ban Na was when, the department of information and culture of Muang Hun city in Udomxay province nominated Tao Boontan as the official leader of the Kieung musical group. Tao Boontan had learned the arts in 1899 from 4 elders named Tao Takong, Tao Tajerm, Tao Takoon and Tao Takon, which were Kieung music teachers from the ancient village of Ban Klon Look, which is now the modern city of Muang Houn. The Kieung musical group of Ban Na still exists today under the leadership of Tao Boontan and currently has 12 musicians and 2 managers. The Kieung music group of Ban Na was created with the objective of preserving the lifestyles and cultural traditions of the Kmhmu ethnic group to be with Muang Houn city in Udomxay province forever. The group's objective include to serve the community and accompany the rituals of the Kmhmu community throughout the year. To assist the guidelines and policy of The People's Party of Laos People Democratic Republic. To preserve and promote the cultural treasures of the Kmhmu. The current situation of Ban Na group Kieung music is that all of the musicians or of working age and many feel shy that that Kieung music is outdated and out of fashion. The timid attitude of the members has limited their determination and has slowed the development of Kieung music. Since 1975, Kieung music development has been slow and imparted orally and by personal tutoring. There exists very

little Kieung musicians in Udomxay province today because, there are no musical schools or traditional music associations. Most of the musicians, in other Kmhmu communities are elderly and small in numbers. The Kieung music group in Ban Na group has survived primarily by services to local Kmhmu communities through the numerous rituals throughout the year. Seniors will pass on their knowledge to younger students and new members of the group so that they are able to perform well during festivals and annual events sponsored by the central government.

The Kieung instruments are constructed from fresh bamboo or Mai Hok. There are four small sized instruments about 50 cm long, which are called Kieung Makul, Kieung Keer, Kieung Triity and Kieung Rityot. There are also, four large size instruments about 150 cm long called Kieung Ma, Kieung Krap, Kieung Longlong and Kieung Mooy. The instruments are thrown away after use, because the sound changes and is no longer resonant or sweet sounding when the bamboo dries.

The music ensemble also, includes other instruments such as the Cymbal, Drums and Gong. Popular songs that are performed are called Lai Kmhmu and Lai Keun. There are established systems for playing each instrument to produce rhythmic notes. The melody moves up and down with gradually conjunctive degree. The rhythm is repeated and the pitch has 6 tones of F, G, A, B, C and D, but there is no E tone.

Belief in Kieung music: Kmhmu ethnics at the village of Ban Na have traditional belief in Animism and worship spirits and ghosts. This belief has changed little since ancestral times. Kmhmu belief is that when there is a natural disaster such as floods, fire, storms and drought or if an individual had fallen ill of a mysterious illness because of an angered spirit or ghosts. These events are regarded as punishment by the spirits and that someone has committed a sinful act. In order to bring back peace and prosperity to the community, the Kmhmu must perform rituals to please the spirits and ask for forgiveness. These rituals are always accompanied by Kieung Ensemble and dance. Besides, natural disasters and personal illnesses, there are also annual rituals that are performed to ensure prosperity of harvest and prosperity of the community. The Kmhmu in the past would make Kieung musical instruments and perform during the start of planting season and during the annual celebration of Pee Bahn or house spirit worshipping.

The ritual to inaugurate the start of planting season would start with elders bringing seedlings and sprouts to their son in law at the rice fields. After the rice seeds and sprouts have been planted, elders and seniors will

together make Kieung music instruments and perform music in a parade back to the house. Meals and rice wine will be prepared for the parade at the son in-laws house, where the elders and senior members of the family will dine together. After the meal, the Kieung musical instruments will be placed or erected in a house or storage where, the spirit of the rice will be placed. In the evening, 2 male villagers will be selected to dress as jungle spirits or ghosts with large wooden ornament in the image of a penis tied around their waists. The spirit figures will wear large scary masks and both will play their roles to scare village girls away from splashing water on the Kieung musicians. Elders will continue to perform Kieung musical notes, while a group of village girls dance around the parade and try to sprinkle and splash water onto the musicians, but the 2 jungle spirits prevent them from doing so. The evil spirits eventually succumb to the efforts and determination of the villagers and when the musical notes ends, the girls finally splash water onto the parade chanting for rainfall and the ritual is complete, signifying the end of the drought and the start of a prosperous rainy season. Kieung music performance is not only to accompany the rituals with harmony and rhythm, but it also resembles the respect and belief in Fah Taen, which is the god who controls the sky, sun and rain.

During the ritual of worshipping house spirits the Kmhmu will perform Kieung music. The ritual is started by selected capable young men to go into the forest and hunt. After a successful hunt they will transport the meat in bags and baskets and make Kieung musical instruments in the jungle. A parade of Kieung music by the hunters will return to the village and the food distributed to each family and presented to in worship the house spirits and then the family will dine together and celebrate. During the harvest season, the same elders and seniors will help the son in-law's family in harvesting and collecting the crops. Food and wine will be provided to thank you and pay respects for their kindness and help.

Kieung Ensemble: The Kieung musical performance include at least 12 musicians. Eight will be playing the Kieung instrument and the other four will play Cymbals, Gong and Drum. There are a total of 8-10 Kieung instruments in an ensemble. Kieung instruments include the Kieung Makul, Kieung Keer, Kieung Triity, Kieung Rityod, Kieung Ma, Kieung Krap, Kieung Longlong, Kieung Mooy, Kieung Mapah and Kieung Ting. Kieung instruments are made from Bamboo or locally called Mai Hok (Bamboosa Blumeana), which is easily found in the region. Bamboo or Mai Hok is the most popular type of wood used to make the Kieung musical instrument (Somsri, 2000). Bamboo has long been used as a musical

instruments to provide music and rhythm to accompany dances and rituals since ancient times (Wongthet, 1999). The bamboo trunks used for making good Kieung instruments must be fresh cut or still green to ensure good sound quality. Selecting the appropriate bamboo trunks must be made by selecting trees that are healthy and is at least 3 years old. The maturity of the trunk can be observed from the bud of the Bamboo, which should be dark brown in color. The average circumference of the appropriate trunks should be between 80-100 mm. The tools used to make Kieung instruments is mainly the Pha knife, which is a machete like knife, which comes in many sizes. The larger Pha's are used for heavy jobs, while the smaller ones are applied to more refined and delicate crafting. The Kieung instruments are made from bamboo and are only used once because after the celebration and performance, the wood becomes dry and the sound changes. The instruments are left in the field and jungle where they were made. New instruments will be made when another performance is needed. The other instruments, which are the gongs, drums and cymbals are cleaned and stored to protect it from the environment.

Traditional teaching of Kieung music is done at the student's home. Students must practice until they are proficient and must proceed in steps and in orderly courses. The study of Kieung music arts is a lengthy process and students must be patient and take time to know the notes and acquire the techniques so that their performance results in beauty, elegance and harmony. They must devote themselves to the art without regards to reward or payment.

Kieung Makul: Large fresh bamboo trunks are used in making the Makul. The length of the Makul is about 68 cm and has an average circumference of 20 cm. The bamboo trunk for the tuning groove is then sliced away from the end of trunk up to about 48 cm having a width of about 5 cm. Tuning of the Makul was traditionally done manually listening to the sound. The note of the Makul compared to modern notes is F1. If the tone was too low, then the end of the trunk where the groove ends will be shortened until the tune is correct. Shortening the length of the groove will increase the sound pitch. Engravings are then carved into the position at the other end of the un-sliced end of the trunk or the start of the tuning groove. The engravings are made in circular or polygon shapes to indicate where the instrument is to be knocked and sometimes also used to indicate how many knocks should be used to play the instrument. The knocking or tapping stick called Look is made from fresh bamboo trunks with a circumference of 15 cm and a length of 39 cm. The knocking stick also has a groove with a length of 28 cm and has a depth of 1 cm and a width of 5 cm.

Kieung Keer: The length of the trunk used in making the Keer is about 69 cm with a circumference of about 20 cm the tuning groove is sliced off from the one end of the trunk to a length of 43 cm. The groove is about 1 cm in depth and has a width of about 6 cm. The Keer tune is G1. Engravings are made into the un-sliced portion of the trunk in the shape of fangs, which are locally called Lai Kiew Mha or Dog Fang patterns.

Kieung Triity: The Triity is made from bamboo trunks with a length of about 81 cm. The groove's length is about 52 cm and has a width of about 6 cm. The tune of the Triity is A1. The engravings are circular patterns made as a ring around the un-sliced portion. The knocking stick is 52 cm long and has a groove length of 34 cm with a width of 6 cm.

Kieung Rityod: The length of the Rityod is about 82 cm long with a circumference of about 17 cm. The tuning groove is about 39 cm long with a width of 5 cm. The tune of the Rityod is B1. The Rityod's engravings are Lai Kiew Mah or Dog's Fang pattern. The Rityod's knocking stick is about 60 cm long with a circumference of 17 cm. The tuning groove's of the knocking stick is about 39 cm with a width of 6 cm.

Kieung Ma: The Ma is made from bamboo trunks with a length of 1.96 m with a circumference of 26 cm. The tuning groove's length is 92 cm with a width of 7 cm. The tune of the Ma is F. The Ma's engravings are three parallel lines. The Ma's knocking stick has a length of 20 cm with a circumference of 15 cm. The trunk of the knocking stick is diced with a knife to make the trunk flexible and soft when tapped.

Kieung Krap: The Krap is made from bamboo trunks with a length of 1.87 m with a circumference of 24 cm. The tuning groove is 90 cm long with a width of 6 cm. The engravings of the Krap are long winding patterns circling the un-sliced portion. The tune of the Krap is G. The Knocking stick's length is 20 cm with a circumference of 15 cm. Around the trunk is softened by making cuts into the trunk to make it flexible when tapping.

Kieung Longlong: The length of the Longlong is about 1.22 m with a circumference of 23 cm. The tuning groove is about 68 cm long with a width of about 7 cm. The engravings on the Longlong are long winding circular patterns in a line circling the un-sliced portion. The tune of the Longlong is A. The knocking stick is the same as the Krap.

Kieung Mooy: The Mooy's length is 1.83 m long with a circumference of 23 cm. The tuning groove is about 97 cm long with a width of 6 cm. The engravings on the Mooy are similar to the Longlong. The Longlong's tune is B. The Mooy's knocking stick is 20 cm long with a circumference of 15 cm. The Mooy's knocking stick is also diced with knife grooves to soften the wood and be flexible when tapping the Mooy.

Kieung Mapah: The Mapah's length is about 113 cm long with a circumference of 16 cm. There are no engravings and tuning groove on the Mapah's. The only decorations are made from shaving the bark all around the bamboo into shreds and fibre.

Kieung Ting: The Ting's length is about 188 cm long with a circumference of 16 cm. The instrument is similar to the Mapah where there is no tuning groove and is also decorated with shreds and fiber from shaving the bark.

Development and promotion to preserve and revitalize

Kieung music: The development and promotion of the Kmhmu music has been carried out in two folds. The development of musicians, which revealed that the numbers of persons playing Kieung music are increasing and specific musical forms are performed. Both men and women musicians wear traditional dress while, playing Kieung music helps to encourage the young generation to continually maintain cultural heritage of Kieung music. The development of performers revealed that the Kmhmu ethnic groups apply their ways of life in their performances. For example, the sword dance using Kieung music to reflect their traditional identity. This is how cultural values of Kmhmu ethnic groups are constantly being conserved.

Guidelines in which Kieung music can be developed are as follows: using dehydrated or dried bamboo to make instruments so that they can produce a standard sound and can be played on all occasions. They can also be made more durable. The Kieung musicians are encouraged to play songs with musical instruments from other ethnicities as well as western music in order to gain recognition and to promote cultural values. The performers are also advised to wear traditional Kmhmu costumes as they play Kieung music.

Kmhmu music and modernization: The rapid advancement of modern technology and globalization has provided economic advancements throughout the country. The economic prosperity has also brought in new ideas, fashions and beliefs. Traditional customs and rituals have been altered and adapted to best suit the

needs of community. Modern instruments and pop music is currently very popular in Laos. This has caused traditional Kmhmu music to be unpopular among the current generation. Kieung Ensembles in many Kmhmu communities are in decline and in danger of disappearing forever. Social and cultural changes are the main driving factors putting Kieung Ensembles and traditional Kmhmu culture at risk. Social changes in the livelihood of ethnic Kmhmu have been dramatically challenged because most Kmhmu musicians are farmers and must devote most of their time to the preparation and harvesting of crops and livestock. Modern economic structure and status has caused the cost of goods to be elevated to the level that agricultural produce receives very low prices. Kieung Ensemble performances are not as popular as in the past and some Kmhmu communities hire modern instrument performances. Modern mediums for distributing music such as CD, VCD, DVD and Karaoke have rapidly modernized the social culture and have made live performance of traditional music to be considered unfashionable and outdated. The lack of support from government agencies to preserve and promote traditional Kmhmu music is not enough. Most of Kieung Ensemble musicians are elderly citizens. Cultural indigenous knowledge in making Kieung instruments, Kieung music and Kieung performances are slowly disappearing due to the lack of successors to inherit traditional Kmhmu Indigenous musical knowledge. Many traditional cultures are disappearing. Cultural treasures in the past that used to represent the community's stability and strength are now becoming souvenirs and tourists items (Wanliphodom, 2000).

CONCLUSION

The Kieung music represents the deep relationship of the Kmhmu society, which evolves around belief and traditional customs that have always been in harmony with nature. The Kmhmu believe that the spirit world and the human world are very much alike. Both spirits and the living enjoy music and must be entertained. Globalization and material value has caused many traditional customs and values to be viewed as outdated and unfashionable.

The development of local indigenous knowledge and culture is important and must be supported in development. The knowledge of local communities should be preserved, nourished and promoted until it is strong and the cultural heritage successfully passed on to the next generation (Songsuntornwong, 2003). The Kieung music performances have been developed for the cultural conservation of the Kmhmu identity, which is one of the arts and cultural aspects of the Lao people's democratic

republic. Currently, there is the planting and conservation project of bamboo and beneficial use of bamboo with support from the government and private sectors.

SUGGESTIONS

The knowledge obtained from the research of Kieung music of the Kmhmu ethnic group can be used as a reference to extend research to the culture and traditions of Kmhmu communities throughout the Lao people's democratic republic and is also, a contribution to the development and conservation of cultural heritage in Laos. Musical instruments from other numerous tribes should be researched, preserved and the uniqueness of their traditions be presented and communicated to the general public. Continued research into the development of preserving and promoting Kieung cultural music should be further explored because the amount of ethnic musical groups are dwindling and slowly disappearing. There are currently no documents, books and texts related to Kieung music in print. Most importantly, most of the musicians are elders and that preservation policies is urgently needed to create new generations and following. Promoting and preserving Kmhmu ethnic music must be supported by central government. Promotional policies and funds must be appropriate so that conservation goals are met and realized.

Extended research should be supported to continue in-depth research into the relation and history of Kieung music and it's relation to rituals, customs, ways of life and culture of other communities. Original songs and rhythms of the Kieung Ensemble have never before been recorded and is passed on orally and through direct tutoring. Successful preservation and promotion can only be

realized by having the recording the gained knowledge and understanding of Kmhmu customs and music and distributed via CD VCD and DVD's to reassure that the data is available to impart with efficiency and preserved correctly. The creation and development of a standard training should be created as a course and made available as a curriculum in schools and as courses in traditional music classes in secondary and university levels. There should also be studies on how to utilize other types of hard wood to create Kieung instruments such as Mai Yoong, Mai Had, which are hardwoods and has been used to make other percussion instruments.

REFERENCES

- Iwata, K., 1964. Halpern. In: Joel Martin (Ed.). *Minority Groups in Northern Laos, Especially the Yao*. Department of Anthropology, University of California (Los Angeles), pp: 30.
- Jumsai, M.M.L., 2000. *History of Laos*. 4th Edn. Chalermnit, Bangkok, pp: 264. ISBN: 9747390213.
- Songsuntornwong, C., 2003. *Human and Environment*. Chulalongkorn University Publishing, Bangkok, pp: 111-112. ISBN: 9741319487.
- Somsri, S., 2000. *Plants Used in Making Local Indigenous Isan Musical Instruments in the Province of Roi-et*. Maharakham University, Maharakham, Thailand, pp: 143-148. ISBN: 9746471325.
- Wanliphodom, S., 2000. *Thatsana Nok Rit: Sangkom-Wattananatam Pajuban Panprae*. Prapet Khong Supayakon, Samnakphim Muang Boran Publishing, pp: 14-20. ISBN: 9747381494.
- Wongthet, S., 2001. *Rhong Rum Tum Plaeng (Singing and Making Music)*, Matichon Publishing, Bangkok, pp: 91. ISBN: 974-321-466-6.